

**Leading for Learner Retention: Learning from Secondary
Schools' Management Team Members**

By

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STATEMENT BY SUPERVISORS

We, Professor Myende and Professor Khumalo, confirm that this thesis by Simangele Mkhize has been submitted with our permission.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my beloved late mother, Getrude (MaNyawose) Mdabe, and her sister, Irene Nyawose, for their support and trust in me. They make me believe that I can defeat every storm that comes my way. I also dedicate this study to my late grandmother, Bathobile Emmah (MaNgcobo) Nyawose. Thank you boBhodlankomo, boSilulu, boMahlashana, boMangamahle, boDabile, boBiyase, boNomndayi. I salute you. You are always in my mind and remembered for always inspiring us and teaching us not to say never. May your Loving Souls continue to Rest in Eternal Peace.

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- The KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Department of Education for giving me permission to conduct this study in three schools under Umlazi and Pinetown Districts.
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ABSTRACT

The South African Constitution under the Bill of Rights states that everyone has the right to basic education. The government invests a large portion of state funding into education to achieve its targeted goal, which is to promote learning opportunities for all by 2030 and 2063. The achievement of these goals by the Department of Basic Education demands that School Management Team members, together with other school stakeholders, play a crucial and dynamic role in ensuring that learners are retained. This study adopted a qualitative interpretive paradigm and employed a case study design to explore and understand how School Management Team members lead for learner retention in secondary schools. This study asks three key research questions: What meanings do School Management Team members attach to learner retention and leadership for learner retention? How do School Management Team members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention? Why do School Management Team members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention the way they do? The two methods of generating data used were one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. I conducted the study in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Through purposive sampling criteria, I recruited 14 School Management Team members, comprised of three principals, one deputy principal and 10 DHs from three schools under Umlazi and Pinetown Districts. The combination of Downton's transformational leadership theory, Maslow's theory of motivation and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory formed the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. Thematic analysis was used to interpret and analyse the generated data. The data generated by School Management Team members in the three participating schools show that learner retention does not have a single meaning. For instance, three perspectives were shared collectively by all participants in this study. Another issue that emerged as a major concern was the use of policies that are not specific to learner retention. The participants revealed that they used policies that were intended to increase the learner retention rates in the schools but were not specific to learner retention. The participants viewed these policies as indirectly pushing learners away from school and negatively influencing other learners who copied them and did likewise. The finding of this study is that participants adhere to these policies out of obligation to implement directives from the Department of Education. However, the Department did not provide explicit guidelines regarding the procedures to follow when children discontinue with their schooling. The findings indicated that in the process of leading for learner retention, School Management Team members are exposed to limited or sometimes no support from various levels of the education system. It is argued that the manner that people do things is influenced by how they link their understanding to reality.

Research of this nature can be advantageous to alleviate social ills such as crime, substance abuse, and the continuing rise of '*amaphara*' (derived from the word 'parasites' as they steal from families and communities) in South Africa. There is a need for similar studies that involve a wider category of participants, such as parents, community members, and school dropouts.

Keywords: Retention, learner retention, leadership for learner retention, School Management Team members, secondary school

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CHH	Child-headed homes
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHs	Departmental Heads
DP	Deputy Principal
DSD	Department of Social Development
FET	Further Education and Training
FGDs	Focus group discussions
HoD	Head of Department
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
LSEN	Learners with Special Education Needs
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NPPPR	National Policy on the Programme and Promotion Requirements
RCL	Representative Council of Learners
SA-SAMS	South African Schools Administration and Management Systems
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	ii
STATEMENT BY SUPERVISORS	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	viii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xix
LIST OF FIGURES	xx
LIST OF APPENDICES	xxi
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.2 BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY	2
1.3 RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY	5
1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.....	5
1.5 PURPOSE STATEMENT	7
1.6 THE KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS	7
1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	7
1.8 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	8
1.9 DEFINITIONS OF THE KEY CONCEPTS	8
1.9.1 Retention.....	8
1.9.2 Learner Retention	8
1.9.3 Secondary School	9
1.9.4 School Management Teams Members	9

1.9.5 Leadership for Learner Retention.....	9
1.10 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	9
1.11 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	10
1.12 THE OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THIS STUDY	10
1.13 CHAPTER SUMMARY	12
CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW	13
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	13
2.2 THE STUDY’S CORE CONCEPTS	13
2.2.1 Three Types of Retention	13
2.2.1.1 Grade Retention	14
2.2.1.2 Learner Retention.....	14
2.2.2 School Leadership	15
2.2.3 Leadership for Learner Retention	16
2.3 LEADERSHIP FOR SMT MEMBERS	17
2.4 LEADERSHIP STYLES IN LEADING FOR LEARNER RETENTION.....	19
2.4.1 Instructional Leadership Style.....	20
2.4.2 Democratic Leadership Style.....	21
2.4.3 The Transformational Leadership Style	22
2.4.4 Distributive Leadership Style	24
2.5 STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION	26
2.5.1 Motivation	26
2.5.2 Collaboration Among Education Stakeholders	27
2.5.3 Early Identification and Intervention	27
2.5.4 Efforts Made by the Department of Basic Education	28
2.5.5 Contextualising Curriculum.....	29

2.5.6 Creating Welcoming Environment.....	30
2.6 EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMES IN PLACE	31
2.6.1 Programme of Hope	31
2.6.2 The School of Life	31
2.6.3 Office of Student Advocacy	32
2.7 THE INFLUENCE OF POLICIES ON LEARNER RETENTION.....	32
2.7.1 Policies Intended to Retain Learners	33
2.7.2 Grade Retention	35
2.7.3 Implementation of National Policies	35
2.7.4 Learner Disciplinary Procedures.....	37
2.8 FACTORS AFFECTING LEADING FOR LEARNER RETENTION.....	37
2.8.1 Personal Related Factors	38
2.8.1.1 Learners Ill Health	38
2.8.1.2 Attitudes Towards Teachers and School.....	38
2.8.1.3 Feeling of Rejection	39
2.8.1.4 Lack of Information	40
2.8.2 School Related Factors	40
2.8.2.1 Academic Performance	41
2.8.2.2 Lack of Good Leadership Skills	41
2.8.3 The Socio-Economic and Cultural Standards	43
2.8.3.1 Family Influence	43
2.8.3.2 Learners from Low-Income Families	44
2.8.3.3 Living with Family Conflicts	44
2.8.3.4 Child-Headed Families	45
2.8.3.5 Learning Environment and Societal Culture.....	46

2.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY	47
CHAPTER THREE	48
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY	48
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	48
3.2 TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY	48
3.2.1 Historical Origins of the Transformational Leadership Theory	48
3.2.2 Characteristics of the Theory of Transformational Leadership	49
3.2.2.1 Inspirational Motivation.....	51
3.2.2.2 Idealised Influence	52
3.2.2.3 Intellectual Stimulation	53
3.2.2.4 Individualised Consideration.....	54
3.2.3 Relevancy of the Theory of Transformational Leadership	55
3.2.4 Limitations of the Theory of Transformational Leadership.....	56
3.3. BRONFENBRENNER’S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY	57
3.3.1 Historical Origins of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory	57
3.3.2 Multiple Connections of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems.....	59
3.3.2.1 Microsystems (Immediate Involvement)	59
3.3.2.2 Mesosystems (Connections).....	60
3.3.2.3 Exosystems (Indirect Involvement)	60
3.3.2.4 Macrosystems (Culture).....	61
3.3.2.5 Chronosystem (Changes)	61
3.3.3 Relevancy of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory	62
3.3.4 Limitation of Bronfenbrenner’s Social Ecological Systems Theory	63
3.4 MASLOW’S’ THEORY OF MOTIVATION.....	63
3.4.1 Historical Origins of Maslow’s Theory of Motivation	63

3.4.2 Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs	64
3.4.2.1 Physiological Needs.....	65
3.4.2.2 Needs for Security and Safety.....	66
3.4.2.3 Needs for Love and Belonging	67
3.4.2.4 Self-Esteem Needs	68
3.4.2.5 Need for Self-Actualisation.....	69
3.4.3 The Relevance of Maslow’s Theory of Hierarchical Needs.....	69
3.4.4 Limitations of Maslow’s Theory of Hierarchical Needs	70
3.5 FRAMEWORK EXPLAINED	70
3.5.1 Integration of the Theories.....	71
3.5.2 Application of the Theories	71
3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY	72
CHAPTER FOUR.....	74
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	74
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	74
4.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM.....	74
4.2.1 The Three Principles Informing Paradigms.....	75
4.2.1.1 Ontology	75
4.2.1.2 Epistemology	76
4.2.1.3 Axiology	76
4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH.....	77
4.3.1 Explanation for Choosing Qualitative Research Approach	77
4.3.1.1 Quantitative Research Approach	77
4.3.1.2 Qualitative Research Approach	78
4.3.1.3 Critiques about Qualitative Approach in Research.....	78

4.3.1.4 Strategies Followed in Obtaining the Knowledge	78
4.4 RESEARCH DESIGN	79
4.4.1 The Reasons for Using a Case Study	80
4.5 THE RESEARCH SITES.....	81
4.5.1 The Geographical Location of the Participating Schools	81
4.5.2 Profiling the Participants	82
4.5.3 The Community.....	84
4.6 POPULATION AND SAMPLE SIZE	84
4.7 SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT TECHNIQUES	85
4.7.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Selection Criteria.....	85
4.7.1.1 Inclusion	86
4.7.1.2 Exclusion	86
4.8 DATA GENERATION PROCESS.....	86
4.8.1 The First Meeting	87
4.8.2 The Second Meeting	88
4.8.2.1 Semi-Structured Individual Interviews	88
4.8.2.2 Strengths for Individual Semi-Structured Interviews.....	90
4.8.2.3 Weaknesses of Semi-Structured Interviews.....	90
4.8.3 Focus Group Discussions.....	91
4.8.3.1 Challenges Experienced During Focus Group Discussions	91
4.8.3.2 The Importance of Using Multiple Data Generation Methods	92
4.9 DATA ANALYSIS	92
4.10 IMPORTANT ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN RESEARCH.....	93
4.10.1 Trustworthiness	94
4.10.1.1 Credibility	94

4.10.1.2 Dependability.....	95
4.10.1.3 Confirmability.....	95
4.10.2 Ethical Considerations	95
4.10.2.1 Maintaining Confidentiality and Anonymity	96
4.10.2.2 Obtaining Approval to Conduct Research	96
4.10.2.3 Making Certain That All Participants Have Consented to Voluntarily Participation	96
4.10.2.4 Ensuring That Participants Are Well Informed About the Implications of the Study	97
4.10.2.5 Protecting Participants from Any Physical and Mental Harm	97
4.10.2.6 Ensuring Transparency and Beneficence	97
4.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY	97
CHAPTER 5	99
LEARNER RETENTION AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS	99
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	99
5.2 MEANINGS OF LEARNER RETENTION	99
5.2.1 Learner Retention as Keeping a Learner in the Schooling System	100
5.2.2 Learner Retention as Keeping a Learner in One School	100
5.2.3 Keeping a Learner to Repeat the Same Grade.....	103
5.2.4 The Importance of Learner Retention	105
5.2.4.1 The Importance of Learner Retention for Learners	105
5.2.4.2 The Importance of Learner Retention for the Country	107
5.2.4.3 The Importance of Learner Retention for Schools.....	111
5.3 MEANINGS OF LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION	114
5.3.1 Engaging in Sustainable Techniques	114
5.3.2 Leading to Ensure that Parents Are Happy	116

5.3.3 Understanding the Diversity of the Learners	118
5.3.4 Employing Collaborative Approaches to Leadership	121
5.3.5 Stimulating and Creating Conducive Environment	124
5.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY	126
CHAPTER 6	128
ENACTMENT OF LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION.....	128
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	128
6.2 ENACTING LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION.....	128
6.2.1 Keep Learners' Attendance Records	128
6.2.2 Implement Progression Requirement Guidelines	130
6.2.3 Offer Remedial Within the Mainstream	131
6.2.4 Lead to Ensure Effective Teaching and Learning.....	133
6.2.5 Share Responsibilities	136
6.2.6 Caring Practices in the Schools	138
6.2.6.1 Take Good Care of the Learners	139
6.2.6.2 Keeping a Close Relationship	140
6.2.6.3 Using Multiple Learner Motivation Strategies	141
6.2.6.4 Ensuring Learner Support	145
6.2.6.5 Structured Forms of Support.....	145
6.2.6.6 Unstructured Forms of Support.....	148
6.2.7 Employing Different Leadership Styles	150
6.2.7.1 Participants Beliefs About Democracy	150
6.2.7.2 Transformational Leadership Style.....	153
6.2.7.3 Laissez-Faire Leadership Style	154
6.2.8 Adopting Uncertain Policies	156

6.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY	157
CHAPTER SEVEN	159
REASONS ACCOUNTING FOR THE WAY LEADERSHIP IS ENACTED	159
7.1 INTRODUCTION.....	159
7.2 REASONS LEADING TOWARDS POSITIVE CHANGES.....	159
7.2.1 Announcement of Matric Results through Social Media.....	159
7.2.2 To Attain High Learner Retention Rate.....	163
7.2.3 Allow Accountability and Flow of Ideas.....	165
7.2.4 To Provide Academic and Non-Academic Support	168
7.3 REASONS LEADING TOWARDS NEGATIVE CHANGES	171
7.3.1 Scarcity of Appropriate Official Documents	171
7.3.2 Guided by the Departmental Policies	173
7.3.3 Reasons Related to the Absence of Specific Policies	175
7.3.4 Reasons Related to Absent Parents.....	180
7.3.5 Reasons Related to Schools' Location.....	181
7.3.6 SMT Members Fear for Their Lives.....	182
7.3.7 Learners Play the Roles of the Primary Caregivers	183
7.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY	184
CHAPTER EIGHT	186
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	186
8.1 INTRODUCTION.....	186
8.2 REFLECTION ON METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	186
8.2.1 Reflections on Methodology.....	186
8.2.2 Reflections on Theoretical Framework.....	187
8.3 LEARNING FROM THE FIELD: DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS.....	189

8.3.1 RQ1: What Meanings Do SMT Members Attach to Learner Retention and Leadership for Learner Retention?	189
8.3.1.1 Meanings Attached to Learner Retention	189
8.3.1.2 Meaning of Leadership for Learner Retention.....	191
8.3.2 RQ2: How Do SMT Members in secondary Schools Enact Leadership for Learner Retention?	194
8.3.2.1 Participants’ Leadership for Learner Retention	194
8.3.2.1.1 Keeping Learners Motivated	194
8.3.2.1.2 Employing Different Leadership Styles.....	196
8.3.2.1.3 Ensuring Learner Support	197
8.3.3 RQ3: Why do SMT Members in Secondary Schools Enact Leadership for Learner Retention in the Way They Do?.....	198
8.3.3.1 Reasons Behind Leadership for Retention.....	198
8.4 PUTTING THE THEORIES TOGETHER.....	202
8.5 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY.....	202
8.6 IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY.....	204
8.6.1 Implications for Policy	205
8.6.2 Implications for Practice.....	205
8.6.3 Implications for Future Research.....	205
8.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	206
8.8 MY FINAL WORD	206
REFERENCES.....	207
APPENDICES	243

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1: Learner statistics for participating schools from Grade 8 in 2018 to Grade 12 in 2022.....	3
Table 4.1: SMT members' profiles who participated in this study	83
Table 4.2: Dates and times for meetings in each participating school.....	87

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1: The four “I’s” connect (adapted from Northouse, 2021)..... 50

Figure 3.2: Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system..... 58

Figure 3.3: Hierarchy of needs (Hopper, 2021) 65

Figure 3.4: Indicates the integration in these theories employed in this study 71

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: A letter requesting informed consent for the study to be conducted in a school.....	243
Appendix B: Permission letter from KZN DoE to conduct research in KZN schools.....	245
Appendix C: A letter to grant permission to conduct research	246
Appendix D: Ethical clearance certificate	247
Appendix E: Declaration for participants.....	248
Appendix F: Informed consent letter.....	249
Appendix G: Interview instruments	251
Appendix H: Ethical clearance certificate (renewed).....	252
Appendix I: Proof of language editing.....	253
Appendix J: Turnitin report.....	254

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“Everyone has the right-(a) to basic education, including adult basic education; and-(b) to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.” (Republic of South Africa, 1996)

I begin this chapter by sharing a quotation that outlines the rights to basic education for everyone in South Africa as stated in terms of Act no. 29(1) in the Constitution for the Republic of South Africa No. 108, 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). This quotation affirms that South Africa is committed to establishing a non-racist post-apartheid education system which encourages change and quality education for all (UNESCO, 2015). To ensure that the rights to compulsory basic education is not infringed, the South African Government has made it compulsory that children are required to attend school from ages seven (Grade 1) to 15 (Grade 9) or whichever comes first.

By right, the government is doing its best in ensuring that all children in South Africa are retained in schools. For example, programmes such as National School Nutrition; orphans and vulnerable children were implemented to enhance learner retention as per the constitution (Department of Education, 2008). School Management Team (SMT) members were introduced to increase the level of accountability within the education system (Fundam, 2018). Despite all these efforts, low learner retention rates in education system still persists (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). Hence, the problem of leading for learner retention has become a global phenomenon (Gill, 2016; McLeod, 2019; Sing & Maringe, 2020). Therefore, this study involves SMT members because its objective is to find out how they lead for learner retention in schools. This was achieved through understanding the meanings of learner retention, leadership for learner retention as well as exploring how leadership for learner retention is enacted in the schools. The study also examined the reasons that led SMT members to lead for learner retention in the manner they do. This chapter introduces the issues that are explored in this current study. It discusses the background and the rationale, followed by the statement of the problem, and the purpose of the study's objectives leading to the three main research questions that guided this study. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the significance of this study and clarification of key concepts. This chapter provides an overview of the study and concludes with a summary.

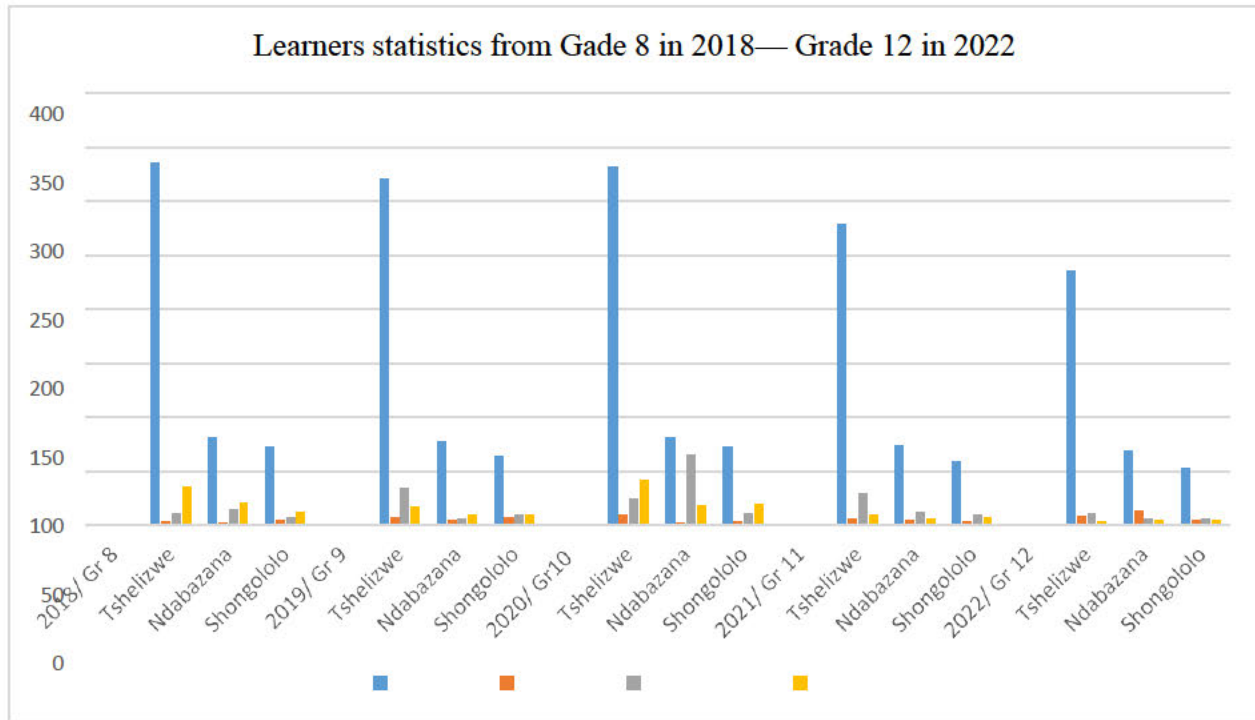
1.2 BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

An understanding of how SMT members interpret and enact leadership for learner retention in South African schools is negligible. Although there are studies on learner retention worldwide, none of them focus on what SMT members actually do in leading for learner retention. For instance, the studies that I reviewed in relation to this study focus on strategies to increase learner retention and factors affecting learner retention (Allen & Nichols, 2017; Rieber, 2017; Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Most international and local studies on learner retention explore learning support, motivation and the reasons why some learners could not complete their education when others could successfully achieve in their studies (Zhu & Doo, 2023). Roman et al. (2022) reported that the connection between intention, motivation, and self-efficacy to learners dropping out of school is an understudied phenomenon that needs to be further researched, particularly in developing countries. Moreover, the Department of Education (2008) found that learner retention in South Africa is more problematical after Grade 9 (UNICEF, 2017). Similarly, the Department of Basic Education (2011) reported that only about 60% of learners are retained between Grades 11 and 12. Smillie and Mabotja (2019) argued that although there was a positive picture of an increasing rate of learners' school attendance of 96% in 2019, the learner retention rate was still low. However, what is apparent from the South African Schools' Reality Report (2020) is that there is always a decrease and never an increase in the number of learners retained in schools, particularly from Grade 9 onwards. This indicates a gradual decrease in learner retention rates from lower grades to higher grades. Likewise, every year when the former Minister of Basic Education (Angie Motshekga) presented matric results, she would report that the number of learners who reached Grade 12 in that particular year was lower than the number of learners who entered Grade 1. She praised the Matric pass rate as having improved but she never suitably clarified that the real pass rate was the unacceptably high number of children who did not make it to Matric (Giannakopoulos, 2022). Linked to this study, it is clear that the former Minister of Basic Education did not view a decrease in learner retention as a crisis that delays children's entry to higher education and opportunities to get good jobs (Marchesi, 2018). This shows that, in South Africa, the profits from education may not be realised due to learners who do not complete their education (Mbambo, 2019). We may not be sure that the learners who did not reach Grade 12 are dropouts because they might have attended Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutes for skills development. However, it is reported that every year in South Africa children drop out of school and never return and their whereabouts are unknown (Giannakopoulos, 2022).

Linked to the study's background, Table 1.1 shows the statistics for learners of the three participating

schools who enrolled¹ in Grade 8 in 2018 to Grade 12 in 2022 and never left the school. It also shows the rates of learners who transfer², dropouts³, as well as the newcomers in each year.

Table 1.1: Learner statistics for participating schools from Grade 8 in 2018 to Grade 12 in 2022



¹ According to the statistics **enrolled learners** refer to those learners who enrolled in these schools from the reception class and continue to study until the exit class without dropping out.

² According to the statistic **learner transferred** are those learners who were issues transfer letters as per their parents’ request to apply for admission in other schools.

³ **Dropouts** are those learners who drop out of school without being transferred to other schools, their whereabouts are NOT known and the school cannot account about them.

Considering the statistics in Table 1.1, it is worth noting that all three participating schools experienced a higher increase in learner enrolment from Grade 8 to Grade 10. This might be affected by the fact that Grade 8 still falls under the General Education and Training phase, while Grade 10 is the reception grade for the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. There is also an indication from the statistics that these schools enrol more learners from Grade 8 to Grade 10, but it drastically decreases in Grade 11 and gets worse in Grade 12. The enrolment as it stands indicates that even though there was an increase in Grade 10, there was a drastic decline observed in Grade 11 and Grade 12 in all participating schools meaning most learners do not reach Grade 12. However, learners in these grades are likely to be vulnerable and at risk, as they are teenagers (Motsa, 2016). Learners who do not complete school will be unemployed and find it difficult to prosper in the future. It is also obvious that if low learner retention rates continue, the country will stand a high chance of increased crime because learners who do not complete Grade 12 are likely to be unemployed and do things that are not acceptable in the country. Moreover, according to Bush et al. (2022), early school leaving affects the country's economy since it leads to less-educated adults and business failure. Bush et al. (2022) further explained that businesses fail because of youth who shoplift during the day, higher levels of daytime crime, and loss of federal-state education funding for schools. Loren (2011, p. 2), in Senyamator et al. (2018), confirmed this view and added that "society suffers when school-age children are not in school".

Furthermore, leading for learner retention in schools is becoming increasingly important to achieve the South African government's targeted goals by 2030 and 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015). For example, there are international developmental goals and programmes to ensure sustainability in education (African Union Commission, 2015). These developmental goals include 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015). In elaboration, the 2015 MDG number 6 requires all school-going children to complete an entire course of schooling (South African School Realities, 2020). Therefore, interventions, advanced policies, and strategies that intend to encourage learner retention amongst Secondary Schools need to be developed as a matter of concern (Robison et al., 2017). For example, early intervention and strong strategies and policies that prevent all those who cause learners to leave schools to increase learner retention (Claude & Cyprien, 2022). As such, this study will form part of these global agreed development goals such as the SDGs to sustain a fair and quality education for all learners to achieve effective learning outcomes by 2030 (UNICEF, 2017).

1.3 RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY

Focusing on the three secondary schools in two education districts in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), this research sought to understand the SMT members' ways of leading for learner retention in secondary schools, and the reasons for leading that way. The reasons for conducting this study have been influenced by my personal and professional experience, as well as the literature available in this field of study. It is noticeable that the Foundation Phase has a high learner enrolment rate, which starts to decrease in the Intermediate Phase and gets worse in the Senior Phase, which is the secondary school level. My position as a school principal for fifteen years has allowed me an opportunity to deal closely with learner retention. When trying to engage with other SMT members, I realised that most of the reasons for learners not wanting to be in school are mostly school related but also personal, family, and socio-economic. With such realisation, I became interested in making close contact with SMT members in secondary schools to explore their understanding of learner retention and leading for learner retention, as well as how they enact leadership for learner retention and the reasons thereof.

This study is necessary for understanding the SMT members' ways of leading and managing for learner retention in secondary schools. It is indisputable that SMT members' commitment plays an essential part in attracting learners' interest and fostering their desire to remain in school to complete their basic education (Al-Shammari, 2016). However, a study conducted by Maja (2016) revealed that many SMT members are not sure of their roles and duties, or working as a team as outlined in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document. One of the most important qualities, critical for SMT members to carry out their duties effectively is the ability to keep learners interested in schooling (Klinck et al., 2023). Therefore, this study used SMT members to find out about how they lead for learner retention as school leaders.

Furthermore, this study may motivate SMT members' interest to lead effectively for better learner retention rates in public secondary schools (Mwihia & Ongek, 2019). It is also hoped that this study will encourage SMT members to put more effort into understanding learners' individual needs, which would keep learners motivated, comfortable and remaining in schools (Eresia-Eke et al., 2020). Linked to this study, when learners are motivated they will remain schooling and the retention rates in the schools will increase.

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This section discusses the gap on understanding the ways that SMT members lead to achieve high learner retention rates here in South Africa. It is crucial to indicate that African countries are making slower progress in achieving learner retention goals based on primary and secondary school learners' completion rates (African Sustainable Development Report, 2020), This is despite the government's efforts that that are in place such as School Nutrition, No Fee Schools and OVC programmes. Also, there are international developmental goals and programmes in place which are to ensure sustainable, inclusive, and unbiased quality education that encourages constant learning chances to all in education (African Union Commission, 2015). According to the African Sustainable Development Report (2020), the average score across all states still suggests that Sustainable Development Goals implementation in the African continent is half way in achieving the SDG goals and targets by 2030. Yet, most studies on learner retention here in South Africa focusses on strategies to increase learner enrolment and factors affecting learner retention (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Moreover, research that has explored learner retention has generally tended to focus on the reasons that lead to children's decision to leave school before completion (Dalangin, 2018). This suggests a gap in the studies that explore SMT members' ways of leading for learner retention (Gogo, 2016). It is therefore, important to understand the ways that SMT members as school leaders lead towards learner retention and the reasons thereof. According to Kumanda et al. (2017), in South Africa, like most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the SMT members face several challenges related to embarrassingly low rates of learner retention in higher grades. For instance, South African schools implement the School Progression Policy while the majority of progressed learners typically feel frustrated, and even leave schools (Khobe & Mukuna, 2023). This practice seemed to create a problem in leading for learner retention because it may lead to learners dropping out of school.

Another problem entails absent parents in the education of their children. The results of a study conducted by Runhare et al. (2021) indicate that the problem with learner retention may be due to a weak relationship between parents and SMT members. According to them, this relationship can play a crucial role in increasing learner retention in the school because learners would be motivated within and outside school. Nonetheless, a number of problems such as parents' insecurities, lack of time, illiteracy and substance abuse are reported (Motshusi et al., 2024). This suggests that SMT members need to put more into supporting, training and the use of different strategies that would encourage parents to take part in the education of their children. Linked to these challenges, Roman et al. (2022) argues that it is not possible for South Africa to meet the requirements of the 2015 MDG number 4 because there are not enough studies to find out exactly why learners fail to complete their schooling. It is

that this study would help SMT members improve in their leadership for learner retention.

1.5 PURPOSE STATEMENT

Based on the problem statement, the purpose of this study is threefold. First, it explores SMT members' understanding of leadership for learner retention. Second, guided by the first focus, it further explores the enactment of leadership for learner retention. Third, this study explores the reasons behind the ways that leadership for learner retention is enacted. The objectives of this study were:

1. To understand how School Management Team members attach meanings to learner retention and leadership for learner retention.
2. To explore the ways that School Management Team members enact leadership for learner retention.
3. To discover the reasons behind the ways that School Management Team members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention the way they do.

1.6 THE KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Key research questions are specific and important to indicate because it is critical in qualitative research (Flick, 2018).

- 1 What meanings do School Management Team members attach to learner retention and leadership for learner retention?
- 2 How do School Management Team members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention?
- 3 Why do School Management Team members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention the way they do?

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Globally, education is acknowledged as a basic human right and everyone has the right to education provided on equality and sustainability terms (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2017). The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 allows learners to legally exit the school system at the end of Grade 9 or when they turn age of 15. Unfortunately, the reality is that those who leave before finishing Grade 12 have very limited options and opportunities (Weybright et al., 2017).

Departmental policies have no information about SMT members' role in leading schools for learner retention. The focus is on learner retention and on learner attrition rates (Department of Basic Education, 2011; Government Gazette, 2015). Hartnack (2017) revealed that the departmental policies are silent about learner retention policies. This raises a concern about how SMT members lead for learner retention without a learner retention policy in place. Thus, this study tried to find and understand the ways which secondary schools lead for learner retention. It is believed that through this study, the Department of Education may see the need to develop policies that speak directly to leading for learner retention in schools.

1.8 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted in the three secondary schools and focused on Senior Phase learners in semi-rural ecologies only. Therefore, the findings are based on the opinion of the participants, limited only by time frames and financial constraints. Accordingly, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to all Senior Phase learner attendance issues, including those in the urban and rural areas. All in all, the results are affected by the notion that different schools and their communities have different contexts and unique incoherencies.

1.9 DEFINITIONS OF THE KEY CONCEPTS

This part of the chapter will define key concepts used in this study. Defining the study's concepts in research is an academic requirement to obtain a common understanding since some concepts may have challenging understandings (Molenaar et al., 2022). I, therefore, believe that they should be explained to ensure that they are understood as consistently used in this study. These concepts are retention, learner retention, secondary school, SMT members, and leadership for learner retention.

1.9.1 Retention

The word *retention* is derived from the Latin verb *retinēre*. According to the Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary, retention means the continued use, to retain or to keep something. In this study it will mean retaining learners in the school to complete their basic education.

1.9.2 Learner Retention

According to van Ameijde et al. (2018), learner retention is a matter of increasing learners' interest in the school so that they complete at least their basic education. For this study, it will mean School

Management' ways of increasing all learners' desire to attend school and complete their Grade 12 without dropping out.

1.9.3 Secondary School

The secondary school is an educational institution from Grade 8 to Grade 12 offering tuition to adolescent learners after completing primary education level (Van der Berg et al., 2021). Secondary schools offer two phases that is the senior phase from Grade 7 to Grade 9 and the FET phase from Grade 10 to Grade 12. It is the middle schools between elementary schools and colleges that offer general, technical, vocational, or college-preparatory courses. According to the South African School's Act No 84 of 1996, secondary school covers a middle phase which falls between the Intermediate Phase level and the Further Education and Training level (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In this study, a secondary school will mean any institution that enrolls learners from Grade 8 to Grade 12.

1.9.4 School Management Teams Members

In the South African schooling system, teachers who hold various leadership positions and are responsible for the day-to-day operations in schools are referred to as SMT members, according to the Department of Basic Education (2011). The SMT members hold senior positions, consisting of the Principal, Deputy Principal (DP), and Departmental Heads (Department of Education, 1998). In this study, SMT members are referred to as the schools' senior staff members who work in collaboration with other stakeholders in leading and managing schools to reach targeted goals such as leading towards learner retention.

1.9.5 Leadership for Learner Retention

Leadership for learner retention is a collective work aimed at improving learner retention and the use of effective strategies to keep learners attracted to and committed to completing their schooling (Manik & Ramrathan, 2021). In this study it will mean how SMT members actually enact leadership for learner retention in a secondary school, as a team.

1.10 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study intends to understand how SMTs currently lead towards learner retention and cater for individual Senior Phase learners' needs to make a difference in their desire to attend school. Therefore, three theoretical frameworks are utilised to guide this study namely, Downton's transformational

leadership theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Maslow's theory of motivation. I found the three theories relevant for this study as it sought to understand how SMT members lead for learner retention. For instance, Downton's transformational leadership theory assists with a clear understanding of SMT members' leadership nature for learner retention. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory help to understand how individuals negotiate the dynamic environment that may influence learner retention. Lastly, Maslow's theory of motivation is employed to guide this study into understanding how SMT members offer different ways of motivation as they enact leadership for learner retention. Combining these three theories can address immediate and broader environmental factors to meet learners' basic and higher order needs, and provide supportive and inspiring educational leadership for learner retention.

1.11 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study intends to find ways that can be used by SMTs to lead for learner retention and to follow up on learners who are at risk of dropping out of school, either legally or illegally from Grade R to Grade 12. Therefore, the paradigm guiding this research study will be the interpretive paradigm because it aims at understanding aspects, experiences, and events in the society (Creswell & Poth, 2017). It is located within a qualitative research approach since qualitative researchers aim to explore and understand the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of the phenomena under study (Du Plooy Cilliers, 2014). In this study, data were generated by interacting extensively and closely with participants, including SMT members in trying to develop a whole picture of the problem under study (Creswell, 2017). This study was conducted in three secondary schools; therefore, a case study design will be the best research design to guide this study. This is because it is small and a case study enables the researcher to obtain rich data and an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). According to Yin (2012), case study methodology is used to cover a broad range of related and compound issues in an ordinary setting. Generated data were analysed through the use of thematic analysis as it involves outlining, examining, and recording themes within the data that was generated (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Thematic analysis is performed through a process of coding which consists of six phases namely: familiarising with the data, creating initial codes, formulating themes among the codes, reviewing themes, naming the themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1.12 THE OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THIS STUDY

In this section, I provide an overview of the study with an intention to point out what I have covered in each of the previous chapters.

Chapter One: This chapter delineated the study and provided the background and rationale of the study while also discussing the statement of the problem and main objectives of the study. A detailed explanation of the research problem, objectives, critical research questions, rationale, purpose, significance, and delimitations of the proposed study was discussed. It concluded with the overall structure of this study. This study revealed that although there are many studies on learner retention worldwide, studies on what SMT members actually do in leading for learner retention are minimal and negligible.

Chapter Two: Chapter two presents a literature review on the phenomenon under study. I reviewed the literature based on other researchers' work on leading for learner retention. I included local and international literature to highlight gaps that this study attempted to fill by including differences and similarities. Only the enhancement of learner retention and factors affecting learner retention exist within the existing body of knowledge on learner retention, but not specific on leading for learner retention.

Chapter Three: In this chapter the theoretical frameworks that underpinned this study are unpacked. The key highlight in this chapter is that education in South Africa is faced with challenges and adjustments after apartheid era. Therefore, I employed the transformational leadership theory, motivation theory, social ecological theory and the theory of collaboration. Towards the end of the chapter I discussed the relative link among all theories adopted in the study.

Chapter Four: Chapter Four presented a detailed discussion on the research methodology and its relevance to the objectives of the study. The case study was used in this study. The interpretive paradigm and its epistemological basis was also discussed in this chapter as the paradigm that drove the study. Using a qualitative research approach, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding based on how and why of the phenomenon under investigation. I used purposive sampling technique to ensure that the study selected participants who had sufficient and relevant information on the phenomenon in question. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with twelve participants was used as a primary method of generating data. I also conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) for generating secondary data to check and confirm the credibility of the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. In this chapter thematic analysis strategy used in the analysis of data was highlighted and discussed. Towards the end of the chapter I discussed how this current study addressed issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations and conclude with the data analysis process followed in completing the study.

Chapter Five: In Chapter five I introduced participants and research sites by providing their brief profiles.

The focus was on data analysis and the presentation of the main theme of this study as indicated in this chapter (section 1.5). The chapter discusses and analyses the first theme looking at how the participants attached meaning of learner retention to the concept of leading for learner retention.

Chapter Six: This chapter presents the discussion and interpretation of the second theme in this study. This theme entails the enactment of leadership for learner retention by SMT members in secondary schools.

Chapter Seven: This chapter presents the discussions and interpretation of the last theme for this dissertation. This chapter focuses on the reasons behind the ways that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention in the manner that they do.

Chapter Eight: This final chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to the theoretical frameworks that guide the study using key research questions as headings. In this chapter I demonstrate how the findings responded to each of the two research questions. I further discuss the contribution made by the study to theory. Towards the end of the chapter I present the contributions, implications, my final words about the study's focus followed by the final conclusion of this study.

1.13 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This is an introductory chapter that presented an orientation to this study. I highlighted the background of this study and articulated areas which I sought to address. For instance, I discussed how South Africa is committed to establish a non-racist, post-apartheid education system which ensures that all children are retained in schools to complete at least their basic education. I have also highlighted other studies' developments on this phenomenon, providing international and local literature. This chapter went on to discuss the rationale for this study, which complements my experience as a principal which allowed me an opportunity to deal closely with learner retention. Furthermore, I discussed the statement of the problem, purpose of the study. Having gone through departmental policies I found them silent about SMT members' role in leading schools for learner retention. Therefore, I found it necessary to provide the significance of this study and have unpacked different reasons for the need and significance of this study. It was also crucial that I provide the detailed overall structure of this study towards the end of the chapter. Finally, this chapter provided a chapter summary which is presented in this section. The next chapter examines the literature that I reviewed for this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the role of SMT members in leading for learner retention by reviewing related literature from international, South African and national viewpoint. According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014) a literature review examines previous research studies to determine the gap that the study will address. Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2011) states that the literature should be clear about why and how the study fits into the current body of knowledge. South Africa celebrated its twenty-sixth year of democracy, and this appears to be an appropriate time to assess the progress toward building an integrated education system to replace the previous racially stratified one. The 1996 South African Schools Act was the essential legislation establishing a unified system. The South African Schools Act prioritised school leadership and management, recognising their role in building a fully working system that would improve school and learner retention.

This chapter contains a review divided into three pieces based on the following themes: The first section of the chapter examines the study's core concepts so that readers may grasp the study's most important principles. Retention, leadership, and learner retention leadership are the three main categories. I begin by debating the notion of retention to clear up some of the uncertainty surrounding its application, followed by a discussion of how to improve learners' retention, which examines how leaders might execute leadership for learner retention. Finally, I critically examine the factors that influence schools' efforts to retain learners to comprehend the reasons for the methods used.

2.2 THE STUDY'S CORE CONCEPTS

Defining the study's concepts in a research is an academic requirement since some concepts usually have challenging understandings. Consequently, this section discusses and clarifies the key concepts to be clearly understood since they are often used throughout the study. They are retention, learner retention, school leadership, SMT members, and secondary school. The meaning of each concept is therefore discussed based on the context of this study in relation to policy and literature.

2.2.1 Three Types of Retention

In the education sector there are three types of retention, the first being grade retention which is the practice of keeping learners in a grade if they do not fulfil the required criteria for progression to the next grade (Beyers, 2018). Secondly, learner retention which, according to the Department of Education (2008), it is the percentage of learners who enrol in a school and remain there until they complete their studies. Finally, learning retention refers to the process of learning and storing new knowledge in long-term memory so that it may be recalled when needed (Valderama & Oligo, 2021). However, this study focusses on the practice of keeping learners in schools to complete their basic education. I briefly discuss grade retention and learning retention in the following section to eliminate the inconsistencies that often surround the application of this concept.

2.2.1.1 Grade Retention

Grade retention is the departmental policy and practice of keeping a learner in the same grade, to repeat it when the learner is identified as failing to keep up with peers and does not meet the requirements to be promoted to the next grade (Gallagher et al., 2021). Sometimes this practice has a negative effect on some learners and their parents as they would lose interest and withdraw their children from school. Accordingly, Goos et al. (2021) state that grade retention in secondary schools has a negative influence on learner retention. A similar study conducted by Hadebe and Moosa (2022) reveals that this practice affects most learners as sometimes they find themselves being bullied by peers and other teachers, which make them to feel forsaken and they leave the school.

2.2.1.2 Learner Retention

The Department of Basic Education (2011) defined learner retention in the South African educational system as learners remaining in formal schooling until they have completed their required basic education. According to the Department of Education (2008), learner retention is the opposite of school dropout, and it indicates the success of the school education system. It is important to retain learners in school to complete their studies since the purpose of education is to bring about changes in society while at the same time increasing the economic, social, and cultural standard of living in society (Mogashoa & Mboweni, 2017). For example, Spiel et al. (2018) note that learner retention assists in skills development and empowerment for better knowledge to improve society's living conditions. Furthermore, learners who leave schools before completion may find themselves doing criminal activities and corrupting the country as they are likely to be unemployed. Omboi (2020) confirmed that youth unemployment encourages people to do bad things because of poverty while education can help push youth away from

criminal activities. Moreover, education can stimulate economic growth that may attract foreign direct investment in the country (Nguyen, 2022). Generally, learner retention is the complement of dropouts and an indicator of the effectiveness of the schooling education system (Department of Education, 2008). However, in the context of this study, learner retention is about ensuring effectiveness of increasing learners' interest to remain in the formal schooling system until the completion of the compulsory schooling phase.

2.2.2 School Leadership

In the South African education system, members of the SMT are employed to provide leadership direction and to administer schools as a group (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). This statement indicates that the issue of retaining learners in the schools lies in the hands of school leadership since they are entrusted by the department to act as agents for school successes and improvements. Also, school leadership as defined by Reed et al. (2019) is the ability to inspire, motivate and direct others towards the achievement of the school's vision. Leaders are expected to encourage, direct and persuade people to willingly do what is expected of them. In other words, successful leaders need to display outstanding leadership skills (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). To put it another way, outstanding leaders have exceptional management and leadership abilities (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Consequently, SMT members' leadership skills are critical to the school's development and are necessary across the institution at various stages for changes to occur and goals to be met (Teasley, 2017). Hence, strong leadership has become a requirement in every school to deal with the rapid changes and varying demands of schools (Wadji, 2017).

Furthermore, Lu and Hallinger (2018) described school leadership as the responsibility of the whole SMT. In this study's context leadership means collaborative procedures through which SMT members consider other stakeholders, especially parents and learners in their leadership for learner retention in the school. According to O'Sullivan et al. (2022), educating a learner is like a three-legged stool because learners' success depends on both teachers and parents. Alternately, Gruber (2018) argued that it cannot be a three-legged stool only, because a four-legged stool involves the community which is needed to add value. For instance, Gruber (2018) explains that by adding the fourth leg, we get a better understanding of how other people such as community members, the neighbourhood and extended families may influence learners. It is critical to comprehend the notion of leadership and how it affects learner retention because of the paucity of scholarly effort aimed at better understanding how leadership is enacted in different

educational contexts.

Additionally, leadership is the ability to inspire and motivate others to achieve their objectives or a way of getting things done with and through other people (Olayisade & Awolusi, 2021). Dağyar et al. (2022) defined leaders as people who manage and produce the talents and abilities required to successfully lead a team. Leaders make informed decisions, develop a vision of what can be accomplished and convey it to others, motivate individuals, and provide good leadership qualities such as honesty and transparency (Wesley & Narayan, 2023). Furthermore, Leithwood et al. (2020) briefly described school leaders as those teachers who have various powers and responsibilities in the school, who work together with others, giving them guidance and support to accomplish the school's objectives. For instance, the concern for educational outcomes that society expects and the desired goals require school leaders who are willing to make decisions and to take risks (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz & Pashiardis, 2020). The following section discusses leadership for learner retention.

2.2.3 Leadership for Learner Retention

As school leaders, SMT members are obliged to encourage learners' interest in attending school (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz & Pashiardis, 2020). Given that the focus is on secondary SMT members who lead and are accountable for retaining learners between 13-19 years of age and adolescents. However, other researchers, such as Ciampo and Delciampo (2020) and Daminabo et al. (2022), stated that leading learners at this stage is challenging since they are highly exposed to emotional challenges and vulnerability. Similarly, Sing and Maringe (2020) posited that the lowest retention rate takes place in the secondary phase of schooling. Moreover, a study carried out by Kumanda et al. (2017) found that the SMT members' ways of leading for learner retention in schools have an influence on the completion of their secondary education as well as their post-secondary education. A study conducted by Mngomezulu (2014) found that being at risk in the higher education level usually starts from secondary education learning. Therefore, leading for learner retention entails conceiving of what needs to be done, bringing people and resources into alignment, and taking an active role in achieving results while working beyond the status quo. According to Monaghan (2022), going beyond the call of duty means appreciating and establishing good quality and hard work. Considering this, good leadership is one of the most important tool that may promote leading for learner retention, and can be more effective if leaders have a good leadership style (Ibrahim & Daniel, 2019). It is also required to develop and maintain a positive image of the schools, making them more appealing and visible to the public (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz &

Pashiardis, 2020).

Leadership for learner retention can also be effective when leaders make sure that teachers motivate and teach beyond the required standard. For example, effective teaching and learning leads to a good academic performance which is the most dominant outcome in leading toward learner retention (Casanova et al., 2018). Therefore, it is beneficial to understand the SMT members' ways of leading for learner retention in secondary schools. Furthermore, after reviewing the literature on the duties of SMT members in leading schools, leading for ensuring learner retention is a priority for all schools in a country (Van Ameijde et al., 2018). This is because promoting learner retention has an impact not just on individual learners, but also on institutions and the country's economy (Kumanda et al., 2017). Although leading and managing are not synonymous, Azad et al. (2017) argued that they are the same ideas used to define different levels of an organisation's leadership effectiveness. Mpungose and Ngwenya (2017) supported this viewpoint because they believed that management is a part of leadership. As a result of these viewpoints, the terms leadership and management will be used interchangeably throughout the research, but leadership will be used alone most of the time. This is not to dismiss the fact that leadership and management are not equally special, but it is critical to recognise the distinction between the two (Khoshhal & Guraya, 2016). It is also important to know that not all managers are leaders, as some are not (Wadji, 2017). Therefore, leading for learner retention requires certain school managers that understand and attain their roles in ensuring that a controlled environment conducive to learning is contemporary (Rooney, 2017). The leadership of the SMT members as school leaders is discussed in the following paragraph.

2.3 LEADERSHIP FOR SMT MEMBERS

The composition of the SMT members in South Africa is established by the provincial department, which uses a formula to determine how many DPs (if any) and Departmental Heads (DHs) each school needs (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). Principals have no authority over the size of their SMT and must work with the deputies and DHs they inherit through learner numbers in that school (Bush et al. 2019). School Governing Body (SGB) members form part of the panel during the process of recommending the suitable candidate for SMT members. Hence, it is evident that there is an abuse of power and political interest among different stakeholders in the appointment procedures (Rammbuda & Arko-Achemfuor, 2024). For instance, findings from a study conducted by Mampane (2020) reveal a power-play and politicking during the process of appointing SMT members other than being fair. Nxumalo

et al's. (2021) research demonstrates that there are challenges that come with school governance since governors lack training and could interpret their roles in different ways leading to poor performance in recommending the suitable SMT members.

Furthermore, according to the study carried out by Balkis et al. (2016), there are organisational and social issues that limit the SGB level of how they function in school governance. Accordingly, Mbokodi and Singh (2011) found parental partnerships in the governance of five primary and secondary schools in townships around Port Elizabeth, where, despite meeting governmental requirements, parental involvement is ineffective due to issues instigating from poor education of people participating. Levy (2022) reported the widespread use of political groupings within the SGBs under consideration such as gender-related conflicts and tensions where dominant males uphold 'traditional' views of women. Concurring with this view, Kruger et al. (2022) conclude that unless the tensions between the SGB members and schools can be overcome, there is little chance for improvement in education. They claim that challenges emanate from differing interpretations of management and control concepts, doubts about the SGB's mission and responsibilities, mutual mistrust and strained relationships. Smith and Oosthuizen (2011) emphasised the necessity of all stakeholders to understand the dissimilarity between participating democracy and governmental democracy, based on a survey of 456 principals, SGB chairs, and district officials. They argued that educator political activism, particularly through teacher union participation, can destroy the growth of democratic values in practice (Smith & Oosthuizen, 2011). In relation to this study without good leadership abilities, SMT members may not be able to fulfil their obligations in leading for learner retention. For example, Mpungose and Ngwenya (2017) revealed that all SMT members, as school leaders are directly responsible for the success of schools in terms of leading for learner retention.

According to Kortantamer (2023), school principals should not be overburdened with obligations to address all issues at the school but they should be distributed evenly to other stakeholders. However, according to a study by Du Plessis (2017), most SMT members struggle to adjust to the expectations of the role they are expected to play when nominated to leadership posts. One of the factors contributing to these issues is the lack of strong norms and standards for the appointment of SMT members, which results in poor leadership from many principals (Naidoo, 2019). This could make it difficult for them to ensure that their schools are focused on learner retention. However, such concerns should be shared among all SMT members to achieve effective educational management and leadership (Sekgota, 2020).

This research is to find out how SMT members perceive leadership in learner retention. Therefore, members of the SMT as school leaders, can play an important role in promoting learner retention (Naidoo, 2021). For instance, according to Narain (2015), it is critical to discuss SMT members' effectiveness in leading for learner retention since they are heavily active in academic problems and the day-to-day operations of the school. This shows that little attention is paid to guaranteeing learners' desire to attend school more especially SMT members are governed by policies. This raises a concern that the SMT members need to be fully empowered in order to ensure effective leadership in all spheres including learner retention.

Thus, it is worth noting that the success or failure of achieving high learner retention goals may be traced back to the leadership styles used by individuals in charge (AI Khajeh, 2018). According to AI Khajeh (2018), some leadership styles have a favourable effect on school performance and are linked to school improvement. As a result, leaders should be able to choose from a variety of leadership styles and then apply them appropriately to their schools. Furthermore, leadership for learner retention in the current study refers to a group of persons who are responsible for helping school learners by providing direction and pushing them to want to stay in school to complete their basic education. Similarly, Lumad (2017) revealed that school leaders locate proper planning at the centre of their core business of the day and use different types of leadership skills by improving teaching and learning in the schools. According to academics, various leadership styles cannot be deemed universal because they are dependent on an individual's ability to lead change and achieve certain goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Noteworthy, the effectiveness of the schools is highly influenced by the way that leadership is enacted (Gogo, 2016). For example, poor leadership style may affect the provision of an enabling educational environment that may attract learners to remain schooling thereby result to a decline in enrolment, yet such a decline affects the schools' image (Cineme et al., 2023). As a result, members of the SMT should be able to successfully lead for learner retention and exhibit a leadership style that encourages learners to desire to attend school. Because the focus is on leading for learner retention in schools, it is necessary to define some of these leadership styles to improve readers' grasp of the notion of leadership. SMT members that integrate democratic, transformational and distributed leadership approaches for the best results are needed to lead for learner retention (Shava & Ndebele, 2016). Following is the discussion of leadership styles that can be successful to leading for learner retention in the schools.

2.4 LEADERSHIP STYLES IN LEADING FOR LEARNER RETENTION

Leadership styles are defined by Fitriani and Haki (2021) as forms of behaviour demonstrated by leaders in their leadership. While Klompenhouwer and Hopman (2021) defined them as what mainly captured different methodological approaches to achieving vital ideas critical to any organisation's success. These definitions, according to Bwayla (2023), include setting and progressing toward achieving prearranged directions inside a certain organisation. In the search of organisational tasks and goals, a variety of leadership styles that include authoritarian, democratic, instructional, transformational, and distributed have been identified and linked to various leadership approaches (Klompenhouwer & Hopman, 2021). According to the research carried out by Maqbool et al. (2023), the findings revealed that when leaders use different leadership styles, school results increase, and this may improve learner retention rates. Similarly, other studies found that leadership styles used in schools plays a major role in improving learner performance which may eventually increase their school learner retention rates (Shava & Tlou, 2018). However, a study conducted by Klompenhouwer and Hopman (2021) found that some of these styles cover some of leadership practices which is critical to understand. Therefore, it is necessary that school managers choose from a variety of leadership styles based on the situation because there is no one-size-fits-all solution (Maqbool, Zeng & Mohammad, 2023). The following sub-sections discuss some of these styles namely instructional, democratic, transformational and distributive leadership.

2.4.1 Instructional Leadership Style

The phrase “instructional leadership” became a permanent part of educational administration and used by instructors due to the effective schools' movement (Bush et al., 2022). This form of leadership construct in the areas of policy, research, and practice in school leadership and management (Gaitanidiou et al., 2023), Indeed, the increased global emphasis on accountability appears to have renewed interest in instructional leadership since the start of the twenty-first century. Leaders, according to Gaitanidiou et al. (2023), should choose whether to operate in an instructional or transformative framework because the two are closely related. In South Africa, instructional leadership is becoming more widely recognised as a viable strategy to increase learners' participation in the schools (Bush et al., 2022). Also, Shava et al. (2021) claimed that the procedures by which change might be done, such as modelling, monitoring, and professional conversation, have received little attention. High-quality classroom observation, discussion of practice within learning areas or stages, and accomplishment of consistency in behaviour and practice standards for both learners and educators are examples of these.

Maja (2016) states that in order to improve in their leadership roles, DHs will have to devote more time

to controlling and managing other than teaching and learning activities that take place every day in their schools. Significantly, monitoring the teaching and learning standards of educators and learners” is one of their primary contributions to school development, but this author doubts that the DHs are doing so. Similarly, Bush et al. (2019) in research of managing teaching and learning made similar suggestions. Accordingly, DHs should, according to their recommendations hold regular educator team meetings to plan lessons and talk about issues and examine work plans and learner outcomes to keep track of educators’ performance. Bush et al. (2019) continued that in each of the eight schools, DHs have assigned curriculum responsibilities. This can be taxing for middle managers who are required to cover a wide range of topics, some of which are not their areas of expertise. They also have a contradiction between their teaching responsibilities and the time they have to manage educators’ work.

Curriculum management is more effectively handled when it is perceived as a whole school’s responsibility and instructional leadership is applied (Bahtilla & Hui, 2020). They do remark that a wide range of leadership styles, resourcing and management, and the transfer of curriculum matters to subject leaders are impeding progress. Bahtilla and Hui (2020) further stated that in order to be able to manage the tasks that are distinct to teaching and learning there must be a successful curriculum and the employment of instructional leadership.

2.4.2 Democratic Leadership Style

All team members are included in the decision-making process when democratic leadership is used. As a result, people feel like they are a part of the project and are inspired and transform to their best (Wahyuwardhana & Wisesa, 2024). According to a study by Kilicoglu (2018), learners are encouraged to participate in decision-making, and their ideas are accepted and considered. This represents a democratic decision-making approach that involves many people. All members involved in decision-making eventually develop a sense of ownership and can deal with obstacles with ease (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). When a democratic leadership style is employed, decision-making authority is distributed throughout the organisation, allowing all learners to participate (Kilicoglu, 2018). It appears to be the opposite of autocratic rule and it strengthens interactions between learners and teachers meaning that not all decisions are democratic in practice at times leaders can be as authoritarian and employ autocracy (Drew, 2023). This is consistent with Drew (2022), who confirmed that autocratic leadership can be beneficial in some instances especially when decisions need to be made quickly without consulting. Accordingly, findings from Rosing et al. (2022) highlighted that involving autocratic and democratic

leadership styles is a key influence for effective leadership across various situations. Democratic leadership is concerned with meaningful participation and decision-making to create conditions for respectful relationships, collaborative associations, active cooperation, and the formation of social, learning, and culturally responsive educational organisations, in part by employing strategies for achievement, enabling specific conversations, and struggling to determine what is needed, when, and how to get there in specific situations, in part by developing strategies for achievement, enabling specific conversations, and struggling to determine what is needed, when, and how (Kilicoglu, 2018). Democratic leadership, according to Sikandar (2016), puts a child at the heart of his educational beliefs in that it spirals from his democratic focuses for the value of child's understandings. Dewey's pragmatism fosters an environment that encourages participation, sharing of ideas, and the virtues of honesty, openness, adaptability, and compassion (McBrayer et al., 2020). This shows that democratic leadership relates rights to meaningful involvement and respect for expectations of everyone as humans. Indeed, democratic leadership indicates that school principals are responsible for establishing educational institutions based on basic democratic ideals such as promoting fairness and social justice, as well as in the larger society.

Overall, it places a strong emphasis on social justice, dignity, rights, and the well-being of minorities and all learners. Democratic leadership necessitates a value-based leadership practice and procedures that promote or preserve social justice, empowerment, and community. Studies of democratic school leadership have generally focused on how leaders demonstrate democratic behaviours, use cooperative connections, and shared decision-making in schools to improve schools, and some research has emphasised the relationship between some organizational characteristics.

2.4.3 The Transformational Leadership Style

Transformational leadership was developed by Burns (1978), who studied how some leaders engage with employees in ways that inspire them to new levels of energy, dedication, and moral purpose across many businesses. According to Bass (1985), transformational leadership is a type of leadership that motivates individuals to do better than expected by modifying their morale, ideas, interests, and values. To put it in another way, transformational leadership refers to a set of leadership actions that should lead to greater staff motivation and performance (Burns, 1978). The adjustments and techniques based on beliefs, values, and attitudes that inform leaders' practices to change for the best results are directly involved with transformational leadership (Khan et al., 2019). Transformational leadership is more successful,

productive, innovative, and satisfying to followers, according to Ibrahim and Daniel (2019). Transformational leadership, as defined by Northouse (2016), is as an unusual style of inspiration that motivates groups to go above and beyond what is anticipated of them. Transformational leadership is, in fact, more realistic than other types of leadership (Ghasabeh & Provitera, 2017). Many school leaders lack the capacity and power to implement change effectively (Acton, 2021).

In today's schools, transformational leadership is a popular image of ideal behaviours towards change (Musaigwa, 2023). Change management is a strength of transformational leaders, and it has been linked to good outcomes such as improvements in the school environment and teacher-staff interactions, according to (Lewa et al. 2022). For example, according to Brown et al. (2019), transformational leadership stimulates good interactions between employees and followers. Therefore, based on this study it can strengthen the relationships between school leaders and learners to enhance learner retention. In support, transformational leadership, according to Bradley (2020), is defined as the ability to rearrange a shared vision and distribute leadership evenly to develop a school culture that is conducive. Also, transformational leadership, according to Burns (1978), is defined as increasing team aspiration to accomplishing higher enactment through commitment. Meaning, it is definitely targeted toward an organisation's developmental capacity and personal dedication (Bradley, 2020). Furthermore, transformational leadership was found to have a direct impact on academic or social learners' outcomes (Zineldin, 2017). There are three dimensions of transformational leadership that were recognised by Burns (1978) within the educational setting, namely vision development, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation. These dimensions of transformational leadership, according to Brown et al. (2019), emphasis behaviours that increase the incentive of followers to perform beyond what is expected of them in the achievement of change and sustainable development. I argue that this type of leadership assists leaders to pay attention to learners' needs and helps them to reach their goals.

Furthermore, maintaining the vision of a school, demonstrating best performances to achieve the goals are some of the ways that transformational leaders prosper in making sure that the educators are committed (Bradley, 2020). Moreover, Ghasabeh and Provitera (2017) emphasised the four main factors of transformational leadership identified by Burns (1978) that is the idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration and the intellectual stimulation. The idealised influence is dominated by leaders who has good morals and ideal performance towards the institution. Secondly, the inspirational motivation, which is used by leaders who has high hopes by motivating people to commit to

a shared vision of the organisation. The other factor is the individualised consideration, whereby leaders provide supportive environments and consider everyone as an individual while motivating them to achieve their own goals. Lastly, intellectual stimulation which involves encouraging people in your power to be creative and resourceful and able to solve problems. These factors are discussed further in Chapter Four as they form part of the transformational leadership theory that directs this study. Ghasabeh and Provitera (2017) analysed the understanding and actuality of transformational leadership in South Africa, based on interviews with educators in two urban primary schools. They conclude that the transformational leadership style should consider the followers' needs and consider both extrinsic and intrinsic incentives to satisfy those needs. In summary, transformational leaders foster a culture of continual learning among instructors and encourage them to change (Musaigwa, 2023). This strategy is thought to encourage commitment by indicating the relation between what they are striving to achieve and the school's way of doing things.

2.4.4 Distributive Leadership Style

Nadeem (2024) expresses reservations regarding the application of distributed leadership in a culture characterised by hierarchical systems, a criticism that Harris et al. (2022) also make. Also, based on interviews and observations at three Soweto elementary schools, and later interviews with 100 teachers from a variety of schools, Naicker and Mestry (2012) drew a similar conclusion about how authoritarianism hinders distributed leadership. They found out that leadership in these schools is still based on autocratic and non-participative decision making. In recent years, distributed leadership has gained traction in the school management and leadership literature as a way to increase teacher participation and empowerment (Torrance, 2013). Because it is obvious that “the popular concept of a heroic leader is antiquated, the goal of transforming schools is too difficult for one individual to do alone,” school leaders may not be able to complete all of the school's leadership tasks alone and must seek assistance from other stakeholders (Kortantamer, 2023). As a result, school leaders must manage the school with various leaders who can execute all leadership functions, including allowing learners to engage in decision-making processes and enhancing mutual reinforcement (Wai-Yan Wan et al., 2017). Because large schools with complicated tasks and a high number of students may result in limited daily interactions between teachers and learners, the traditional idea of school leadership is abandoned in favour of distributed leadership (Sahraee et al., 2021). In leadership literature, the term “distributed leadership” has a wide range of interpretations such as guiding other stakeholders to achieve in distributed tasks (Eryilmaz & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2023). This popular concept is defined as an

emergent quality of a group or network of interconnected individuals in which group members pool their knowledge (Agyeman & Aphone, 2024). For example, it is when the principal creates an open, pleasant, and supportive atmosphere for teachers, and frequently employs expert and referent power in suitable circumstances, situations and settings, an enabling environment is established (Elmazi, 2018).

Indeed, distributed leadership emphasises both official and informal leadership positions (Torrance, 2013). Various leaders, whether formally recognised or not, get experience in a wide range of leadership and management duties in schools when leadership is divided among all school workers (Fourie & Naidoo, 2022). According to the same line of thought, distributed leadership is process of sharing and increasing people's individual and group capability to do their work successfully (Bastea et al., 2023). Due to questions about the difficulty of school leaders' work in South Africa, it was pointed out that there must be a way to move away from courageous leadership to an approach focused on distributed leadership among school leaders (Sibanda, 2017). Fourie and Naidoo (2022) highlight that distributive leadership can be seen as a process based on everyday interactions of numerous leaders in the school, including organisational practices, structures and tools.

Distributed leadership is based on expertise rather than hierarchical authority and is spread over several individuals (Kortantamer, 2023). Distributed leadership does offer a new way of thinking about school leadership (Sahraee, 2021). According to Harris et al. (2022), distribution of leadership is a less structured model of leadership that is apart from the organisational hierarchy and provides individuals at all levels with leadership influence and duties. As a result, leadership tasks can be shared among numerous leaders who work together (Kortantamer, 2023). According to existing research, the essential functions of leadership must be spread. Setting directions and communicating a school vision, training and inspiring teachers, and monitoring and evaluating teachers' performance are all leadership duties (Sibanda, 2017). The workload of school leaders should be reduced by delegating leadership tasks to others in the school (Sahraee, 2021). Teachers' expectations, confidence, professional growth, inspiration, and satisfaction in schools are all enhanced when school leadership duties are spread (Sibanda, 2017). Furthermore, leadership distribution helps to improve school performance (Rosing & Buengeler, 2022). Working together fosters teachers' sentiments of being respected and supported in schools (Ereş & Akyürek, 2016). Distributed leadership also improves teachers' job satisfaction. Furthermore, distributed leadership has been identified as a potential contributor to good change and transformation in schools (Rosing & Buengeler, 2022). It also contributes in improving organisational

trust, support, and school achievement as it also involves learners especially in secondary schools (Phillips et al., 2023). Accordingly, Phillips et al. (2023) argued that distributed leadership involves giving learners significant responsibilities, such as peer mentoring and being part of school committees and the school governance. Therefore, distributive leadership styles can be more effective in leading for learner retention because learners may open up to each other to solve problems that might cause them to leave schools.

In summary, South Africa is working to remedy historical imbalances and injustices that resulted from prior apartheid policies. As a result, these leadership styles are promoted as the most effective means of equipping leaders to lead change (Kilicoglu, 2018). For instance, democratic leadership appears to be a technique of distributing decision-making power among all leaders within the institution to lead a change (Phillips et al., 2023). While transformational leadership enables and inspires people to grow and transform beyond their expectations to effectively lead change (Lewa et al., 2022). However, Kilicoglu (2018) believed that distributed leadership is an example of democratic leadership that fits into the transformational and democratic leadership styles since it allows all leaders to lead for a change and that it is a form of transformational leadership. The next section discusses effective means of leadership for learner retention.

2.5 STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION

Despite the attention given to the enhancing learner retention rates nationwide by using different strategies, early intervention, programmes, and incentives, the retention rates have not improved in schools (Caruth, 2018). However, SMT members need to increase learners' interests to want to be in the school and complete their education (Van Ameijde et al., 2018). Indeed, learner retention may be enhanced by SMT members through motivation, collaboration, efforts made by the Department of Education, intervention programmes and creation of conducive environment through effective communication (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

2.5.1 Motivation

Motivation is desperately needed to increase the learners' desire to remain in the school rather than leaving the school. This means that leadership for learner retention requires SMT members who are able to motivate, inspire, consider empowering people's behaviours and influence individuals to do what is expected of them (Tian & Zhang, 2020). Ali and Anwar (2021) assert that by recognising the achievement

of each member publicly can provide role modelling to others and this can generate competition among everyone. Linked to this study it is vital that SMT members may be motivated to work beyond while learners will develop an interest in the school. For example, learners can be given an opportunity to be part of school motivational activities which is essential to provide activities that boost persistence and a sense of belonging to increase learners' interest in remaining in school (Tinto, 2017). Ghimpau (2020) highlights that providing incentives in the form of awards can be the most effective strategy to keep groups motivated and willing to deliver at their best. However, incentives are mostly used by leaders to reward groups and attendants to increase their commitment in supporting long-term and continuous achievements (Ghimpau, 2020). Moreover, Van den Berg et al. (2021) assert that when talents are identified and developed this can help in addressing issues such as physical, mental, academic and psycho- social features that will improve learner retention. This shows that motivation can play a vital role in enhancing learner retention in secondary schools (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Linked to this study SMT members have an obligation to motivate learners and ensure that they are persuaded to want to be in the school until they complete their basic education.

2.5.2 Collaboration Among Education Stakeholders

Drawing from the Zulu proverb '*izandla ziyagezana*', which means people support each other, school leaders can work together with other stakeholders as a team in leading learner retention and success. For instance, Supasitthimethee et al. (2018) highlights that when all education stakeholders such as parents, policymakers, community members and educators, share responsibility, schools can continuously improve. This implies the involvement of parents and guardians because deciding on the schools for children to attend is a vital role of parents and learners themselves (Abdulkadiroğlu, 2015). Accordingly, researchers in Japan have noted that collaborative efforts can be a successful strategy for supporting learning (Agawa & Takeuchi, 2016). In agreement, Mbambo (2019, p. 114) notes that "collaborative initiatives are mostly comprised of unique individuals with unique and diverse talents; such initiatives should provide space and opportunity where varied individuals learn from each other in a shared-joined manner." This is because working as a team entails sharing responsibilities (Ralph & Wagner, 2018).

2.5.3 Early Identification and Intervention

This section discusses the influence of early identification and intervention in increasing the interest of learners to remain schooling. Mayet (2021) found that intervention and support are appropriate in leading to increase learner retention and reduce drop-outs rates. However, early intervention and effective advice

on learners at risk may have a positive influence on academic and non- academic issues (Zhang et al., 2014). According to them, such issues can lead to better results in retaining learners in the schools. Furthermore, early identification of learners at risk can enable the early use of intervention strategies for the behavioural difficulties that children experience (Zhang et al., 2014). It emerges from the literature that SMT members have to support the learners and ensure responsibility and accountability by identifying learners' problems, as well as their causes; and proposing solutions (Van Der Voort & Wood, 2014). Linked to this view, Manyanga et al. (2022) states that the more supporting the institutions become, the more learners return to finish their studies. Moreover, the impact of early intervention on at-risk students' academic progress was investigated by Zhang et al. (2014) who found that a minority serving schools implements an intervention programme that provides at-risk students with counselling and motivation. Pupils' attendance is also tracked and assessed to see if early intervention can have an impact on at-risk students' chances of success to remain in the school.

In terms of the National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996, schools use learner attendance registers to keep records of learner attendance in the schools (Department of Basic Education, 2010). When, according to these records a learner is marked absent for at least 10 consecutive days the school leaders must try to intervene and contact the families of such learners (Department of Basic Education, 2010). Yet, the class registers are controlled by teachers in classes who sometimes forget or sent prefects to mark registers meaning there is no uniformity in place to keep these records reliable for early intervention (Mojapelo, 2022). Another programmes include identifying learners' talents and invite experts so that it is developed. According to Van den Berg et al. (2021), when talents are identified and developed this can help in addressing issues such as physical, mental, academic and psycho-social features that will improve learner retention. Their preliminary findings, based on the matching sample approach, reveal that at-risk students who receive additional motivation are more likely to pass the course than those who do not. They also discovered that a student's prior grades and gender have statistically significant effects on their academic success. These findings add to the growing body of evidence that early intervention programmes can help students succeed.

2.5.4 Efforts Made by the Department of Basic Education

Other important programmes are those designed by the Department of Education and implemented in schools to improve learner retention. For example, after introducing free primary education in public primary schools in the central zone of the Malindi sub-county of Kenya, the retention rates increased

(Kumanda et al., 2017). Shindler et al. (2016) notes that an ongoing public awareness campaign programme may increase parents' understanding of the need to send learners to school. Moreover, as alluded in Chapter One, there are efforts made by the Department of Basic Education that are already in place as measures of enhancing learner retention. For example, inclusive education policy, learner attendance policies and the provincial control of learner attendance through South African Schools Administration and Management Systems (SA-SAMS). And more so the supporting programmes such as school learner transport, school feeding schemes, orphaned, vulnerable children programmes, and individualised incentives. Muljana and Luo (2019) and Sitao (2018) found that learner retention has improved through the School Nutrition Programme because learners must be well-nourished to fully participate in education.

Knowing that some of the basic needs in the lives of humans is shelter therefore the South African government established the Reconstruction and Development Programmes (RDP) to provide a shelter to families who are unemployed and vulnerable (Greyling, 2009). Linked to learner retention these houses secure the learners and are now able to attend from well-resourced homes. Also, schools are allocated funds to maintain and improve the schools' building to create an environment that a learner would want to be around and continue with their studies (DBE, 2012). Above all it is also evident that the Department of Education introduced the inclusive education policy to accommodate all learners in the schools irrespective of their special needs as per their rights to education (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). Inclusive education may sometimes cause learners to drop out. Andrews et al. (2021) specified that learners who experience learning challenges are at risk of not gaining access to a fair and equal education chances in South African schools. However, Adewumi and Mosito (2019) found that teachers are faced with diverse challenges in applying the inclusion of learners with special needs. According to them these challenges included lack of parental involvement, overcrowded classrooms, scarcity of resources and more they are lacking skills to assist learners as they are not specialists.

2.5.5 Contextualising Curriculum

Curriculum management, according to Smith (2019), stems from the connection between strategic planning at the provincial, district, and school levels in order to address issues such as failure, dropout, educator and learner absenteeism, and indiscipline before the content is planned. Mathipa et al. (2012) indicated that SMT as established in the new educational privilege plays a role of providing leadership guidance by directing and assisting in the teaching and learning. Most of research focuses on curriculum

management at the macro level rather than classroom practice. Contextualising curriculum is among a list of 31 characteristics that may affect curriculum effectiveness (Ngidi & Qwabe, 2006). Hence, it calls for a productive collaboration between school leaders, learners, and parents in the development of a teaching and learning culture. According to the report presented by the National Education Evaluation & Development Unit (2018), contextualising curriculum can create a strong bridge between school and home. The social backdrop of the school, the character of school culture, will influence how it is learning oriented. Also, the good use of resources, and the level of leadership distribution within the school are all factors of a contextualised curriculum (Nadeem, 2024). It is also advisable for school managers to design the curriculum around the school context (contextualisation) because learners understand their context. It was evident in a study carried out by Karp et al. (2017) that the retention of learners increased under contextualised teaching. McLeod (2019) conducted a study to observe the results of inserting program-specific and contextualised modules into an online course in the United States. Notably, this study saw an increase in student retention rate, which proved the effectiveness of a broader delivery of contextualised teaching. These conversations have demonstrated the importance of good leadership abilities in leading for learner retention even though it is influenced by some of the practise in education. It also involves the influence of departmental policies and guidelines; grade retention; implementation of National Policy on Promotion Requirements; learner disciplinary procedures.

2.5.6 Creating Welcoming Environment

It is of vital importance that SMT members need to create a conducive, safe and welcoming environment where everyone feels comfortable to express their feelings. According to Andrews and Almoham (2022), conducive environment directly reflects on learners, and they develop an interest to keep enrolling in the same school to complete their education. In elaboration, when the SMT keeps the doors open and listens to everybody including parents, teachers, and learners, a conducive environment is established (Elmazi, 2018). Moreover, according to Munna and Kalam (2021), teachers promote engaging and creative learning environments for learners to feel free to communicate their challenges. Additionally, Munna and Kalam (2021) revealed that effective leadership means allow teachers to create a friendly environment with learners to increase their expectations eventually learners will remain in the school opportunities. Shava and Ndebele (2016) further noted that principals are accountable for building an atmosphere conducive to good teaching and learning. Correspondingly, Ntuli et al. (2023) stated that the conformability of the school environment inspires both teachers and learners to participate effectively in the teaching and learning process. As such, emancipatory objectives in educational research have long

promised to give under-represented and marginalised people a voice. It is increasingly a characteristic of policies and programmes aimed at enhancing young participation and civic inclusion. Voice has been critiqued for a variety of reasons, ranging from providing just cosmetic forms of inclusion to the problem of power in the selective granting of voice. Tinto (2017) further suggested that learner retention can be improved by listening to learners' voices and engaging in partnerships with them. What can be learned from feminist and other critical attention to boosting voice in education and listening to learners' voices can promote equity and wider involvement in education (Tinto, 2017). It is also imperative to keep learners safe and always under the care of the teachers. Netshitangani (2014) stated that it is an unprofessional conduct of teachers to leave the class unattended as it may contribute to a chaos in the class without a teacher.

2.6 EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMES IN PLACE

Knowing that learners' decisions for leaving school before time is a long process related to several factors mean SMT members are supposed to practice early intervention to enhance learners' retention (Kaplan & Yahia, 2017; Zuilkowski et al., 2016), Some of these intervention programmes are briefly discussed below.

2.6.1 Programme of Hope

Hope is related to both academic success and overall well-being in children (Pedrotti, 2018). It is also an important source for grown-ups working with young people like teachers and learners, in relations to holding views of hope among them (Murdoch & Larsen, 2018). Cherrington (2017) argue that hope is critical in developing learners' interests to continue with education, therefore there are programmes in place intended to assist both teachers and learners. For instance, the Programme of Hope which is a programme used worldwide to help in changing learners' attitudes towards the schools. According to Hester (2019), this programme can change the academic and lifestyle for all learners enrolled in the programme. This programme is a curriculum-based aftercare treatment programme for chronic, high-risk immature lawbreakers who are released from secure custody (Pedrotti, 2018). Small achievements are celebrated as the habitual offender's worries of the outside world are addressed. The programme uses a combination of lifestyle and life skill treatment methods in an integrated educational approach to healthy decision-making to treat inadequately socialised adolescent offenders.

2.6.2 The School of Life

The school of life programme is used internationally to increase learner retention rates in schools. For example, a study conducted by Hawken et al. (2018) in the United States found that students' interest increased after participating in the School of Life intervention programme, offered as an in-school detention and suspension programme. A study conducted by Sujatha and Kavitha (2018) revealed that motivation, perceived effectiveness, and self-efficacy can play a vital role in enhancing learner retention. It is essential to look at the issues that boost persistence and a sense of belonging to increase learners' interest in remaining in school (Tinto, 2017). Additionally, the introduction of the Basic Education Assistant Module programme in the Zimbabwean schools is a government programme that assists learners in need (Taurai & Hlatshwayo, 2012).

2.6.3 Office of Student Advocacy

The Office of Student Advocacy is a globally used programme to keep the government accountable for youth education and get all children to complete their basic education to accomplish the SDG agenda (Gronne, 2022). It highlights a collaboration that aims to better integrate the school issue resolution process and learner contribution into school governance decision-making to ensure learner retention. It also aims to increase the effectiveness of learners' voices in interacting with decision-makers to improve student satisfaction, success, and retention and to remove barriers to student involvement (Allen & Nichols, 2017). This strategy incorporates a variety of techniques to encourage meaningful data collecting, mentoring, training, and learner participation in conversations that span the domains of prevention, early intervention, and post-intervention in governance involvement. Learners' skills, knowledge, partnership, and ownership of school governance are all anticipated to improve (Allen & Nichols, 2017). Similarly, the Australian researchers, Allen and Nichols (2017), found that establishing the Office of Student Advocacy to inform decision-makers about learner's concern was successful in keeping learners in school to complete their education.

2.7 THE INFLUENCE OF POLICIES ON LEARNER RETENTION

For school administrators, context is becoming increasingly important (Bush 2011). The transformation from a racially stratified to a united non-racist education system in South Africa has drastically altered the policy context for school leaders and managers (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). Nevertheless, reform measures have had a limited impact for many reasons. Continuing challenges of profoundly established class and racial attitudes dating back to apartheid, chronic lack of physical and human resources, educator under-training and development, and perceived SGB ineptitude are among them. Moreover, as seen in

the evaluations of the Quality Learning Project, school leadership and enhanced leadership for teaching and learning have shown some improvement (McBrayer, 2020). However, learner-teacher violence, especially in secondary schools has slowed progress (Makhasane & Majong, 2023). According to school-leaving examination (matric) results and elementary school annual national assessment findings, many schools continue to deliver substandard education for the learners (Wolhuter, 2014). Ngcobo and Tikly (2010) also mentioned that the impact of ethnic identities and values, which is made worse by the changeability of learner populations, particularly in urban schools.

I was noticeable that there were extensive quantitative differences in secondary school transitions across participants in different racial categories. The minority White population was consistently able to achieve both more and better education. As a result of apartheid-era regulations and differences in funding, South Africa is faced with considerable discrepancy in school environments such as high educational standards in big cities than in other areas (Mckeever, 2017). For example, inadequate facilities continue to infect schools in townships, rural areas, and informal settlements more than in big cities while the country no longer allow the obvious opportunities by racial groups (Wolhuter, 2014). Regardless of these inequalities particularly the South African Schools Act (1996) have a significant impact on school leadership. Leadership in schools, like in any other organisation, entails the design of policies to attain educational goals through the organisation, decision-making, and control (Mestry & Du Plessis, 2020). Effective policies can help students to do better in school, which can lead to higher retention rates. This suggests that successful leadership for learner retention may require an ongoing evaluation of guiding policies to ensure that they remain relevant to the school context (Bhengu & Myende, 2016). According to educational leadership literature, there is still a lot of misconception among educators about policies that can help SMT members establish commitment and accountability (Mpungose & Ngwenya, 2017). Some of these guiding policies are discussed in the following section.

2.7.1 Policies Intended to Retain Learners

The South African education management system is decentralised across four levels from national to province, to districts, and to local schools. The DBE's Policy on the Organisation, Roles, and Responsibilities of Education Districts (DBE, 2013). clearly states that education districts play a key role in school success and in ensuring that all learners have access to high-quality education. Specifically, the policy mandates district offices to: "work collaboratively with principals and educators in schools, with the vital assistance of circuit offices, to improve educational access and retention, give management and

professional support, and help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching” (DBE, 2013, p.11). However, in reality, this practice is limited especially in underprivileged communities. Confirming this, Myende et al. (2020) posited that district officials in poor communities spend most of their time attending to community issues more than their professional obligations. This policy thus, re-affirms the role of SMT members in the delivery of quality education and confirms their responsibilities for school improvement and broader educational reforms. Existing evidence on the role of the SMT members in school improvement shows the significance of school district leadership in driving educational reform initiatives (Bantwini, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004), with districts as a conduit between government and schools (Bantwini & Diko, 2011).

Cost of education and the policy interventions to minimize the negative impact of high school fees and other hidden costs were either too cumbersome to implement (such as school fee exemptions) or were not fully understood by both schools and parents (such as no-fee schools). Therefore, the issue of free education should become central to the debate. The weaknesses in policy monitoring, related to that issue, ensures that policy intentions translate to real benefits for learners from relatively poor communities. An example of monitoring the implementation was cited, following reports that there were no-fee schools that were still charging school fees. Inconsistencies in policy intentions, where some policy intentions appeared to contradict other policy instruments. An example that was cited related to the Department’s clear intent to retain learners in the schooling system as far as possible, was that pregnant girls were encouraged to take leaves (Birungi et al., 2015).

Leading for learner retention necessitates professional leadership and management teams capable of dealing with challenges democratically, considering everyone’s rights and obligations (Mthiyane et al., 2014). It also entails excellent educational provision management to improve learners’ rates of completion of a full cycle of basic education (Sabates et al., 2010). Appanah and Pillay (2020) studied the impact of leadership styles in retaining millennials at a South African organization. Even though the study was conducted at a company, it indicated that effective leaders demonstrate appropriate leadership styles such as developing strong relationships, enhancing leadership abilities, setting clear objectives, and encouraging teamwork (Huong, 2020). According to the findings of a study conducted by Venketsamy (2021), principals and all other stakeholders are accountable for building an atmosphere conducive to good teaching and learning and should be strategic in their leadership responsibilities integration. In support, findings from a study by Seary and Willans (2020) indicated that constructive relations in a

caring and supportive learning environment may eventually develop learner's interest and retention in the schools.

2.7.2 Grade Retention

The school managers as instructional leaders are supposed to follow departmental guidelines and make informed decisions that promote effective teaching and learning in the schools (Mphale, 2014). Some of these guidelines and decisions may seriously affect the retention of learners. For example, it is lawful that learners struggling with academic performance can be retained to repeat the grade or progress to the next grade; even when they have not met the required standards (Carroll, 2018). It is also the departmental policy practice of keeping a learner to repeat the same grade when identified as failing to keep up with peers and do not meet the requirements to be promoted to the next grade (Gallagher et al., 2021). Kumanda et al. (2017) argued that learners' retention in public schools was low because of learners who repeated the grades (grade retention). Moreover, grade retention can be associated with high drop-out rates because learners who are repeating the grade may sometimes feel demotivated and leave the schooling system (Grossen et al., 2017). This is aligned with the idea that grade retention can be associated with high drop-out rates because retained learners may feel demotivated and leave the schooling system (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022). Moreover, Martorell and Mariano (2017) found that grade retention in secondary schools increases the occurrence of chronic absenteeism that lead to learners dropping out of school. Similarly, a study conducted by Hadebe and Moosa (2022) revealed that this practice affects most learners as they sometimes they find themselves being bullied by peers and teachers, which make them to feel forsaken and leave the school. This is an indication that grade retention in secondary schools has a negative influence on learner retention (Goos et al., 2021). Sometimes, slow learners would be persuaded by the teachers to opt for community training centres, especially when they reach Grades 10 and 11 since it is assumed that they will cause the pass rate for Grade 12 to drop down (Carroll, 2018).

2.7.3 Implementation of National Policies

The National Programme and Promotion Requirements (NPPPR) as an official curriculum document that emphasises learners' assessment as part of the performance strategy (DBE, 2011). The National Protocol on Assessment, together with the National Policy on Promotion Requirements, stipulate that the implementation of these policies has an impact on learner promotion and progression (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013; Van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). However, the National Protocol on Assessment has been criticised

for being mute on the task's quality and for allowing for a variety of methods and inconsistencies that undermine assessment quality at the micro-level (Du Plessis & Marais, 2015; Van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). For example, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) implemented the progression law in the Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools in 1998 to ensure that no student is kept in a phase for more than four years (DBE, 1998). Besides ensuring that learners are kept in a phase for a maximum of four years, this policy also ensures that learners progress through a phase with the appropriate age cohort (DBE, 1998).

Teachers are very uncomfortable with the way that the National Policy On the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the national curriculum statement Grades R-12 (NPPPR) practice is enacted. The challenges with its implementation emanate from the fact that teachers were not trained on how to enact the National Policy On the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the national curriculum statement Grades R-12 (Carifio, 2010). Observations suggest that only SMTs received training on NPPPR. Even though SMTs are responsible for the management of assessment but teachers remain responsible for assessing learners in different subjects. As a result, this seems to constitute multiple interpretations of enacting NPPPR. Furthermore, teachers claimed that Provincial Education Departments add more confusion with the circulars that demand them to adjust marks for underperforming learners so that they can qualify for the promotion (Kika & Kotze, 2019). It seems that some provincial education departments have abdicated the responsibility to support the low achievers instead, they have formulated circulars to override the policy and force teachers to manipulate learners' marks. This suggests that the true reflection of progressed learners is hidden, thus, slow learners are not given the necessary support rather they are being promoted to the next grade without attaining promotion requirements (Van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). Accordingly, this practice promotes a sense of power among learners and parents who demand this practice if teachers fail them.

Additionally, teachers are struggling with learners' disinterest and disengagement in teaching and learning. In similar, Xu et al. (2021) raised a concern about new generation employees that they are the main force of the organisation, but their behaviour is directly affecting the organisation's future development. Often learners who are automatically progressed absent themselves from school with the knowledge that they would progress to the next grade regardless of their performance. These experiences render both teachers and learners demotivated and seem to promote dishonesty and unethical assessment practices. Linked to learner retention these learners who are automatically advanced frequently skip

school because they know that regardless of their performance they will be promoted but, on the way they get demotivated as they will get worse and underachieving (Van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). It is through this process of being reflexive that teachers have to engage in interpreting the inclusive education policy to ensure its proper implementation and to navigate mechanisms to cope with problems in their current practices (Van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). For example, a study conducted by Themane and Thobejane (2018), in Limpopo province, indicated that, despite the lack of resources to implement inclusive education as described in policy guidelines, teachers try to adjust their planning and available resources to accommodate all learners as per inclusive education. Their reflexive positions are brought by the knowledge that they should be following particular practices articulated in the National Protocol on Assessment Policy which promulgates fair, honest, ethical, and just assessments.

2.7.4 Learner Disciplinary Procedures

According to Alidzulwi (2000), discipline problems have reached frightening proportions in Venda, South Africa's Limpopo Province, because regular classroom routines are no longer prioritised, to the point that certain schools have become battlegrounds. Learners have little respect for their teachers, while educators go on strike, hold sit-ins, and chalk-downs because some have lost faith in their professions (Alidzulwi, 2000). This has resulted in the break-down of the disciplinary structure in schools. Furthermore, for example, the delay caused by the Provincial Department of Education policy on attending to learner disciplinary procedures, after they have committed serious crimes (Agbomeji, 2016). Such delays can send a wrong message to learners who are suspended while the department is following up on their cases then they can drop out before the school receives a response (Agbomeji, 2016). Therefore, the SMT members have a major role to play in following up on such cases, as they affect leading to learner retention. Besides, Muiru's (2022) study revealed that it is imperative for teachers to develop a useful connection with their learners to allow their holistic development to attain greater things in their lives. However, there are factors that affect them in their leadership. The following section discusses factors that affect leading for learner retention.

2.8 FACTORS AFFECTING LEADING FOR LEARNER RETENTION

Learner retention, according to (Muljana & Luo (2019), is influenced by school retention strategies, learner personal issues, and conditional factors. This emphasises the importance of school leaders comprehending these conditional difficulties to increase their ability to lead for learner retention (Sarker et al., 2019). Yet, it is critical to comprehend the factors that cause learners to drop out of school before

finishing (Dalangin, 2018). Several factors influence learners' chances of finishing secondary school (Sabates et al., 2010). These factors vary from personal, school, familial to socio-economic factors and they all affect leading for learner retention in schools, according to a substantial body of research (Begizew, 2015; Sarker et al., 2019). The section that follows discusses the related literature on the factors that affect leading for learner retention.

2.8.1 Personal Related Factors

Personal characteristics such as psychological stress, age and race were found to be significant predictors of attrition in a more recent study (Payne et al., 2024). Adams and Blair (2019) found no evidence that stress was a factor in learners who dropped out of school, they notice that successful learners are helped with studying and time management. Moreover, learner retention is mostly influenced by personal factors that originate within each learner such as ill health, academic self-perception, attitudes toward teachers and school, goal valuation, and lack of motivation are all examples of such factors (Balkis et al., 2016). These factors are discussed in the following section.

2.8.1.1 Learners Ill Health

Fornander and Kearney (2020) and Finning and Moore (2019) confirmed that an individual's ill- health is the highest factor that negatively influences the retention of learners in the schools. This is because ill health may cause depression and exhaustion (Finning & Moore, 2019). However, depression in young learners may lead to social withdrawal, lack of motivation, sleep disorder, low enthusiasm, and loneliness (Gill, 2016). This shows that learners may leave the school before completion. Tucker (2019) asserted that to leave school before completion is a personal decision made when learners feel that it is their best option considering personal and humiliating problems. For example, early pregnancy, peer pressure, poverty, and young parenthood are seen as the main personal factors that negatively affect learners' retention (Tucker, 2019). Peer pressure is likely to affect learners in secondary schools, especially girls in many ways and this hurts SMT members' ways of leading for learner retention (Beyers, 2018). Even though the SMT members are guided by policies that protect school-going children, there are learners' feelings that are beyond control, such as the feeling of rejection and bullying (Finning & Moore, 2019).

2.8.1.2 Attitudes Towards Teachers and School

Learner and teacher motivation and attitude are of great importance to the study of learner retention in schools (Davidse, 2015). Therefore, SMT members are supposed to maintain a good relationship with

learners to motivate learners to want to be in the school. In agreement, Sahin et al. (2016) revealed that learners who cannot sustain a good personal relationship with peers and teachers are likely to dislike school. Therefore, leaders are supposed to promote engaging and creative learning environment for the learners to come up with new ideas (Munna & Kalam, 2021). Other factors include being disbelieved, experiencing disorderly support, and being unfairly punished (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Furthermore, the harsh and oppressive attitude of the teachers toward learners who perform poorly may also cause them to give up (Sahin et al., 2016). Moreover, a study conducted by Peguero et al. (2019) found that there were multidimensional school factors correlated to school disorders that influenced learners' retention in schools relative to race and gender. Therefore, SMT members' commitment plays an essential part in attracting learners' interest and love to remain in school (Al-Shammari, 2016). Based on such issues, Teuscher and Makarova (2018) posited that the more there is a good relationship, leading for learner retention will improve.

2.8.1.3 Feeling of Rejection

The feeling of rejection is one of the factors that affect learners, especially in the secondary schools which makes them reluctant to continue with their studies (Birungi et al., 2015). Since the introduction of democracy in South Africa in 1994, several new education policies and guidelines have been developed intending to effect change in the system of education (Morifi, 2018). It is also stated clearly that:

“Schools in the basic education system will ensure the retention of pregnant learners during their pregnancy and make provision for their short-, medium- and long -term absences during the term of their pregnancies”.

Furthermore, the Department of Education introduced awareness programmes for school leaders and other stakeholders to empower with understanding and how they are supposed to accommodate learners who are pregnant (Morifi, 2018). However, even though the SMT members are guided by these policies, but still there are learners' feelings that are beyond control, such as the feeling of rejection. For instance, the policy for pregnant learners affirms the right of a pregnant learner to remain in school during her pregnancy and to return as soon after giving birth as is appropriate for both the learner and her child (Ramulumo & Pitsoe, 2013). They further explained that this policy is not easy to implement because teachers lack skills of taking care for pregnant learners and this could be risky to unborn children. Birungi et al. (2015) further argued that the re- enrolment of learners into the school system after pregnancy is affected by the truth that the implementation of these policies is often ignored and more so learners feel

rejected by some educators and learners. This indicates that in most countries in Africa, policies are not properly used. It is therefore imperative for SMT members to ensure that school policies are in place and properly implemented. Moreover, it is a need for the SMT members to obtain critical skills to be able to manage all policies as required by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Ramalumo & Pitsoe, 2013). The next paragraph discusses the influence of school-related factors that affect SMTs in leading to learner retention.

2.8.1.4 Lack of Information

Consistent with other researchers in this field, Mulaudzi and Rankakane's (2018) study confirmed that the low retention rate is more pronounced among females than male learners due to vulnerability and lack of information. For example, in many cases, older girls are responsible for taking care of other siblings and household chores, in the absence of their mothers, and so are unable to schedule a time for their schoolwork (Fuzy, 2016). Teuscher and Makarova (2018) posited that leading for learner retention may be effective when SMT members take a lead in assisting learners who are vulnerable and at-risk, by giving them relevant information and support. Having discussed the factors that negatively affect leading for learner retention in schools, it appears that there is a need for the schools to put more effort into leading-learners for learner retention. The next section discusses the ways that are successful in enhancing learners' retention.

2.8.2 School Related Factors

There are multidimensional school factors correlated to school disorders that influenced learners' retention in schools (Peguero et al., 2019). It emerges from the literature that SMT members have to support the school setup and ensure responsibility and accountability by identifying learners' problems, as well as their causes; and proposing solutions (Van Der Voort & Wood, 2016). The setup issues include the school's organisational structure, such as extracurricular activities, safety and security, learners' services, and processes that enhance overall learner perseverance and learner retention (Tambone, 2012). However, when the school setup is not supported, there is a possibility of learners' interest to attend school being interrupted (Begizew, 2015). A study conducted by Kirimi and Moteti (2016), in the central zone of Malindi, found that indiscipline such as truancy, irresponsible sexual behaviour in form of early pregnancies, and prostitution because of the high numbers of tourists found in this area is an important influence towards learner retention rates. It is also increasingly noted that academic performance, departmental guidelines, learner disciplinary procedures, and leadership approaches

influence learner retention in schools (Begizew, 2015).

2.8.2.1 Academic Performance

Academic performance is the most influential and unpredictable outcome of leading to learner retention (Casanova et al., 2018). Likewise, learners' academic performance is the most powerful predictor of learners' retention followed by the level of leaders' commitment within the school (Dalangin, 2018). It is the responsibility of the SMT members to emphasise the quality of teaching, check on learner discipline, propose programmes that address barriers to learning, and ensure the equal opportunities to learning (Dlamini, 2012). For instance, teachers try to incorporate variety of teaching and learning strategies and approaches while the main intention is to ensure equal opportunity for the learners so that they can develop love for the subject content (Munna & Kalam, 2021). Accordingly, Munna and Kalam (2021), teachers need to prepare lesson plans accordingly to meet the learning objectives of all learners because at times they can be disruptive just because they have some barriers in learning. Munna and Kalam (2021) further noted that the teachers' effectiveness in teaching and learning involves the understanding of the subject content, how to teach, when to teach, where to teach and why is it taught which entails proper planning.

Moreover, Ayua (2017) noted that teaching is not an art but a science therefore for effective teaching and learning there must be sufficient resources and suitable planning. For Ayua (2017) planning makes educators to be familiar with what to be taught and it is a guide to effective teaching and serves as a reminder. Similarly, Raba (2017) highlighted that the main objective of teaching is to ensure that learners are learning because if there is no teaching it means the goal for learners to learn will never be accomplished. Furthermore, Moore (2017) carried out a study to find out preventative methods to keep learners from quitting schools before completion. The study found that poor academic performance and falling behind in schoolwork were the most common reasons why learners quit (Moore, 2017). This finding is in line with Mboweni's (2014) findings, that learners who performed far below average were likely to develop hatred towards schooling. Moore (2017) suggested that SMT members must monitor learner progression, provide academic support and keep to departmental guidelines such as learners' progression requirements.

2.8.2.2 Lack of Good Leadership Skills

Principals and SMT members are supposed to take a lead in playing their leadership roles in making certain that learners develop an interest to remain in the school until they complete their studies (Oni et

al., 2016). For example, school leaders need to locate learning at the centre of their core business of the day and use types of leadership skills to improve teaching and learning in the schools (Lumad, 2017). This means as school leaders they are committed to play an essential role in attracting learners' interest and love to remain in school (Al-Shammari, 2016). It is important to highlight that the government uses a large portion of its money on education. The education allocates these funds to the schools to improve and support schools in providing resources needed to according to its enrolment. In explanation, "the school allocation is an amount of money that Government gives to each public ordinary school every year to improve education at the school on the basis of how many learners there are in a school" (Department of Education, 2004). Therefore, poor leadership affects the parents' and learners' image of the school and they decide on leaving school A for school B which in turn disturbs the learner retention rate (Ahlstrom, 2013). Furthermore, Naidoo (2019) argued that school leaders may generate good leadership skills if they are trained and professionally developed with leadership programmes before they assume their duties. Hence, in South Africa, there is currently no predominant principal preparation or certification programmes (Naidoo, 2019).

Accordingly, a study conducted by Peguero et al. (2019) found that there were multidimensional challenges that influenced learners' retention in secondary schools which are linked to the lack of good leadership skills. For example, Mthiyane et al. (2014) emphasised that school in all if faced with many challenges therefore requires leaders with good leadership skills. These challenges include poor learning infrastructure, unemployment, substance abuse and business facilities around schools such as clubs and taverns (Makorani & Muli, 2017). Moreover, another noticeable challenge facing leadership in schools is that many SMT members are not sure of their roles and duties of working as a team as stated in the personnel administrative measures (PAM) document (Maja, 2016). This explains that some schools are unable to enhance learner retention due to leaders who lack good leadership skills and do not adapt to changes, by often visiting current documents in hand. Therefore, there is a need for the department to develop programmes for SMT members on different aspects of leadership such as understanding policies, curriculum management, human resource management, and school safety and security (Agbomeji, 2016).

Accordingly, managers, especially the principals, should be continuously evaluated to ensure that they remain updated about current issues which help them deal with challenges (Pillay, 2016). It emerges from the literature that even though schools are guided by departmental policies but they are mostly influenced by school leadership practices and leaders' workload. Pillay (2016) noted that the SMT

members are highly engaged in the development, but the quality is reduced because of time. This suggests the need for the National Department of Education to evaluate school SMT members' workload, as they are supposed to be more engaged in ensuring the school's effectiveness (Pillay, 2016).

2.8.3 The Socio-Economic and Cultural Standards

Jugmohan (2015) and Mogashoa and Mboweni (2017) emphasised socio-economic factors as the key factors that influence the retention of learners in schools. A study conducted by Wanyonyi (2018), in the Msambweni sub-county in Kenya, revealed that there is a close relationship between socio-economic status and learner retention. Also, findings from previous studies showed that many learners in high socio-economic schools hardly considered dropping out of school and family challenges were often cited as a major reason for dropping out of school (Roman, 2022). This shows that the lower the social-economic condition, the lower the retention rates in schools. It appears from the literature that many schools in South Africa are characterised by traumatised communities due to apartheid practices (McKeever, 2017). Such communities find it difficult to be part of their children's schooling, thus in the next section, I critically examine social-economic factors that might lower the retention rates in schools.

2.8.3.1 Family Influence

Initially, parents control the final decision of children to attend school and often influence the nature of a children's participation in education including the schools where they had to attend. In reality, deciding on the school for children to attend is a vital role of parents and learners (Abdulkadiroğlu, 2015). Therefore, parents should know from a fact that their children need their emotional support and guidance more than providing learning material (Abdulkadiroğlu, 2015). This suggests that the support that children receive from their families may influence persistence in school. It is anticipated that to increase learners' potential for schooling, it is imperative that learners gain support from their families, communities as well as in the schools (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). This is further supported by Lara and Saracosti (2019) who stated that family and parental involvement in schools is a key aspect of children's achievement and interest to be in school. A study by Abdulkadiroğlu (2015) found that when families and schools share responsibilities through coordination, collaboration, and working in harmony the learner retention rate increases. This suggests that an important part of any plan to lead to learner retention is for school leaders to improve the family-school relationship, as well as parental involvement in education (Ross, 2016). Moreover, the support children receive from their parents encourages their persistence in school (Gobena, 2018). Gobena (2018) further elaborated that to increase learners'

potential for schooling it is imperative to involve parents because they gain support from their parents. This is related to Mbokodi and Singh (2011) who described parental support in learners' education as an effective support but it is lacking due to issues originating from young parents and their poor education who are supposed to take part in their children education. Linked to these views it also apparent that many schools in South Africa are still considered as less educated communities due to apartheid practices and parents hardly take part in their children' s education. Many challenges prevent parents and their families from helping their children, including low-income status, family conflict, lack of information, social deprivation and unemployment.

2.8.3.2 Learners from Low-Income Families

The support that learners obtain in their education has influenced their interest to want to be in the school (Kirui et al., 2015). According to Mogashoa and Mboweni (2017), parents are the ones who control their children's decision to attend school. Literature confirms that low learners' retention rates are strongly influenced by parents of learners from low-income families who undervalued their children's education (Foy, 2018). It is evident that children raised in low-income families are likely to develop social problems which can demoralise learning achievement and lose interest in schooling (Engle & Black, 2008). The same views coincide with findings from a study conducted by Kainuwa et al. (2017) which revealed that the majority of secondary schools failed to retain learners who come from low-income households as they are faced with social problems. It is also noted that learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds often lack financial and educational support and have limited access to educational resources due to poverty (So-Oabeb, 2021). The latter agrees with Kirimi and Moteti (2016) who asserted that the income of the parent harms learners' retention because it affects the accessibility of sufficient resources. Furthermore, the study conducted by Gershenson et al. (2017) found that in North Carolina the learner retention is lower among learners from low-income families. This has also been evident during the global COVID-19 pandemic lockdown when learners from low-income households dropped out since they were unable to attend online classes because they do not have reliable internet access (Goudeau, 2021). Bhatti et al. (2017) opined that parents from low-income families are likely to put more effort into their children's education since they are aware of its importance and see it as a way out of poverty.

2.8.3.3 Living with Family Conflicts

The impact of family conflicts on children's schooling has a long-term effect such that they may perform badly and develop negative attitudes towards school (Ndayambaje et al., 2020). However, Ndayambaje et

al. (2020) further noted that families continue to stay together even when it is inappropriate to protect their children and do not understand the effect of living with family conflict. Moreover, Stempel et al. (2017) asserted that numerous learners living with family conflict are psychologically affected, physically affected, and develop unsuitable behaviours such as using unacceptable words from fighting family and becoming bullies and will eventually leave or expelled from school. Yet learners with conflicting interactions with families are at risk to leave schooling because it affects them and becomes bully at times (Rubbi Nunan, 2022). Furthermore, conflicts amongst families are more powerful than conflicts in other institutions and controlling them may be difficult whilst it is damaging children's school attendance (Ndayambaje et al., 2020). Family conflicts are much more disturbing for SMT members to lead to retention therefore these learners may need protection from the law to freely continue with their education (Stempel et al., 2017).

2.8.3.4 Child-Headed Families

According to Nyaradzo (2013), CHH are those households where all children younger than 18 years of age and the eldest becomes responsible for the rest. According to Nyaradzo (2013), CHH come with many problems such as reduced opportunities for education and psycho-social problems. It is imperative to highlight that it is not only orphans who become CHH but can be a result of socio-economic development issues. These issues include desertion, migrant work, deprivation, and displacement and they remain a severe problem that requires early intervention (Pillay, 2016). Furthermore, young children can be emotionally and psychologically affected by out-of-school needs and responsibilities such as family needs and family changes, for example, child-headed families. The study conducted by Nyaradzo (2013) also found that most challenges facing learners from CHH are absenteeism, poor performance, sexual abuse, lack of adequate food and school needs, poverty, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy. This finding agrees with Olmstead (2020) who asserted that young learners during adolescent stage involve in sexual relationships and experiences from child-headed families have truancy problems and are often absent from school. It also arises from the existing literature that these challenges may cause learners to lose interest in their schooling career because it is challenging for a child to take care of their siblings in the absence of a parent (Davidse, 2015). The children from CHH are deprived of their rights as stated in term of Act no. 28(f) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa No. 108, 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996), which states that:

“Every child has the right- not to be required or permitted to perform work or provide

services that- (i) are inappropriate for a person of that child's age; or (ii) place at risk the child's well-being, education, physical or mental health or spiritual, moral or social development" (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

The quotation indicates the rights for every child in South Africa as stated in term of Act no. 28(f) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa No. 108, 1996. Furthermore, Pillay (2016) asserted that children from CHH have to deal with the challenges of being disadvantaged, marginalized, and discriminated against in terms of their human rights and dignity by not having adult caregivers. These challenges may include lack of time, lack of resources, and relationship breakdown therefore it may affect children intellectually (UKEssays, 2018). Initially, children who are faced with challenges have long-term problems with skill development because they lack opportunities to practice (UKEssays, 2018). This finding implies that CHH had a negative influence on every learner coming from that household. Therefore, it calls for SMT members to ensure that effective policies and programmes are in place and implemented to address the problem to prevent learners from leaving the school before time.

2.8.3.5 Learning Environment and Societal Culture

The socio-economic position of a children's parents affects the educational development and achievement of the children (Machebe et al., 2017). For example, unemployment can lead to low income and create long-lasting unhappiness for family members since they are directly affected and more so it can spread over to children (Machebe et al., 2017). Furthermore, Li and Qiu (2018) argued that learners' school attendance is highly affected by the environment in which they grow and by the cultural behaviours and resources available. For instance, families who are non- educated may not be able to contribute to their children's schoolwork and this can make them fall behind and quit. Furthermore, Mabhoyi and Seroto (2019) conducted a study to explore the impact of social-related circumstances on at-risk learners in Chitungwiza secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The study found that at-risk learners experienced poor social conditions in Zimbabwe, such as social and cultural conditions. For instance, learners who walked long distances to school without transport could not attend school when there were heavy rains and were often late for school and eventually developed a negative attitude towards school (Mafa, 2018). These views are consistent with Murambiwa and Hall's (2018) finding in that, for children who do not have schools near their homes, the cost, threat, and attempt of getting to school may decrease their interest. They further explained that this is because they may have to wake up very early, arrive late and be punished in their physically exhausted state, and eventually lose interest in school. All these issues

affect the leadership for learner retention (Mafa, 2018). Furthermore, a study conducted by Makorani and Muli (2017) in Hindi Division, Lamu west sub-county discover that the features of social culture such as learning environment, and societal culture affected the retention rate of pupils in schools.

2.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented a reviewed literature related to leadership for learner retention from international and national viewpoint. I started by discussing the study's core concepts to clear up some of the uncertainty surrounding its application. This was followed by a discussion of leadership styles demonstrated by leaders in their leadership. I further linked the leadership styles to existing education policies viewpoints and their impact on learner retention. Scholars such as Zhu and Doo (2023), Dalangin (2018) and Sujatha and Kavitha (2018) have largely focused on factors affecting learner retention and strategies to increase learner retention. I therefore presented factors affecting leading for learner retention followed by the discussion of different strategies and programmes that have effectively supported the retention of learners in schools. This suggests that there remain serious gaps in relation to an understanding of how and why SMT members lead for learner retention in the way they do. Furthermore, Roman et al. (2022) argued that it is not possible for South Africa to meet the requirements of the 2015 MDG number 4 because there are not enough studies to find out exactly why learners fail to complete their schooling. Therefore, this study hopes to contribute towards an understanding of how and why SMT members in secondary schools actually enact leadership for learner retention to meet the requirements of the 2015 MDG number 4. Finally, I provided a chapter summary which is presented in this section. The next Chapter Three, critically presents the four theoretical frameworks that informed this study.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study explores how SMT members attach the meanings of learner retention and leadership for learner retention to their leadership practices in secondary schools. This study employed the three theories as theories underpinning the framework this study. This study draws from Downton's transformational leadership theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I begin with the theory of transformational leadership, the ecological systems theory, and the theory of motivation.

3.2 TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

The transformational leadership theory is one of the theories that I employ to understand leadership for learner retention in this study. In presenting this theory, I will focus on its historical origin, its characteristics, its limitations and later on how the theory is relevant to this study.

3.2.1 Historical Origins of the Transformational Leadership Theory

The theory of transformational leadership was first invented by James V. Downton around 1973 in descriptive research that focused on political leaders. Downton's theory of transformational leadership focuses on those leaders who enact change around them and make things better for everyone (Ismail, 2018). It was further developed by leadership specialist James MacGregor Burns in 1978 (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). According to Gumusluoglu and Ilsev (2009) James MacGregor Burns insist that the leadership model focuses on intrinsic motivation as well as followers' improvement in line with the needs of all that may require inspiration and empowerment to succeed. He further defined transformational leaders as being on different ends of the leadership field.

Burns and Bass applied transformational leadership to an educational administration context (Leithwood et al., 2020). In 1985, Bass further developed Burn's theory on leadership by adding a psychological idea to the factor implying that the leaders who link up to their followers on an emotional level are taken as a prominent leader (Bunaiyan & McWilliams, 2018). Later researchers Bass and Avolio (1989) suggested that leaders display transformational characteristics to varying degrees. Hult et al. (2011) described

transformational leadership as a way of encouraging and motivating followers to accomplish the vision and mission of the organisation. Similarly, Northouse (2021) asserted that transformational leadership theory involves excellent practices of inspiration that change groups to achieve more than what is typically expected of them.

Furthermore, transformational leadership theory speaks about leaders working with followers. Simply put, it is centred around the idea that leaders can inspire and motivate followers to exceed their own self-interests for the good of the organisation. Also, it promotes valued and good change in groups and develops them to reach their desired results (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). Therefore, this study employs it to understand the nature of leadership that SMT members demonstrate in leading for learner retention. Noteworthy, the application of this theory to this study is twofold. First, it can work when associating leaders with SMT members and followers with teachers and learners. Second, it might not work with learners as followers in this context even though they are, because we may not describe them fully as followers but rather describe them as products. This aligns with the study's focus in that it is about SMT members' ability to work with teachers to retain learners although the learner part happens automatically through care and support. This theory encompasses several characteristics such as (1) inspirational motivation, (2) the idealised influence, (3) intellectual stimulation, and (4) individual consideration. The following section looks at these four key characteristics of transformational leadership theory.

3.2.2 Characteristics of the Theory of Transformational Leadership

In this section I discuss the of transformational leadership mentioned in the preceding section. The study carried out by Pennell (2023) revealed that there is a close relationship between these four characteristics of transformational leadership theory towards reaching the targeted goals. According to Ghasabeh and Provitera (2017), these four characteristics of transformational leadership can improve the success of the organisation if they are carried out correctly. Figure 3.1 shows how these four essential characteristics connect to the transformational leadership theory as described by Northouse (2021).

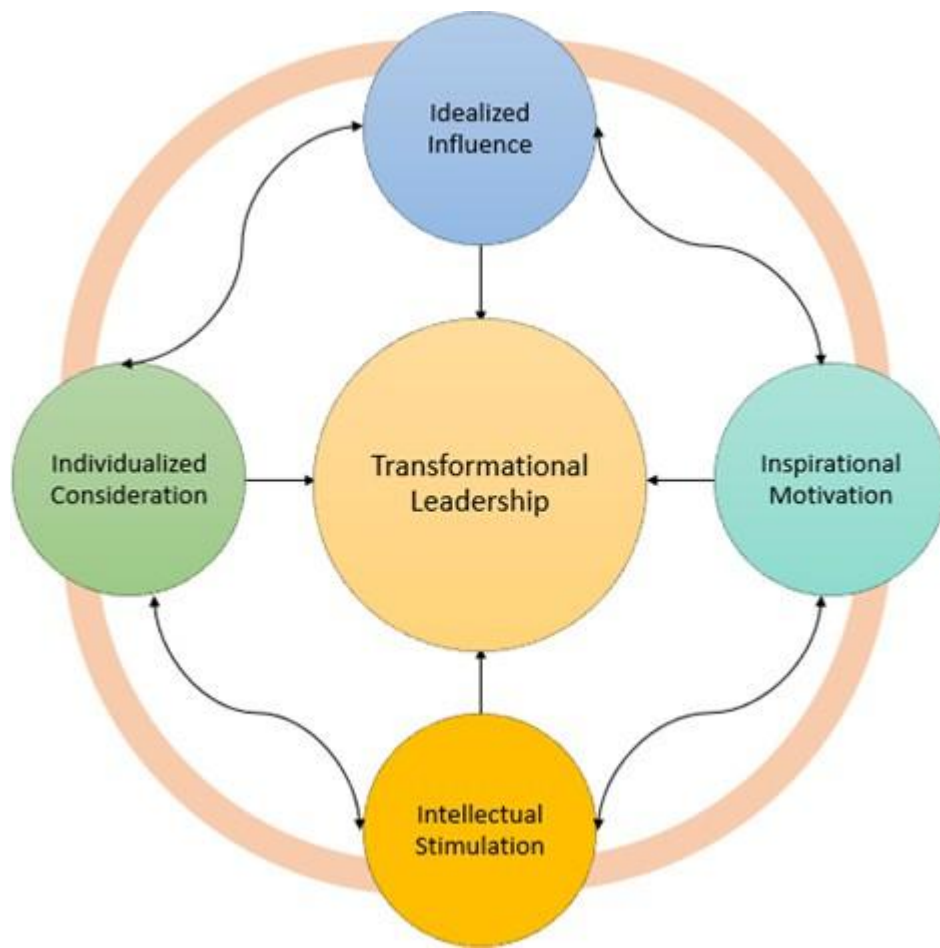


Figure 3.1: The four “I’s” connect (adapted from Northouse, 2021)

As shown in Figure 3.1, the four characteristics indicate that they all connect and work towards transformational leadership. Consequently, combining these characteristics may help in understanding the nature of leadership. Confirming this as shown in Figure 3.1, it has no starting and ending. Explaining this, transformational leaders display idealised influence, meaning in their leadership, they serve as models for others to imitate and trust. They also use intellectual stimulation to push their followers to explore new ideas beyond conventional approaches. They challenge their team to achieve more than they thought is possible through inspiring motivation on a continuous basis. In individualised consideration they focus on the unique development of each follower, recognising and nurturing the potential in each follower. These characteristics are discussed as follows: (1) the inspirational motivation; (2) the idealised influence; (3) the intellectual stimulation and (4) the individual consideration.

3.2.2.1 Inspirational Motivation

Inspirational motivation is the degree to which leaders and followers motivate one another to work beyond expectations so that they reach their highest levels of success (Burns, 1978). This definition agrees with the statement made by Trmal et al. (2015) that transformational effects and performances associated with leadership competence may effectively inspire motivation, drive change and transform organisations to succeed. This shows that inspirational motivation involves encouraging followers to commit to the organisation's goals and values. Consistent with the present study leaders who share and responsibilities and inspire and motivate others with a vision to reach aspiring goals can make a difference in leading learner retention (Emiru, 2018). For instance, in a secondary school everyone is involved in creating a vision and a mission for the school even in setting rules so that they develop a sense of belonging. It is also imperative to use the theory of transformational leadership as this study entails leading for learner retention and requires continuous changes, adaptations and coming up with new ideas to solve problems. It is also believed that inspirational leaders help followers find personal meaning and satisfaction in their work. Gomes (2014) further asserted that transformational leaders encourage practices of inspiring motivation such as team spirit, confidence and communicate high expectations that everyone wants to reach. Moreover, leaders generate enthusiasm and optimism among followers using positive language, passionate communication and expressive actions to energise the team.

Furthermore, transformational leaders set high standards and expectations for their followers. They challenge their team to achieve more than they thought possible and create a culture of excellence for continuous improvement. Through having a vision and communicating it transformational leaders set high standards to inspire and encourage their followers to always excel (Pennell, 2023). Aligned with this study, school leaders may demonstrate confidence to both teachers and learners' abilities to achieve the vision, fostering a sense of purpose and belonging through inspiring motivation. Therefore, in this study I want to find out how in their leadership, SMT members display awareness of inspiring motivation to keep learners in their schools. For example, how SMT members inspire motivation to teachers to work in such that learners are retained. With clarity, principals may readily inspire motivation to learners through inspiring motivation to other SMT members such that they motivate teachers and teachers motivate learners by doing things that will make them remain in the school. Given that this study does not draw on the principals only but to other SMT members and teachers down to learners while principals should also feel inspired. I argue that the whole process of inspiring motivation follows a cyclical pattern from top to bottom and the other way round.

3.2.2.2 Idealised Influence

The idealised influence is also known as charismatic leadership, here transformational leaders model required behaviours and developed idealised influence which made them trusted and respected by their followers (Ghasabeh & Provitera, 2017). Similarly, Gomes (2014) stated that leaders act as role models for the followers to become respected and trusted by the followers who want to imitate them. It is believed that leaders exhibiting idealised influence demonstrate high standards of ethical and moral conduct. They behave in ways that are consistent with their values and the values of the organisation, serving as a model for others to imitate. This study looks at how SMT members lead to enhance learner retention in their schools. Therefore, for effective leadership SMT members need to lead by example so that learners may develop trust and want to be around them. For instance, if the SMT members, teachers and also other adults outside the school may avoid being seen by learners under the influence of alcohol or drug abuse, they will always be respected and trusted. Mittal and Dhar (2015) posited that when leaders show appealing behaviours they push followers to become more like them. This statement concurs that by personifying the values and ideals of the organisation, leaders instil a sense of pride and belonging in their followers. This fosters a strong organisational identity and loyalty among team members.

Moreover, a study conducted by Gomes (2014) found that transformational leaders encourage team spirit, interest, confidence and communicate high expectations that everyone wants to reach. Hence, leaders with idealised influence support their team in developing problem-solving skills and provide opportunities for followers to tackle complex challenges and think critically about issues. They are always willing to put the needs of the organisation above their own and make personal sacrifices and take risks for the benefit of their team, which reinforces their commitment and dedication. For example, in a child headed home the eldest child is responsible for accompanying young siblings to another school far from hers to make sure they are safe and is always late. It is, therefore, crucial that the school leaders accommodate this learner and make sacrifices, take risks, and consider the school's needs for the benefit of that learner to remain in the school. This process is ideal when transformational leaders set high standards and expectations for themselves and instil the same in followers by modelling them to the institutions (Emery, 2020). I want to know how SMT members in the secondary schools create a vision and a mission to demonstrate their values and ideals. However, leaders with idealised influence clearly articulate a vision that is compelling and aligned with shared values that inspires teachers and learners to commit to the organisation's goals. They are often admired for their character and achievements and are

motivated to align their own behaviours with those of the leader.

3.2.2.3 Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation is when transformational leaders have a strong vision for the organisation and encourage all parties involved to support that vision (Sanchez-Cardona et al., 2018). The question that arises here is how in their leadership, SMT members create a persuasive vision that challenges critical thinking and values varied perceptions of each member, including teachers and learners. Therefore, by promoting intellectual stimulation, SMT members as transformational leaders can help teachers and learners develop critical thinking skills, become more innovative, and contribute more effectively to the school's success. This approach enhances not only individual growth but also drives organisational improvement that develops learners' interest to continue with schooling. Also, intellectual stimulation is a crucial component of transformational leadership that emphasises encouraging creativity and innovation among followers. They recognise that different viewpoints can lead to better decision-making and innovative outcomes. Linked to this definition, leaders who use intellectual stimulation push their followers to go beyond conventional approaches and explore new possibilities. They challenge the status quo and seek novel solutions to problems. They promote open communication and the free exchange of ideas which makes people feel safe to express their thoughts and opinions without fear of criticism. Accordingly, Sanchez-Cardona et al. (2018) highlighted that there is a need for leaders to encourage followers to work beyond their status quo by challenging them to be innovative and creative for the accomplishment of the vision and mission of the organisation.

Furthermore, according to Reza (2019), transformational leadership is about developing new ways of solving existing problems, such as imploring new ideas and adding creative solutions to problems. Linked to this definition leaders using intellectual stimulation provide opportunities for followers to tackle complex challenges and think critically about issues. This means that SMT members need to come up with new ideas and apply different leadership styles to support, motivate and encourage learners to sustain schooling. Likewise, through intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders can promote an environment where new ideas and creative solutions are welcomed. They also encourage followers to think independently and question assumptions. Moreover, leaders with intellectual stimulation support calculated risk-taking and view failures as opportunities for learning rather than as setbacks. They create a safe space for experimentation and exploration. For instance, in some of the schools there is an indication that learners bring drugs sometimes sent by outside drug dealers to sell them to other learners

but once identified SMT members take risks and follow up on such cases and even involve police. They even follow up on abused, vulnerable and learners at risk through often visiting their homes to find out more about their problems as some stop attending schools. Knowing that things change with time for instance the South African education system is adapting to a variety of changes after post-apartheid Bantu Education that require continuous learning to gain new knowledge and skills to grow. Transformational leadership theory is good to use in this study because it involves intellectual stimulation that foster a culture of continuous learning and development. Leaders encourage their followers to acquire new knowledge and skills, facilitating personal and professional growth.

3.2.2.4 Individualised Consideration

The individual consideration involves transformational leaders who encourage and open a clear line of communication to create fundamental motivation and admiration within their followers (Ahmed & Simha, 2022). Linked to individualised consideration this study is focusing on understanding how SMT members deal with the individual teacher such that they feel recognised and teach learners in a way that they would always want to be in that school. For instance, SMT members as school leaders have to satisfy teachers' individual needs to change their commitment to the school. Individualised consideration is one of the crucial transformational leadership constructs as its name suggests, it is the ability to get individual people to want to transform and improve beyond expectations (Busari et al., 2019). It is also the main component of transformational leadership that focuses on the unique development of each follower. Henceforth, individualised consideration involves recognising and nurturing the potential in each follower. Transformational leaders acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of each follower and provide positive feedback and reinforcement, boosting morale and motivation. Confirming this, leaders provide opportunities for learning and growth, helping individuals to acquire new skills and advance in their careers. Leaders who consider followers as individuals support them in achieving their personal and professional goals. For instance, once learners' talents are identified SMT members together with teachers and learners' parents work with experts in that field to develop those talents. This aligns their individual aspirations with the organisation's mission, to be more engaged and satisfied. This agrees with a study conducted by Ogola et al. (2017) on individualised consideration conduct which found that leaders who recognise others work, encourage self- development practices, mentor and coach individuals attain high performance.

Moreover, transformational leaders pay close attention to each individual needs and concerns and take

the time to listen and understand the unique challenges and aspirations of their team members. This suggests that through individualised consideration in relation to this study, learners may see themselves having an opportunity to achieve with the attention they receive from teachers and continue with schooling. In line with this argument, Hassan et al. (2019) postulated that each member of the organisation has needs and concerns that need to be attended to by leaders. Moreover, one-on-one attention with a teacher or a learner helps to build trust between and be able to identify problems so that those who are having difficulties are developed (Hassan et al., 2019). In line with this statement leader who consider the individuals act as mentors and coaches, providing personalised guidance and support to help followers achieve their full potential. They build strong and personal relationships with their followers by showing empathy, compassion, and genuine concern for their well-being which fosters trust and loyalty. Also in considering the individuals' leaders adapt their approach and ground them on the specific strengths and weaknesses of each individual. Individualised consideration involves creating an environment where followers feel valued and supported. Leaders ensure that each team member has the resources and support they need to succeed. Accordingly, the leaders create new learning opportunities to support and accept individual differences, adopt active listening styles, and delegate tasks to develop individuals' skills (Gomes, 2014). For example, inclusive education involves teaching learners in the mainstream class irrespective of their abilities giving slow achievers extra support to develop interest in learning such that they remain schooling. It also emerges from the literature that transformational leadership theory considers every individual goal in shaping changes (Bunaiyan & McWilliams, 2018). This implies that principals as transformational leaders can prioritise other SMT members' goals, SMT members can consider the teachers' goals, teachers can consider learners' goals, and all these groups work as a team to enact change (Bunaiyan & McWilliams, 2018). Overall, by practicing individualised consideration, transformational leaders can build a more motivated, committed, and high-performing team. Hence, this approach not only enhances individual satisfaction and growth but also contributes to the overall success of the organisation.

3.2.3 Relevancy of the Theory of Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership theory is particularly relevant to this study, which aims to address the challenge of learner retention in South African schools. According to the African Sustainable Development Report (2020), South Africa is making slower progress in achieving MDG number 4, which focuses on education, as evidenced by primary and secondary school learner retention rates. Understanding how transformational leadership can be applied to improve these retention rates is crucial.

In my opinion employing transformational leadership theory in this study will allow a clear understanding of SMT members leadership nature for learner retention. Similarly, Islami and Mulolli (2020) in their study revealed that transformational leadership is the most leadership style to increase the groups' level of performance. Xu et al. (2022) defined transformational leadership as it involves leaders who motivate and encourage team members to attain highest results that are beyond and above status quo by helping them to grow and change while responding to their individual needs. This means transformational leadership appears to have a favourable impact on organisational success because of its outshining effect among team members (Xu et al., 2022). Considering these definitions of transformational leadership by Xu et al. (2022), in this study, I wanted to understand how SMT members encourage teachers and learners to have a favourable impact on organisational success. According to Deng et al. (2023), transformational leaders may help their followers grow and be more creative by encouraging and facilitating and driving the team towards change. It is also argued that the relevance of this theory to this study is premised on the notion that the success and change in education systems are rooted in strong leadership working with followers (Mhaga, 2019).

3.2.4 Limitations of the Theory of Transformational Leadership

Limitations of transformational leadership theory as it relates to this study is that it was not designed to understand how leaders lead things related to learners. It was designed to deal with how do top leaders lead their followers. Given that, in this study I included learners as end products in leading for learner retention. Also, as one of the most widely studied and acknowledged leadership theories, but transformational leadership is not without errors (Goestjahjanti et al., 2022). For instance, transformational leadership, being one of the behavioural theories popular in the final quarter of the twentieth century, shares the same errors as these other theories, such as making sense of things, creating stories, and identifying figurative purposes are all elements that are difficult to evaluate (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). While transformational leadership appears to work in theory, practical data does not support it as a sustainable theory due to possible weaknesses that might cause misunderstanding (Ren et al., 2024). Knowing that charisma, inspiration, and motivation are personal features that rely primarily on feelings may be one of the fundamental reasons why this leadership paradigm is questioned (Ren et al., 2024). It is argued that what is inspiring to one person may differ from the other meaning that the most significant problem is the uncertainty that permeates this theory at every turn. Many have questioned the validity of transformational leadership due to the overlap in an inspiring message, inspirational motivation, personal consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Reza, 2019). According to

Gomes (2014), transformational leadership encourages team spirit and communicates high expectations that inspire everyone in a team to have a similar mind-set. Hence, this may lead to a situation where everyone concentrates on such targeted goals and does not find ways to achieve that goal (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). It also appears in the literature that the foundation of transformational leadership is to persuade team members to implement a shared belief about fostering success which can make it challenging for people to bring up any concerns (Hassan et al., 2019).

3.3. BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

The Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is another theory that I employed to understand how in their leadership SMT members show the awareness of multiple areas that make a learner decide to remain or quit schooling. In presenting this theory I will focus on its historical origin, multiple connections and influences of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, its limitations and later on how it is relevant to this study.

3.3.1 Historical Origins of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory was first developed by Uri Bronfenbrenner a Russian-American psychologist between 1970's and early in the 21st century (Cherry, 2023). He developed this theory based on It was first presented in his book titled "The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design" in 1979. When further advancing this theory, Bronfenbrenner considered the influences of all the ecological systems that impact the lived experiences of the individuals (Ettetal & Mahoney, 2017). Uri Bronfenbrenner divided the environment into five different but interconnected systems that have an influence on human development (Cherry, 2023). They are microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems and chronosystems. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, people find themselves surrounded by various environmental systems, from home to the school system, and to the most generous systems that includes society, values and culture (Tudge et al., 2017). Therefore, I want to look at how the different systems affect learners' decision to be out or in the school and how SMT members lead to ensure that the influence of these systems is considered. Henceforth, I use ecological systems theory to understand the aspects that SMT members have to consider as contributing to their leadership for learner retention. In my opinion these factors are not only school related and may result on whether a learner remains within or outside the schooling system. The study carried out by Runhare et al. (2021) found that the main tactics to enhance learner retention rate was the introduction of National School Nutrition Programme, encouragement of parental involvement; and the collaboration

between the community and school leadership in monitoring learners. For example, a study carried out by Lebesse et al. (2024) in Mahwelereng, Mpumalanga, South Africa, reported that the implementation of the National School Nutrition Programmes contributed to a valuable learning environment and increased a number of learners who participate and complete schooling. This shows that the connections and interrelations between the school and other government services are needed to support learners interest to continue with schooling. Therefore, in this study I want to understand how then in their leadership SMT members show the influence of schools working together with external systems that can make a learner be retained or drop out of the school.

Hereunder is Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system’s model that shows how each system influences the individual’ development and their living background.

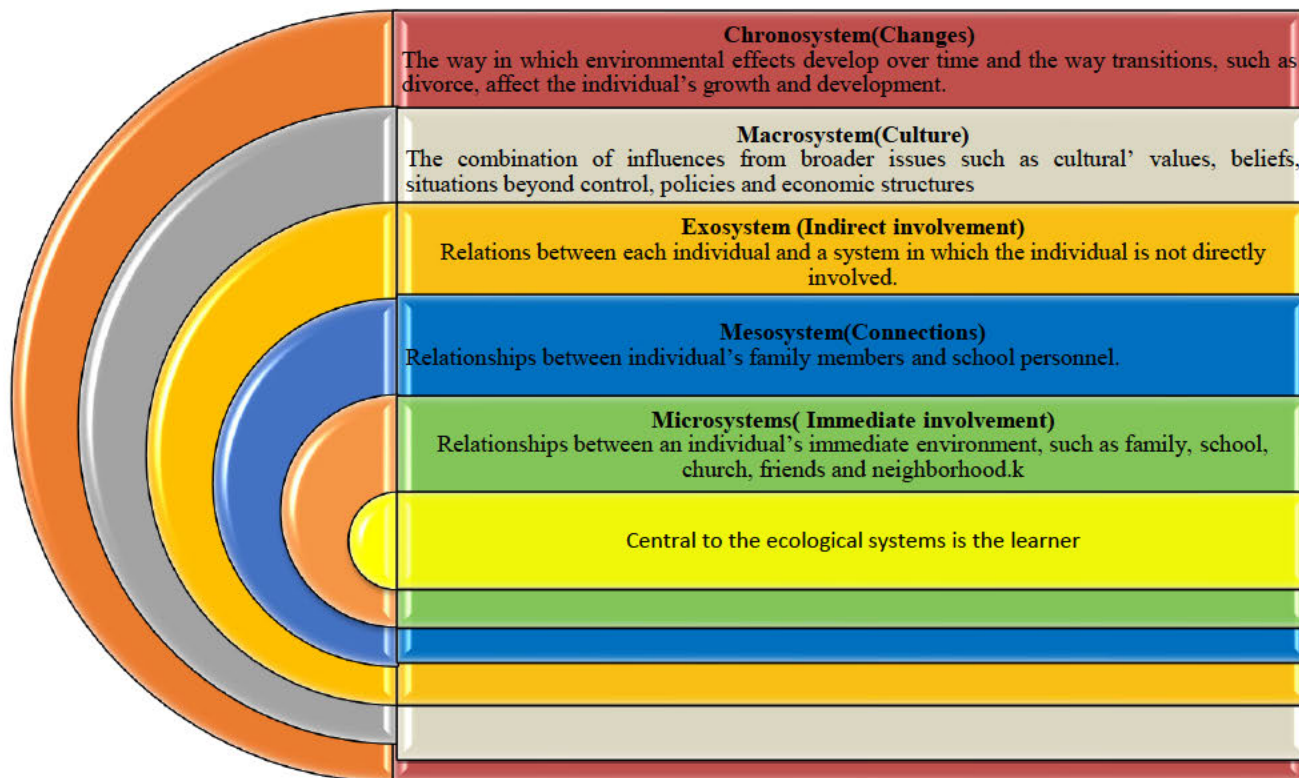


Figure 3.2: Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system

Figure 3.2 presents a clear understanding of how the Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system’s theory can be used to understand SMT members’ leadership for learner retention. It shows that learners as children are positioned in the centre of all the systems which suggests that they are continuously influenced by these systems therefore take a decision to leave or remain in the schooling system. Align with the proverb that

says ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system’s indicates that schools and learners’ homes may not be the only one responsible for learner’s retention and attrition because they interact with many people outside their schools and families. It is therefore critical to know the interactions of these systems as this is the key to understanding how they lead to the SMT members’ failure or success in leading for learner retention. Following is the discussion of multiple connections of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems.

3.3.2 Multiple Connections of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems

In this section, I examine multiple connections and influences of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems. As alluded, remaining in the school and leaving school come from multiple areas that make a learner decide to quit or remain schooling. In relation to this study central to the ecological systems is the learner and each of these systems certainly interrelates with and influences each other in all aspects of lives. Therefore, through Bronfenbrenner’s work, I want to understand how SMT members consider the environmental systems in their leadership for learner retention. It is thus crucial to discuss multiple connections and influences of each system.

3.3.2.1 Microsystems (Immediate Involvement)

Microsystems are the most influential that has the closest relationship to the person, and it contains structures such as teachers, parents, peers, and neighbours where direct contact occurs (Berk, 2000). Microsystems examine the connection between each child and the immediate surroundings that impact their development, such as home and school (Coetzee & Venter, 2016). Learners are believed to spend most of their time in their homes with families and in school interacting with teachers and other learners (Jugmohan, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to encourage parental involvement in school activities and involve them in monitoring and controlling learners loitering in the streets during school hours (Mahmud et al., 2019). It is also argued that when the home and school display a good relationship, learners may remain schooling, but when there is no relationship, it is likely that learner retention may be negatively affected. For example, the school’s failure to accommodate religious or cultural beliefs for individual learners may force parents to remove their children from school. Levy (2022) reveals that according to the South African Constitution, learners must be excused from school policies that affect their home religious and cultural practices. However, some SMT members would choose to unfairly discriminate against other religious and cultural practices other than to accommodate diversities (Nthontho, 2017). I therefore wondered how the SMT members showed awareness of the influence that school and home relationships

have on a learner's decision to remain or leave the schooling system. The following paragraph discusses the mesosystems.

3.3.2.2 Mesosystems (Connections)

Mesosystems consists of the interactions between the microsystems for example the relationships between each individual. For example, mesosystems focus on the maintenance of good relationship with school, parents and learners (Geldenhuis & Wevers, 2013). In relation to this study, it means the relationship between SMT members and teachers, teachers and learners, then parents and school. For example, learners' behaviour in the school can be influenced by their surroundings and home experiences thus impact learner retention. Moreover, Mesosystems indicate the stable relations of schools, peers and family in the children's development and is formed when microsystems interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). I argue that the connections and interrelationships between the pupils at home and those in the school are needed to support learners such that they develop interest to remain schooling until they complete their basic education. Most importantly, the correlations between these components need to be continuous because they may have an influence on learners' behaviour (Meda, 2013). It is argued that the active involvement of parents in terms of supporting learners is critical and have an impact on learner retention and learner attrition. For instance, "lack of parental involvement will have a negative rather than a neutral effect on the child's development" (Naicker, 2013, p. 61). Generally, educating a learner is three legged meaning that a learner needs both teachers and parents to support them such that they remain schooling (O'Sullivan et al., 2022). Although Gruber (2018) argued that it cannot be three legs only the fourth leg is needed to add value because the learner does not attend school in isolation from extended families, community members and the government. However, in a study conducted by Maqoqa et al. (2023), the findings revealed that although parents were expected to participate in their children's learning, but it was found minimal for different reasons. Supporting this view, Okeke (2014) highlighted that schools should apply strategies to make parents aware of their participation in schools. In some instances, parents would not even respond when invited to the school; instead, they victimised the teachers or withdrew their children from school. I, therefore, look at how SMT members display their understanding of how they can involve parents, so learners are retained.

3.3.2.3 Exosystems (Indirect Involvement)

Exosystems refers to a relationship between each individual and a system in which they are not directly involved. Exosystems are regarded as the social environment whereby learners are not directly involved

but are affected indirectly (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2012). According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), exosystems affect the psychological development of children in the family not only by what happens in the other environments but also by what occurs in the other settings in which their parents live their lives. In relation to my study, when learners' parents are migrant labourers and learners are taken care of by other siblings, and this could develop stress and depression in them. Although learners are not directly involved but their relationships with parents may be affected. On the other hand, if parents are unemployed, they develop stress and will take frustration to children and fail to satisfy their school needs thereby lose interest in the school. In this study, I look at how SMT members ensure that within their leadership they address these issues in leading for learner retention. Surapto et al. (2024) further argued that dropouts may not be observed in isolation but be treated as a person-in-context. Confirming this, Jordan et al. (2019) stated that the most successful strategies for improving learner retention involves working with the society, schools, policymakers, businesses, community leaders, health providers, parents and learners.

3.3.2.4 Macrosystems (Culture)

Macrosystems are the combination of children's influences from situations beyond their control, such as abuse and vulnerability, policies, and economic structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). For example, there is evidence of abuse that leads to long-term psychophysical moments, while victims are often afraid of asking for support from both parents, thereby losing self-esteem (Saladino, 2021). I argue that such learners may decide to withdraw from school as they would be physically and psychologically affected without help. Also, macrosystems can be associated with the impact of cultural contexts, geographical location, socio-economic status, and poverty evolving over time and the policies' influence towards learner retention. Confirming this, according to Crawford (2020) individuals' needs can be badly influenced by wider concerns such as economics, cultural values and policies. For instance, families' beliefs, parents' unemployment and learners travelling long distances due to poor transportation can affect leading for learner retention. For instance, a study conducted by (Mafa, 2018) found that learners who walked long distances to school without transport could not attend school when there were heavy rains and were often late for school and eventually developed a negative attitude towards school. In this study I want to look at how SMT members show awareness and how macrosystems can influence their leadership for learner retention.

3.3.2.5 Chronosystem (Changes)

The chronosystems level can be understood as an overtime experience that influences the individual's

development such as chronic illness, poverty, parents' divorce, permanent job loss due to terminal illness and parents' death resulting to CHH (Naicker & Mestry, 2013). This is a way in which environmental effects develop over time and the way changes, such as divorce, affect the individual's growth and development. Bronfenbrenner (1994, p. 40) as discussed under Section 3.3. asserts: "*Chronosystems encompass the change of consistency over time not only in the characteristics of the person but also of the environment in which that person lives.*" Accordingly, Bronfenbrenner (1993) proposed chronosystems to represent those changes that develop over a period of time for the individuals and their living background. Confirming this, children's chronic illness can have a negative effect on their school attendance and engagement, leaving them at risk of failing to meet their full developmental goals such as school completion. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner (1994) asserted that chronosystems involve change of stability over time not only in the physical appearance of the person, but also of the background in which that person lives. In relation to this study, the terminal illness of a parent can affect learners' school attendance in that the learner might be responsible for taking care of a parent even during the day which can make learners drop out of school. Also, the parents' death leaving the all children raised by another sibling who is also a learner. Due to these experiences these learners are forced by circumstances to be caregivers and to head their own households which may affect them and leave school before completion to find jobs and even join criminals to support themselves and other siblings (Coetzee et al., 2016). Therefore, in this study I look at how in their leadership SMT members adapt to such issues such that learners remain schooling.

3.3.3 Relevancy of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is found relevant to facilitate understanding of the reasons based on how SMT members lead for learner retention. Here, I employ Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to understand the connections among the components of these systems that may affect learner retention. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is the best framework to understand how individuals negotiate the dynamic environment and their identities in intercultural education settings. Accordingly, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offer a nuanced and holistic framework that can assist education stakeholders to appreciate the significance of diverse cultural contexts, values and norms that can contribute to learner retention. This holistic approach is also essential for effectively addressing the complex challenges of learner retention. Moreover, this theory is in line with learner retention because the factors that affect learners' school attendance are directly and indirectly influenced by the contexts. Therefore, integrating Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in this

study may allow SMT members to adopt a comprehensive and systemic approach to improve learner retention. This theoretical framework can also allow SMT members to identify and address the multiple environmental factors that influence learners' educational experiences and outcomes. The theory also offers practical insights into how SMT can create a supportive and conducive learning environment at various levels of the ecological system that contributes to learner retention.

3.3.4 Limitation of Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Systems Theory

In this study, I examine how SMT members lead for learner retention. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a means for understanding the influence of environmental systems on learners' development. However, using it may be questioned for how it looks at the understanding of the individual's role in relation to the environmental systems (Christensen, 2016). Although, in this study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory may help with the understanding of what encourages learning processes, it ignores the intimacy of the individuals towards a group or context. For example, other learners especially in a secondary school may decide on their personal interest to leave or remain schooling while receiving all the necessary support from the environmental systems. This indicates that through using this theory it is difficult to understand how these systems can interact in some learners' decision to stop or to continue with schooling.

3.4 MASLOW'S' THEORY OF MOTIVATION

In addition to transformational leadership theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory this study draws on Maslow's' theory of motivation as a third theory to understand how in their leadership for learner retention SMT members integrate motivation.

3.4.1 Historical Origins of Maslow's Theory of Motivation

Maslow's theory of motivation was developed by Abraham Maslow who was an American psychologist during the Second World War. That was a time of global disorder and change, when the world was dealing with enormous loss, trauma, and transformation (Copley, 2024). He first developed this hierarchy of needs to explain human motivation which was presented in his article titled 'A Theory of Human Motivation' in 1943 and this was followed by his book 'Motivation and Personality' in 1970 (Cherry, 2024). In this theory, he suggested that people have a number of basic needs that must be met before people move up the hierarchy to pursue more social, emotional, and self-actualising needs (Hopper, 2021). He then anticipated that these needs could be hierarchical based on how basic they are to human functioning

they were as indicated in the hierarchy (Harris, 2020). For example, he categorised these needs in the following order: physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). He also emphasised that the most basic needs are found at the bottom of the pyramid (Haggbloom et al., 2002).

It is critical to understand that every human being starts with intrinsic motivation but as time goes by, they gradually lose interest and require extrinsic motivation essential for long-term achievement (Khaliq, 2023). In explanation, intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is fundamentally enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separate outcome (Irvine, 2018). Initially, people who are motivated carry out their responsibilities to the best of their ability and motivation has always been a central challenge for leaders in leading for change (Safa et al., 2020). Munna and Kalam (2021) noted that motivation is a key to learning because learners would continuously like to be in the school if they are motivated. Accordingly, in this study I want to understand how in their leadership process of learner retention SMT members ensure that learners are motivated and supported to continue with schooling. Ali and Anwar (2021) reported that followers who feel adequately recognised develop self-esteem and always eager to achieve more.

3.4.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow classifies people's needs into five groups where each category is applied once the needs in the previous category have been met (Dar & Sakthivel, 2022). It assumes that when the best initial needs of a human being are satisfied, all other requirements appear as motivation (Navy, 2020). According to Maslow (1943) motivation in all humans is the satisfaction of the following needs: (1) physiological needs that support and maintain a stable environment; (2) need for safety, which is important in ensuring learner safety from home to school and within the schools; (3) need for both giving and receiving love such that learners feel a sense of belonging; (4) need for self-esteem which is developed when recognised; (5) need for self-actualisation which raises an interest to become best person in life. Notable, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is still applicable nowadays when perceived as a guide to achieve South African goals (Dar & Sakthivel, 2022). As alluded, I employ Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory in this study because I look at how SMT members keep learners motivated in their leadership for learner retention. These needs are discussed fully in the following section in relation to how each apply in the school context.



Figure 3.3: Hierarchy of needs (Hopper, 2021)

3.4.2.1 Physiological Needs

Physiological needs, such as air, water, food, shelter, sleep and clothing, are all critical for human survival (Hopper, 2021). Here I discuss just few which are important in the schooling system such as food, clothing, sleep and shelter. In applying physiological needs, leaders must ensure that learners have proper meals, proper clothing, sufficient sleep and that their homes and classrooms are in good condition to allow conducive learning (Calisaan, 2023). It is crucial to understand that schools may not cater for all physiological needs because other needs such as sleep, clothing, food and home shelters are influenced by their home lives (Shah, 2024). However, it is interesting that South African Government, Department of Education and school staff members went beyond and provide assistance so that these needs are met. In this study I look at how SMT members lead such that within their schools, the physiological needs for learners are catered for. One example currently in the South African schooling system is the introduction of the school nutrition programme. As discussed in Chapter Two section 2.5.3, Muljana and Luo (2019) and Sitao (2018) reported that learner retention has improved through the introduction of School Nutrition Programme. The South African government established the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to provide shelter to families who are unemployed and vulnerable (Greyling, 2009). General, it can be depressing to learners when they are homeless in the streets or residing in open shacks

which are sometimes without water supply. A study conducted by Pillay (2017) found that learners who live in overcrowded informal houses perform badly in the school. I also argue that it became worse for learners if the schools' infrastructure is not in good conditions because they can even affect their health conditions which can make them decide to leave the schools. For example, if the windows are broken and the floors are rough and dusty, learners will be exposed to cold and dust thereby develop ill health. It is critical that some schools continue to experience terrific challenges of overcrowding and neglected classrooms with unwelcoming poor conditions (October, 2023). However, schools are allocated funds to maintain and improve the schools' building to create an environment that a learner would want to be around and continue with their studies (DBE, 2012). Also, there are learners who cannot afford school uniforms due to poverty therefore some schoolteachers went to an extent that they ask for sponsorships and donations to provide those learners with uniforms so that they. Linked to this statement, *Top News*, in March (Likaka, 2024), reported that a teacher, Ms Mhango of Mulunguzi primary school, in Zomba, donated school uniforms to needy learners to encourage them to remain in school and feel a sense of belonging.

3.4.2.2 Needs for Security and Safety

After the physiological demands have been met, according to Maslow the next level of needs is security and safety (Harris, 2020). The needs for safety and security involves creating a conducive environment and ensuring the safety of learners on their way to and from school as well as within the schools (Linden, 2023). Confirming this, Calisaan (2023) stated that a safe school atmosphere encourages better concentration and focus. While Hopper (2021) stated that to grow and learn, we must ensure that we are safe everywhere we go in our lives. However, it is argued that many learners experience difficulties in getting to the schools because they walk long distances to schools (Budlender, 2017). For instance, learners may be attacked by criminals or bullied by other learners even hi-jacked and offered lifts by criminals and could not reach the schools. Accordingly, the Department of Basic Education is doing its level best to ensure that safe and security needs are met. Few examples the Department of Basic Education provide learner transport for those learners who walk long distances to schools so that they are able to access schools safe and timeously (Budlender, 2017). For instance, learner transport provides a consistent and safe means for learners travelling long distances to and from school thus increases learner attendance rates of learners at risk to withdraw from school (Edwards, 2024).

Furthermore, learners are bullied by other learners and also by members of the community within the schools as well as on their way to and from school (Lamb & Warton, 2017). A study by Mokwena and Setshego (2021) found that the incidence of substance abuse is very high in schools, and it makes learners drop out of school. It also revealed that learners can easily access illegal drugs within the community because of unemployment, insufficient support, and resorting to drugs to meet their needs. This shows that learners deal with drugs in the school premises having been influenced by the communities where their schools are situated. A study by Nzama and Ajani (2021) found that learners' involvement in substances was linked with challenges from their community, homes, and schools. In my opinion, SMT members in their leadership for learner retention can invite different people from different departments such as the police, the Health Department and the Department of Social Development (DSD) to talk to learners to ensure that they are safe and aware of the influence of substances. Also, they can organise awareness campaigns and programmes that involve the community on issues around substance abuse (Chueng et al., 2022). Example of these programmes include the 'STOP, WALK, TALK' programme that was introduced in April 2018 by the DBE, aiming to prevent bullying in schools across South Africa (DBE, 2018). Therefore, this study looks at how SMT members lead such that they ensure that the learners are safe on their way to and from school as well as within the school.

3.4.2.3 Needs for Love and Belonging

When the physiological and security needs are being satisfied, the next level of needs to be satisfied according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs is the need for love and belonging. For Maslow, we need to give and receive love to overcome the feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction (Hopper, 2021). Hoy (2021) highlighted that teachers' motivation influences their actions, which in turn affect learners' engagement in learning. Simply put, when teachers are happy, they can teach learners such that learners are also happy because happy teachers are equal to happy learners. Moskowitz and Dewaele (2021) found that motivation increases teachers' happiness which reflects directly on learners. This indicates that learner retention is multifocal which means it is not only about learners, but it is also about teachers being motivated. This implies that when the SMT members motivate teachers, teachers will in turn motivate learners to develop a love for their school.

According to Uslu and Gizir (2017), the feeling of loved and belonging in the schools is influenced by good relationships between teachers and learners that make them want to go to school. It is therefore necessary that leaders should create good relationships with teachers and learners based on kindness, care, trust,

respect, honesty and support such that they feel loved and develop school belonging (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020). Kumar (2021) asserted that teaching kindness and forgiveness starts with the teachers through being kind, using words that are polite, full of respect and mannerly so learners will feel belonging and develop love for the school. If teachers and learners share their areas of strengths and weaknesses, they can understand and support each other and, therefore, feel loved and enjoy being in school. Furthermore, leaders can organise activities that put learners together and encourage team work so that they are happy and feel belonging (Kumar, 2021). Also, when learners are psychologically affected for example losing the loved one, putting other learners together to sympathise with them can develop a sense of belonging in the school (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020). I believe that even though it is not documented, it can make them feel loved and develop a sense of belonging then they continue with schooling until completion. I therefore wanted to understand how do SMT members, in their leadership for learner retention promote love, care, and belonging within their schools.

3.4.2.4 Self-Esteem Needs

Needs for love, caring and belonging develop to self-esteem therefore when they are addressed, self-esteem needs can take over. Simply put, every human needs to be respected in life, and valued therefore leaders should create a supportive environment that strengthen learners' self-esteem (McLeod, 2018). For example, there are learners with special needs but accommodated in the mainstream classes as per inclusive education policy and this lower their self-confidence (McKenzie, 2021). According to McLeod (2018), when their self-esteem requirements are met and satisfied, people as if they belong in the world but, if they are not met, they feel inferior and worthless. It is argued that learners who struggle with their work may feel left behind and discouraged and need to overcome these challenges, so extra lessons can play a critical role in improving their confidence and developing self-esteem (Thakuria, 2024). Furthermore, Johnson and colleagues, in Freeman- Green et al. (2023), asserted that teachers should adapt to flexible and relevant approaches and activities that promote active engagement which cater for all learners irrespective of their disability. Some school's leaders make sure that they organise extra lessons and remedial classes such as after-hours catch-up sessions, non-formal education and equivalency programmes so that these learners develop self-esteem and a sense of belonging (Thakuria, 2024). Linked to this study, recognising achievements can help individuals realised their self-esteem needs, which in turn prepares them to fulfil self-actualisation and participate intensely in their schooling (Calisaan, 2023). It is also important that learners should be recognised for their effort and achievement from as little as well done and cheer them up. Akafo and Boateng (2015) noted that recognition is an

important motivational tactic since it involves appreciation and praise thereby develop self-esteem. Therefore, in relation to this study I want to know how SMT members in their leadership for learner retention make learners develop self-esteem such that they develop love for the school.

3.4.2.5 Need for Self-Actualisation

Maslow considers the desire for self-actualisation to be the most important of all the needs that is on top of other needs (Shah, 2024). He believed that all individuals have an innate need to be self-actualised to be all what they can be but, in achieving those goals their basic needs must be satisfied (Cherry, 2024). This means that when learners' needs are addressed and met, their desire for self-actualisation will be stimulated. Maslow views the desire for self-actualisation in terms of human life as the point at which the individuals have arrived at their destination for which they were created (Du Toit-Brits, 2022). Therefore, in this study I want to understand how SMT members motivate learners and help them be excited about schooling such that they achieve their ultimate goals to become what they were meant to be. Self-actualisation in leadership involves developing a vision for the organisation by motivating learners, fulfil their needs and realise their full potential (McLeod, 2018). Linked to the school according to Maslow's theory implies that SMT members must understand learners' needs to better manage them and find ways to meet those needs. Learners who are demotivated are likely to learn very little and generally make teaching painful and frustrating. Therefore, teachers cannot take learners' motivation for granted because they have a responsibility to ensure learners are motivated and persuaded to want to do what they ought to do (Filgona et al., 2020). Hence, using Maslow' theory of motivation is important to know how in their process of leading for learner retention they actually stimulate their desire for self-actualisation. For example, school leaders are obliged to motivate staff and learners so that they are more driven to stay in the schools longer, put in more effort, learn more deeply, and be what they want to be (Schwanke, 2021).

3.4.3 The Relevance of Maslow's Theory of Hierarchical Needs

Maslow's theory of motivation is relevant to guide this study since it offers motivation guidelines to managers and leaders (Maslow, 1943). Since the framework operates as a guide, Maslow's theory of motivation will guide this study into understanding how SMTs in secondary schools adopt different ways of motivation as they enact leadership for learner retention. I believe that in the process of leading for learner retention, SMT members might consider doing things that motivate teachers to motivate learners such that they may be retained in their schools.

3.4.4 Limitations of Maslow's Theory of Hierarchical Needs

Although the theory of hierarchical needs is commonly used worldwide but there is a concern that the theory may not need to be followed in ranked order as suggested by Maslow (Cherry, 2024). Gepp (2022) acknowledged that inability to meet certain needs could be another way of motivation for self-actualisation. Accordingly, Omodan and Abejide (2022) contend that in the fluctuating world, management might not be limited to the fundamental way of motivation for instance from bottom hierarchy to top hierarchy as suggested by Maslow's theory of hierarchical needs. Also, Calisaan (2023) highlighted that Maslow's needs are presented in a perfect hierarchical order. However, life does not always follow this order since other people might make every effort for self-actualisation even if their basic needs are not fully satisfied (Calisaan, 2023). For instance, others might select love and belonging over other needs based on their personal conditions which means that Maslow's hierarchical structure might not reveal the liquefied nature of human motivations (Calisaan, 2023). Moreover, the hierarchical order emphasised that the most important needs found at the bottom of the pyramid are basic needs supposed to be met before applying other needs until realising your potential (Maslow, 1943). In relation to this study the order of needs might not work because learners come from different backgrounds and that their behaviour could not be driven by Maslow's hierarchical order (Tay, 2013).

3.5 FRAMEWORK EXPLAINED

This section presents and discusses how the three theories employed in this study integrate focusing precisely on the explanation of how each concept is applied to this study. This study looks at how SMT members lead for learner retention. Guided by this study's focus as mentioned here, it had to be grounded on understanding the nature of leadership, immediate and wider ecological issues as well as satisfying the human needs. I have therefore decided to integrate three theories that do this and also relates to this study which is triangulation of theories. According to Turner and Turner (2009) the triangulation of theories is used in the study to strengthen its idea when the viewpoints are related. As part of the discussion, I commence by presenting Figure 3.4 that indicates how each theory builds from Downton's transformational leadership theory to Maslow's theory of motivation and down to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

3.5.1 Integration of the Theories

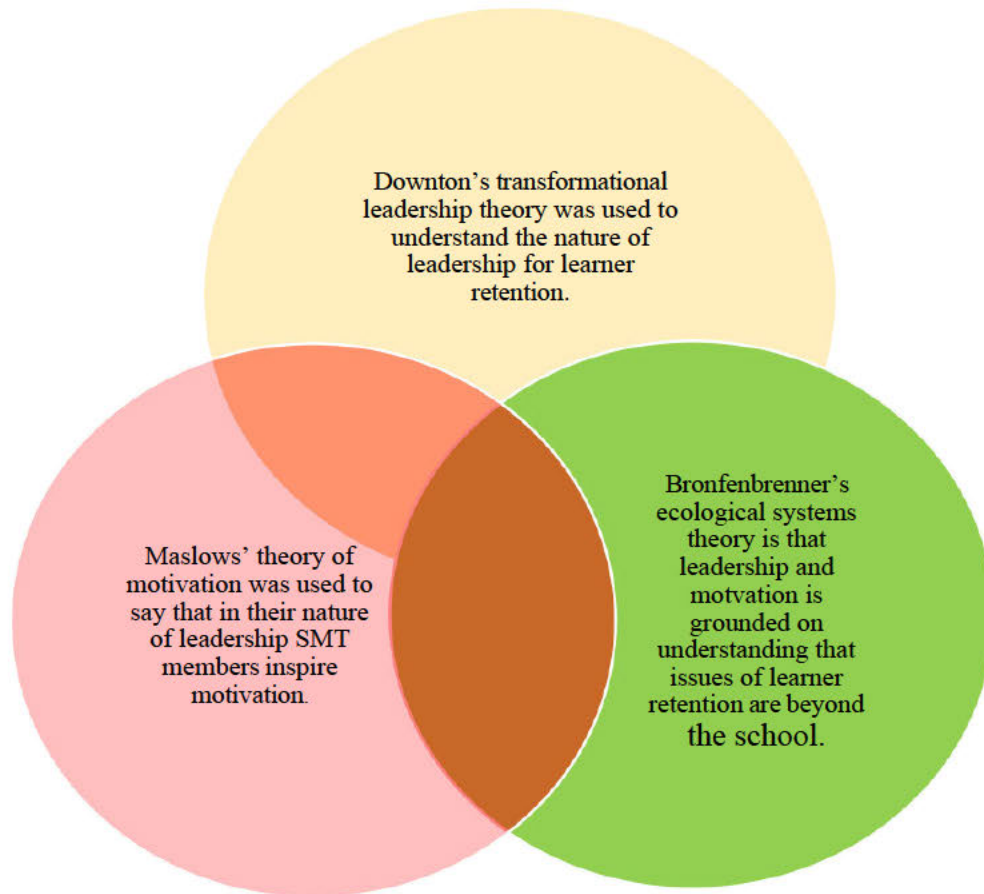


Figure 3.4: Indicates the integration in these theories employed in this study

Considering Figure 3.4, it is clear that the three theories integrate in terms of how SMT members lead for learner retention. To begin with leadership theory talks about understanding the nature of leadership. While, the ecological systems theory is saying that transformational leadership and motivation should be grounded on understanding that learner attrition and learner retention is influenced by both internal as well as external issues. It also indicates that in their leadership SMT members should understand that inspiring motivation plays a huge part in ensuring that people are interested in what they are doing. The next section discusses the integration of these theories and their application in this study.

3.5.2 Application of the Theories

This section discusses the application and how three theories employed to guide this study connect to leadership for learner retention. In this study, I want to understand how SMT members encourage their teachers to work with learners such that learners treat the school as the place to be in. In transformational

leaders can promote a close and encouraging relationship between the school and external systems such that learners feel loved and belonging to the school and continue with schooling. Moreover, transformational leaders inspire motivation by ensuring that they involve the learners' immediate environment to create a safe and inclusive environment where learners feel accepted and valued. Also, the three theories combined help in understanding how SMT members can make learners realise their full potential. For example, transformational leadership theory aligned with Maslow's concept of self-actualisation need may assist SMT members to keep learners in the schools. Transformational leaders can also provide an opportunity for personal and academic growth, encouraging creativity, and recognising achievements can motivate learners to stay engaged. Transformational leaders address individual differences and challenges, through attending to individual learners' needs and find assistance from external systems to support them such that they feel respected and develop self-esteem. They also implement recognition programmes, promote their talents, and celebrate successes to build learners' confidence and self-worth. It is also critical to understand that transformational leaders can collaborate with organisations outside the schools to provide various forms of support to needy learners to create a safe and a more supportive environment. Coming to societal and cultural contexts where learners are affected by broader cultural and societal influences, such as educational policies and cultural values, can help create a more supportive environment for learners. In a nutshell, by combining these concepts, school leaders can create a holistic approach to leading for learner retention that addresses immediate and broader environmental factors, meets learners' basic and higher order needs and fosters a supportive and inspiring educational leadership.

3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented a detailed discussion of the three theoretical frameworks that are used to guide this study based on historical origins, constructs, limitations and relevancy of each theory in this study. Although the three theoretical frameworks have been selected for this study, but they offer different tools for understanding the phenomenon under study. For instance, Downton's transformational leadership theory assists with a clear understanding of SMT members' leadership nature for learner retention. Mhaga (2019) argued that the relevance of transformational leadership theory is premised on the notion that the success and change in education systems are rooted in the nature of leadership working with followers. Since I sought to establish a wider understanding, I found that looking at only the nature of leadership was inadequate. Therefore, I employ Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which I found relevant to understand the connections among the multiple systems and how individuals negotiate the dynamic

environment that may influence learner retention. Predominantly, I believe that in the process of leading for learner retention, SMT members might consider to do things that motivate learners such that they may be retained in their schools. Therefore, I also adopt Maslow's theory of motivation to guide this study into understanding how SMTs in secondary schools offer different ways of motivation as they enact leadership for learner retention. Towards the end of this chapter I provided a critical discussion on how the three theories can integrate and give a clear understanding of the phenomenon. For example, the three theories combined help in understanding how SMT members can make learners realise their full potential and remain schooling. The last part discussed under this section formed the chapter summary. The next chapter discusses the research methodology that was adopted in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter dealt with the four theories that framed this study. This chapter discusses the research designs and the methodological processes that were followed to achieve the research aims of conducting this study. This is followed by the discussion of the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions underpinning the paradigm. Thereafter, the data generation methods employed in this study are discussed followed by data analysis procedures. This chapter begins with the detailed information regarding the research paradigm, research approach and research designs. This is followed by the presentation of how participants were selected, their profiles and the research site. Thereafter, the data generation methods that were used, a description of how generated data was analysed, the issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations were also explained. The research questions were clear and focused, Johnson et al. (2020) asserted that clear research question contribute in enhancing trustworthiness and reduce biasness.

4.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A paradigm is understood as a framework representing a specific worldview that dictates conventions of research and how it ought to be conducted (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). As researchers, our philosophical dispositions shape how we see the world and subsequently our thinking of how to conduct research (Wray, 2011). As such, the researchers' philosophical assumptions of concepts and practices become the determining factor for what to be investigated and how to go about it. Simply put, a paradigm becomes a "perspective about research held by a community of researchers that is based on a set of shared assumptions, concepts, values and practices" (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p.31). Even though the scope of the report does not allow for a discussion of all paradigms, there is a need for readers to understand why I chose interpretive paradigm as opposed to others. Therefore, I briefly discuss some prominent ones that fall within the human sciences and disciplines namely, positivism, critical, pragmatic and interpretivists paradigms. Positivism is a quantitative approach to research and embraces objectivity where findings are based on cause and effect of controlled variables (Creswell, 2014). Within the realms of the critical paradigm, reality is moulded by socio-cultural, political and economic dynamics that give way to unequal power struggles (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, critical researchers argue that the inequality and fight for

equality, fairness and transformation of society Creswell, 2014). The pragmatic paradigm may embrace one or more philosophical system and rely on the truth that works at that time while proving other truths as false (Cohen et al., 2011). While interpretivists wish to understand the social worlds of people and acknowledge that although people's interpretations vary, they are equally valid (Neuman, 2011). Researchers Cohen et al. (2011), Creswell (2014) and Neuman (2011) explained that both the interpretive and pragmatic paradigms recognise that knowledge may come in multiple forms and interpretations while constructivists are concerned with meanings that people assign to their real-life worlds.

This study sought to understand the meanings that SMT members attached to learner retention and leadership for learner retention without imposing any influence based on my perceptions and experiences (Cohen et al., 2011). Based on the study's objectives and discussions, I located this study within the interpretive paradigm because it concerns itself with subjective meaning-making of human experiences and the real-life world (Henning et al., 2004). Moreover, according to Bailey (2007) interpretive paradigm recognises the definitions and meanings people derive from understanding the circumstances. Furthermore, Pervin and Mokhtar (2022) mention that the selection of a philosophical viewpoint to evaluate a phenomenon under investigation should be guided by the demands of the research study and not concentrating on the needs of a research enquiry. In principle, interpretive research classifies that different people have different experiences of the world. This was obvious in this study when all participants from each school sharing similar context but the manner that they experienced their leadership in this regard was unique. This confirms that knowledge is produced by exploring and understanding the nature of reality and the social world of the people (Cohen et al., 2011).

4.2.1 The Three Principles Informing Paradigms

The three principles of the interpretive paradigm specifically the ontology, epistemology and axiology are in accordance with the qualitative methodology. Other researchers, such as Kivunja and Kuyini (2017); Mertens (2014); Nguyen (2019) and Ormston (2014), explained that paradigms are informed by the principles of ontology, epistemology and axiology. These principles are discussed in the following section.

4.2.1.1 Ontology

The ontology principles can be called the assumptions we make about the nature of reality (Nguyen, 2019). Accordingly, Ormston et al. (2014) maintained that ontology concerns the question "whether or

not there is a social reality that exists independently from human conceptions and closely related to this there is a shared context-specific social reality”. Fitzpatrick (2018) added that ontology represents that what is real and a believed view on the nature of reality which is why interpretive researchers are supposed to spend more time in the field with participants. For Creswell and Poth (2017), spending time with the participants in the field enables researchers to understand how they construct their reality and what they perceive as the participants’ subjective experiences. In relation to this study, this ontological view generally indicated that the leadership for learner retention by SMT members may be understood through considering the viewpoints of different stakeholders within the school. Even though leadership for learner retention can be seen as the responsibility of the SMT members in schools but according to participants in this study it extended to a variety of the concerned individuals in the school and in the community.

4.2.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is about the assumptions that we make about the nature of knowledge, how it can be acquired and communicated to other human beings (Cohen et al., 2011). Simply put epistemology is anxious about how we know the reality (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In elaboration, all people in this world have their own beliefs and personal experiences, and in the interpretive paradigm, their interpretations are accepted as true since they are the ones who lived through those experiences (Maree, 2007). Moreover, Bertram and Christiansen (2014, p. 26) further noted that “within the interpretive paradigm, researchers aim to develop a greater understanding of how people make sense of their contexts in which they live or work which is part of epistemology.” In addition, Kolbas (2018) indicated that interpretivists accept that the understanding created is distributed to all stakeholders involved. Accordingly, in this study all participants were viewed as important and their roles in leading for learner retention were distributed in making sure that learners remain in the schools until they complete their basic education.

4.2.1.3 Axiology

Axiology is described by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) as to do with ethical issues. However, in this study axiology principles allowed an understanding of the reasons for SMT members to enact leadership for learner retention in the manner that they do and I reported on how participants value what they know. Gameda (2010) stated that interpretive paradigm had implications for the study’s methodology. Therefore, in this study qualitative methods such as individual interviews and FGDs were used in honouring these principles. I used the two methods of data generation to gain rich data from each source.

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

Research methodology refers to the approaches used to acquire knowledge regarding the study in question (Kumar, 2019). In explanation, qualitative researchers aim to explore the ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the phenomenon under study (Du Plooy Cilliers, 2014). According to Mahajan (2018), qualitative researchers regard individuals as participants and not as objects and that they put more emphasis on how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences to better understand the world in which they live. In elaboration, researchers maintain that qualitative methods aim to make sense of peoples’ perceptions, feelings, experiences and situations exactly as they happen in the natural world (Coghlan, 2019). Therefore, this study is within a qualitative research approach. Furthermore, according to Jonker and Pennink (2010), research methodology is about the way that researchers carry out the research and decide about people to include and the area of study. Creswell and Clarke (2017) referred to research designs as plans that illuminate who will take part in the study and how, where and when data will be generated and analysed. The research methodology section indicated how outcomes of the research study and its objectives are achieved at the end (Sileyew, 2019). Furthermore, I find the qualitative approach more suitable for this study because qualitative researchers are interested in the in-depth information about human (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). It enabled this study’s participants to express their detailed responses through interviews and FGDs. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) noted that a qualitative approach is characterised by its aim to collect verbal, textual and visual data to provide an in-depth understanding of actions and meanings.

4.3.1 Explanation for Choosing Qualitative Research Approach

Between the two research approaches of quantitative and qualitative research methods, I chose to employ the qualitative approach for this study. In the following section I discuss my reasons for choosing qualitative route over the quantitative or mixed methodological route.

4.3.1.1 Quantitative Research Approach

Quantitative research is characterised by seeking statements, objective facts in the form of numerical data. A quantitative researcher conducts research with an aim to predict and generalise from universal findings and controlled environment (Rule & John, 2011). I believed that the outcomes of this study could never be realised through quantitative means as in- depth verbal coupled by prompting and probing to achieve depth information which is essential to realise the findings. In addition, Roberts (2020) noted that quantitative research method is undertaken in a controlled environment.

4.3.1.2 Qualitative Research Approach

Contrary to quantitative research approach is undertaken in an uncontrolled and free environment that allows the participants to move into the outside world to get a full picture about the participants' experiences and interactions (Roberts, 2020). Also, qualitative research focuses on people's social practices and experiences in real life (Silverman, 2016). Moreover, as asserted by Cohen et al. (2011), the use of qualitative research did not only offer participants a chance to convey their actions freely but emphasised the interpretive and contextual nature of this study. Furthermore, the qualitative study concerned itself with understanding the individuals involved in the natural settings where the phenomenon of study is happening, for example, in this study, it is a school (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Hence, the qualitative research approach has been criticised by its opponents.

4.3.1.3 Critiques about Qualitative Approach in Research

A qualitative research approach has been criticised by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) as being unscientific. Lub (2015) further argued that traditionally much tension existed among the proponents and opponents of qualitative researchers where doubts regarding validity and reliability dominate discussions. Yet, the issues of validity and trustworthiness are significant for research, to reveal how rigorous the research process and the findings are. Therefore, regarding this study data triangulation enabled me to confirm the credibility of the data generated. As much as case studies do not have the strength of generalising, the findings from this study does not discourage the readers of this study to relate their personal circumstances to the research findings and benefit from it (Creswell, 2014). Researchers such as Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Lub (2015) indicated that opponents of qualitative research question its ability to provide valid, reliable research while proponents argue that the credible methodologies are able to address issues of trustworthiness.

4.3.1.4 Strategies Followed in Obtaining the Knowledge

The objectives of this study are threefold. The first objective of the study was to explore how the SMT members attach the meanings of learner retention and its leadership. Secondly, the enactment of leadership for learner retention by SMT members. Lastly, the reasons behind the way that leadership for learner retention is implemented. Similar to these objectives, Taylor et al. (2015) contended that qualitative research has the potential to tell the nature of certain actions and discover challenges that exist within a particular context. Furthermore, Taylor et al. (2015) explained that this approach permits the researchers

to confirm expectations and ideas that they have. In addition, Taylor et al. (2015) pointed out that qualitative approach can provide a platform where researchers can draw conclusions about a certain practice. It was indicated that this study employed a qualitative research approach. In this study, qualitative approach allowed freedom to inquire deep into data generation where meanings and actions were explored, understood and analysed (Cohen et al., 2011). The essential strongpoint of qualitative research in achieving this is its ability to utilise ‘naturally occurring data’ (Silverman, 2011, p. 17). The contextual underpinnings of this qualitative research project were that it was conducted in the uncontrolled naturalistic settings without researchers’ intervention (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

Furthermore, in this study the qualitative research methodology was enriched by the individual interviews and FGDs as data generation methods. According to Creswell (2014), the methodological stance is useful in qualitative studies that sought to ascertain how things happen. As a qualitative researcher, I approached the field being aware that the world is a platform where all participants differ in their beliefs, behaviours, assumptions and that through thorough exploration of such diverse dispositions new knowledge was found (Maree, 2010). I found myself becoming more agentic in my leadership for learner retention as a teacher. Fecher (2021) asserted that the strongpoint of qualitative research is when knowledge gained through research influences participants and helps in solving social problems.

4.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

I found the case study suitable for this study because data was generated from the diverse group of SMT members within the selected three schools and it enabled me as a researcher to discover the participants’ experiences, feelings and inner thoughts. A case study, as described by Yin (2012), allowed a clear understanding of the phenomenon being studied. I opted for the case study as it allowed me to probe far deeper into the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the phenomenon. Exploring further into deep, reflective descriptions. I was able to discover organisational, cultural, social factors, interactions, actions and attitudes that had significant implications for the improvement in leadership for learner retention. Rule and John (2011) contended that all case studies indeed have some descriptive elements. Therefore, defining case boundaries is significant in understanding case study research. A case study is a close examination and analysis of a system that is bounded (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2012) stated that case studies offer multiple viewpoints enquiry in which the researcher considers not just the perception of one or two participants in a situation, but also the views of other relevant groups.

This study was a multiple case study on how SMT members attach meanings to learner retention and leadership for learner retention; the enactment of leadership for learner retention and the challenges in leading for learner retention. Multiple perspectives and understanding of the phenomenon from participants were derived. The three school sites were the bounded systems (Merriam, 1998) where SMT members voiced their contextual realities and deep-engrained experiences of the enactment of leadership for learner retention. All participants had to put much effort in retrospective reflection and discuss how the leadership for learner retention journey continued in their schools. Their interaction with each other and how such interactions influenced leadership for learner retention resulted in rich, multi-perspectival data outputs. This case study design, therefore, allowed me to bring to fore, the logically natural interpretations of different role players and their realities. Larkin et al. (2019) asserted that gaining multi-perspectival data gives voice to those previously neglected, marginalised, voiceless groups. Qualitative case studies pride themselves of such richness of data (Merriam, 1998).

This qualitative case studies could focus on extracting rich, verbal data from a small sample of participants while achieving a greater depth of insight from each participant. I was therefore at ease and successful in conducting a strong exploration of particular individuals in the three well- led participating schools. As opposed to a single case, a multiple-site case study offered me greater confidence (Yin, 2012) in my findings because, as Grant (2012) posited, leadership occurs differently in different contexts. It pleased me that conducting research in three contextually different schools may yield valuable data to explain how and why teacher leadership occurs differently in the three schools. Although it was not my intention of comparing cases when I started this study, I welcomed any data that brought out similarities and differences in leadership practices. As a case study researcher, embarking on this research allowed me to conduct this research, single- handedly from start to finish, without assistant researchers. I was able to generate data from a small sample of teachers and members of SMTs from each school, since a smaller sample in a case study has the potential to yield rich results owing to the specificity and uniqueness of each case and multiple data generation methods (Yin, 2009). Subsequent researchers may also be able interpret, understand and predict other similar research situations (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, I am comforted that multiple case studies such as the current study, carried out in different sites/schools offers more chances for comparison, generalising and validating findings (Merriam, 1998).

4.4.1 The Reasons for Using a Case Study

A case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigate a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p.18). The case study also captured events and phenomena as they unfolded so it improves the dynamics of occurrences (Cohen et al., 2011). Also, the case study gurus such as Yin, Stake and Merriam conform to the idea that in a case study there are multiple layers of knowledge construction and interpretation (Yazan, 2015). Balfour et al. (2009) acknowledged that case studies are generally useful for research projects in education and social science. The case study pursues in-depth information from a small case and focuses on one phenomenon, which in this study it is leading learners for retention. The study is a single case study because it focuses on understanding the experiences of SMT members within the context Umlazi and Pinetown Districts. In a single case study, the researcher chooses one issue and studies it in one case within a bounded system (Yin, 2009). The following section discusses the area of study, population size, the recruitment and sampling techniques.

4.5 THE RESEARCH SITES

The selection of research sites, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), concerns itself with identifying and justifying a selected site to locate the most appropriate people to participate in the study. Furthermore, the sampling of sites was done through purposive sampling technique. Elsewhere it is stated that “with regards to case studies researchers can purposively ‘hand-pick the case’ if they possess that particular characteristics being sought” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 156). Based on this statement, I purposively chose these three schools in the Umlazi and Pinetown⁴ Education Districts in KZN. This was because I believe there will be a higher probability of understanding how SMT members attach meaning to learner retention and leadership for learner retention. In addition, research sites refer to the areas and everything that the research falls into especially the study’s geographical boundaries (Kumar, 2019). Therefore, the next section discusses the geographical location of the three participating schools.

4.5.1 The Geographical Location of the Participating Schools

In this study, the geographical location of the three secondary schools where the study was carried out is KZN, South Africa. These schools fall under Umlazi and Pinetown Education Districts⁵. The first participating school falls under Umlazi District and is situated about +/- 30 kilometres from Durban city. For confidentiality, this school is named Tshelizwe High school (pseudonym). According to the staff establishment this school is allocated seven SMT members made up of the principal, two DPs and four DHs. The second school of study is located in Umlazi about +/- 35 kilometres from Durban city

and is named Shongololo High school (pseudonym). In this school the SMT members consist of a principal and three DHs. This school is not allocated a DP due to its staff establishment based on the number of learners enrolled in the school. The third school of study is situated about +/- 30 kilometres from Pinetown and is named Ndabazana High school (pseudonym). Due to a low number of learners this school has not been allocated a DP post, therefore, it has only five SMT members made out of the principal and four DHs. In addition, the three schools of study are public high schools similar to most of the schools in South Africa and fall under Quintile 3⁶. According to the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996), the context of Quintile 3 schools is that those schools depend mostly on the departmental norms and standards for funding schools. Therefore, these schools are not entitled to pay school fees meaning they are not collecting any fees from parents. Moreover, the three schools benefit from Government programmes such as ⁷National School Nutrition Programme and ⁸Orphans and Vulnerable Children's Programme.

4.5.2 Profiling the Participants

In this section, I present the participants' profile to introducing them to this study. The participants were drawn from the SMT members of the three high schools in Umlazi and Pinetown Districts. However, not all SMT members participated from the three schools due to various reasons as mentioned in Chapter Four. Therefore, the following table shows only the SMT members who participated in this study. As earlier stated the pseudonyms are used instead of the real names to protect their identity in compliance with the ethical principles.

⁴ **Education Districts:** Education district offices provide a line of communication between Provincial Department of Education and the education institutions through circuit offices to improve educational access and retention and help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching (Department of Basic Education, 2013).

⁶ Quintile 3: The Department has tried to bridge the gap using quintile categorisation of public schools since democracy in funding the schools based on the socioeconomic status of the community in which the schools are located. These ranking ranges from quintal 1-5, however learners in Quintile 1-3 no fee paying schools and receive more funding per learner from the government than schools in Quintiles 4 and 5 (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019).

⁷ The National School Nutrition Programmes is a government programme that provides nutritious meal to all learners in Primary and Secondary school to enhance learner retention (DBE, 2013)

⁸ Orphaned and Vulnerable Children programmes (OVC) are governmental and social interventions that give orphaned and vulnerable children support on a continuous basis be it in schools or in their homes (Mohlakwan, 2013).

Table 4.1: SMT members' profiles who participated in this study

School Names (Pseudonyms)	Participants (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Leadership positions	Years in Teaching	Years in Leadership	Highest Qualification
School A Ndabazana High School	Gwala	F	58	Principal	35	12	Honours in Education
	Magagula	F	47	Departmental Head	24	9	Honours in Education
	Zikode	M	54	Departmental Head	26	7	Bachelor of Education Honours
	Mncube	M	35	Acting Departmental Head	4	2	Honours in Education
School B Tshelizwe High School	Zwane	M	46	Principal	24	12	Honours in Education
	Ntobela	M	62	Deputy Principal	36	10	Secondary Teachers Diploma
	Zulu	F	54	Departmental Head	11	3	Post Graduate Certificate in Education
	Langa	F	49	Departmental Head	15	9	Honours in Education
	Gobela	F	61	Departmental Head	32	7	Bachelor of Education Honours
	Khathide	F	57	Departmental Head	31	15	Bachelor of Education Honours
School 3 Shongololo High School	Lukhele	M	52	Principal	23	8	Secondary Teachers Diploma Advanced Certificate in Education
	Shazi	F	42	Departmental Head	12	2	Bachelor of Science + Post Graduate Certificate in Education
	Hlabangane	F	59	Departmental Head	38	15	Secondary Teachers Diploma
	Nxasana	M	37	Departmental Head	12	1	Bachelor of Education Honours

4.5.3 The Community

While keeping the findings and objective of this study in mind, there were issues that need to be considered regarding the community where these schools are located. For example, this study explored the reasons behind the ways that leadership for learner retention is implemented in secondary schools. In responding to this, participants indicated that community issues where their schools are located were the key challenges that causes them to lead for learner retention in the manner that they do. It is therefore imperative to briefly discuss community related issues to give readers an idea regarding this. The three participating schools are situated in areas that are regarded as townships even though they are in the township's areas but most of the learners come from nearby informal settlements. In confirming this, most of the people in the surrounding areas are unemployed, characterised by high rates of low socio-economic status. The majority of the learners' parents are falling below the poverty line due to unemployment and relying on government grants for survival. Moreover, the rate of teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, crime, CHH and orphan hood is high and affect their leadership for learner retention.

4.6 SELECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were sampled using purposive sampling methods to find individuals who were able to provide the study with rich data and manageable to work with (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). For this reason, I purposively and intentionally selected those individuals who were SMT members in their schools. Creswell (2014) posited that purposive participant selection allows researchers to deliberately select participants and research techniques suitable for the intentions of their studies. Cohen et al. (2011, p.156) further highlighted that "As its name suggests a purposive sample has been chosen for a specific purpose." According to Etikan et al. (2016), selecting participants using purposive sampling occurs when researchers select a specific group of participants for a particular purpose that the participants have. The participants that were selected in this study were all those individuals who were serving in the participating schools as SMT members. These members according to me were identified as key partners in the development and the achievement of education goals as indicated in Chapter One, Section 1.2. Though, participants indicated that leading for learner retention cannot be the responsibility of leadership only but it is inclusive. Mbambo (2019) posited that including all relevant stakeholders in shared thinking is suitable even though they differ in their developmental levels of existing knowledge. This emphasises the idea leading schools for learner retention requires the working together and participation of all stakeholders working together with the SMT members.

For Teddies (2007), participants' selection entails a representative group of people, places or things from which data is collected. In addition, Creswell (2014) believed that the purposive participants' selection process permits researchers to purposively select participants and research methods suitable for the objectives of the studies. This study intended to utilise three principals, two DPs and 12 Departmental Heads (DHs) according to these schools' staff establishment. However due to unforeseen circumstances the number of participants reduced to three school principals, one DP and 10 DHs. Therefore, in total the sample size was reduced to 14 participants. The criteria for selecting the participants was based on SMT members who were willing to take part in the study. Some of the SMT members did not consent for different reasons such as that they were newly appointed into these positions. Other SMT members did consent but they were not available during the process of data generation because they were on long leaves. The next section focused on the recruitment and sampling techniques.

4.7 SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT TECHNIQUES

This section discusses the procedures that were followed in the sampling and recruitment of school with an attempt obtain the gatekeeper's permission. The study was proposed during the COVID-19 pandemic period, and as a result, sampling and recruitment techniques for finding schools that were willing to participate in this research project was really a rough journey. The three schools were chosen deliberately from the list of Umlazi and Pinetown high schools that I requested from the Provincial Department of Education in Pietermaritzburg. I contacted these schools using phone details and email addresses provided in those lists. Unfortunately, most schools declined and pointed out the issues of safety and time since lot of teaching time was wasted during lock down, so they were catching up and worse they are high schools. I did not give up I continued until I get the gatekeepers permission from these three participating schools (see Appendix C). To comply with COVID-19 safety measures, all recruitment correspondence was communicated using phone calls and emails.

4.7.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Selection Criteria

It is however noteworthy to highlight that there were exclusions and inclusions in recruiting the people who participated in this study. The following section describe the reasons why this study' participants were selected, and these are briefly stated.

4.7.1.1 Inclusion

Various individuals that included both males and females irrespective of ages were included in the study. These were school principals, DPs and HDs since they are relevant to the study in question. Each school has one principal that will be included, one DP responsible for school administration will be included in the study, and all DHs in these schools were also recruited. However, their inclusion was contingent on their interest and willingness to participate in the study. All participants selected in this study were identified as the key stakeholders in ensuring that learners remain in school until they complete all grades available in that school and was also based on the following:

- **School Principals:** School principals from each school were recruited since the school has one principal. They were also chosen as accounting officers who keep school records and liaise with people within and outside the school in matters concerning learner retention.
- **Deputy Principals:** Deputy principals responsible for administration and school management were recruited from each school. The DPs are the ones who liaise with the DHs and report to the principal.
- **Departmental Heads:** Departmental heads who were in charge of the Senior Phase were recruited from each school. The choice of selecting the DHs was that, they are exposed to working with class teachers in terms of managing and reporting learner attendance in schools.

4.7.1.2 Exclusion

The group of SMT members who do not show interest and unwilling to participate in the study were not forced to participate irrespective of their relevancy in this research in question. The SMT members who were on long leave due to ill health were not included to participate in this study. Also post level one teachers and school administrators were not included since the focus of this study is the SMT members.

4.8 DATA GENERATION PROCESS

When I was in possession of all the required documents namely the gatekeepers' permission from the school principals of the research sites, the permission letter from the KZN DBE (see Appendix B). and the ethical clearance from the University of KZN Ethics Department (see Appendix D). I then explained all the information contained in the letters and let the participants to sign the consent forms thereafter I embarked on the process of data generation. I conducted the three meetings with each participating schools

whereby the first meeting aimed at introducing myself to participants and vice versa and to create a close relationship with them. It was followed by the individual one on one semi-structured interviews then lastly, I engaged with all participants in a Focus Group Discussion from each school.

4.8.1 The First Meeting

As alluded in the introduction the main aim of the meeting was to acquaint myself with the participants in accordance with methods of data generation which were going to be used in this study. It was also to establish a relationship of trust between the participants and myself. These meetings took place in June 2022 in different schools. They were planned and confirmed telephonically with the school principals. The following table shows the dates and times for these meetings in each participating school:

Table 4.2: Dates and times for meetings in each participating school

School Names (Pseudonyms)	Dates	Time	Venues
Tshelizwe	20 June 2022	10am – 11am	Principals’ office
Ndabazana	22 June 2022	14pm – 15pm	Acting DH’s office
Shongololo	24 June 2022	10am - 11am	Principals’ office

According to plan, the meetings were to last for an hour after teaching hours or during break time. All SMT members attended the meeting. As alluded that this study used multiple-data-generation techniques which are the individual semi structured interview and FGDs. Researchers Creswell and Poth (2017) and Aguinis et al. (2019) described the use of various data generation methods as an effective way of capturing individual and group perspectives while generating reliable and relevant data.

These methods were also discussed in the first meeting. The participants seemed to understand, and they agreed to use the two data generation methods then they were requested to sign their written consent letters (see Appendix F). The consent letters had all the information about this study in terms of the topic and its purpose. A clear explanation was given to all participants pertaining to reasons for the study and what is expected of them. As the participation to the study was voluntary, it was stated in the letter of

consent and was discussed with the participants. In these meetings I defined the objectives of this study and explained some of the ethical issues to the participants. I also advised them of how the interviews will be conducted and were given a chance to decide on the dates, time and venues for the interviews. Thereafter, we finalised their availability, meeting dates, times and venues convenient to all participants for the semi-structured individual interviews. These meetings were not voice recorded because it was just some introduction sessions, but notes were taken.

4.8.2 The Second Meeting

The second meeting was the individual interviews with each participant on agreed dates and time. This study employed a qualitative research approach because it aimed at generating data by interacting closely with the participants (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). This study used the individual semi-structured interviews and FGDs to interpret the participants' feelings and inner thoughts. The two data generation techniques allowed me to obtain information from the participants based on the detailed questions guide. In elaboration, the focus group discussion helped to strengthen what individual participants has communicated during individual interviews. Pernecky (2016) specified that qualitative approaches provide an opportunity to tap into the richness of individuals' opinions, feelings, experiences, backgrounds and contexts in which they live and work. Furthermore, using my cellular telephone as an audio recording tool for both interviews, I was able to guarantee trustworthiness, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim. According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014) and Harding (2018), if the researchers record the interviews, it can reduce interruptions during data generation process and strengthen the data credibility as they would not miss anything. Recording these interviews assisted in generating a large amount of data during a short period of time that can be accessed at any time. I was also taking notes for everything that cannot be voice recorded such as gestures and body languages. Having discussed the two data generation methods, the next sub-section discusses the individual semi-structured interviews emphasising the reasons for choosing to use this method.

4.8.2.1 Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

This sub-section elaborated on the procedures that were followed to generate data in this study. Flick (2018) and Du-Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) noted that semi-structured interview is a qualitative data generation method that allows the researcher to pose follow-up questions to gain in-depth information from a small number of respondents. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used in this study as the main data generation method to investigate individual experiences (see Appendix G). The semi-

structured interviews were conducted with each participant and the duration of the interviews depended on the individual participants. I ensured that follow-up questions probed under each of the main research questions depending on the responses. I follow- up with a clarifying question to ensure that there were no stones left unturned in the interview. According to plans interviews were supposed to last for an average of 60 minutes with each participant. However, some of the interviews lasted longer because participants seemed to understand and interested on the questions asked and eager to express themselves in a manner that probing was important after the respondents' responses.

As mentioned in Chapter One this study entails three schools, therefore the venues where the study was conducted with each participant differ. In school 'A' which is Tshelizwe high school, I conducted the interviews with the Principal **Zwane**, DP **Ntobela** and one DH **Zulu** in the principals' office in different times that we agreed upon in the first meeting. These meetings took longer than expected so I have to rescheduled with the other three participants for the following day. On this day one DH **Langa** was absent and had to continue with DH **Gobela** and DH **Khathide**. There was a change of venue because the principal had a meeting in his office, so we used their respective offices. I had to reschedule the interview with DH **Langa** for July since I had to meet with other school and the schools were about to be closed for the second term. It also became impossible to plan for the FGDs since the individual semi-structured interviews were not complete.

In school B which is Ndabazana High school it was not a smooth journey even though I managed to interact and interview participants. On the agreed dates I found that Principal **Gwala** and DH **Magagula** took long leave and I was forced to reschedule the dates and venues for their interviews. When I called them they chose their homes to be used during the day when there was no one home to avoid interruptions. I could not wait because she was about to retire in three months and there was a possibility that she could not come back from her leave anytime sooner. I rescheduled for July with them and they were to confirm the dates. I continued with DH **Mncube** in his office and with DH **Zikode** in the principal's office since she was acting as a principal. We managed to carry on without interruptions but could not plan for the focus group as individual interviews were not complete. As mentioned in this paragraph that it was not a smooth journey, but it was worse with school C in such that the two DHs were so reluctant in such that it took us about nine months before the data was completely generated. I interviewed Principal **Lukhele** and one DH **Shazi** on agreed upon dates. and the FGDs were on hold until they were interviewed. Principal **Lukhele** was interviewed in his office

after school on an agreed date. Departmental head **Shazi** was also interviewed in her car. Departmental head **Hlongwane** and DH **Nxasana** were not available on their dates and seemed to be reluctant about their participation but did not withdraw. Instead, they kept sending apologies and insisting that they will make up to me. I had no choice but to wait until my clearance certificate expired and had to apply for its renewal. Fortunately, it did not take too long and by then the DHs were ready for interviews, so I continued. Departmental head **Hlabangane** and DH **Nxasana** were interviewed in their respective offices on one day. Departmental head **Hlabangane** was interviewed during break and DH **Nxasana** was interviewed after school. The individual semi-structured interviews were finalised in March 2023. FGDs were conducted five days after the semi-structured individual interviews were completed with all participants.

4.8.2.2 Strengths for Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews allowed me to probe follow-up questions and ask participants to elaborate and clarify their points and explain their responses further to obtain a deeper understanding. According to Ahlin (2020), even though semi-structured interviews start with the main questions prepared for the interviews but it allows researchers to ask follow-up questions to give clarity on their responses. Moreover, through individual semi-structured interviews, I felt closely connected to most participants and were confident to share their experiences. Cronje (2014) noted that the semi-structured interviews allow the close connection between the researcher and participants. Furthermore, I was able to identify and take notes of participants' non-verbal actions that revealed hidden responses such as nodding heads which helped me when analysing data. Ritchie et al. (2013) highlight that one-on-one semi-structured interviews enable researchers to reveal hidden information that can be useful in the analysis process.

4.8.2.3 Weaknesses of Semi-Structured Interviews

First, and foremost, the participants did not keep to the scheduled time then we had to reschedule for another date and you will find that they are not even available on that date. I intended to complete the data generation process within three months but due to unforeseen circumstances as mentioned in Section 4.8.2 it took about twelve months to complete. Second, few participants were very shy and could respond with limited responses although they managed to elaborate and provide an in-depth information after numerous probes. Limited responses can destroy the conversation especially when the interviewer try to draw conclusions from the unintended poor responses (Kakilla, 2021).

4.8.3 Focus Group Discussions

The focus group discussions (FGDs) allow the researcher to ask prearranged questions and probe responses through discussions in a group of people, thereby creating a conducive atmosphere (Creswell, 2014). However, during FGDs, participants are encouraged to participate freely and confidently (Ritchie et al., 2013). In this study, FGDs allowed participants to cooperate freely and share ideas and thoughts with each other when discussing the ways that they enact leadership for learner retention and the reasons thereof. Therefore, these discussions allowed the participants to engage in a broad discussion and gather rich and in-depth data about their understanding of leading for learner retention (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) a focus group discussion is used to regulate the attitudes, preferences, and dislikes of the participants being interviewed at the same time. The FGDs were conducted with all SMT members simultaneously from each participating school. During FGDs the participants engaged in the same key questions as in one-on-one semi-structured interviews (see Appendix G). Same as with the individual semi-structured interviews follow-up questions that were probed under each of the main research questions based on the responses. It was interesting that participants from the three participating schools were all free and showed interest in sharing their experiences in the meeting. For instance, the meetings were supposed to last for approximately 60 minutes as planned in each school, but with all schools it lasted more than 60 minutes because participants were excited and willing to share their experiences. I benefited more from the FGDs even though there were some challenges that were experienced and will be discussed further in the next paragraph. Different from the individual semi-structured interviews, all participants were active and shared their experiences with confidence.

4.8.3.1 Challenges Experienced During Focus Group Discussions

I experienced challenges in maintaining the number of participants required to conduct FGDs in a way that I ended up involving five participants in two schools. This was due to the number of SMT members allocated in those schools based on staff establishment. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), focus group discussion usually consists of about six to twelve members including the researcher to generate rich discussion from a manageable number of participants. It was also difficult to get all participants at once I had to reschedule for other days because I could not find them all present on agreed upon dates and time. Even though it happened but it took me longer than I expected. For example, with Tshelizwe high school I rescheduled once while with Ndabazana high school I rescheduled four times.

It was a different with Shongololo high school; it took about seven months although we did not reschedule, it just happened once on the planned date.

4.8.3.2 The Importance of Using Multiple Data Generation Methods

In this study semi-structured interviews were used as a primary source of data generation and the findings from these interviews were triangulated with the data generated from the FGDs. Creswell and Creswell (2017) specified that the use of multiple-data-generation methods are effective and resourceful ways of combining individuals and groups' ideas in generating consistent data about issues appropriate to a particular context. Regarding this study data triangulation permitted me more time with the participants to understand what they really know about this study. Accordingly, Goldkuhl (2019) noted that using numerous ways of data generation methods allows more time with the participants and it assisted in understanding what they really know and understand about the study in question.

4.9 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis means evaluating and developing data was generated to make it useful aiming to discover relevant information (Kumar, 2019). Cohen et al. (2011) postulated that data analysis involves systematic organising and synthesising the data generated with the intention to understand rather than to predict data in terms of participants' interpretation. Precisely, the raw data generated in this study was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis entails outlining and recording themes within the data generated (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Using thematic analysis in this study allowed me to realise similarities and differences from the participants' views (Akinyonde & Khan, 2018). According to Dodge (2011), collected data are continuously analysed with an effort to realise and understand the meaning of participants' perception and their experiences about what is being studied. Therefore, in this study I continuously analysed data generated in trying to construct participants' meaning, experiences and perceptions regarding the ways that they attached the meaning of learner retention in leading for learner retention. I carefully analysed the findings to establish recommendations for practice and future research. This was performed through a process of coding, that consists of the six phases namely, (1) getting familiar with the data and creating the first codes; (2) formulating the themes from the codes; (3) reviewing themes; (4) grouping together meaningful themes; (5) naming themes; (6) producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Getting familiar with the data: This was the first step in which I listened to the voice recordings several

times. I then transcribed the data recorded on the audio recorder verbatim, going back and forth a number of times to familiarise myself with the generated data from both individual interviews and FGDs. This was done together with data cleaning process where I removed the repeated sayings and fixed errors to get the best results from the generated data. Data cleaning is tedious but it is essential to get the best results and powerful insights from data (Osborne, 2013). These transcripts were read several times, I took notes, marked ideas and generated the initial codes. Transcribing the data on my own enabled me to capture all the utterances.

Formulating the themes: In this stage, I identified key words and sentences that were closely related to the phenomenon under study. Accordingly, I coded the interesting features across the entire data to form themes by going through the initial codes again and again, organising and categorising the data related to each code. The themes formed in this stage were combined to form possible themes. In the beginning I found this stage difficult until I received guidance from my supervisors.

Reviewing themes: In this stage, I engaged in several attempts to articulate meanings for each of the responses accordingly and used codes to identify patterns of similarities and differences.

Grouping together meaningful themes: During this process repeated statements across participants' meaningful themes were grouped together. These meaningful themes were confirmed by returning them to the participants to provide clarification.

Naming themes: This is the last step before producing the final report, in which I reviewed, interpreted and named the themes that correspond with the objectives of this study. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), the reviewing, interpreting and naming of themes that correspond with the objectives of this study must take place before producing the final report.

Producing the final report: This is the final stage that involved the presentation, analysis and the writing of the final report. This is the stage where I presented the verbatim words and discussions of the data clarifying participants' responses in line with the existing literature and the theoretical frameworks.

4.10 IMPORTANT ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN RESEARCH

The issues of validity and trustworthiness are important issues to consider when conducting a research study to demonstrate how worthy the findings and processes are. Since this is a qualitative research study,

instead of validity, trustworthiness is used. This study employed qualitative research method as it sought to present a profound understanding of a phenomenon and not to generalise the results to a broader population (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Therefore, trustworthiness was a preferable concept to use in this study to ensure its quality and that the research findings are worthy of attention (Moon et al., 2016). Moreover, Kalu and Bwalya (2017) noted that researchers are required to adhere to moral principles of conduct and consider ethical issues as important more especially when they deal with humans to ensure human dignity.

4.10.1 Trustworthiness

Validity and trustworthiness are important in research to demonstrate how demanding the research processes and the findings are. This is a qualitative research study and in general instead of validity we use trustworthiness. Trustworthiness consists of four quality concepts that enable the readers to determine the study's trustworthiness namely, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln, 1985) in Korstjens and Moser (2018). The findings of this study are context-based meaning stories are told by certain people based on their lived experiences so they cannot be generalised cannot be transferred to other contexts therefore transferability is not included. Therefore, trustworthiness in this study will be enriched through applying credibility, dependability and confirmability and are discussed in the following sections.

4.10.1.1 Credibility

Credibility in this study, was enhanced by adopting multi-data generation methods and it involved a wide range of participants from different levels. Specifically, this study employed the semi- structured interviews and FGDs with principals, DP and DHs that forms SMT members in three secondary schools. According to Forero et al. (2018), credibility is a way of establishing confidence so that the participants' results are true, believable and credible. Similarly, Nowell et al. (2017) described credibility as it is concerned with how consistent the findings are with the participants' responses. Using two methods of data generation was helpful, as I was able to generate rich and detailed data for this research (Shenton, 2004). The interviews were audio-recorded and were later transcribed into text. In relation to this study, credibility was improved through member checking whereby the transcripts were issued to the participants enabling them to confirm the accuracy of what they said during interviews. According to Kornbluh (2015), member checking is when the transcripts are taken back to the participants enabling them to correct, add, revise and determine the accuracy of the data generated. I found member checking

useful because we were able to discuss and share their responses. The transcribed interviews were confirmed as a true reflection of their responses.

4.10.1.2 Dependability

Dependability is described by researchers as the consistency of the research findings and how research processes are accepted allowing readers to follow those processes over a period of time (Anney, 2014; Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Stenfors et al., 2020). Simply put, if the study can be conducted in a similar or same context with different people, the similar findings would be found. As such, in this study, the participants' verbatim quotations represent specific themes and processes within this study and they were detailed to ensure the dependability of the findings. According to Kalu and Bwalya (2017), a researcher can ensure dependability by giving a reader adequate information required to determine how consistent the study is. Therefore, in this study, the research processes were explained and justified to an extent that even data gathering instruments and data analysis were detailed for the sake of dependability.

4.10.1.3 Confirmability

Confirmability is the ability of the researcher to be neutral during data interpretation (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). As such I continued to avoid biasness and stay neutral to ensure that my assumptions do not affect this study's findings. Accordingly, Forero et al. (2018) referred to confirmability as a strategy of ensuring that the study's findings are not affected by personal interests and biases. For example, in this study, I created a good relationship with my participants and did not impose my views on them in terms of the time and venues for the interviews. Also, the participants were free to use language of their choices although I posed them in English, I was flexible to translate to only isiZulu when requested. I presented the findings in both English and the language of their choice in order to maintain the original meaning. I have also provided a detailed methodological description so that readers are able to understand how the study was carried.

4.10.2 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics are the mechanisms that should be applied to ensure protection of those who participate in research (Flick, 2018). Such mechanisms, according to Bertram and Christiansen (2014), involve maintaining participants' confidentiality and anonymity, protecting participants from any physical and mental harm, ensuring beneficence, obtaining approval to conduct research, making certain that all participants have consented to voluntarily participation in the research study and that the participants are

well informed about the implications of the study. For Vanclay et al. (2013), ethics are values of behaviour about what is right and wrong in research.

4.10.2.1 Maintaining Confidentiality and Anonymity

As indicated before the good research depends on satisfying the ethical principles by observing confidentiality and anonymity (Miller et al., 2012). Accordingly, in this study I had to respect participants' human rights, dignity and privacy during and after the research and I valued their requests. It happened at some point that on participants asked me to switch off the recorder for the personal reasons during one-on-one individual semi-structured interviews, I also respected but listened attentively and I take it down in my notebook. All participants consented to be recorded and they were ensured that recordings were to be used for the research purposes only and were to be kept between ourselves to keep the information confidential. Anonymity and confidentiality were further guaranteed by using pseudonyms instead of using the real names for the school and participants. All electronic files and recordings were locked and protected by a password.

4.10.2.2 Obtaining Approval to Conduct Research

In adhering to ethical issues, the first step was to apply for the permission from the selected schools that serves as a gatekeeper to facilitate this study. I the permission from the participating schools on different dates in September 2021. I therefore applied for the permission to use these selected three schools in this province to conduct this research study from KZN Department of Education (see Appendix A). The permission was granted on the 14th of October 2021. To ensure the proper conduct, I further applied for the permission to conduct this study from the Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal where I am registered as a PhD student on the 26th of January 2022 (see Appendix C). The ethical clearance letter was granted and valid from the 9th of February 2022 until the 8th of February 2023 (see Appendix D). As it will be detailed in 4.8.2.4 there were some delays during data generation process and the ethical clearance letter expired before completion. I therefore re-applied for the renewals from the HSSREC and received the approval letter on the 24th of May 2023 (see Appendix H). Thereafter, I proceeded with the interviews.

4.10.2.3 Making Certain That All Participants Have Consented to Voluntarily Participation

I gave each participants the consent forms to sign as part of ethical concerns to make certain that they agreed to take part in this study per ethical concerns. In the consent forms I provided them with brief

details of the study, and they were all signed before data generation started. I also emphasise the voluntary participation and they were informed that they can withdraw at any time when they feel to do so. During data generation process there were two DHs from one school who consented but did not avail themselves for both interviews after several attempts to meet with them and were not taking my calls. They requested for some time because one was new in leadership position while the other one was complaining about ill-health. With the ethical consideration in mind, I had to wait for their time as the participation was voluntary. I waited for about seven months but when I was about to recruit another school with the help of my supervisor, I checked on them and they were ready. We confirmed dates for individual interviews with them and were done on a set date. Thereafter we met for FGDs with all participants five days after.

4.10.2.4 Ensuring That Participants Are Well Informed About the Implications of the Study

Having been granted a permission by the Ethics Committee I then proceeded with the recruitment of participants. I was able to visit the schools personally to finalise their participation since the COVID-19 measures were reduced. I carefully informed participants about this study's objectives, rationale and implications. All SMT members from three participating schools except one who was on leave agreed to participate in this study.

4.10.2.5 Protecting Participants from Any Physical and Mental Harm

I avoided falsification and abuse of all participants in trying to protect them any harm as part of the ethics principles. Creswell (2013) and Bertram and Christiansen (2014) affirmed that research studies should strive to prevent physical and mental harm. Accordingly, I always maintained respectful and a good relationship with all participants as abided by the ethical issues.

4.10.2.6 Ensuring Transparency and Beneficence

Ethical issues in conducting research principles of behaviour that the researcher needs to adhere to such as ensuring transparency and beneficence (Kalu & Bwalya, 2017; Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). These principles are respected and followed in this study. For example, participants were further assured that they have access to outcomes of the study before, during and after the publication of the thesis to ensure the transparency and beneficence for their participation

4.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the research methodological choices and their justification on how the research process was carried out in this study. For instance, I discuss my reasons for choosing qualitative route over the quantitative or mixed methodological route. The description of the research site was also discussed followed by presenting the detailed participants' profile to introduce them to this study. I further discussed data generation and data analysis methods employed in the study. I found that using one on one semi-structured interviews and FGDs made me realise how individual's understanding of the phenomenon matched with my theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, the issues of validity, trustworthiness, ethical issues and their application to this study were discussed to demonstrate how worthy the findings and processes are. Finally, the chapter summary concluded this chapter. The next chapters present and analyse the data guided by three key research questions that resulted to three major themes in line with literature reviewed for this study.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNER RETENTION AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study is about SMT members' ways of leading for learner retention in secondary schools. The previous chapter unpacked and discussed the research designs and the methodological processes that were followed to achieve the research aims of conducting this study. It is guided by three key research questions as indicated in Chapter One of this study and resulted to the following three major themes. They are presented here as Chapter Five and in the next two chapters as Chapter Six and Chapter Seven. meanings of learner retention and leadership for learner retention; enactment of leadership for learner retention and the reasons accounting for the way leadership is enacted. This chapter forms the first part of the three analysis chapters, as alluded to. In this chapter, the findings of this thesis are presented and discussed according to the main theme that emerged from the data guided by the first question of this study which was:

- What meanings do SMT members attach to learner retention and leadership for learner retention?

This chapter focuses on meanings attached by SMT members to learner retention and leadership for learner retention. Here, I present and discuss data that focuses on the meanings that SMT members attach to learner retention and the meanings attached to Leadership for learner retention. I begin with presenting and discussing the meanings attached by participants to learner retention.

5.2 MEANINGS OF LEARNER RETENTION

During the individual semi-structured interviews and during the FGDs participants were asked about what learner retention meant to them. The intention was to connect their understanding of learner retention with how they lead for learner retention and their reasons. I found that the participants' understandings particularly of what learner retention means to them is similar to all the participants. Although few participants revealed multiple meanings that are attached to this concept of learner retention. For example, three meanings of learner retention surfaced across all participants. The first meaning relates to keeping learners in any school as long as the learner is within the schooling system. The second relates to learner retention as keeping the learner in one school for the duration they are required to be in that school. Lastly, as indicated by a few participants, learner retention means keeping

a learner to repeat the same grade. These meanings are discussed in the following three sections.

5.2.1 Learner Retention as Keeping a Learner in the Schooling System

This meaning emerged from a few participants who explained learner retention as a means of keeping learners in the schooling system. This meaning differs from other two meanings in that it means keeping a learner in any school as long as the learner is within the education system. Confirming this, during a focus group discussion with SMT members from Shongololo Secondary, **Nxasana** a DH said *“I think the term applies to all learners irrespective of different schools but as long as they continue with their schooling until they finish at least their Grade 12 or colleges of skills like TVET colleges”*. Similarly, during an interview **Lukhele**, the principal of Shongololo, shared that learner retention was not only about retaining learners in one school but ensuring that learners were in a school system. The principal explicated: *“With my own understanding, the term learner retention means to retain learners who are either in their school or other schools to continue with schooling until they complete their basic education”*.

The SMT members’ understanding of learner retention is linked to the way this concept is defined by the Department of Education and other scholars. In contrast, this meaning was shared by **Nxasana** and Principal **Lukhele** from Shongololo secondary school only. I therefore argue that there is an abnormality in their understanding because it is supposed to be in line with how the department of basic education views learner retention in South Africa as the employer. It was also discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2 that learner retention is the opposite of dropout an indicator of the effectiveness of the schooling education system to retain learners in formal schooling until they have completed their required basic education (DBE, 2011). Similarly, Manyanga et al., (2017), as indicated in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2, described learner retention as it means the process of encouraging learners to remain enrolled in the schools and continue to do so until they finish their studies. Moreover, Van Ameijde et al. (2018), as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2, defined learner retention as a process of encouraging learners to stay in the school system and finish their education. Noticeable, this meaning came out from few participants as another way of understanding learner retention as they all seemed to understand learner retention as keeping learners in one particular school where they are enrolled.

5.2.2 Learner Retention as Keeping a Learner in One School

As alluded in preceding section across all participants in this study, a dominant understanding of learner

retention was that learner retention is a school approach to ensuring that learners are retained in their schools until their final grade. Simply put, according to these participants, learner retention is about keeping learners in one school to do all grades provided in that school without dropping out which was highlighted by all participants in this study. For example, **Gwala**, the principal of Ndabazana Secondary, stated, *“In general, speaking the term learner retention is to keep all learners in school to complete all grades provided in the school”*. The meanings provided by **Gobela**, the DH of Tshelizwe Secondary and **Mncube**, the DH of Ndabazana Secondary were not different from the one provided by Principal **Gwala**. **Gobela** and **Mncube** said about what learner retention means to them: *“There is learner retention which means keeping learners in the school, the ones who came to do Grade 8, it means we have to keep those learners up until they are Grade 12 which means we will be having the same number of learners (Gobela)”*. A similar sentiment was echoed by **Mncube**, though phrased differently, *“Learner retention is the process of trying to ensure that learners do not leave the school before they get maybe their matric since we are a high school which is about keeping all learners in our school to complete matric”*.

While the principal of **Tshelizwe** Secondary School, **Zwane** shared a similar meaning with Principal **Gwala**, **Gobela** and **Mncube** in these utterances He went on to add that to him it also means trying to bring back those learners who had already left the schooling system. In his explanation of learner retention, the Principal **Zwane**, expanded from the meaning provided to indicate that learner retention was not only about keeping those who were at school until their final grade, but argued that it included making means to ensure that those who have drop-out come back to the school to maintain the enrolment number. The principal said: *“My understanding of learner retention is to keep learners at school at all times avoiding them from leaving the school. Even trying to bring back those for whatever reason left the school and maintaining the number that we are having in the school”*. The DP of the same school **Ntobela**, shared a similar meaning but further added that learner retention is about keeping learners in the school ensuring that no learner leaves the school and instead number of learners in the school increases. The DP said: *“Learner retention for me means that you don’t have learners leaving school rather see learner numbers increasing and not decreasing”*. Generally, to the participants, learner retention, as indicated in the extracts before, entails keeping learners in the same school. Linked to this meaning, as defined by other scholars under Section 2.2.1 in Chapter Two, learner retention is the percentage of learners who enrol in it is not clear if it is in one school or in the schooling system a school and remain there until they complete their studies (Department of Education, 2008). Similarly, the literature discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2 described learner retention as the process of

encouraging learners to remain enrolled in a school and continue to do so until they finish their education (Manyanga et al., 2017). Although, it is not clear if it is in one school or in the schooling system but these meanings can be associated with keeping the learners in one school as understood by all of participants in this study.

I can also argue that, to the participants, learner retention means more benefits from the Department of Education in terms of funding, resources and buildings. For example, **Zwane**, the principal of Tshelizwe Secondary, highlighted, “*Even for the schools to survive there have to be learners at school, so if there are no learners at school then the school is closed and funds allocated are wasted*”. In the same manner, Principal **Gwala** of another school **Ndabazana Secondary School**, and emphasised the following:

The department invests a lot of money towards the education of learners in terms of buildings, staff establishment and resources. So if learners are not retained classrooms remain unoccupied more teachers lose their good schools through post-provisioning norms whereby they are moved to other schools with posts that are sometimes far away from their homes.

The Principal **Lukhele** of **Shongololo Secondary** supported Principal **Gwala** and Principal **Zwane’s** meaning but further explained how it happened:

The learner is admitted on January 10 day statistics are submitted and the department will pay the schools based on the same tenth-day statistics whilst the learner will soon leave this school for another, having been allocated funds and given the stationary. Some teachers may leave the schools and go to other schools because teacher numbers depend on the number of learners in that particular school so, teachers get worried if learners leave.

Portrayed in these utterances is that the participants’ major concern about keeping learners in the same school entails losing benefits that come with the number of learners enrolled in the schools. In my opinion to these participants keeping learners in the same school appears to be linked with these benefits. This argument is in line with school allocation as described by the Department of Education (2004) in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.6, as an amount of money that is allocated every year in each public school to improve education based on learners enrolled. Contrary to the dominant meaning presented, few participants

presented a unique side to this argument and emphasised keeping learners in any school as long as they are within the education system.

In support of the views, **Shazi**, the DH of Shongololo Secondary emphasised on keeping learners in the same school, *“It (learner retention) means keeping learners in one school to complete the last grade provided in that particular school”*. Similarly, though put differently, **Zikode** another DH of Ndabazana Secondary agreed with **Shazi** and expressed that *“Learner retention to me means keeping the same learners in our school for the calculated time the learner should be at that school”*. Similarly, **Magagula**, a DH at Ndabazana Secondary expounded: *“Here, it’s a High school it means the learner should be in this school for the minimum period of five years and two more years if they have to repeat some grades”*. Principal **Lukhele** of Shongololo Secondary further explained: *“Learner retention for me means admitting learners say in Grade 8, in the high school, and then they depart only in Grade 12 they don’t leave school before they reach Grade 12”*. While **Magagula**’s meaning is not different from all the other meanings drawn from SMT members, this participant’s meaning takes us further to include the maximum number of years that learners should be kept in the school even if they have repeated some grades. **Magagula** in her description, specifies that learner retention in a secondary school has to happen only for a minimum period of five years and two additional years for learners who might have repeated a grade in the two phases in a secondary school. This explanation is in line with what was revealed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.4 that the South African Department of Education implemented learner progression policy for public schools that prevent learners to remain more than four years in a phase in 1998 (Department of Education, 1998). Also, this policy may clash with learner retention as it means progressing learners who are not ready for the grades in those phases. Based on this study’s focus this policy and the explanation provided by **Magagula** as earlier stated, is critical and contradicting at this point. Although this may not be the focus of this study but it brings an important dynamic to this concept that the retention of learners in the schooling system is limited. Hence, these limitations might cause some learners to feel demotivated as they would be struggling with their works and leave the schooling system.

5.2.3 Keeping a Learner to Repeat the Same Grade

Although across all participants, the meanings attached to learner retention seemed to suggest keeping the learners in the school system, this third meaning suggests a conceptual challenge. Here a few participants indicated that they understand learner retention as keeping learners in the same grade when they are not ready to be promoted to the next grade. Confirming this, Principal **Gwala** stated, *“Generally*

*speaking the term learner retention is to retain a learner to repeat the grade when that learner does not meet the required standards to be promoted to the next grade". This meaning is in line with the departmental policy as indicated in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.3, that grade retention is described as the practice of keeping learners to repeat the same grade when identified as failing to meet their requirements to be promoted to the next grade (Carroll, 2018). Similarly, **Gobela** said, "My own understanding is when learners are retained in the grade because they are not suitable to move to the next grade. But that's my understanding of learner retention". **Shazi's** meaning was similar to **Gwala's** but **Shazi** shared both meanings, and this is what she said:*

In my opinion, there are two explanations: one, learner retention is to hold a learner to repeating the same grade; two is a way of keeping learners in one school until they finish all grades and phases provided in that school without changing schools. The difference between the two is that on the first one, the learner is retained in the grade and the second one refers to a learner to be retained in the school to complete all grades.

The definitions align with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.3 for example, Hadebe and Moosa (2022) described grade retention as it means holding back learners who have failed to meet promotional requirements as required by the policy, to repeat the same grade. Similarly, it is also the departmental policy practice of keeping a learner to repeat the same grade when identified as failing to meet the requirements to be promoted to the next grade (Gallagher et al., 2021). Noteworthy, in terms of departmental policy it is not pronounced as learner retention but as grade retention even though it speaks about keeping learners. It is also argued that this meaning does not connect with keeping learners in the schooling system. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.3 that grade retention can be associated with high drop-out rates because learners who are repeating the grade may sometimes feel demotivated and leave the schooling system (Grossen et al., 2017). Some studies also revealed that this practice affect most learners as they sometimes find themselves being bullied by peers and teachers, which make them to feel abandoned and leave school (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022). Similarly, a study conducted by Martorell and Mariano (2017), as indicated in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.3, found that grade retention in secondary schools increases the occurrence of chronic absenteeism that lead to learners dropping out of school. Even though, the intention was to engage in understanding the meanings attached by SMT members to learner retention another issue emerged that concerns its importance. The participants' discussions spanned beyond what leadership for learner retention is about and covered its

importance which suggested that this aspect is significant. I argue that this is because promoting learner retention has an impact not just on individual learners, but also on institutions and a country's economy (Kumanda et al., 2017). The following section discusses the importance of learner retention.

5.2.4 The Importance of Learner Retention

As alluded in the previous section, both semi-structured interviews and FGDs revealed that learner retention was important for multiple reasons, which were grouped into three categories, namely the importance of learner retention for learners, for a country, and for schools. These reasons are discussed here as subthemes.

5.2.4.1 The Importance of Learner Retention for Learners

Data showed that participants in this study understand the importance of learner retention for learners as a means of developing learners' skills especially, those that struggle academically. It further emerged from the participants' responses that learners lose a lot of opportunities such as getting good employment and living a better life. Similarly, it appeared from the data that when learners leave the school, they lose the purpose and involve themselves in crime to satisfy their needs. For instance, Principal **Zwane** of Tshelizwe said: "*Learners who are not at school they lose a lot because there are lot of opportunities that they miss for not having finished school*". Sharing the same view, DH **Zulu** from the same school as Principal **Zwane** said: "...they lose the purpose and indulge in drugs, involve themselves in crime in order to satisfy their needs, that is why the country is full of amaphara all over". While DH **Magagula** of Ndabazana secondary concurred Principal **Zwane** and **Zulu** and she said:

The learners lose their bright future because these learners leave school, they cannot be part of the working community then they become drug addicts, become baby makers, become thugs.

Further emphasising the importance of learner retention another different view came out that it can be one way to eliminate social ills such as crime and substance abuse more so from becoming *amaphara*⁹. The participants' interpretation of the importance of learner retention for the learners was as follows: "*Learner retention involves giving the learners information about life and it is when learners are building their way towards their future (Ntobela)*". This view was supported by participating Principal **Zwane** and Principal **Lukhele** though put differently. In his response Principal **Zwane** said: "*Education is the key to succeed in future because without education the future is empty*". It emerged from participants'

responses that they understand the importance of learner retention for learners as means of developing their skills especially, those that struggle academically. For example, participating **Hlabangane** insisted: “Learners’ skills are developed and they can use their skills to earn a living even if they are not gifted academic wise”. A similar pattern was also found from the DP **Ntobela** when he said:

About this what is important about retaining learners is that they are building their future, is about developing themselves, is about leaving a meaningful life, is about empowerment having the know-how, because even if they’ve got skills but you cannot utilise your skills properly if you not educated (DP Ntobela).

Sharing the same view, participating Principal **Gwala** indicated that learners also have to be responsible for their lives and able to uplift their parents from poverty. She stated:

It is important because they will be responsible for their lives, able to uplift their parents from poverty. Some parents are unable to provide they had hopes maybe that their children will make a difference once they have finished school and educated.

Echoing similar sentiment **Shazi** indicated:

Parents lose hope as they thought these learners will lift them one day and what happened now, it turned out in a negative way when they leave school early and these learners happen to add more poverty in their homes and some steal from their homes to get drugs (Shazi).

Similarly, Principal **Gwala** mentioned that “Some parents are unable to provide they had hopes maybe that their children will make a difference once they have finished school and educated”. Another important issue for learner retention entails the elimination of social ills. This is what Principal **Zwane** said: “When learners come to school, some of the social ills are eliminated”. The participants further indicated that if learners are not at school, they may sit in their homes unemployed increasing a negative circle of poverty.

⁹ This insulting name of *amaphara* was given in line with the rise of cheap heroin sellers to a group young people who left schools and homes to live in the city centres (Hunter, 2021).

This is what participating DH **Gobela** indicated:

Most of them they sit at home so it means they increase a negative circle of poverty and now bringing a child in the family and that is a vicious circle of the negative circle of poverty.

In the same manner, **Hlabangane** shares a view that relates to a Zulu saying ‘*izandla ezingenzi lutho usathane uyazinika umsebenzi*’, meaning ‘empty hands are the devil workshop’. This saying indicates that if learners leave the school, they will be doing nothing and they will be easily tempted to bad things. He asserted that: “*Bad people maybe influential to them and ended up copied bad people and do the same because children are easily influenced*”.

Overall, it transpired from the responses that when learners are retained they can be responsible for their lives and able to uplift their families from poverty. According to participants, some parents had hopes that their children will make a difference in the family once they have finished school. Linked to Literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.3.2, Bhatti et al. (2017) argued that parents from low-income families are likely to put more effort into their children’s education since they see it as a way out of poverty. It is also clear from data sources that participants understand the importance of learner retention for learners as to empower learners with skills and the opportunity to succeed. It also transpired that some learners are not gifted academically so when they are in schools their skills will be developed and will be able to use these skills to earn a living in the future and become responsible for their lives and families. According to Spiel et al. (2018), as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2, learner retention assists in skills development and empowerment for better knowledge to improve their living conditions. This suggest that the majority of participants are concerned about learners’ living condition when they have completed their basic education.

5.2.4.2 The Importance of Learner Retention for the Country

Learner retention is important as educated children might contribute effectively to society and South Africa. Therefore, it is important to retain learners as they belong to society and when leave the school they might develop problems which in turn affect the country. Generally, without education the learners might not be employed and turn to crime. Additionally, data sources revealed that a country will have no peace as it will be faced with numerous problems such as high crime rates, high early pregnancy rates, and the high rise of *amaphara*. The utterances present the participants different views on the importance of learner retention for the country: “*It is thus possible that they will not be employed even become criminals*

adding crime rates in the country (Principal **Lukhele**)". Similarly, DH **Langa** also concurred with the views and she stated: "Education is the weapon to fight the following; crime, poverty, early pregnancy, low income or unemployment at all madam they are so many". Further emphasising on this point, Principal **Zwane** quoted Nelson Mandela when he said, 'education is the most powerful weapon with which you can change the world'. He further elaborated:

*I think they lose the most important weapon, which is education. As Mandela said, "education is the most powerful weapon with which you can change the world", if I'm quoting him correctly but it's along those lines (Principal **Zwane**).*

While in the same manner Principal **Zwane** added: "Without education in our country it means there will be no peace like now South Africa is full amaphara and they do dirty businesses". **Gwala** the principal of Ndabazana supported these views but she further explained what is meant by a country without peace. This is how **Gwala** expounded and insisted on the issue of *amaphara*:

"Kunesisho esithi; ithini elingenalutho linomsindo omkhulu" it means there will be no peace in our country and this may hinder the progress of our country. You know South Africa is full of these people called "amaphara", that are all over doing dirty things like theft, burglary, thugging, drug abusers, rapists and many more.

In support of these views DH **Nxasana** said:

I think retaining learners is important especially here in South Africa as it can reduce the number of criminals and limit amaphara who leave homes and schools and live in the streets stealing and selling for drugs.

In elaboration, Principal **Lukhele** raised his concern regarding the rapid rise of *amaphara* in South Africa and further explained that these children are used by foreigners to sell drugs to earn a living. In explaining this is what he said:

When children with school going age are not at school they join these crowds who are up and down in the streets and township roads doing dirty things, stealing from other people for a living because they left their homes and school. They will run away from their homes because parents will keep pushing them to the schools. They are used by foreigners to sell drugs and end up using drugs and become "hobos", thugs, and

substance abusers, in this country we also call them amaphara.

In support of these views D H **Nxasana** said:

I think retaining learners is important especially here in South Africa, it can reduce the number of criminals and limit amaphara who leave homes and schools and leave in the streets stealing and selling for drugs.

The participants further indicated in their responses that learner retention is important because South Africa needs educated people who will contribute effectively and improve the economy of the country rather than adding crime rate. Similar to literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2, Wanka (2014) states that educated people can stimulate economic growth that may attract direct investment which create many job opportunities in a country. It was also obvious from these participants' voices that learner retention is important to reduce unlawful activities because according to their understanding children are easily influenced when they mix with bad people outside the school.

When this is closely analysed it suggests that participants link the unlawful doings in the country with schools' failure to retain learners. Moreover, the participants' articulations suggest that learner retention is important to eliminate social ills such as poverty, crime and the rapid rise of *amaphara* in the society. Based on the utterances, it is clear that participants in this study maintain what Mogashoa and Mboweni (2017) referred to as the importance of learner retention in that the purpose of education is to bring about changes in society while at the same time increasing the economic, social, and cultural standard of living in the country. Another view that emerged from data sources revealed that when learners are not retained the country loses future leaders, doctors, and engineers in such that they depend on other countries instead of using service providers in the society who might be reasonable as they understand the society they grew in. Also, participants see retaining learners in the schools as very important in that it helps improving the economy of the country.

¹⁰ These are a group of thugs and substance abusers who left their homes and leave in the streets.

A participant stated:

*So, retaining learners at that school is very important in fact it also helps improving the economy of the country. Because if we have more learners that are educated, it means we have an educated community, a learned nation which will also improve the economy of the country and an educated society at large (Principal **Zwane**).*

*Society and the country lose educated people who will be empowered to lead in the future, lose doctors and engineers and many more, other than that they depend on other societies and countries (**Nxasana**).*

*The society same as the country they lose future leaders and service providers in the society who might be reasonable as they understand the society they grew in (**Hlabangane**).*

In line with the participants' extracts, **Nxasana** added another issue of how government funds are wasted on grants and on supporting criminals in jails. This is what they said:

Governments' funds are wasted as they are paying grants to support these learners who leave school and become young mothers who will not be employed as they are not fully educated you can see the lines every month. It is worse with criminals who live the soft life in jail enjoying government funds all this lowers the countries' economy.

Principal **Zwane** elaborated on **Nxasana's** view and said:

In our country as a whole the government itself also loses a lot because when the criminals get arrested and kept in jail and they have to be looked after in jail.

Overall, the interviewed participants position the importance of learner retention for the country alongside the notion of limiting crime rate, substance abuse, daytime robbery and children who become *amaphara*. In explanation, learners who leave schools before completion may find themselves doing criminal activities and corrupting the country. This is in line with reviewed literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2 based on the importance of finishing schooling in that youth unemployment encourages people to do bad things because of poverty while education can help push youth away from criminal activities (Omboi, 2020). It also transpired here that Governments' funds are wasted as they are paying grants to support these learners who leave school and become young mothers while they will hardly be

employed as they are not fully educated. **Nxasana** further highlighted that criminals are kept in prisons and enjoy government funds which also affect the countries' economy. This shows that participants believed that if these children completed their education they will not depend on the government social grant and there will be no criminals sent to prisons and the government fund will not be wasted on them. It also transpired from participants that every year the Department of Education received more funding in terms of the country's budget. For instance, DP **Ntobela** stated: "... *if you look at the budget allocation education department gets the most slice because educating children is very important*". This is consistent with the current 2024 budget review which shows that learning and culture receives the highest percent of the total budgets. This suggests the importance of learner retention for the country. This was also discussed in Chapter Two that leading to ensure learner retention is a priority for all schools in a country (Van Ameijde et al., 2018). Kumanda et al. (2017) further explained that promoting learner retention has an impact not just on individual learners, but also on school and the country's economy.

5.2.4.3 The Importance of Learner Retention for Schools

The participants shared a common understanding of the importance of learner retention for schools. What was found common from the majority of participants was that when learners are not retained the schools lose good teachers. This is linked to post-provisioning norm (PPN) which states that teachers are allocated in schools using the post-provisioning model (PPM) formula based on the number of learners enrolled (Ntuli, 2012). It determines the number of teachers to be allocated, therefore when there is a decrease in the number of learners, teachers above PPN are moved to other schools (DOE, 2004). The participants contended that some learners develop interest in school because of some teachers so if those teachers are moved, they will either follow them or leave the schooling system. Furthermore, participants seemed to be concerned about the school allocation¹¹ of funds and learning resources which is also based on the number of learners in each school (DOE, 2004). This is what participants stated, "*It is also bad when the learners do not come back to school in their numbers the staff will decrease and some educators will be taken to other schools*" (DP **Ntobela**). Similar view was shared by Principal **Zwane** during FGDs indicated, "*As for the school we lose teachers because the learner numbers have dropped the number of teachers also will have to drop and lose very good teachers*".

Also, participants indicated that practice affects even teachers in different ways as indicated in the

extracts. For example, **Nxasana** during FGDs in his school stated, “*Teachers who are working in those schools will be above PPN and will be moved to other schools, this movement demotivate teachers because sometimes they have to travel long distances to new schools*”. Principal **Gwala** support **Nxasana**’ view and added that schools it loses a good teachers sometimes good learners follow their teachers through this PPN and sometimes they might not afford transport to that school and drop out.

Teachers lose their good schools through post provisioning norms whereby they are moved to other schools with posts which are sometimes far away from their homes. As schools it loses a good teachers sometimes good learners will follow their teacher through this PPN. To give an example some learners left school because their best teachers were moved to schools that they could not afford as it is one is in jail and the other one is one of amaphara (Principal Gwala).

These assertions show that participants are not happy about this practice of moving teachers from one school to the other due to a decrease in the number of learners. However, this practice seemed to frustrate and demotivate teachers and learners for several reasons. It was apparent that some learners would lose interest in that school and want to follow that teacher, but schools may be far from their homes and they have to travel long distances then prefer to stay at home.

Furthermore, participants reported that failing to retain learners affect the school reputation and the school community will raise an eyebrow in that the school is not good. The participants argued that when learners are not retained it negatively affect the reputation of the school in that parents may lose trust and remove their children. These participants’ views are consistent with the existing studies. For instance, literature in Chapter Two indicated that retaining learners in the schools help leaders to maintain a positive image of the schools, making them more appealing and visible to the general public (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz & Pashiardis, 2020). It is obvious that participants associate keeping learners in one school with one of the ways to ensure that there is discipline in the schools because they have long been there and understand the school culture.

¹¹ The school allocation is an amount of money that Government gives to each public ordinary school every year through Norms and Standards based on how many learners there are in a school (Department of Education, 2004).

The participants stated: *“If the learners are not coming back to school that will affect the staff and the school because the community will raise an eyebrow towards the school (DP Ntobela)”*. Similarly, Principal **Gwala** asserted: *I think learner retention is important because the school is in the map of the community that will give an impression that the school is not good”*. Confirming this **Langa** has this to say, *“The society they lose trust in that school because you know learners may not just leave the school for another school unless there is a problem in that school, then parent remove children for better schools”*.

Khathide added:

*...Instead of parents trusting this particular school and sending their learners to that particular school, they prefer to spend money transporting their children to other schools instead of their children walking to this nearby school then maybe they do not have money for transport they drop out (**Khathide**).*

Drawing from the responses, it is obvious that these learners might end up leaving the schooling system. These views are consistent with Murambiwa and Hall (2018) who found that, for children who do not attend schools near their homes, the cost, threat, and attempt of getting to school may decrease their interest. Also, as indicated in Chapter Two, learners who walked long distances to school without transport could not attend school when there are heavy rains and are often late for school and eventually developed a negative attitude towards school (Mafa, 2018).

The participants further revealed that the department invests a lot of money in education to accomplish the children’ right to basic education as stated in the constitution of this country. In confirming this, participants from all three schools share a similar understanding. This is what Principal **Lukhele** and DH **Shazi** of Shongololo secondary during FGDs shared the following:

*The government invest a lot of money on the education of learners to accomplish the children’s right to basic education as stated in the Bill of Rights”. If this can the case with schools, funds and resources allocated in schools will not be wasted but will be used fruitfully. So, schools will keep their good teachers and learners to meet their goals and achieve its vision (**Shazi**).*

Echoing similar sentiments, Principal **Gwala** of Ndabazana secondary stated:

There is no Department of Education without learners to be taught and yet the department invest a lot of money towards the education of learners in terms of buildings, staff establishment and resources. So if learners are not retained those funds become a waste classrooms remain unoccupied more teachers to teach few learners and many more (Principal Gwala).

The overall expression from participants suggests that the government invest a lot of money on the school buildings, school resources that includes teachers and other human resources in the schools. This is evident from the 2024 budget allocation report, it appears that education received the highest allocation (Budget Review, 2024). The following section defines and discusses leadership for learner retention.

5.3 MEANINGS OF LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION

During both data generation processes I found that participants attach multiple meanings of leadership for learner retention. For instance, it came out that participants understand leading for learner retention as it means (1) engaging sustainable techniques, (2) making sure that all learners are retained in the school, (3) using collaborative approaches, (4) stimulating and creating a conducive environment.

5.3.1 Engaging in Sustainable Techniques

It emerged from the participants that they understood leading for learner retention as a means of leading with innovation by engaging in sustainable techniques. It also transpired that participants in this study believe that engaging sustainable techniques enables effective teaching and learning. Confirming this, participants described it as follows: *“To my understanding leading for learner retention is about engaging techniques to ensure effective teaching and learning so that learners stay at school (Mncube)”*. He went on and added that:

“Basically, leading for learner retention is about leading with innovation coming up with mechanisms to monitor learner attendance in ensuring that the school is functional and we go beyond ensuring that there is a book, there is a teacher, there is a chalk and all other resources in time to ensure effective teaching and learning”.

Mncube's perspective corresponded with **Hlabangane**'s understanding but in his view he added that:

Leading for learner retention means a way that school leaders are able to lead in a way that there is effective teaching and learning to develops learners' desire to keep

coming back to school and applying some techniques to keep them in the schooling system until they complete their basic education and beyond (Hlabangane).

Echoing similar sentiments with those two participants, **Langa** and **Shazi** described leading for learner retention as it means ensuring that learners needs in terms of subjects offered are catered for. This is what participants stated:

It is about making means to take care for learners' needs in terms of the subjects offered so that learners remain in the school and never drop out or change the institution because they are not satisfied about the subjects. (Langa).

To me leading for learner retention means understanding the goal and the needs of the learners that they have, ensure that they are catered for. For example, the subjects that are offered in that school, if the learners are not catered with the subjects that they need, they will leave that school eventually to go to the particular school where those needs are catered (Magagula).

While **Shazi** shared a similar meaning with other participants, in her description she emphasised that to her leading for learner retention means using necessary skills to monitor learners' attendance to follow up on the learners at risk by absenting themselves more often. She said, *“To the SMT as school leaders, leading for learner retention is about developing strategies involving all stakeholders especially learners and using necessary skills to monitor learners' attendance. It also means taking care for learners and interfere when there is a need by using different techniques to follow up on the learners at risk by often absenting themselves more often” (Shazi).*

The participants further argued that teaching and learning alone may not develop interest to all learners to remain in the schooling system. Therefore, to them leading for learner retention means managing and controlling schools in the manner that encourages learners to remain schooling until completion. For example, the DP **Ntobela of Tshelizwe secondary** when noting that *“Leading for learner retention is about the means of controlling and managing in a way that encourages everybody to like the school...”*. Similarly, **Mncube** stated:

I would like to come in and add that in policy leadership for learner retention means it becomes the duty of the SMT to ensure effective leading for learner retention in terms

of ensuring that learners do not drop out of school by communicating with parents, solving problems and ensuring that the school is driven to the right path.

The meanings of leading for learner retention directly portray that to the participants in this study, it means employing mechanisms and applying techniques to ensure that learners are kept in the schooling system. It is indicated under Section 2.2.5 that effective teaching using techniques leads to good academic performance, which is the most dominant outcome in leading toward learner retention (Casanova et al., 2018). Also, as noted in the utterances, the participants saw the need to have the necessary leadership skills as their professional responsibilities in leading for learner retention. They suggested that using different techniques to follow up on the learners at risk is necessary to retain learners in their schools. Linked to literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5, Teasley (2017) stated that SMT members' leadership skills are critical to the school's development and are necessary across the institution at various stages for changes to occur and goals to be met.

It also appeared that participants in this study positioned caring for learners' needs alongside the notion of learner retention. For example, participants seemed to understand that leading for learner retention is about understanding the needs of the learners in terms of subject grouping because if it does not cater for all the learners, they may leave that school eventually to go to the school where those subjects are offered. This is in line with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5 that strong leadership has become a requirement in every school to deal with the quick changes and varying demands of schools (Wadji, 2017). It also transpired that leading for learner retention means monitoring learners' attendance so that they intervene to assist those at risk, for instance, the learners who often absent themselves. This finding confirms participants' understanding of learner retention as it is about intervention and applying care so that learners complete their schooling. Linked to this finding Mayet (2021), in her study as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.3, found that intervention and support are appropriate in leading to increase learner retention and reduce drop-outs rates.

5.3.2 Leading to Ensure that Parents Are Happy

Leading to ensure that parents are happy about the school came out as another most important issue in leading for learner retention. The participants noted that as leaders it is their responsibility to lead for learner retention, but as SMT members they still have less power in deciding for learners' school attendance. According to them, the full power lies with the learners' parents or guardians. Confirming

this, the participant stated: *“As SMT members, we still have less power in deciding for learners’ school attendance since the full power lies with the parents (Mncube). Mncube further said, “it basically means trying by all means to ensure that we come up with ways of ensuring that parents are happy about the school for these kids to stay at school, go to class until they finish their education”*. Echoing a similar sentiment, Principal **Zwane** said:

As a leader and a principal of the school to me leading for learner retention means that I have to draw the lines in terms of making sure that it happens that learners remain in this school from Grade 8 and finish their Grade 12. So, it means number one making sure that learners are taught because that’s the main core business of the day and two parents are happy and involved by attending to all other secondary and primary issues and taken care of they possibly remain in schools (Principal Zwane).

The meaning provided by participants affirms that leading for learner retention means caring beyond the school and keep parents satisfied about school developments. However, caring is not defined by their leadership styles but driven by an important role to be played by teachers, as stated in the norms and standards for educators (Department of Education, 1996). In support of these views presented, some participants said: *“Therefore, leading for learner retention means to control the activities, to monitor if the ship is driven at a right place and satisfy parents in order to attain the high rate of learner retention” (Magagula).*

Although participants are aware that, in policy, they are obliged to effective leadership for learner retention, they do not decide for learners dropping out of the schooling system. Henceforth, they looked at leadership for learner retention as it means solving learners’ problems through communicating with parents since they have full powers to decide about their children’s attendance. Showing concern, some participants stated that:

Leadership for learner retention means to be very strict with absenteeism and taking good care of our learners even though some issues are beyond our control, like we cannot change parents when they have decided to withdraw the children from school either for good or transferring to another school (Nxasana).

What is missing on our leading for learner retention, is the policy that allows us to prevent parents from keeping their children away from school. This way to me leading

*for learner retention is about the development of the policy that will prevent parents from keeping their children away from school (Principal **Lukhele**).*

These utterances indicate that even though participants as leaders are trusted with leadership for learner retention but all in all it is about giving guidance while parents are the ones to decide about their children. This meaning is aligned with Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz and Pashiardis (2020), in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5, who stated that SMT members as school leaders are obliged to give guidance to encourage learners' interest in attending school. Consistent with literature discussed in Chapter Two deciding on the school for children to attend is a vital role of parents and learners themselves (Abdulkadiroğlu, 2015).

5.3.3 Understanding the Diversity of the Learners

The previous theme addressed the participants' different understandings of leading to ensure parents happiness. While on the analysing process regarding this theme, another key emergent sub- theme emerged that concerned the way in which the participants linked their teaching to inclusive teaching. **Magagula** the DH from Ndabazana High school indicated that leading for learner retention means understanding the diversity of the learners in that some are academics while others are non-academic. This shows that in leading for learner retention they also have to develop their learners' skills especially those are struggling with academics. She stated:

To me leadership for learner retention means we need to understand the diversity of the learners as some are not academics so as a school we need to make sure that at least within their leadership they cater for different needs of those learners. Then it means for learners who are good in skills the school must try to provide such skills e.g. sports and they remain in the school and will have something to face the world.
(Magagula).

While on the same view the majority of participants portray another important meaning that to them leading for learner retention means that they need to make sure that all learners including those with barriers are equally attended. The participants emphasised that this is crucial as it provides an opportunity for learners with barriers which makes it hard for them to cope in a stream class. The participants further stated that once these learners are identified parents would deny that their children need to attend special schools because they have barriers in learning. This suggests that those children will continue in the

mainstream and will fall behind until they quit schooling. According to participants, teachers were not trained to teach learners so to them leading to retain learners with learning disabilities means just applying blanket approach which make it worse for learners with barriers to learning. In affirming this Principal **Gwala** of Shongololo together with the two DH of the same school during FGDs highlighted the following issues: *“There is nothing you can do about learners with learning disorder because you are not Specialist when you go to class you just apply the blanket approach. You teach all of them whereas they have different abilities”*. Similarly, **Mncube** and **Magagula** raised their concerns and expounded:

The Department of Education does not seem to concentrate on employing teachers who are skilled in facing modern society e.g. the LSEN (learners with special education needs) specialists. When the leadership of the school and the teachers have identified learners with special needs they cannot handle learners who need remedial work successfully. We are all trying because we want to keep these learners in the schools (Mncube).

When calling in the parents they feel undermined and discouraged when the school explain that the child needs to be transferred to a remedial school. There are not enough LSEN schools in the vicinity where there will be inclusivity with the needs of that child. So the parents resist taking the child to the relevant place. So the kids end up staying at the school, frustrated, demotivated and eventually they drop out of the school (Magagula).

Emerging from the utterances is that **Mncube** argued that the department is failing schools in leading for learner retention. **Magagula** further explained that despite the insufficiency of the special schools, even some parents resist it is in their power to make a decision. However, this meaning attached by **Magagula** concerning parents’ resistance must be looked at in terms of who decides about learners’ schooling because currently it seems as if the final decision lies with learners’ parents. It also transpired that learners with barriers get frustrated and leave the schools. Linked to literature as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.1, Dalangin (2018) found that learners’ academic performance is the most powerful predictor of learners’ retention within the school. Contrary, poor academic performance and falling behind in school work appear to be the most common reasons why learners quit (Moore, 2017). According to participants when learners’ performance is good, they will develop interest in the school. In explanation, participants noted that if learners with barriers in learning should also be taught at their

level, they develop good academic performance so they will love the school and continue with schooling. It further came out during both data generation processes that participants describe leading for learner retention as it means the ability to manage learners with learning barriers. In their expressions they said:

Leadership for learner retention also means to make sure that teachers attend to learners with learning difficulties accordingly, giving them extra time and the activities that are at their level. We provide extra time for slow learners, inviting experts from other institutions and LSEN specialists to assist our learners so they will cope in the mainstream and pass at their level. Then, they will also love the school (Nxasana).

Leading for learner retention according to my experience it means making sure that teachers are teaching effectively and learners are learning meaning teachers need to teach all learners and attend to those with learning difficulties accordingly, giving them extra time and the activities that are at their level and progress to the following grades (Nxasana).

As observed here participant's position leadership for learner retention as it means teaching all learners irrespective of their abilities through early identification and early intervention by coming up with solutions to keep learners retained in the schools. Linked to literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.3, it was highlighted that SMT members have to support the school and ensure responsibility and accountability by identifying learners' problems, as well as their causes; and propose solutions (Van Der Voort & Wood, 2014). It is through this process that teachers have to engage in the inclusive education policy to ensure its proper implementation and cope with learners' problems in their current practices (Van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). For example, a study conducted by Themane and Thobejane (2018) in Limpopo province, indicate that despite the lack of resources to implement inclusive education as described in policy guidelines, teachers try to adjust their planning and available resources to accommodate all learners as per inclusive education. Additionally, participants' responses link its meaning to the following subtheme as they describe leadership for learner retention as it means involving other stakeholders to ensure that learners find schools interesting and see the need to complete their basic education.

5.3.4 Employing Collaborative Approaches to Leadership

According to the of participants, leadership for learner retention means employing collaborative approaches and involve all stakeholders in leadership. Under Section 2.2.4 in Chapter Two it appears that school leadership is the responsibility of the whole SMT members (Lu & Hallinger, 2018). In line with what is presented in Chapter Two, participants pointed out that leading for learner retention should be a duty of the management together with all stakeholders. The participants mentioned that leading for learner retention means involving teachers, parents and learners themselves. In line with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.4, Bans-Akutey and Tiimub (2021) indicated that in the South African education system members of the SMT are employed to provide leadership direction and work with others as a team. In support, participants stated that they always consider that educating learners is three-legged which means it involves teachers, learners, and parents. For example, to most participants it means involving teachers as they are always next to learners at school. The participants further explained that in reality learners can easily confide to other learners, teachers, and parents as they spend most of their time with them. It also means involving parents since they are the ones who sometimes decide in terms of their children's schooling. This implies what was discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.1 in that it is necessary to involve parents and guardians because deciding on the schools for children to attend is a vital role of parents and learners themselves (Abdulkadiroğlu, 2015). Lastly, it involves learners themselves who have to make sure that they attend from the first day to their last day of schooling.

Moreover, to some participants it means the involvement of the SGB and Representative Council of Learners (RCL) when it comes to leading for learner retention. The participants in this study believed that through the SGB and RCL members, learners can communicate their problems with the school, either with teachers or with the SMT members. It also came out from the participant's responses that the schools cannot be isolated from the community because they are community- based with stakeholders who form a chain in leading for learner retention. Mbambo (2019), as indicated in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.1, explained that collaborating with unique individuals can provide space and opportunity where each may learn from each other in a shared-joined manner. Confirming the discussions, the majority of participating members of Tshelizwe secondary during FGDs highlighted a need for community members that will help schools. The participants mentioned that they need to be assisted with school-age children seen outside the school during school hours that any community member must bring the child to the school. For example, DH **Langa** explained about the role played by

community members in this school in leading for learner retention:

You cannot see a learner from this school in uniform out of the school premises during teaching hours because we involved the community they phoned the school and reported that there was a child somewhere and any one of us would go there and fetch that child. That was an idea from the parents and we agreed to that (Langa).

Echoing the same sentiment, the DP **Ntobela** from the same school took us back in their school days when the community members were to take bunking learners found in the streets during school hours back to their schools. This is what he stated:

The responsibility of the community or the society was valuable because if you are seen uh, during school hours, but you are not at school, you are somewhere else.

The community was to take you personally straight to the school. Maybe just to add on that society includes ourselves because we belong to society. So ... why I'm saying this is because during our days, if we were not in school any adult would make sure that they would report to your parents.

Emerging from the assertions is that community members were concerned and understood the importance of ensuring that children are always in school to complete their studies. Interestingly, when participants raised the issue of community and other stakeholders' involvement in this regard, all participants in the FGDs nodded their heads and clapped their hands. Their actions give the impression that participants acknowledged and understood the importance of involving community members in leading for learner retention. Following are other notable assertions from the participants:

School leaders need support from other stakeholders to be successful in leading for learner retention for instance community leaders since learners come from the community (Shazi).

In the same manner, **Zulu** emphasised on **Shazi**'s views and added that learners communicate easily with class teachers and she stated, "*SMT members will not succeed alone, there are also class teachers who are always with learners so they can communicate easily with class teachers, and teachers can notice if a learner has problems*". While still on the same issue Principal **Zwane** added that leading for learner retention in schools is basically a collective effort and expounded: "*Basically, it's a collective effort for every SMT member and every teacher in the school to make sure that learners are retained in school*". This was articulated clearly by Principal **Lukhele** who said, "*If you lead, you give direction of what needs*

to be done, you also involve other stakeholders like the parents, even the community. **Mncube** elaborated on these views during FGDs and this is what he said;

Oh! basically I do agree that leading for learner retention should be a duty of the management together with all stakeholders, but it becomes important that we understand that in school there are many dynamics; teachers, SGB members, parents and community members as schools are community based.

A similar sentiment was echoed by **Magagula** as she said:

Leadership includes the SGB of the school so the SGB is responsible for communicating what the parents think, for what the parents want for their learners, so the parents in leadership for learner retention are helping in retaining the learners in schools.

In line with the SGB representation **Zulu** explained that:

We have learner representation in our SGB as secondary school. Leadership of the RCL and the responsibilities that they have is to find the concerns and the problems that the learners are facing and come forward to us as the SMT of the school and tell us what the learners are having problems with because they are able to voice out their problems through the RCL.

It also came out that to participants leading for learner retention means involving even other government services such as social development, health and police services. The participants said:

*To me leading for learner retention is about the involvement of the government structures e.g. social development helping with vulnerable learners, health department assisting with sick learners and police services to deal with learner abuse (**Hlabangane**).*

*We need the Department of Education to come up with relevant policies and provide government structures starting with social workers, school nurses, armed security guards or polices, psychologists etcetera. With these structures in the schools' learners will not leave our school I still say (**Langa**).*

Raising her frustration about these services mentioned here, DH **Magagula** from Ndabazana expounded:

You find that sometimes you have to consult with the support structures like a social

worker for a particular learner but they are not available because they will tell you that they are short staffed so the resources turn to be the let-down.

Drawing from the responses it is clear that although participants involve parents, they depend mostly on the community in their leading for learner retention. This argument is in line with literature as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.4. According to O' Sullivan et al. (2022), educating a learner is like a three legged stool because learners success depends on both teachers and parents. Gruber (2018) argued that it cannot be a three legged stool only but the fourth leg is needed a better understanding of how other people, such as the community, may influence a learner. As discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.1, Supasitthimethee et al. (2018) highlighted that when all education stakeholders such as parents, policymakers, community members and educators share responsibilities schools can continuously improve. Another issue that came out entails the involvement of the government structures which served a dual purpose. Likewise, participants stated that even though the government structures intervened in some emotional and psychological cases, learners have to leave classes to get support out of school and sometimes are taken out from the school and this affects learner retention. The participants argued in agreement that it would be better for schools to have these services on the school site so that learning and teaching are not interrupted. The literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.2 that was reviewed for this study confirms that when the school setup is not supported, there is a possibility of learners losing interest in attending school being interrupted (Begizew, 2015).

5.3.5 Stimulating and Creating Conducive Environment

The participants in this study understood leadership for learner retention as something beyond the curriculum and describe this concept as it means stimulating and creating conducive environment for learners. What emerged here is that participants relate leadership for learner retention as it means taking care of learners' needs through early identification and early interventions. The participants indicated that as part of the intervention, they keep a close relationship with parents and learners to create a conducive atmosphere. This meaning of keeping a close relationship with learners is in line with the literature in Chapter Two. For example, Teuscher and Makarova (2018) posited that the more there is a good relationship between teachers, parents, and learners, the more leading for learner retention will improve. This is what participants stated: *"To my understanding leadership for learner retention means keeping a close relationship with learners and parents this way they are free to communicate with the school if they encounter problems with their children (Hlabangane)"*.

In a similar manner, Principal **Gwala** said: “... *it means having a good relationship with learners so that it is easy for learners to share anything with the school leaders (Principal Gwala)*”. In further confirming this, DH **Nxasana** gives an example of how they relate with parents and learners to ensure that they are towards the same goal: “*Every year beginning, we meet with parents and learners’ wards together with learners and we issue the year plan and we discuss those holiday classes and extra hours*”. Furthermore, according to participants keeping a close relationship with learners and parents means taking identifying their needs and intervene. Affirming this, it emerged from Principal **Gwala’s** response that for her leadership for learner retention means getting closer to learners and providing them with their needs and taking care of their wellness because educating learners is about developing them as a whole. Confirming this, Principal **Gwala** mentioned that: “*I think also retaining learners means early identification of learners who are having problems that can cause them to leave the school and intervene as school leaders*”.

A similar sentiment was echoed by **Gobela** as she said:

Leading for learner retention means having a close relationship with learners and parents as means of taking care of learners even beyond and addressing issues that stand in their way... and meeting their basic needs, their wellness, taking care of their wellness because as teachers we mould them in totality (Gobela).

It also transpired from the participants’ responses that they position their close relationship with learners and parents as it is about encouraging a conducive, safe and welcoming atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable. This finding links with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.6.4. Munna and Kalam (2021) state that teachers promote engaging and creative learning environment for the learners to feel free to communicate their challenges and needs to develop interest in the school. Similarly, for Elmazi (2018) conducive environment directly reflects on learners and they develop an interest to keep enrolling in the same school to complete their education. In explanation, when the SMT keeps the doors open and listens to everybody including parents, teachers, and learners, a conducive environment is established (Elmazi, 2018).

Furthermore, participants mention that they intervene and supportive if it calls to. For instance, if learners

encounter problems that pushes them away from school. In their expression participants stated: “As a school we have make the environment is conducive to teaching and learning, learners feel comfortable, welcome at school and are able to express their feelings (Principal **Zwane**). Similarly, **Hlabangane** said: “We always make sure that we develop a friendly atmosphere by sympathizing with our learners. This way they are free to communicate with the school if they encounter problems that pushes them away from schooling and we intervene”. In the same sentiment, Principal **Lukhele** of Shongololo secondary added that:

*First and foremost, we show sympathy to our learners, always be there for them and giving proper advices you know what, at times learners will leave school because they don't feel like they are welcomed and comforted. We also take into consideration of the environment in which learners come from and the community that we're working with (Principal **Lukhele**).*

Sharing the same view with Principal **Zwane** and **HD Hlabangane**, DP **Ntobela** said:

*We ensure that learners feel welcome and to create that positive atmosphere within the school so that they're able to see the need of the school and also, to see the schools as attractive and safe. Because it is not only going to the class and academic, no. Also, about sports activities, and through our activity they get support (**Ntobela**).*

Drawing from the utterances in this section, it appeared from the participants as a school make the environment conducive to teaching and learning, learners to feel comfortable and welcome at school. Linked to the findings SMT members create an open, pleasant, and supportive atmosphere for teachers and frequently employ expert and referent power in suitable circumstances, situations, and settings an enabling environment is established (Elmazi, 2018). These views are consistent with the literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.6.4 that principals are accountable for building an atmosphere conducive to good teaching and learning opportunities (Shava & Ndebele, 2016). Similarly, Munna and Kalam (2021) stated that the conformability of the school environment inspires both teachers and learners to participate effectively in the teaching and learning process. According to Munna and Kalam (2021), effective leadership means to allow teachers to create a friendly environment with learners to increase their expectations eventually learners will remain in the school.

5.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented and discussed the data that was generated drawing from individual semi-structured interviews and FGDs responding to the first research question. Responding to this question, I presented the participants' understanding of the term learner retention and leadership for learner retention in relation to literature reviewed for this study. Firstly, I started by presenting the meanings attached by SMT members to learner retention. The discussions went beyond and cover its importance therefore, I also discuss the importance of learner retention in order to establish a clear understanding of the term leading for learner retention. The data revealed three meanings of learner retention. First, as it means keeping learners in the schooling system to complete their basic education. Second, as intricately linked to keeping learners from the first grade to the last grade offered in their schools. Third, as keeping learners to repeat the same grade after failing to meet the pass requirements.

However, from the three meanings presented previously keeping learners in any school within the education system is found in line with this study as it is about leading for learner retention. The data has also shown that learner retention is important for the learners, for schools and also for the country for various reasons. Therefore, it is crucial to keep learners in the schooling system to complete their studies. Related to the meanings of leading for learner retention the participants have instead responded with multiple strategies they use to keep learners in their schools. Although there were similarities in the participants' responses but it appeared that their understanding of leading for learner retention vary from one school to the other. This suggests that to participants, leading for learner retention cannot be universal across all schools but could be contextual and situational. The last part of the chapter which is this section provides a conclusion of the chapter. The next chapter analyses and discusses the ways that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention.

CHAPTER 6

ENACTMENT OF LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Five, I presented data and discussed the meanings attached by SMT members to learner retention and leadership for learner retention. This is the second analysis chapter that presents the data focusing on the second theme of this thesis. This chapter moves beyond to present and discusses the ways that SMT members enact leading for learner retention. I have organised the theme in the following manner: The enactment of leadership for learner retention and the theme is followed by the conclusion.

6.2 ENACTING LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNER RETENTION

This theme presents the data focusing on the second research question which is as follows:

- How do SMT members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention?

It covers the ways that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention in secondary schools. The interview questions that were posed to the participants aimed at generating the data that explains how they enact leadership for learner retention. It was inspiring that the majority of participants from all three participating schools were confident and shared common ways of enacting leadership for learner retention. It emerged from the individual and focus group interviews that the SMT members enact leadership for learner retention focusing on (1) keeping learners' attendance records; (2) implementing progression requirement policy guidelines; (3) offering remedial within the mainstream; (4) leading to ensure effective teaching and learning; (5) sharing responsibilities; (6) Caring practices in the schools; (7) employing different leadership styles; (8) adopting uncertain policies.

6.2.1 Keep Learners' Attendance Records

What emerged from the participants in this regard was that they enact leadership for learner retention by keeping learners' attendance records using registers as imposed by the department and guided by its guidelines. Data revealed that participants depend on registers such as attendance registers, period registers and SA-SAMS as prescribed by the Department of Education. It appeared from the participants' responses that they mark registers and keep the records and submit to the department. However, participants argued that certain rules that guide the control of learners' attendance is against the retention of learners. For example, the participants highlighted that if the learner is absent for 40 consecutive days,

that learner is considered to be a dropout according to the guidelines and removed from the register. Confirming this DP **Ntobela** argues that these tools sometimes act against leadership for learner retention. This is what he stated:

We track each and every learner every day through marking attendance registers and period registers. We issue forms to the class representatives each and every day to indicate all learners attended every period. If the learner is being made absent for 40 conservative days, actually according to the policy, it says we have to expel that learner from school.

In his view DP **Ntobela** indicated that they depend on the class representatives to mark registers. Contradicting, as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.8 that the class registers should be controlled by class teachers in classes, assigning class representatives may suggest that there is no uniformity in place to keep these records reliable for early intervention (Mojapelo, 2022).

The participants further raised as a concern that they have never seen the department taking any action towards these learners to bring them back in the schools. Therefore, in trying to ensure that they retain these learners at risk they try to contact their parents and even visit their homes. This poses a challenge in terms of participants' ability to enact leading for learner retention in their schools. Expressing his frustration in this regard, Principal **Zwane** stated: *"We have these documents that we use to monitor the attendance of learners every day teachers do a roll call to check if learners are present but this does not prevent learners from leaving the schools"*. Concurring with Principal **Zwane**, DH **Shazi** further revealed that: *"We use departmental documents, for an example the class attendance register, SA-SAMS that assist leaders to report to provincial Department and I have never seen the Department of Education taking any action"*. Further evidence was given by Principal **Zwane** and added that they also provide support to those learners who are at risk by constantly absent more often but we could not prevent them from leaving the school. *"Every Friday departmental heads submit registers to the administrators so that they capture the number of learners who were present and absentees. In that way I am able to see if there are learners at risk by constantly absenting more often and provide support but we cannot prevent them from dropping out"*. Similarly, Principal **Gwala** from Ndabazana secondary highlighted that they support learners and visit their homes to find out about their whereabouts.

We use to visit learners' homes when they have been absent to find their whereabouts because at times they leave our school for School B without asking for a transfer letter.

We always admit those learners to increase our enrolment although it interferes with our schools in terms of ensuring learner retention.

Portrayed in the utterances is that participants are required to enact leadership for learner retention through the use of different types of registers as prescribed by the Department of Basic Education. According to participants in this study these registers assist with keeping the records for learners to inform the department and not to retain learners. This finding contradicts with the purpose of keeping registers as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.8 in that schools use learner attendance registers to keep records of learner attendance, and according to these records when a learner is marked absent for at least 10 consecutive days the school leaders have to try by all means to intervene and contact the families of such learners (Department of Basic Education, 2010). However, participants argued that based on their experiences the department do not take any action to assist learners who might according to records be experiencing difficulties with school attendance and at risk of leaving the schooling system. Instead, there is an indication that the department assist schools by tracking learners through SA-SAMS not necessarily for learner retention but to confirm learner statistics for the allocation of school funds. It also transpired that to some instances the use of registers may lead to learners being excluded from school instead of being retained as required by the Department of Basic Education. For instance, when in spite of interventions and the learners persist on absenting themselves, those learners are to be removed from the register (Department of Basic Education, 2010).

6.2.2 Implement Progression Requirement Guidelines

The data indicates that participants enact leading for learner retention by implementing the progression requirement guidelines provided by the DBE, such as grade progression, grade retention, and age cohort, which they assume is pass one pass all in disguise. The participants reported that these policy guidelines require them to progress learners to the next grades having not met the required standard to keep them interested in attending schools. However, according to participants these progression requirements are not helping in their enactment of learner retention instead they encourage learners to leave schools. The statements articulated by the participants here indicate that learners experiencing difficulties in learning do not complete their schooling. It transpired that they get frustrated as they are progressed while not ready until it gets more difficult for them and leave the schools. For example, DH **Langa** said: *“This pass one pass all and grade progression do not give learners with learning barriers a chance to progress at their level but make life difficult for them and decide to leave”*. Accordingly, participants suggested that

it could be better if the department can provide the professionals and LSEN specialists in the schools to assist learners. The participants highlighted that it would be better if these learners are placed in a special class and attended by a specialist. In the same manner, **Gobela** raised her concern regarding these guidelines:

*They (learners) come here (secondary school) to do Grade 8 yet they might have repeated Grade 7 since their phase begins from Grade 7 in a primary school. When they come to us we assume is the 1st year when some of them may be the second year in the phase. However, one of the criteria for promotion is age cohort so we do not keep learner who is over age in the grade ...and so we progressed having not met the pass requirement. What happens now they easily get irritated in the classroom, become fed up, and leave the school (**Gobela**).*

Similarly, this is what participating **Nxasana** had this to tell regarding this issue: “At a long run these children experience difficulties academically and will keep changing schools as allowed by the admission policy and eventually they will leave the system having not completed”. Echoing similar sentiment, **Hlabangane** raised a concern that it would be better if these learners are placed in a special class and attended by a specialist as he said, “We keep these learners in the same class as all learners whereas according to their performance they are supposed to be in a special class and attended by a specialists and receiving more attention”, It transpired from these extracts that these children will experience difficulties academically and will keep changing schools as allowed by the admission policy and eventually they will leave the system having not completed. In reality, this practice has a negative influence in leading for learner retention. This is in line with literature as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.4 in that the Provincial Education Departments add more confusion when they have to progress underperforming learners after they reach the maximum number of years in the phase (Kika & Kotze, 2019). Linked to learner retention these learners who are automatically advanced, on the way they get demotivated as they will get worse and leave the school (Van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). This suggests that participants looked at the inclusive education as it hinders their enactment of leadership for learner retention. Therefore, the following section discusses inclusive education in enacting leading for learner retention.

6.2.3 Offer Remedial Within the Mainstream

The participants indicated that they provide remedial within the mainstream as per inclusive education policy. This means participants teach learners with learning barriers in the same class with all learners

instead of referring them to special schools. Even though they try and accommodate these learners as per inclusive education policy but in reality, they hardly assist them and eventually they leave the school. The participants reported that they apply a blanket approach to all learners irrespective of their capabilities because they are not specialists, teacher shortages, learners are overcrowded in the classrooms and special education is minimal. What also emerged from the participants, was that learners with barriers in learning are not fully supported in the mainstream classes as they need professional care by trained specialists. This implies that teachers in these schools are unsuitable to teach these learners with learning barriers because they are not trained to deal with such learners. Accordingly, participants suggested that it could be better if the department can provide the professionals and LSEN specialists in the schools to assist learners. However, the department does not seem to concentrate on employing these specialists in the mainstream schools instead it is trying to do away with special schools and encourages inclusive education This is what participants stated as their concerns:

We include all learners in the mainstream and communicate with the psychologists for help. But in their process, it does not happen and we cannot even offer them the remedial classes because they are not qualified or specialists, teacher shortages, lack of infrastructure, and because of overcrowding in our classrooms it is hard to offer individualisation but we try our level best to assist slow learners (Gobela).

By right in complying to inclusive education we do not assess learners' abilities before admission. We register learners with barriers as we go along we identify their barriers and provide remedial within the school and not referring them to special schools since the Department of Education is trying to do away with special schools and encourages inclusive education (Gobela). The Department of Education does not seem to concentrate on employing teachers who are skilled in facing the modern society e.g. the LSEN Specialists. As the leadership of the school and the teachers, we identify learners who have special needs but we cannot help them because when you go to class you just apply the blanket approach (Magagula).

Participants **Gobela** and **Magagula** contended that inclusive education in mainstream schools is challenging because it goes beyond their qualifications, available resources and infrastructure. Also, **Magagula** revealed that they are not specialists and they sometimes misunderstood learners' intelligent quotient, and SNA's department took longer to assess the identified learners.

Interestingly, it appeared that teachers do try their best in helping these learners according to **Gobela** in her response. It also came out that the participants seemed to be concerned about the parents who do not want to admit that their children have learning problems and these were not discovered at the primary school level. The following is DH **Magagula**'s concern in this regard:

As we are not specialists sometimes we misunderstand learners. We saying they are lazy to work whereas the child is having serious IQ challenges. So we do not have enough skills as teachers to identify those learners. If you have successfully identified the learner, you have a problem with the parent understanding that the learner needs inclusive education. If the parent understands and you move further to consult the SNA's it takes forever for the child assessment (DH Magagula).

Considering the data in these extracts, it is clear that inclusive teaching and learning is driven by a desire to provide equal education to all, but it comes with a number of challenges that affect leading towards effective learner retention. For instance, it transpires that teachers do not have enough skills to identify those learners and the parents do not understand that the learner needs special education. This is consistent with Walton and Engelbrecht (2020), who found that that even though teachers maintain the inclusive education as required by the Department of Basic Education, the lack of adequate and skilled human resources, technical, and infrastructural resources to facilitate implementation is still a major challenge. It was also interesting that despite numerous challenges as found in the extracts, they try their level best to assist slow learners. Linked to literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.4, a study conducted by Themane and Thobejane (2018) in Limpopo province, indicated that, despite the lack of resources to implement inclusive education as described in policy guidelines, teachers try to adjust their planning and available resources to accommodate all learners.

6.2.4 Lead to Ensure Effective Teaching and Learning

It came out that participants in this study enact leadership for learner retention by ensuring that there is effective teaching and learning in their schools which is coupled with some responsibilities and actions. For instance, according to participants, teaching and learning can be effective as long as they are teaching beyond the required standard; involve all stakeholders; they practice pastoral care in their schools; using policies that are not specific to learner retention as well as using different leadership styles in enacting leading for learner retention. It was evident that most participants appeared to link effective teaching and learning with teaching beyond the required standard. For example, during both interview processes,

participants in this study stated that they enact leadership for learner retention by making sure that teachers teach beyond the required standard. The participants further reported that they teach beyond the required standard which is aligned with providing extra teaching time. The participants highlighted that they provide extra teaching time, learners are given enough time to study while supervised and that all staff members are dedicated and work as a team. Confirming to this, **Zikode** stated: “*We provide extra teaching time in fact we work beyond status quo to ensure effective teaching and learning*”. Similarly, Principal **Lukhele** said: “*We have introduced supervised study periods in the morning and in the afternoon and we try as teachers to give them extra classes*”. While on the same view, Principal **Lukhele** of Shongololo secondary during FGDs emphasised that they work as a team beyond the status quo, meaning they work above the required standard as a team. “*we are all dedicated to work beyond status quo and work as a team even on decision making*”. Attesting to this, **Zulu** and Principal **Gwala** had this to tell:

The most important thing that we do in leading for learner retention is to keep learners in school and make sure as leaders that learners are learning teachers are there to teach and are competent and dedicated. All we do is to keep learners interested in the school and always willing to be in the school till their final year of schooling (Zulu).

We are committed and do everything to make sure that the academic in the school is moved further to ensure that there is effective teaching and learning. We teach the learners with dedication and passion so that is what we do in this school to make sure that the dropouts are reduced (Principal Gwala).

Furthermore, Principal **Gwala** added that as SMT members they lead by ensuring that teachers employ different strategies to help learners with barriers so that they all get equal opportunity in learning. Besides helping learners with barriers in learning it was apparent that participants go beyond in helping all learners by providing different streams in the school to maintain equal education for all learners’ capabilities. For instance, Principal **Gwala** said: “*We go beyond to use different methods to help the learners with barriers to sustain equal education for all even though we are not specialists*”. This is in line with literature discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.1 that teachers try to incorporate variety of teaching and learning strategies and approaches while the main intention is to ensure equal opportunity for the learners so that they find the subject content interesting (Munna & Kalam, 2021). It was also

apparent from what **Magagula** stated that participants go beyond in helping all learners by providing different streams in the school. In her voice she said:

Like Mrs Zikode has said, the school need to provide for different streams to attract all learners with different abilities of learners. So, the school is trying its level best, we have now introduced sciences stream and we planning to introduce commercial stream and then technical stream slowly but we are slowly getting there (Magagula).

Based on her response, **Magagula** explained that they have introduced sciences, technical and commercial streams that were not offered previously to cater for the different needs for different learners' abilities. Ayua (2017) highlighted that the main objective of teaching is to ensure that learners are learning because if there is no teaching it means the goal for learners to learn will never be accomplished.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that when planning they ensure that the resources are available and sufficient enough to ensure teaching and learning. Following is how participants from Tshelizwe secondary express themselves in agreement during FGDs. **Gobela** indicated, “*We ensure that we have resources sufficient enough.* Similarly, Principal **Zwane** from the same school with **Gobela** added “*By making sure that proper structures are in place and we have got enough teachers in the school in terms of human resource and other resources as possible*”. Echoing similar sentiments participants added that they lead through ensuring that there is on time planning for teachers to get the material that they need beforehand. **Langa** argued that *if the teachers are well prepared, those learners who want to disrupt, will not have an opportunity to do so and even teachers will have no time to entertain them.* Similarly, **Khathide** stated:

Okay, number 1, we always make sure that there is proper and on time planning because according to my understanding proper planning reverse poor performance and increases interest in learning. We prepare timetables we prepare duty loads on the previous year, make sure that all teachers have duty loads all educators have the material that they need beforehand (Khathide).

Essentially, it appeared from these extracts that participants make sure that there is effective teaching and learning. Similarly, effective teaching and learning leads to a good academic performance which is the most dominant outcome in leading toward learner retention (Casanova et al., 2018). It is indicated in Section 6.2.1 that participants in this study associate leading for effective teaching and learning with

ensuring that there is proper planning and lesson preparation. As articulated in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.1 of this study, Ayua (2017) noted that teaching is not an art but a science therefore, for effective teaching and learning, there must be sufficient resources and suitable planning. For Ayua (2017), planning makes educators familiar with what to be taught and it is a guide to effective teaching and serves as a reminder. It was also clear that to these participants leading for learner retention entails conceiving of what needs to be done, bringing people and resources into alignment, and taking an active role in achieving results while working beyond the status quo. Accordingly, to Monaghan (2022), as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.6, going above and beyond the call of duty means appreciating and establishing good, quality and hard work to accomplish desired goals.

6.2.5 Share Responsibilities

It emerged from the generated data that participants in this study share responsibilities with everyone concerned about the retention of learners in the school when they enact leadership for learner retention. The participants insisted that they call for every stakeholder who cares for learners' education to support the schools in the enactment of leading for learner retention in their schools. Accordingly, participants reported that they involved the community members, parents, learners, teachers, and other departments to support them in leading for learner retention. Further confirming the issue of leading for learner retention as inclusive, the majority of participants explained that as SMT members they come out with ideas and sell them to all other stakeholders including learners and parents. In his voice DP **Ntobela** stated: *"We share responsibilities when enacting leadership for learner retention by involving educators, learners, parents and the society"*. Echoing a similar sentiment HD **Nxasana** said: *"In leading for learner retention we include the community, parents, learners, teachers, not leaving out the all other departments like DoE, DSD, police and many more for their support in fact it involves all stakeholders who care for learners' education"*. Attesting to **Ntobela** and **Nxasana**, DH **Magagula** came with another issue that as leaders they share their ideas and responsibilities with all other stakeholders in leading for learner retention. She said: *"For learner retention as leaders we always come out with ideas and sell them to all other responsible stakeholders most probably we include community, learners and parents which makes it easier to attain this particular goal"*. For instance, most participants indicated that they meet with parents and teachers when they plan for extra lessons and extra classes after teaching hours and during weekends and school holidays.

Also, participants revealed that they lead for learner retention by involving community members in

ensuring that learners are protected from all social ills in the area. For example, participants highlighted that in their school they have got a problem of drug abuse that comes from the community in the neighbouring of their schools. Therefore, they involve community members to help them in protecting learners from taking drugs because once they become addicted they leave the schools. The participants further revealed that they got into agreement with the community members to assist the schools by taking the learner into the school when they are seen in the street in uniform during school hours. In affirming this, participants asserted:

This is what I can share with you, we made an arrangement with the community members that when they see a learner from this school in uniform out of the school premises during teaching hours they phoned the school and report that there is a child somewhere and any one of us SMT would go there and fetch that child. That was an idea from the parents and we agree because we want them to be our ears and eyes since we cannot be all over (Langa).

Although at times learners change uniforms once they are away from home and ask any adult in the street to pretend as their parents or wards. This is how **Nxasana** expressed his concern regarding this:

Involving the community members was a good idea because learners come from the community and they know each other. You know these children are clever) they changed the uniform once they left their homes so that it becomes difficult to be identified as scholars although they are questioned if they looked young. Even the taxi drivers don't allow them during the day unless with a parent konake (although) sometimes they ask any elder to lie as if is a mother or granny in that case siyarobheka (they get bored).

Furthermore, participants revealed that they involve other stakeholders even in planning. This is what **Shazi** said:

For learner retention we make sure that when planning we involve other stakeholders such as parents and teachers to motivate learners so that they would stick to agreed-upon issues. To give an example, when we plan for extra classes during weekends, after teaching hours and during holidays and for providing good curriculum involving all stakeholders to a point that everyone is satisfied especially learners.

Shazi's views were echoed by Principal **Zwane** though put differently, this is what he stated:

It therefore becomes the responsibility for everyone, not the school community, but even outside community. So, we involve everyone, not just one stakeholder, but everyone to come to the party and be responsible for taking part in leading for learner retention at school.

While on the issue of responsibilities **Magagula** gave an example of some SGB members roles and its impact in leading for learner retention.

The leadership of the SGB communicates with the parents to support our school in leading for learner retention for instance if there are concerns from the school or from the parents it is their responsibility to share with other stakeholders

Emerging from the utterances is that participants involve all stakeholders and share responsibilities with them when they enact leadership for learner retention. It was discussed in Chapter Two that responsibilities should be shared among all SMT members to achieve effective educational management and leadership (Sekgota, 2020). This finding is also in line with the literature discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.1 that when all education stakeholders such as parents, policymakers, community members and educators, share responsibility, schools can continuously improve and learners achieve in all spheres (Supasitthimethee et al., 2018). As was also discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.1 working as a team entails sharing responsibilities (Ralph & Wagner, 2018). This statement was further clarified by Mbambo (2019), in Chapter Two, Section 2.6.1, who explained that working together are mostly comprised of unique individuals with diverse abilities that allow a chance to learn from each other in a shared-joined manner. This further suggests that leading for learner retention requires everyone concerned to come on board as it could not be the principal's duty only. It is argued that this could make it difficult for school principals to ensure that their schools are focused on learner retention. Linked to this, according to Myende (2014), school principals in South Africa are overburdened with obligations and are unable to address all issues at the school.

6.2.6 Caring Practices in the Schools

The participants indicated that as leaders they enact leadership for learner retention through caring; motivating and supporting learners as part of pastoral care practices to ensure that they remain in their schools. Indeed, one of the important roles that is supposed to be played by school leader and teachers is pastoral care practices. In confirmation participants stated: “*As leaders and teachers some of the most*

important role that we play is to support, motivate and take care for our learners psychological, health, social and learning needs as pastoral care (Principal Lukhele)". **Nxasana** concurred with Principal **Lukhele's** view and said: *"We make sure that we motivate and support all learners by permeating extra-mural activities to accommodate even those who are not academically competent to develop their love for the school. Sharing the same sentiment Mncube expounded that: "So it becomes of utmost important that as SMT we look at dynamic way to support our learners, like we infuse sports, art and culture in our education and provide a variety of things that learners can be drawn in to ensure that these learners stay in school. What transpired here is that participants promote pastoral practices in their schools by (1) taking good care of the learners; (2) adopting multiple learner motivation strategies (3) ensuring learner support. These practices are discussed in the following section.*

6.2.6.1 Take Good Care of the Learners

It came out from the participants' responses that they take good care of the learners in their schools. As part of caring, it was indicated that the majority of participants create an environment that is safe and conducive to everyone in the school. The participants emphasised that the creation of a safe environment in the schools can be the best tool to keep learners in the school. The participants added that school leaders are responsible for creating an atmosphere that enables effective teaching and learning to produce good results. Following is what participants stated: *"On top of the above we enact leading for learner retention by creating a safety environment where there is no bullying (Shazi)"*. This view was also supported by **Zikode** and she said, *"We lead effectively, and make our school a safe school."* While still on the issue of caring, **Langa** agreed with the other participants in this study and stated, *"We enact leading for learner retention through taking accountability of ensuring that learners are safe in the school, and they are supported."* Principal **Gwala** and DH **Zikode** from Ndabazana secondary further explain that it is about ensuring that there is safety in the schools. Following is Principal **Gwala** voices: *"As leaders we consider the safety of our learners as important which means as school leaders we have an obligation to create an environment that allows for safety of our learners for effective teaching and learning"*. Supporting **Zikode** and **Langa** stated:

In our school we lead for effective learner retention and we make our school a safe school by allowing all learners, teachers, parents and community members even political parties to ensure that learners are safe in school during the day (Zikode).

Further supporting this, participants explained that they care for learners by dealing with their cases

timeously especially when they are suspended. This is what **Nxasana** said: “*We are very strict with absenteeism and we follow up on such learners who shows a sign of vulnerability*”. Principal **Gwala** concurred with **Nxasana** and she stated:

If a learners have committed a crime and suspended or moved from the community for their safety kodwa ke (anyway) we try to reduce the number of learners who leave the school by making sure that as leaders, we always show them that we care for them and deal with those cases timeously (Principal Gwala).

It also came out that they are very strict with absenteeism which shows that participants understand that when learners absent themselves they fall behind school work and loose interest to continue with schooling. This finding linked with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.2.1. A study by Moore (2017) investigated preventative methods to keep learners from quitting schools before completion. The study found that poor academic performance and falling behind in school work were the most common reasons why learners quit schooling (Moore, 2017). Drawing from the verbatim quotations in this section it appeared that to them leading for learner retention means creating a caring and friendly atmosphere that is safe and welcoming for everyone to ensure that there is safety in the school. The findings from the study conducted by Seary and Willans (2020), as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.3, indicated that caring and supportive learning environments can stimulate very constructive relations which eventually develop learner’s interest and retention in the schools.

6.2.6.2 Keeping a Close Relationship

It also emerged from participants that they keep a close relationship with learners so that they can be free to communicate with them when they find difficulties. The participants also believed that getting closer to learners can assist them with the identification of those who are having problems that can cause them to leave the school and intervene as school leaders. This is what participants stated: “*We always keep a close relationship with learners and parents this way they are free to communicate with the school if they encounter problems with their children (Hlabangane)*”. In similar, Principal **Gwala** said: “*We are having a good relationship with learners so that it is easy for learners to share anything with the school leaders (Principal Gwala)*”. In further confirming this, DH **Nxasana** gives an example of how they relate with parents and learners to ensure that they are towards the same goal: “*Every year beginning, we meet with parents and learners’ wards together with learners and we issue the year plan and we discuss those holiday classes and extra hours*”.

Furthermore, according to participants in keeping a close relationship with learners and parents they also identify their needs and intervene. Affirming this, it emerged from Principal **Gwala's** response that in their leadership for learner retention they get closer to learners and provide them with their needs and taking care of their wellness because educating learners is about developing them as a whole. Confirming this, Principal **Gwala** mention that: *“We also retain learners by early identification those who are having problems that can cause them to leave the school and intervene as school leaders”*. A similar sentiment was echoed by **Gobela** as she said:

In leading for learner retention, we keep a close relationship with learners and parents as means of taking care of learners even beyond and addressing issues that stand in their way... and meeting their basic needs, their wellness, taking care of their wellness because as teachers we mould them in totality (Gobela).

What emerged from these utterances is that participants relate closely with learners and parents so that it could be easy to identify their needs and intervene. As discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.3 learner retention is mostly impacted by personal qualities that each learner brings to the table such as the lack of support (Balkis et al., 2016).

6.2.6.3 Using Multiple Learner Motivation Strategies

Herein, participants share multiple motivational strategies that they use to assist them in enacting leading for learner retention. Regarding this it emerged from the majority of participants that SMT members use multiple motivational strategies to keep learners highly motivated to remain schooling depending on individual needs and circumstances. For example, **Nxasana** from Shongololo secondary reported that: *“We conduct morning assembly every Mondays and every Fridays to develop them spiritually and emotionally and are motivated by teachers, other learners and by motivational speakers from outside.”* Echoing a similar sentiment DH **Magagula** from Ndabazana secondary said: *“We do motivational assemblies in the morning. We have educators who serve as motivational speakers at times because you motivate learners to become what they want to be”*. It also came out from the data that learners are also given a chance to motivate one another in sharing an agreed upon topic so that they are further motivated to be in the school. **Zulu** stated:

... As leaders we allow learners to share the assembly and motivate one another and they talk about things that touches them so they develop more interest in the school

by listening to one another. I remember one learner last year who took her mother's medication trying to commit suicide fortunately she was saved and came forward to share with other learners. From there we created a theme that is stay motivated talk and listen to talks.

What is portrayed from **Langa** and **Zulu's** responses is that leading for learner retention involves giving learners an opportunity to motivate one another. This is an indication that learners are given an opportunity to be part of school motivational activities so that they develop a sense of ownership. I argue that their understanding of leading for learner retention appeared to be about allowing peer motivational talks because they understand one another. These views aligned with Tinto (2017), in Chapter Two, Section 2.6.4, that it is essential to provide activities that boost persistence and a sense of belonging to increase learners' interest in remaining in school. Regarding learner retention, it is obvious that when learners are motivated and involved they develop pride about their school and continue with schooling.

Furthermore, it came out across all the participants that awarding learners who have improved, behaved well and performed well is one of the best ways that they use to keep learners motivated to want to be in the school. Confirming this, Principal **Lukhele** and DP **Ntobela** affirmed.

*Let me add this important way of motivating these learners, we use to have awards' days every term where we provide incentives and award learners who excel and those who have improved and those who behaved very well for others to copy and improve and we discuss these categories with them and their parents (Principal **Lukhele**).*

The views are in line with the literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.5 of this study. Ali and Anwar (2021) asserted that by recognising the achievement of each member publicly can provide role modelling to others and this can generate competition among learners and develop an interest in the school. Accordingly, Ghimpau (2020) stated that providing incentives in the form of awards can be the best effective strategy to keep groups motivated and willing to deliver at their best. Moreover, incentives are mostly used by leaders to reward groups and attendants to increase their commitment in supporting long-term and continuous achievements (Ghimpau, 2020).

In addition, it was clear from other participants' voices that some learners enjoy entertainment, so they bring different forms of entertainment into the school. It was also apparent from the participants'

responses that learners are motivated by being given an opportunity to perform and be entertained. To substantiate this, the following views were expressed by the majority of participants: “*We provide all forms of entertainment on planned days in the school this way learners enjoy being in the school. We bring in entertainment into the school so they watch movies (Hlabangane)*”. Furthermore, participants believed that there are multiple gains that can be seen motivational to learners through extra-curricular activities so that they remain in the school. For instance, according to participants awarding learners who excel and showing talents in extra curricula activities make them feel special and willing to be in the school. For example, DP **Ntobela** stated: “*The extra-curricular activities are also available in the school where in school competition are provided and we award those who excel so every learner feels special*”. Secondly, to participants introducing the extra-curricular activities enables those who are poor in academics but good in sports an opportunity to show off their talents and be developed. According to Van den Berg et al. (2021), as highlighted in Chapter Two, Section 2.5, when talents are identified and developed this can help in addressing issues such as physical, mental, academic and psycho-social features that will improve learner retention. What is also gained by those learners who are poor in academics is that they are introduced to experts to train them in the school and develop their skills. The participants said: “*There are learners who are poor in academics but very good in extra curricula-activities so we motivate them by introducing them to different people who promote their skills and train them while in the school (Mncube)*”.

The participants further explained that through extra- curricular activities, the learners especially the non-academics are given an opportunity to show off their talents and once identified, the school invites experts to develop those learners’ talents and get exposed to those fields. He stated:

We provide extra-curricular activities so even when they are not good in academics but to have something that they enjoy and we are able to identify their talents and skills to be developed. We also invite experts in different categories to meet with those talented learners and those demonstrating different skills and are trained and developed (Hlabangane).

Echoing similar sentiment, **Zulu** reported that they motivate learners by inviting experts from different categories to meet with talented learners to help in developing their skills. This is what she had to say: “*We also invite artists and experts in different categories to meet with those talented learners and those demonstrating different skills and are introduced to people who will assist them to follow their talents*”.

Attesting to these responses Principal **Zwane** has this to tell during FGDs:

*As leaders in this school we encourage extra-curricular activities for those who are talented in different sport codes. They know that it's not only about learning like subjects they also have a chance to express or to show off their talents in different sporting activities (Principal **Zwane**).*

Overall, what emerged here is that learners are motivated using multiple strategies to remain in the school. In this theme I have presented data and a discussion on the participants' different ways of motivating learners so that they continue with schooling. I highlighted their emphasis of motivational talks, awarding top achievers, bringing entertainment into the school, identifying and developing learners' talents as important in leadership for learner retention. According to Van den Berg et al. (2021), as discussed in Chapter Two, when talents are identified and developed this can help in addressing issues such as physical, mental, academic and psycho-social features that will improve learner retention. This is in line with literature under Section 2.2.4 in Chapter Two that school leadership as defined by Reed et al. (2019) is the ability to inspire, motivate and direct others towards the achievement of the school vision. This is further discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5 that leadership for learner retention requires SMT members who are able to motivate, inspire, consider empowering people's behaviours and influence individuals to do what is capable of them (Tian & Zhang, 2020). In congruence, literature discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.1, motivation can play a vital role in enhancing learner retention in secondary schools (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). It was also indicated that they lead for learner retention by involving other stakeholders especially the community members. The participants reported that they take care for learners' needs even beyond their professional obligation. This is in line with literature as discussed in Chapter Two that leaders are required to motivate, inspire, urge, direct, and persuade individuals to do what is expected of them (Tian & Zhang, 2020). For example, Munna and Kalam (2021), as discussed in Chapter Two, under Section 2.5, reported that if learners are motivated they find learning interesting and continue with the schooling until their final grade. In the following theme, I present and discuss the data that emerged in relation to learner support provided to learners to ensure that they find school an important place to belong. It is concerned with how participants enact leadership for learner retention through providing learner support. Generally, I argue that the participants linked leading towards learner retention to ensuring that learners are motivated to develop an interest in the school.

6.2.6.4 Ensuring Learner Support

It came out in this study that SMT members make sure that learners are supported such that they continue with their schooling. This is substantiated by Muljana and Luo (2019) that learner retention may be enhanced by early intervention, learner support and continuous communication with stakeholders. Manyanga et al. (2022) further stated that the more supporting the institutions become the more learners return to finish their studies. The data generated from the participating schools shows that participants in this study provide support to address physical and social challenges encountered by learners. The responses given by the participants based on the support offered to learners as means of keeping them interested in the school were found common in all three participating schools. For example, among other things participants revealed that they enact leading for learner retention through supporting learners by finding donations and sponsors as can be seen in participants' extracts. It was evident from the participants' responses that they enact leadership for learner retention by ensuring that there is a maximum learners support drawing from within and beyond the school. Two categories emerged from the data which were structured and unstructured forms of learner support. The structured forms of support can be defined as departmental, legal, documented with clear guidelines and policed. While on one hand, unstructured forms of support referred to those measures that are not departmentally documented to guide schools sometimes risky and without any specific rules and guidelines. These forms of learner support are discussed in the following section.

6.2.6.5 Structured Forms of Support

The participants commonly revealed that they enact the leadership for learner retention through the structured forms of support from the Department of Basic Education and through their efforts as a school. To start with it came out from participants that there are departmental programmes that play a huge role in supporting them to successfully enact leadership for learner retention. Such programmes include, School Nutrition Programme and no fee paying schools. Highlighted from all participating schools was that participants commonly believe that the School Nutrition Programme in particular has increased learner retention rates in their schools. The literature discussed in Chapter Two section 2.9, confirms that learner retention has improved through efforts made by the Department of Education's intervention programmes, such as the School Nutrition Programme, because learners must be well-nourished to fully participate in education (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Sitao, 2018). Showing excitement in this regard, DH **Zulu** stated that this form of support is the best amongst all and need to be nailed down in this study as a token of appreciation for all government structures involved. This was her words: *"I was praising our*

government that amongst all what they did was to provide learners with food. So, I nail this to be written down in your PhD”. Similarly, DH **Langa** stated: “Support from the Department of Education through school nutrition programme has increased the number of learners who are retained in secondary schools”. This finding coincides with the study conducted by Sitao (2018) as indicated under Section 2.5.3 which explored the role of the Mozambique National School Feeding Programme on the retention of learners. Sitao (2018) found that schools with feeding programme seems to have a positive effect on the improved retention of primary school learners as compared to schools without school feeding programme. The participants further raised another issue of exempting some learners from paying school fees and of no fee schools where school resources are provided by the Department of Education through norms and standards aiming at keeping all learners in the schools. For instance, DH **Nxasana** stated that: “School fees are no longer paid in schools that is all in this school”. The implications of the DoE support through exempting learners from paying school fees is in line with the study conducted by Kumanda et al. (2017) in the central zone of the Malindi sub-county of Kenya. The study found that after introducing free primary education in public primary schools the learner retention rates increased.

Besides the support from DoE it came out from participants that there are other numerous structured forms of support that are provided by the schools with the aim of attracting learners to want to continue with their schooling. The majority of participants indicated that in trying to enact leadership for learner retention they provide social, psychological, emotional, academic and counselling services to learners when need arises. However, their support is limited to minor issues and they refer serious cases to external services such as police, education specialists, psychologists, and DSD. This was evident from the following participants’ expressions: “To ensure leadership for learner retention we identify learners who show signs of vulnerability and we intervene by providing social support to all learners (**Langa**)”. In the same manner, Principal **Gwala** noted that they also help learners with psychological problem and explained that they invite assistance from different specialists. In her explanation she highlighted that they only assist with minor cases, “We assist learners who are psychological affected the school invite assistance from different specialists but it depends on the cases because as leaders we assist with minor cases that are not putting our lives in danger”. Similarly, **Shazi** added that as leaders they also provide counselling session to these learners and interconnect with government specialists. She expounded: “Learners are provided counselling sessions in case they encounter the minor psychological and social problems but it is a challenge with serious cases. We only interconnecting them with government professionals such as social workers, psychologists and have created a relationship with them support

learners in need of their services". In explaining this Principal **Zwane** said: *"When learners are sick they would be physically taken to the clinic and they will not to wait in queues"*. Contrary with literature as indicated in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.4 that it is an unprofessional conduct of teachers to leave the class unattended as it may contribute to a chaos in the class without a teacher (Netshitangani, 2014).

What was also found common as a concern across the majority of participants was that they are able to assist vulnerable and abused learners by communicating with external services because other cases are beyond their control. Confirming this **Hlabangane** said: *"With the help of DSD and police services we are able to assist vulnerable and abused learners by communicating the learner issues with them"*. Furthermore, participants highlighted that as leaders they intervene and provide support to those learners through following procedures of reporting such cases to relevant government services. The participants explained that they involve DSD and South African Police Services as some learners are often abused by relatives and parents would deny that and assault the children even withdraw them from school. For example, the following participating DH **Shazi** said: *"We contact police to assist with learners who are sexually abused and bullied by stepfathers but their biological parents would deny everything and assault the child some even withdraw these children from school"*. In explaining this **Magagula** expounded: *"If the abuse was disclosed to the teachers, we then follow the certain procedures of reporting the case communicating with SAPS through the social department of social development"*.

It also appeared from participants' reflections that there are other structured means of support in place as agreed upon by the school stakeholders that are noticeable. For example, all participating schools in this study followed the same pattern of having programmes where they attend to orphans and vulnerable learners' issues. Suffice to say that these schools relied on these programmes to identify learners who are in need and make sure that they provide support to them respectively. This is what participating schools' principals indicated: *"As a school we have teachers who form the committee for orphans and vulnerable learners this committee report to the SMT once every week all the issues that needs to be discussed and we intervene if need arises but emergency matters are reported as and when (Lukhele)"*. In the same manner Principal **Gwala** stated: *"Our school has a desk for orphans and vulnerable children as leaders we ask teachers to identify needy learners and we call for donations everywhere in any form, some provide money, food parcels, school uniforms and sometimes household like blankets then we give to*

these learners”. This was also supported by most participants during both individual interviews and FGDs that they invite donors and sponsorships to support learners. In confirming this **Hlabangane** said:

Every year beginning our school identified learners whose families are in need such as those families that are from children headed homes and the orphans and vulnerable learners and are provided with food parcel sponsored by DSD and other business centres and this has prevented many learners from leaving the school.

According to participants, support given to the learners has prevented a number of learners from leaving the school before completion. These views are in line with literature discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.2 as follows: Teuscher and Makarova (2018) posited that leading for learner retention may be effective when SMT members take a lead in supporting learners who are vulnerable and at-risk, by giving them relevant support. Manyanga et al. (2022) stated that the more supporting the institutions become, the more learners return to finish their studies. Moreover, Van der Voort and Wood (2014) suggested that SMT members have to support the school setup and ensure responsibility and accountability by identifying learners’ problems, as well as their causes; and provide support. In line with literature reviewed, leading for learner retention may be effective when SMT members take a lead in assisting learners who are bullied, vulnerable and at-risk, by giving them relevant information and support (Jacobs, 2015; Steyn & Singh, 2018; Teuscher & Makarova, 2018). Another example highlighted by the participants entails support from the Department of Education through school nutrition programme has increased the number of learners who are retained in secondary schools. This finding coincides with the study conducted by Sitao (2018), as indicated under Section 2.5.3, which explored the role of the Mozambique National School Feeding Programme on the retention of learners. Sitao (2018) found that schools with feeding programme seems to have a positive effect on the improved retention of primary school learners as compared to schools without school feeding programme.

6.2.6.6 Unstructured Forms of Support

The majority of participants from all participating schools reported that in many cases they support learners through unstructured forms of support. For example, it came out from the majority of participants that more often they give each month’s left overs, from PSNP supply to the orphans and vulnerable learners who do not have sufficient food at home in the form of food parcels. The participants were aware that what they were doing is illegal as it is not documented and policed by the department. Another emerging issue from all participants concerned visiting the learners’ homes to find out about learners who are often

absent in the school to communicate with parents. Hence, in most of the time parents and relatives are the reasons behind their children's behaviours which according to participants it puts themselves at a high risk. This is what DH **Zulu** emphasised that more often learners are asked to bring big lunchboxes to take food home and share with their families, "*Learners are asked to carry big lunchboxes so that if there is surplus of food it is given to them especially the orphans and vulnerable learners to share with families...*". In the same manner DH **Nxasana** indicated:

To top up these items as a school we go to an extent that we take a risk and do what I can say it's illegal because it is not documented and policed by the department. Every month we use the surplus food from nutrition and prepare food parcels and give to learners identified as needy to take home and share with family. They also take home the cooked meal when there are left overs.

As indicated, the participants supported learners through visiting their homes when they often absent themselves without a valid report. This is what **Hlabangane** stated:

We also assist our learners by taking turns as managers to visit the homes of those learners who are often absent in the school to communicate with parents even though this does not end well in most of the because at some points the parents and relatives are the reasons for the learners to be away from school so we become victims and threatened.

Khathide concurred with her colleagues during FGDs explain:

School leaders take risks and take turn to visit homes of learners who often absent themselves to find reasons and provide support so that a learner is motivated and come back to school. In most cases they find that parents are the reason for a learner not to come to school and will fight them.

In general, when considering the responses, it is clear that the participants position leadership for learner retention as supporting learners beyond expectation even if it means risk taking. It transpires from the participants that they are sometimes threatened by learners and parents when visiting their homes to check on their whereabouts. Literature that was reviewed for this study, was generally found silent regarding to this form of support. Nevertheless, literature discussed in Chapter Two confirms that the concern for educational outcomes that society expected and desired requires school leaders who are

willing to make informed decisions and to take risks (Brauckmann- Sajkiewicz & Pashiardis, 2020).

6.2.7 Employing Different Leadership Styles

Another aspect that emerged as a critical issue concerns how the leadership for learner retention is enacted as it can be associated with employing different leadership styles. Data sources shows that participants understand that there is no one-size-fits-all solution in leading for learner retention therefore, they choose from a variety of leadership styles depending on the situation. According to Al Khajeh (2018), as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3.1, that some leadership styles have a favourable effect on school improvements therefore leaders should be able to choose from a variety of leadership styles. Linked to this study, it is to achieve the goals of leading to ensure that learners are retained in the schools. Seeing the use of some leadership styles in the data coming out from the majority of participants, I decided to comprehend how it benefits them to lead for learner retention. These styles include changing from democracy to autocracy, laissez-faire leadership style and transformational leadership styles.

6.2.7.1 Participants Beliefs About Democracy

It appeared from this study that participants still believe that they cannot survive with democratic leadership style only as they deal with children. This suggest that participants will always change to autocratic styles because they are dealing with children. It also transpired from participants' responses that they link democracy with the belief that South Africa is a democratic country therefore they need to make sure that what they imply is with what the South African constitution is saying. However, they still believe that they would not survive without being autocratic in leadership for learner retention. This suggest that participants in this study critically challenge the autocratic leadership with its remains from undemocratic apartheid era. Besides, participants revealed that they understand that problem shared is problem solved and allow every stakeholder to take part in decision making so that they own and value those choices. Interestingly, it was obvious that participants understand that when learners are part of decision making they develop an understanding that they are respected, taking part, valued and given what they want within the school setting so the own whatever decision taken but still consider that children are children.

The participants further give certain circumstances where they cannot rely on democratic style only

because “children are children. For instance, **Magagula** stated, “*At times we do involve autocratic styles whereby we try to force them come to school daily, to do their work because it is not what they want so we cannot succeed with democratic style. In fact, we have tried but fail.* Resonating the same feeling in this regard, **Nxasana** further noted that: “*We understand that we are dealing with children who are young and immature so at times we need to force them and use autocracy*”. Further confirming, this is what participants stated:

*I wouldn't say, no, I don't use the autocratic, I am a democratic person yes, living in a democratic country, so I believe in democracy. I believe in being open being approachable in that way it makes it easier for everybody to talk to me about anything but sometimes in practice it doesn't work for me. That is when I resort to autocracy because people are people (Principal **Zwane**).*

*In leading for learner retention, we believe in democracy to allow different opinions from everyone when taking decisions so that they own that decisions knowing that they are part of it but in some instances we use autocratic leadership style even though constitution wise it is not allowed but it helps at some point like when you force learners to attend extra classes during holidays and after teaching hours (**Nxasana**).*

*Our school believe in democracy and using democracy is helping us a lot in leading for learner retention because we invite opinions from everyone like parents, learners, community leaders and so forth. I cannot hide this our school still use autocratic styles because we are dealing with different children and different parents so at times we have to put our feet down and force things to happen in dealing with learner retention (**Khathide**).*

In the same manner, **Shazi** voiced out that through democracy learners will have freedom of raising their concerns as a result they would be less likely to resort to drop out:

In actual fact the democratic style is relevant since all the other stakeholders within the school system most probably the learners will have freedom of raising their concerns as a result they would be less likely to resort to drop out as they would have an understanding that they are respected, taking part, valued and given what they want within the school setting so the own whatever decision taken.

Linked to **Shazi**'s view, as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3.2, is that when people have been

involved in decision-making eventually they develop a sense of ownership and can easily deal with hindrances and achieve their goals (Kilicoglu, 2018). Similarly, a study conducted by Ugwu et al. (2018) revealed that in order to reach the desired goals of an institution learners must be encouraged to participate in decision-making, and their ideas are accepted and taken into account. Also, WaiYan Wan et al. (2017) argued that by allowing learners to participate in decision-making processes may in turn improve mutual support and school attendance. Accordingly, Mabovula (2009) explained that the role of learners in school governance is certain as part of democratic leadership style under the National Department of Education guidelines for Representative Councils of Learners.

What also emerged from the participants' views is that although they adopted democracy style but they still believe that autocratic style may be used when other styles fail to achieve the goals to keep learners in the schools. However, few participants believed that employing autocracy may have a negative impact in leading for learner retention because when they use autocracy they say that we are being hard on them and they leave the school. For example, **Gobela** stated, *"I think employing autocracy does not work for us because when we demand things it is also considered like we are not taking care of all learners"*. Echoing similar sentiment, **Mncube** had this to share: *"When we use autocracy they say that we are having hard feast on them and they run away from school because the more you make the laws strict and tough actually you are losing those kids because the law itself endangers the kids if I can say"*. In the same manner Principal **Zwane** discouraged the use of autocracy and he said: *"We are a democratic country so to be autocratic may not help us in dealing with the retention of learners as they will think that we are forcing them and they know it is against the laws of the country and quit"*.

It emerged from the findings that participants respond to the use of democracy as it is to protect the values of the country and yet are aware that they will not survive without being autocratic towards leading for learner retention. This is consistent with Kendra (2022), who confirmed that autocratic leadership can be beneficial in some instances, especially when decisions need to be made quickly without consulting. This is also in line with literature presented in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3.2, that not all decisions are actually democratic in practice at times leaders can be authoritarian and employ autocracy (Drew, 2023). Accordingly, these two styles are presented and discussed jointly as participants indicated that even though they believe in democracy but at times they opt for autocracy. Changing from democratic leadership style to autocratic leadership style has been found most common to all participants in this study.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2, Rosing and Buengeler (2022) highlighted that involving autocratic and democratic leadership styles is a key influence for effective leadership across various situations. These views discussed here point to the contradicting situation where participants have to change from democracy to autocracy while they know that it is against laws of the country. I argue that this behaviour may break the relation between the participants and learners as it looks as if it is going back to apartheid whereas the country has to adapt to new changes. Henceforth, the majority of participants highlighted that they also use transformational leadership style as is discussed in the following section.

6.2.7.2 Transformational Leadership Style

Emerging from participants is that they adopt transformational leadership style to transform from the past apartheid era in leading for learner retention in their schools. It emerged from the data sources that some participants seemed to be concerned about changes that South Africa faced after the apartheid era and that there are many adjustments that are involved in the South African current education system. For example, **Langa** associated transformational leaders with those leaders who can adapt to changes so that are able to reach set goals. In relation to this study it can strengthen the relationships between school leaders and learners to enhance learner retention. Confirming this **Langa** stated:

The ability to keep learners in the school without dropping out requires transformational leaders who possess power to reach the desired goals and bring improvement in the school. We are adapting to new changes from apartheid so we involve many changes then we transformational leadership style. Again we are adapting to new changes from apartheid so we involve many changes.

Khathide concurred with **Langa** but argued that besides the influence of apartheid in South African education, the culture did not prioritise taking children to school. This is what **Khathide** had to share with other participants during FGDs:

First and foremost, madam our country is transforming from apartheid period where our education as Blacks was not prioritised as best in our culture. So now since things have changed for the best so to be successful we definitely use transformational leadership style.

The same sentiment was echoed by **Shazi** and Nxasana as they said:

Our school mostly employs transformative styles of leadership which is more

appropriate to allow changes in our education system. The transformative leadership style is more appropriate to allow changes from everyone involved and concerned about retaining learners in the school (Shazi).

And again, we are from the apartheid period where our parents use to look at educating children as a waste of time and there are parents who still believe in that and influence their children. So far the transformational leadership style is helping us in leading for learner retention (Nxasana).

The participants' voices emphasised the importance of using transformational leadership style in South Africa since it has been influenced by bantu education during apartheid era. Confirming the importance of using the transformational leadership style **Nxasana** in the extract indicated that most of learners' parents look at educating children as a waste of time and therefore influence their children to leave schools. According to them transformative leadership style is more suitable to allow changes from everyone involved and concerned about retaining learners in the school. Moreover, participants in this study associated transformational leaders with those leaders who can adapt to changes so that are able to reach set goals. This finding link with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3.3 in that change in management is a strength of transformational leaders, and it has been linked to good outcomes such as improvements in the school environment and teacher- staff interactions (Leithwood et al., 2020). Similarly, according to Brown et al. (2019), as highlighted in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.3 transformational leadership stimulates good interactions between employees and followers. Also, in line with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3.3, Ghasabeh and Provitera (2017) stated that transformational leadership style is seen more accurate than other types of leadership styles in the schools. This shows that transformational leadership style is really an effective style to be used in leading for learner retention. In line with Kilicoglu (2018), transformational leadership style is promoted as the most effective means of equipping leaders to lead for change. For example, Emery (2020) explained that transformational leadership style allows and motivates people to grow and transform beyond their expectations to effectively lead for change. Furthermore, Harris et al. (2022) and Ylmaz (2015) specified that using transformational leadership can be a way of improving schools' leadership and management.

6.2.7.3 Laissez-Faire Leadership Style

It came out from most participants that they use laissez-faire leadership style to enhance learner retention. It emerged from the responses of the participants as a recurring theme as they keep emphasising that in

order to retain learners they provide learners with what they enjoy within the parameters of the school. Confirming this, participants described a laissez-faire type of a leader as one who allows things to be proven as positive, for example allowing learners to do what they enjoy, such as sports, if they have completed their work in class. Accordingly, Principal **Gwala** explained: “*we also use laisses-fair style to accommodate all learners. In this styles learners are given an opportunity to do what they like to do guided and supervised so at the end they know that they have their time so they enjoy schooling*”. Similarly, **Nxasana** further expounded:

In actual fact we change styles depending on the situations like when you see that the learners interest is on sports more than academic stuff then we provide sport then they will attend lessons knowing that if beqeda (they finish) their favourite sport will be waiting and this way we apply laisses-fair style. So far these styles are helping us in leading for learner retention.

The way that participants describe laissez-faire style indicates that they are convinced that it helps them to keep learners in the school as they know that it is not about the curriculum only. These views are associated with literature in Chapter Two that laissez-faire leaders often get higher retention rate from the followers as it makes them feel motivated, relaxed knowing that they have independency over their part of the projects (WGU, 2020). It also emerged from the participants that at time, autocratic style of leadership is used because children are children. Therefore, they do not rely on the democratic style only. Sometimes, they are forced to be autocratic for their own benefit, such as participating in school holidays and extra classes. However, autocratic style may be used when other styles fail to achieve the goals to keep learners in the schools. Even though other participants believe that it may chase away learners from attending the school.

Overall, participant revealed that they use a variety of leadership styles depending on the situation. This is in line with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3.1, in that various leadership styles cannot be deemed universal because they are dependent on an individual’s ability to lead for achieving certain goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Also, in Section 2.4.1, according to the research carried out by Maqbool et al. (2023), the findings reveal that when leaders use different leadership styles, school results increase and this may improve learner retention rates. Similarly, other studies found that leadership styles used in schools plays a major role in improving learner performance which may eventually increase their school learner retention rates (Shava & Tlou, 2018). However, a study conducted by Klompenhouwer and

Hopman (2021) found that some of these styles cover some of leadership practices which is critical to understand.

6.2.8 Adopting Uncertain Policies

The significant points that emerged from participants concerns the adopt uncertain policies that are not specific to learner retention when they try to enact leadership for learner retention. Across all the participants it came out that there is no policy that speak directly to learner retention, which comes with clear guidelines in terms of what procedures to follow when learners leave the school. Accordingly, participants revealed that they use policies that were intended to increase the learner retention rates in the schools such as admission policy, teenage pregnancy policy and drug abuse. In confirming this all principals from three participating schools revealed that they do not have a policy specific to learner retention thus they use other departmental policies in place. This is how Principal **Lukhele** of Shongololo expressed his concern:

To lead for the retention of learners we normally use the code of conduct for learners which plays a huge role in maintaining the discipline in the school and not to keep learners in the school, because there's nothing that we have in order to retain learners as the policy with clear guidelines that we follow in the school even within the department itself.

Principal **Gwala** of Ndabazana echoed similar sentiment and said:

I would be lying if I say yes there is a policy for learner retention not that I have heard of or see no not at all. We only apply policies that are meant to protect learners from leaving the school according to the policy makers but they all have more of negative effects than positive ones in leading for learner retention.

While in the same manner Principal **Zwane** of Tshelizwe secondary stated:

We use an admission policy which is not that strict in terms of how we retain learners. We use it with other protecting policies from the department in actual fact we do not have a specifically retention policy as such. It is difficult to control learners leaving because it not easy to control without policy.

What came out from the extracts is that participants rely on the policies that are there to protect learners

from being expelled in schools which are not specific on how to enact leading for learner retention. It appeared from participants' responses that some of these policies are sometimes frustrating and difficult to implement because some of them might have a negative influence to other learners in the school. While some may indirectly push learners away from school and drop out. For instance, the drug and substance abuse policy with a bad influence to other learners in the school.

Furthermore, the participants reported that learners sometimes leave school because there is a competition of interest and they will fight each other or else they can be killed by drug dealers. In affirming this, DH **Mncube** said: *"We use sufficient policies to protect learners, to give an example, teenage pregnancy policy which is difficult to implement because we would like to retain that child in school but others get sick regularly and stop attending"*. This was also apparent from **Hlabangane** when he argued that, *"Besides these policies have a negative influence learners and indirectly pushing them away from school and drop out"*. According to **Mncube and Hlabangane** it is clear that at times these policies are not serving the purpose instead they indirectly pushing learners away. Departmental head **Gobela** shared a similar sentiment and she added: *"What is worse you know these policies that are available in our schools yes they do support learners but they are not easy to implement"*. **Shazi** further spoke about teenage pregnancy policy and said: *"Teenage pregnancy policy is a bad influence to learners because they will get pregnant intentionally as they are protected but at the end they will have challenges to leave school and look after their babies (Shazi)"*. Moreover, participants noted that they also use drug and substance abuse policy to keep those learners involved with drugs which is a bad influence to other learners. Besides, participants revealed that sometimes these learners find themselves being followed and attacked in the school. This was what **Nxasana** stated:

To be specific it is not proper to allow drug abusers to be together with other learners in one school because they are a bad influence. In fact, I can say these policies affect leadership for learner retention because sometimes they work against us instead of working towards us and they are frustrating.

Here participants argued that these policies are difficult to implement and that in practice it is not happening. Instead participants perceive these policies as frustrating them and a bad influence to other learners in the school who may copy and do likewise.

6.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, I presented data on the nature of the leadership on how participants in this study enact leadership for learner retention in their schools. The overall findings in this chapter suggested that school leaders exceed expectations in trying to lead for learner retention and revealed that it is circumstantial and contextual. The data and discussions revealed that SMT members in this study are guided by documents such as registers as well as guidelines as imposed by the Department of Education. The data further indicate that besides these documents and guidelines they go beyond and share their responsibilities with everyone concerned about the retention of learners within and outside the school. Accordingly, participants reported that they involve the community members, parents, learners, teachers, and other departments to support them in leading for learner retention. The data further suggest that they offer caring practices such as providing motivational support and other forms of support to learners in their school. Considering the participants' experiences related to learners' backgrounds as they come from different areas and homes, they find it helping to employ different leadership styles as guided by situations. Seeing that there is no policy with clear guidelines that speak directly to learner retention, participants revealed that they use related policies such as admission policy, teenage pregnancy policy and drug abuse. Hence, according to them these policies are not helpful instead they are frustrating, difficult to implement, a bad influence to other learners and sometimes push learners away from school. The data suggest immediate attention in drawing up of these policies to ensure effective leading for learner retention. The participants responded to this theme in its broader sense and highlighted the reasons why they enact leading for learner retention in the way that they do. Chapter Seven of this thesis presents and discusses the reasons why they enact leading for learner retention in the way that they do.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REASONS ACCOUNTING FOR THE WAY LEADERSHIP IS ENACTED

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding two analysis chapters, namely: meanings attached by SMT members to learner retention and leadership for learner retention and the ways that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention, I presented data and discussed several themes for each chapter. Herein, I present and discuss data about reasons behind the ways that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention. This theme presents the reasons accounting for the way leadership is enacted in their schools as highlighted in Chapter Six. It is specifically concerned with the following key research question:

- Why do SMT members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention the way they do?

The participants were asked about the reasons behind the ways that they enact leadership for learner retention. The intention was to explore the views regarding the reasons that they perceive as having an impact on enacting leadership for learner retention in the manner that they do. Responding to this key research question, it emerged from the participants that there are several reasons behind enacting leadership for learner retention in a manner they do. The enactment of any practice that people are assigned as their responsibility is influenced by certain whys that can be linked to either positive or negative results. This chapter has two sub-themes which are as follows: (1) reasons leading towards positive changes and practices that bring about positive changes (2) reasons leading to negative changes.

7.2 REASONS LEADING TOWARDS POSITIVE CHANGES

As alluded in the introduction in this chapter the enactment of any practice with which one is assigned is influenced by certain reasons that can be linked to positive results. This section discusses the reasons that include the following: (1) announcement of matric results through social media; (2) integrating various leadership styles to attain high learner retention rate; (3) engaging various stakeholders can allow the flow of different ideas; (4) providing academic and non- academic support.

7.2.1 Announcement of Matric Results through Social Media

The majority of participants indicated that Angie Motshekga (the former Minister of Basic Education)

announces the matric results through social media. It came out that since their institutions are secondary schools with matric, the participants believed that the announcement of matric results by the DBE is a way of encouraging schools to do their best. The participants further highlighted that their main concern is for Grades 11 and 12 because the focus of the department is on Grade 12s, so they account for every learner who drops out. Therefore, they make sure that there is effective teaching and learning coupled with good leadership skills, which can make their schools visible. This is because they believe that if the results are good they become schools of choice. Affirming this, **Nxasana** highlighted that:

The only way to advertise your school to keep learners retained in the school is to make it possible that there is a high standard of teaching and learning. This will ensure best results and most importantly in matric as everybody knows high schools are judged by their good results because Angie make sure she will spread them all over the world then all parents and children would know and enrol their children where there are good results.

Echoing similar sentiment this is what his second in command said:

I would like also to emphasise on the important point that my principal has mentioned when he says we lead for learner retention by ensuring effective teaching and learning that involves good leadership skills and to teach above required standard and provide good education because we want to produce excellent results at the matric level and a good percentage of pass rates (DP Ntobela).

DH **Zulu** added that are not that strict in Grades 8 to 10 because the focus of the Department of Basic Education is on Grade 12s:

We are not that strict in Grades 8 to 10, our main concern in retaining learners is from Grade 11 to ensure they all progress to Grade 12 because the focus of the department is on Grade 12s so we account about every learner who drop out.

Generally, what transpired from these utterances by **Nxasana** and DP **Ntobela** that effective teaching and learning coupled with good leadership skills. What transpired here participants' major concern of ensuring effective teaching and learning is on achieving the best Grade 12 results as the focus of the DBE. Contrary, this suggests that learner retention is not fully supported the main focus is the Matric results which can be the reason why some learners do not make it to their final grade (Grade 12 according to this

study). Interesting, although the focus in terms on managing school attendance is on the final grades as reported by **Zulu** but participants make sure that the number of learners leaving the school is reduced through fight for the best results in all grades. The participants reported that they do this so that they achieve the highest pass rate then be always chosen by learners and parents. In confirmation, this is what participants from Tshelizwe secondary stated during FGDs:

*In this school we lead for learner retention and manage teaching and learning effectively and provide good education so that learners choose to remain in the school and finish their schooling and to be competent in what they will do after matric. Let me give you an example of this, we ensure that there is high standard of teaching and learning with proper planning, good curriculum to produce best results especially in Grade 12 since we all know that our schools are chosen based on matric results that is how we are judged (Principal **Zwane**).*

Similar sentiments were also echoed by participants from other participating schools. For example, participants from Shongololo secondary had this to tell:

*The most important part is that schools offering Grade 12 are judged by matric results therefore we motivate learners and make sure that they keep to agreed days and teachers aiming to provide extra classes during weekends, after teaching hours and during holidays so that at the end of the year learners produce high quality results (**Shazi**).*

This was also evident from participants of Ndabazana secondary school that they lead in the way that they do because learners and parents always choose the schools where there is a high pass rate in matric. Following is what Principal **Gwala** said:

Another thing school with matric are chosen based on good pass rate in matric thus we make sure that the number of learners leaving the school is reduced through dedication, commitment and good results in all grades so that our matric excel and achieve the highest pass rate then will be always chosen by learners and parents. We care about the learners and also go beyond even to helping the learners with barriers.

Further confirmed by Principal **Gwala** in her response in the extracts is that they are committed and dedicated to fight for the best results in all grades and even go beyond helping slow learners and those

with barriers to produce good results. This is an indication that participants in this study exceed expectations to assist learners with learning barriers so that they maintain high pass rate since school with matric are chosen based on good pass rate in matric. Further confirming effective teaching and learning **Gobela** stated:

Also there are those learners who are ungovernable we encourage teachers to be well prepared when they go to class so that those learners who want to disrupt, they don't have an opportunity for doing so. Because if the teacher is well prepared, there would be no time to entertain them. So, we ensure that we try our level best to make sure that our teachers are well prepared and the classes are occupied (Gobela).

In her response **Gobela** highlighted that there are those learners who are ungovernable therefore they encourage teachers to be well prepared when they go to class so that those learners who want to disrupt, would not get a chance for doing so. Munna and Kalam (2021), as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.1, argued that teachers need to prepare lesson plans accordingly to meet the learning objectives of all learners because at times they can be disruptive just because they have some barriers in learning. It is apparent from the findings that from all three participating schools leading for learner retention is enacted in the way that they do to maintain excellent results in Grade 12 and high pass rate so that they become a school of choice because secondary schools are judged by matric results.

It is also clear from participants' utterances that to participants the announcement of results in social media is one of the main reasons of ensuring effective teaching and learning in their schools to provide good education. These reasons are supported by the literature in Chapter Two. According to Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz and Pashiardis (2020), as presented in Section 2.2.2, good leadership skills are therefore required to develop and maintain a positive image of the schools, making them more appealing and visible to the public. The participants further confirmed that they teach and provide good education because they want to obtain a good percentage of pass rates because their schools are chosen based on matric results. Linked to this finding, Wadji (2017), in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2, argued that strong leadership in terms of providing good education is a requirement in every school to deal with the quick varying demands of attracting learners. Similarly, Casanova et al. (2018), as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5. reported that effective teaching and learning leads to a good academic performance which is the most dominant outcome in leading toward learner retention.

7.2.2 To Attain High Learner Retention Rate

One of the important finding was that participants in this study believe that using different types of leadership styles is their main weapon to attain high learner retention rate. Lumad (2017) revealed that school leaders use different types of leadership styles and locate proper planning at the centre of their core business of the day to achieve the highest goals. The participants further explained that they use different leadership styles so that when one style is not working towards achieving the goals of retaining learners in the school, they change to another method. This explanation is linked to the literature in Chapter Two under Section 2.3. According to Amanchukwu et al. (2015), various leadership styles cannot be deemed universal because they are dependent on an individual's ability to lead change and achieve certain goals. This shows that leadership styles are not one shoe fits all. This was obvious when **DH Hlabangane** from Shongololo secondary indicated that: *"We use different leadership styles depending on the situation like when one style is not working towards achieving the goals we change for the other, it depends"*. While in the same manner, DP **Ntobela** of Tshelizwe said: *"We cannot use one method we come up with different styles because you have different targets and the aims if it doesn't work, we try another one"*. Further confirming this, participants went on to explain their reasons behind the use of each style. The participants stated:

We intergrade different styles because we understand that in enacting leadership for learner retention we cannot succeed with only one leadership style. We cannot be autocratic only because it will mean we are forcing people, we cannot be laissez-faire only because it is basically mean providing support for non-academics, but we can't be democratic only because we are dealing with children. But, using democracy is necessary because every person who participated in decision making is encouraged to own their decisions and cooperate. (Magagula).

The extracts indicate that an overarching experience across all the participants was the use of democracy more than other styles because they live in a democratic country so they also believe in democratic values of the country. While, they also believe that when all members are involved in decision making they develop a sense of ownership. It was discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3.2 that when people are involved, they feel as if they are a part of a project and are inspired to do their best (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). It was also indicated that if all members involved in decision-making eventually develop a sense of ownership and can deal easily with obstacles (Kilicoglu, 2018).

Moreover, some participants are mostly concerned with the changes involved since South Africa has been influenced by the past-apartheid era when education was not prioritised as it is nowadays. Explaining this, participants highlighted that before the concern was on farming to feed families not in education, in modern times you need to have a qualification in order to get a job and able to earn a living. Therefore, since as leaders they are dealing with these people who still believe in the past they adopt transformational leadership style in trying to change them to consider education as important. As discussed in Chapter Two under Section 2.4.3 the adjustments and techniques based on beliefs, values, and attitudes that inform leaders' practices to change for the best results are directly involved with transformational leadership style (Khan et al., 2019). Articulating his concern regarding this Principal **Lukhele** asserted: "*Education in our country is changing many things like curriculum as it has been influenced by bantu education during apartheid era therefore we are forced to be transformational and it helps.*" In the same manner, Principal **Gwala** stated:

Before the concern was on farming to feed families they did not need education to do that. Unlike in this era where you need to have a qualification in order to get a job and able to feed your family. We are dealing with these people who still believe in the past and trying to change them to put education first that is why we adopt transformational leadership style.

The participants further explained that they sometimes use a laissez-fair style to accommodate all learners because in this style learners are given an opportunity to do what they enjoy the most such as sports and extra-curricular activities. Moreover, deputy **Ntobela** insisted that they may not stop using an autocratic style even though it is against the values of this country. For instance, **Mncube** said:

I say that we need to be more of laissez-faire style of leadership. Why am I saying this? By using the laissez-faire, you are kind of saying do what you want but within the parameters of the school. So, if you are providing sports it's what they want then to let them go to sport but they learn which is what you want so by using laissez-faire type of leadership you actually allowing them to get what they want but at the very same time they are giving you what you want.

I think it's all about what works at that time and employ. We sometimes use laissez-fare type to allows things to be proven as positive, and at times you have to be democratic in ensuring that all people including learners are part of decision making

so they honour that decision and comply, definitely they will be no way that they leave the school unless for a solid reason.

Deputy Principal **Ntobela** further explained that although they are democratic but they may not leave autocratic styles because children are children.

General speaking, we believe in democracy because we understand that problem shared is problem solved so we involve everybody. Whereas, we cannot leave the autocratic style behind, yes we know it is against the values of this country but we cannot survive without being autocratic in leading for learner retention because children are children so at times we apply it (DP Ntobela).

Overall, the excerpts suggest that participants believe in employing more than one leadership styles because they want to be successful in leading for learner retention. It also transpires from the utterances that enacting leadership for learner retention cannot be a one size fits all because every leadership style plays its role different from the other. Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3 discussed that there is no one-size-fits-all solution because leaders can choose from a variety of leadership styles based on the situation (Dimopoulos, 2020). The participants stated that they live in a democratic country so they also believe in democratic values of the country. It is however confusing that participants may not leave autocratic styles which is against the values of this country because it. The participants explained that they see this opportunity as aiding them in exercising discipline in retaining learner hence this may cause learners to leave the school. Linked to this statement, Smith et al. (2017) explained that autocracy appears to be the polar opposite of democratic rule but it strengthens interactions between learners and teachers. Similarly, Drew (2023) further revealed that not of all decisions are actually democratic in practice at times leaders can be as authoritarian and employ autocracy. Contradicting, participants are aware that autocratic approach is against the values of this country but they continue to use this approach to impart discipline. This further indicates that participants in this study are more concerned about discipline as they believe it is a way of keeping learners in the school.

7.2.3 Allow Accountability and Flow of Ideas

It emerged from this study that participants involve various stakeholders because they believed that it promotes accountability, a flow of different ideas and responsibilities. It was indicated that participants involve all stakeholders within and outside the schools to ensure that learners are protected. Furthermore,

participants came with a different explanation that they enact leadership for learner retention by involving other stakeholders because they understand that leaving school starts way back from learners playing truancy. The participants revealed that the community assist them by taking the learners to the school when seen in the street wearing uniform during school hours. Accordingly, it appeared that participants got into agreement with community members to be the ears and eyes of the school because as school leaders they may not be able to identify learners who left their homes in the pretence of going to school and do not reach the school. What also transpired as participants' concern was that their schools are located in areas influenced by social ills. Therefore, they involve community members to help them to safeguard learners from these social ills such as taking drugs because once they become addicted they leave the school. It is interesting that participants include learners even when they are planning so that they may keep to plans since they were part of decision taken Principal **Zwane** expounded:

It therefore becomes the responsibility for everyone, not the school community, but even outside community because both stakeholders inside school and outside schools can provide the flow of different ideas and responsibilities to protect learners from all the bad things that these learners who are not at school could get into.

DH **Magagula** supported Principal **Zwane** and said: "We know from fact that problem shared is problem solved, so involving everyone in leading for learner retention helps us solve all problems that might hinder us when leading for learner retention". **Shazi** stated, "...we need them to be prepared and keep to the decision without pointing fingers to anyone of as we planned together *and reach the consensus not that it was imposed*".

The participants also explained that different stakeholders have different responsibilities towards ensuring that learners do attend school. For instance, DP **Ntobela** stated: "*We involve other stakeholders since we all have different responsibilities towards ensuring that the learners attend schools.* The participants further highlighted some of these responsibilities and their impact on the ways that they enact leading for learner retention. To start with, **Magagula** explained that they include SGB because according to the schools' act to work towards achieving the schools' goals. This was her voice: "*Above and beyond, it is their duty as the governance according to the school's act to work towards achieving the schools' goals*". Accordingly, participants argued that they involve all stake holders because in practice the registers and policies in place are not fully supporting them in increasing the learner retention rates as intended to. This is what participants stated: "*We involve even community members, "... because we*

understand that leaving school starts way back from learners playing truancy so in leading for learner retention in this school” (Shazi).

We encourage and involve parents to be part of leadership for learner retention because we need to have parents who are dedicated and interested in their children’s learning, who can help the school by protecting learners from social ills. For example; in our school we have got a problem of drug abuse that comes from the community in the neighbouring of the school so they understand each other (Gobela).

There is a need to involve all stake holders because in practice the registers and policies in place are not fully supporting us in increasing the learner retention rates as intended to. Instead (1) they sometimes push learners away from schools (2) they are specific to certain condition (3) they may be influential to other learners and do likewise since young people are easily influenced either negative or positive (Mncube).

Emerging from the utterances is that participants involve all stakeholders in leading for learner retention because they believe that problem shared is problem solved. It was discussed in Chapter Two, under Section 2.5.1 drawing from the Zulu proverb which says ‘*izandla ziyagezana*’ meaning people support each other. This shows that if school leaders can succeed when working together with other stakeholders in leading learner retention. For instance, Supasitthimethee et al. (2018) highlighted that when all education stakeholders such as parents, policymakers, community members and educators, share responsibility, schools can continuously improve (Section 2.5.1). It also came out that participants involve community members and other stakeholders because departmental documents used in leadership for learner retention are not helping as they are guided by certain conditions. As indicated in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.2 that in terms of the National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996, schools use learner attendance registers to keep records of learner attendance in the schools (Department of Basic Education, 2010). It is argued that they may not be the reliable source in ensuring that learners are retained in the school. For example, as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.2 the class registers are controlled by teachers in classes who sometimes forget or send prefects to mark registers meaning there is no uniformity in place to keep these records reliable for early intervention (Mojapelo, 2022). It was also discussed in Chapter Two, under Section 2.5.1 drawing from the Zulu proverb which says ‘*izandla ziyagezana*’ meaning people support each other. This shows that if school leaders can succeed when

working together with other stakeholders in leading learner retention. For instance, Supasitthimethee et al. (2018) highlighted that when all education stakeholders such as parents, policymakers, community members and educators, share responsibility, schools can continuously improve (Section 2.5.1).

7.2.4 To Provide Academic and Non-Academic Support

It came out during the data generation process that participants believe that when academic and non-academic support is provided, learners will not leave the schools. The participants revealed that the Department of Basic Education has introduced inclusive education. Meaning all learners even those with special needs are included in the mainstream as intending to phase out special schools. It was also evident that they allow learners to motivate other learners so that they value and own the motivation as theirs since it comes from peers. For example, participants revealed that they allow learners to select a topic to talk about when they are sharing motivational talks. The participants highlighted that when learners are involved in choosing a theme it became theirs and are motivated. This was evident from the following responses: “*We motivate learners and make sure that we permeate them to choose a topic to talk about during assembly (Nxasana)*”. In support, **Langa** elaborated and said:

As a school we set up a theme together with learners and educators so that it becomes theirs. Sometimes we give them topics that are motivational and give one or two learners to share the topic with the whole school so they enjoy that they are motivating others.

Similarly, DH **Shazi** from the same school with **Nxasana** supported this finding during FGDs and said: “Like we said before, we bring entertainment into the school so they watch movies every Friday and other forms of entertainment therefore they enjoy being in the school”. In support of this view **Hlabangane** said:

Oh yes like we motivate learners they watch movies during certain days so that they enjoy to attend school, I can remember few years back we had a girl who was very good in dancing and modelling but was struggling academically, we invited people who were in that industry the learner was motivated to follow her dream she now owns a modelling school she is teaching other girls how to walk like a lady.

What transpired from **Nxasana**'s extract is that they bring entertainment into the school so that learners will be motivated to remain in the school rather than to be out of school entertaining themselves. In

elaboration, Principal **Lukhele** expounded: *“Learners may leave the school to have enough time to watch movies during the day or to take part to some entertaining activities like beauty pageants”*.

Furthermore, the majority of the participants revealed that they also support learners by liaising with relevant departments and have created a close relationship with them. According to participants this relationship prevents learners from leaving the school before completion their basic education. In confirming this, **Gobela** said *“We’ve adopted the nurse and if there’s a child that is sick, this educator takes them straight to the clinic then they are attended and went back to school instead of sending them home where they are sometimes not taken care of”*. The participants explained that they involved the DSD and South African Police Services because some learners are often abused by relatives, and parents would deny that and assault the children, even withdrawing them from school. This shows that learners in secondary schools are faced with various challenges that might lead them to leave those schools. As indicated in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.6, researchers Ciampo and Delciampo (2020) and Daminabo et al. (2022) stated that leading learners at a secondary school level is challenging since they are highly exposed to emotional challenges and vulnerability. For example, the following participating DH **Shazi** said: *“We contact police to assist with learners who are sexually abused and bullied by stepfathers because their biological parents often deny everything and assault the child some even withdraw these children from school”*. Noticeably, these participating schools have got desks that comprise of committee members who deal with orphans and vulnerable learners’ issues. Confirming these support desks Principal **Zwane** of Tshelizwe said: *“Learners has got a lot of problems and you can see and in this school, there is a desk comprises of a committee that deal with orphans and vulnerable learners’ issues and give support on time which prevented a lot of learners from leaving the school”*.

It also emerged from the findings of this study that participants engage in some unstructured form of support that are illegal and sometimes risky in trying to stop learners from leaving the school. Regarding the illegal issues, DH **Nxasana** indicated that they use PSNP surplus food to support needy learner’s families, while this programme is meant to support learners who may suffer malnutrition at home to share with other learners in the school. This is his voice: *“Every month we use the food from nutrition supply and prepare food parcels or take home the cooked meal when there are left overs to share with families so that they remain in the school”*. Another undocumented risky issue that came out that participants take turns to visit homes of learners who often absent themselves to find reasons and provide support to those

learners. It was stated earlier that there is no policy that speak directly to learner retention. This was what **Shazi** in her voice stated:

School leaders take turn to visit homes of learners who often absent themselves to find reasons and provide support. They find that some learners are very rude, and other parents will also attack them so it is dangerous and putting their lives at a high risk because there is no policy that inform them to do that it is a matter of supporting learners; we do it to support our learners to continue with schooling.

In summary, it transpires from the findings that participants in this study are required to teach all learners even those with special needs are included in the mainstream as intending to phase out special schools. The participants further reported that they incorporate variety of teaching and learning strategies and ensures proper planning to accommodate these learners. Linked to this finding, it was discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.8.2.1 that teachers try to incorporate variety of teaching and learning strategies and approaches while the main intention is to ensure equal opportunity for the learners so that they can develop love for the subject content (Munna & Kalam, 2021). It was discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.8.2.1 teachers need to prepare lesson plans accordingly to meet the learning objectives of all learners because at times they can be disruptive just because they have some barriers in learning (Munna & Kalam, 2021). Another finding that appeared consistently across all participants was that they create an atmosphere that allows effective teaching and learning so that learners remain in the schooling system. It appeared from their responses that they identify and intervene to support learners because to them it is one way of keeping them in their schools. This is consistent with the views in Chapter Two that as school leaders SMT members are committed to play an essential role in attracting learners' interest and love to remain in school (Al-Shammari, 2016). This finding is also in line with the views in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.2. For instance, according to Zhang et al. (2014) early intervention and effective advice on learners at risk may have a positive influence on academic and non-academic issues and can lead to better results in retaining learners in the schools. Furthermore, it emerged that all participating schools have a close relationship with relevant departments such as DSD, health and SAPS to assist learners with problems that might cause them to decide on dropping out of school. Also, it became apparent that participants involve stakeholders inside and outside schools because they can provide different ideas and actions. Finally, participants in this study engage in some forms of support that are sometimes risky aiming to stop learners from leaving the school. The next theme focuses on exploring the reasons caused by policies, issues and practices that bring about negative changes.

7.3 REASONS LEADING TOWARDS NEGATIVE CHANGES

It emerged from the data that some reasons that are behind SMT members' ways of leading for learner retention derived from policies, issues and practices that bring about negative changes. It was also apparent from the data that these policies, issues and practices hinder leading for learner retention. It came out from the participants that they enact leadership for learner retention in the way that they do because (1) there is scarcity of appropriate official documents; (2) they are guided by the policies imposed by the Department of Education; (3) reasons related to the absence of specific policies; (4) reasons related to absent parents; (5) reasons related to schools' location; (6) SMT members fear for their lives; (7) some learners play the roles of the primary caregivers. They are discussed in the following section as subthemes.

7.3.1 Scarcity of Appropriate Official Documents

I found that some of the reasons that cause the participants to lead for learner retention in the way that they do entails the scarcity of the appropriate official documents to ensure learner retention. It came out from the participants in this study that they only use various types of registers provided by the department as controlling tools in leading for learner retention. Articulating their concerns on the use of these controlling tools participants highlighted that registers come with certain rules that needs to be followed. For instance, it emerged from participants that at times these rules encourage the removal of the learners from the schooling system meaning they act against leadership for learner retention. It also appeared from participants in this study that to them these documents assist with keeping records for attendances and absentees to inform the department but not to retain learners. Likewise, participants argued that the department do not take any action to assist learners who might according to records, be experiencing difficulties and at risk of leaving the schooling system. Instead, there is an indication that the department assist schools by tracking learners through SA-SAMS not necessarily for learner retention but to confirm learner statistics to allocate school funding through Norms and Standard. In confirmation, **Hlabangane** stated: *"We use registers to keep records of learner statistics because we have to report to the provincial Department of Education for them to allocate funds accordingly into the schools and not to retain learners"*. It transpires that some of the rules guiding the learner' attendance involve removing learners from the schooling system after they have been absent for 40 conservative days. Therefore, to avoid removing the learner from the schooling system they follow up on such learners by visiting learners' homes or by calling their wards to find out about their whereabouts. The participants further explained that they contact families because they need to be sure of learners' whereabouts because at times learners leave their schools for School B without asking for a transfer letter and will be accepted in those schools. This

is what DP **Ntobela** expounded:

We try and follow up on those learners until we are sure that they are dropouts..., because sometimes they re-appears to write examination, coming with stories and after the examination they are gone again. We cannot chase them away because we are policed by the admission policy however this is not helping in leading for learner retention because when they fail to deliver academically they quit schooling.

Supporting similar sentiment, Principal **Gwala** from Ndabazana secondary explained that some schools admit learners without transfer cards so it is not easy to know the whereabouts of a learner. In her voice she said:

We use to visit learners' homes when they have been absent to find their whereabouts because some learners are found double parking when the system is tracking them down to confirm learner statistics as we have submitted when some are nowhere to be found. We have seen these visits helping in leading for learner retention and we had saved some learners.

Portrayed in the utterances is that participants are required to use of departmental documents however there is no proper documentation that guides them on how to retain learners. It also transpired that to some instances the use of registers may lead to learners being excluded from school instead of being retained as required by the Department of Basic Education. According to the National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996, if the school is unable to communicate with parents of learners at risk of dropping out based on continuous absence, such learners are cancelled from the register (Department of Basic Education, 2010). There is also an indication that the department is mainly concerned with learner enrolment so that they allocate funds accordingly. While on the other hand, the SMT members are concerned about the retention of learners in their schools as it comes with more benefits in terms of the allocation of school funding and resources. These findings emphasise what participants stated in that the department do not take any action to assist learners who might according to records, be at risk of leaving the schooling system. I, therefore, agree with the participants' report in this study that there is no proper documentation that guides them on how to retain learners.

7.3.2 Guided by the Departmental Policies

It emerged from the data that other reasons that influence SMT members to enact leadership for learner retention in the manner that they do is because they are guided by policies provided by the Department of Basic Education. It emerged from the participants' responses that they are guided by the progression requirements guidelines to progress learners having not met the pass requirement. For example, it transpired that participants are required by law not to keep learners more than four years in the phase and it does not work towards leading for learner retention. Following is what participants raised as their concern regarding these guidelines: This is what participating **Shazi** had to tell: *“We do not keep learners in a phase more than four years because the progression requirements allow learners to be progressed based on the years spent in a phase even if they are not ready”*. According to participants, learners experience more difficulties as they are progressed because they do not receive attention that they need as slow learners in the mainstream rather be placed in special schools. **Zulu** during FGDs at Tshelizwe secondary stated: *“In reality learners experience more difficulties as they are progressed because they do not receive attention that they need as slow learners in the mainstream. Actually, they are supposed to be placed in special schools and not included in the mainstream schools”*.

I have also observed from the participants in this study that they are very uncomfortable with how they enact leadership for learner retention because of these guidelines as they do not allow learners a chance to improve. According to participants these learners develop more problems as they would not be ready for the next grade. It transpired from what **Zulu** stated that these learners experience more difficulties as they are progressed because they do not receive attention that they need as slow learners in the mainstream. Concurring the utterances Principal **Gwala** mentioned that they do not have enough time to spend on individual learning in a class of more than 50 learners when more than 15 needs special attention. This is what she had to say:

It is not easy to attend to learners who need special care because our classroom is overcrowded, learners are over 50 and you find that sometimes more than 15 of them need special attention. Worse madam, we have to move with the curriculum time waits for nobody because when planning we do not consider different learning needs of individuals so we apply the blanket approach.

Generally, participants from the three participating schools seemed to be against this policy because as

secondary schools the worse challenge regarding this is that it is late for them to help these learners. The participants argued that as secondary schools this policy is challenging because learners develop stress and it led to these learners leaving school having not completed. Moreover, even their parents would always deny it since maybe it was not identified in their primary level of schooling. According to participants regarding this policy, it is too late for them to help these learners, as parents would deny it and could not provide support.

Another issue concerns that they apply a blanket approach to all learners irrespective of their capabilities as they are not specialists, teacher shortages so learners are overcrowded in their classrooms and special education is minimal. However, they do try and accommodate these learners as per inclusive education but in reality we could hardly assist them and eventually they leave the school. What also emerged from the participants, was that they are not allowed to declare these learners as having barriers in learning but can only identify and refer them for further assessment which sometimes takes longer than expected because they are not specialists. For instance, **Magagula** voiced out an important issue regarding the assessment of learners:

As we are not specialists sometimes we misunderstand learners. We saying they are lazy to work whereas the child is having serious IQ challenges. So we do not have enough skills as teachers to identify those learners. If you have successfully identified the learner, you have a problem with the parent understanding that the learner needs inclusive education. If the parent understands and you move further to consult the SNA's it takes forever for the child assessment.

Echoing the similar sentiment **Gobela** from the same school explained that the department is phasing out special schools and encouraging inclusive education. **Gobela** expounded:

To support what my colleague has indicated we include them in one class and apply a blanket approach because the Department of Education is trying to do away with special schools and encourages inclusive education. Inclusive education is saying we must include all learners in the mainstream.

It also emerged that participants apply a blanket approach because the Department of Education is trying to do away with special schools and encourages inclusive education. Considering the data in these extracts, it is clear that these policies requirement guidelines imposed by the department are the main

reason for them to enact leadership for learner retention in the way that inhibit the retention of learners. It is evident from the discussions in Chapter Two, Section 2.5.3 that the Department of Education introduced the inclusive education policy to accommodate all learners in the schools irrespective of their special needs as per their rights to education (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). It can be contended that the Department of Education is driven by a desire to provide equal education to all. However, it comes with a number of challenges that affect leading for learner retention as indicated. The extracts imply that teachers in these schools are unsuitable to teach these learners with learning barriers because they are not trained to deal with such learners. Furthermore, Principal **Gwala** raised an important point that the planning and the material used when planning does not provide for special cases. This is in line with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.4. Some current studies, such as those by Adewumi and Mosito (2019); Andrews et al. (2021) and Themane and Thobejane (2018), revealed that due to various challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of resources, teachers are unable to create other methods that accommodate every learner as they are not specialists. This implies that as much as they teach these learners but are unsuitable for facilitating remedial education and the material is insufficient. I argue from what the participants stated that the implementation of these guidelines works against the learner retention because these learners do not cope in the main stream and leave the schools.

7.3.3 Reasons Related to the Absence of Specific Policies

What emerged from this study is that the participants adopted policies that are not specific to learner retention because there are no policies that directly speak to learner retention. Across all the participants it came out that there is no policy that speak directly to learner retention, which comes with clear guidelines in terms of what procedures to follow when learners leave the school. Accordingly, participants revealed that they use policies that were intended protect certain learners' behaviour and to increase the learner retention rates in the schools such as admission policy, teenage pregnancy policy and drug abuse. One participant from Shongololo secondary indicated that in their school they sometimes use their own discretion other than these policies. The participants argued that these policies are not helping because they are specific to certain conditions and may have a negative influence and indirectly push learners to leave the schools. This suggests a challenge to participants when they enact leadership for learner retention using these policies because they are conditional. In confirming this all principals from three participating schools revealed that they do not have a policy specific to learner retention thus they use other departmental policies in place. This is how Principal **Lukhele** of Shongololo expressed

his concern: *“To lead for the retention of learners we normally use our own discretion because there’s nothing that we have in order to retain learners that we follow with clear guidelines that we follow in the school even within the department itself”*. **Mncube** supported Principal **Lukhele** and said, *“Department of Education did not capacitate us on how to retain learners and measures to follow when a learner left school, it only falls upon us as SMT members”*. Principal **Gwala** of Ndabazana echoed similar sentiment and said: *“We only apply policies that are meant to protect learners from leaving the school according to the policy makers because there is a policy for learner retention not that I have heard of or see no not at all”*. While in the same manner Principal **Zwane** of Tshelizwe secondary stated:

We use an admission policy which is not that strict in terms of how we retain learners. We use it with other protecting policies from the department since in actual fact we do not have a specifically retention policy as such. It is difficult to control learners leaving because it not easy to control without policy.

Another most important issue that came out from the data was that other learners enrolled in the school with the intentions of selling drugs but they may not be denied admission as per admission policy. To confirm this point, **Hlabangane** said: “*Some of them enrolled in the school with an intention of selling drugs, admission policy says no learners should be denied admission so even if we knew but we do not have grounds so we have to admit the learner*”. What came out from the extracts is that participants rely on the policies that are there to protect learners from being expelled in schools after certain behaviours which are not specific on how to enact leading for learner retention. It appeared from participants’ responses that some of these policies are sometimes frustrating and difficult to implement because some of them have a negative influence to other learners in the school. While some may indirectly push learners away from school and drop out. For instance, the drug and substance abuse policy with a bad influence to other learners in the school and it is clear that once learners are addicted they leave the school. In affirming this, DH **Mncube** said: “*We use sufficient policies to protect learners, to give an example, teenage pregnancy policy which is difficult to implement because we would like to retain that child in school but others get sick regularly and stop attending*”. This was also apparent from **Hlabangane** when he argued that, “*Besides these policies have a negative influence learners and indirectly pushing them away from school and drop out*”. According to **Mncube and Hlabangane** it is clear that at times these policies are not serving the purpose of retaining learners instead they indirectly pushing learners away. Further explaining **Shazi** said: “*Teenage pregnancy policy is a bad influence to learners because they will get pregnant intentionally as they are protected but at the end they will have challenges to leave school and look after their babies*”.

Following is the quotation from the literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.1.3 that confirms the retention of pregnant learners (Government gazette, 2015). “*SMT members of the schools in the basic education system will ensure the retention of pregnant learners during their pregnancy and make provision for their short-, medium- and long -term absences during the term of their pregnancies*”. The participants reported that this is a challenge to them as they are not clear about health services. For instance, they may be sick

and teased by children in their families or learners at school and feel rejected and leave the school. For example, **Mncube** said: “*We have teenage pregnancy, we would like to retain that child in school but getting sick regularly and stop attending the school*”. In the same manner **Gobela** stated: “*Another thing is teenage pregnancy the department says these learners must be kept in the school and that alone is so frustrating because it comes with a lot of problems like they will be teased by teachers and learners then feel rejected and leave the school*”. In support of what was said by **Gobela** and **Mncube**, Principal **Zwane** added:

One other thing that also affects is that we've got quite a number of learners who fall pregnant once learners get pregnant she will have complications and leave the school. Pregnancy sometimes girls will be sick on and off from school and they will not have a person to look after the baby it then obvious they will leave the school.

Emerging from **Gobela**, **Mncube** and Principal **Zwane**'s assertions was that keeping the pregnant learners in the school frustrate them because they may often get sick, be on and off from school and they will not have a person at home to look after the baby and absent themselves more often. Consistent with literature in Chapter Two, the UK Essays (2018) explained that these issues may cause relationship breakdown therefore it may affect these children intellectually and leave the school. Moreover, Magwa and Ngara (2015) find that pregnant learners might be teased or labelled by family members and other learners and that may cause them not to want to be in the school at all. Furthermore, participants noted that they also use drug and substance abuse policy to keep those learners involved with drugs sometimes these learners find themselves being followed and attacked in the school. This was what **Nxasana** stated: “*To be specific it is not proper to allow drug abusers to be together with other learners in one school because they are a bad influence. In fact, I can say these policies affect leadership for learner retention because sometimes they work against us instead of working towards us and they are frustrating*”. Here participants argued that these policies are difficult to implement and that in practice it is not happening. Instead, participants perceive these policies as frustrating and a bad influence to other learners in the school who will copy and do likewise.

Further confirming, all participants shared similar views that it is difficult to lead for effective learner retention in their schools because in most of the time they improvise and do as they please and use what works at that time because they do not have a policy that guides them. The participants indicated that if the Department of Basic Education can come up with specific policies, learner retention can be controlled. This is what Principal **Gwala** suggested: “*I think the Department of Education together with*

the schools must draw up a policy that speaks specifically to learner retention maybe it can be controlled mhlampe (maybe) the policy that would guide schools on how to follow up on learners who leave that school". Contradicting, some participants argued that one policy from the department may not be enough because schools are different and in different communities and what works for another school may not work for the other. For instance, Principal **Lukhele** said: *"It cannot be a departmental policy because schools are different and in different communities and what works for another school may not work for the other. But maybe we can have something that is a guide"*. Emerging from participants' perceptions indicate that they claim that the Department of Basic Education is letting them down by not providing the policy that would guide schools on how to follow up on learners who leave that schools. The participants further gave the impression that they see a need for a learner retention policy that comes with clear guidelines on how to retain learners as they believe it can make a difference. In confirmation, participating principal of Ndabazana secondary and said: *"Truly, there is nothing actually this research I think is opening up our eyes and now we see that we should have such policies because such policies will make a difference* (Principal **Gwala**). In the same manner, the principal of Shongololo secondary raise his appreciation about being part of the study:

I would like to thank you for choosing our school for this research it has opened our eyes even though you experienced some challenges we appreciate that at last it happened. I wish some challenges that we experience as schools in terms of failing to keep learners in the schooling system will in future be history. I am hoping these research even if it is for your degrees' completion but there might be a way that we are helped I don't know but this topic is very important (Principal **Lukhele**).

Emerging from this section is that the policies used by the schools to prevent learners from leaving schools have a negative influence on learners and indirectly push them away from school. For instance, pregnant learners are protected by policy which affirms the right of a pregnant learner to remain in school during her pregnancy and to return as soon after giving birth (Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, it came out that the issue of teenage pregnancy policy appeared to be an overarching experience across the majority of participants. Accordingly, as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.1.3, SMT members are expected to manage teenage pregnancy within the requirements of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Ramulumo & Pitsoe, 2013). According to the participants keeping the pregnant learner in the school frustrates them because sometimes girls will be sick on and off from school and they will not have a person from their families to

look after the baby it then obvious they will leave the school and eventually they ended up leaving the school. This statement is in line with literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.7.1.3 that even though the SMT members are guided by policies that protect pregnant children, there are learners' feelings such as the feeling of rejection that are beyond control (Finning & Moore, 2019). Generally, participants viewed this policy as a challenge in leading for learner retention as it is not easy to implement. Hence, it transpires that participants are interested and see this study as it has opened their eyes because, in reality, all systems have some policies with clear guidelines. Based on the participants' responses, it was clear that they hope that maybe some factors that they experience as hindrances in terms of enacting leading for learner retention will in future be history if the department can amend and come up new policies with clear procedures to follow. They also doubt if that could work unless if each school can develop their own policies that are contextual and specific to circumstances and it can be evaluated from time to time. This view is linked to literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.6 in that successful leadership for learner retention may require an ongoing evaluation of guiding policies to ensure that they remain relevant to the school context (Bhengu & Myende, 2016). According to literature in Chapter Two, Section 2.6, there is still a lot of misunderstanding among leaders about policies that can help SMT members establish commitment and accountability (Mpungose & Ngwenya, 2017).

7.3.4 Reasons Related to Absent Parents

During interviews and FGDs, participants keep mentioning that other reasons for enacting leading for learner retention in the way that they do are triggered by several issues related to the absent parents in learners' schooling. For instance, it came out from all participants in this study that they seemed to be concerned about absent parents in children's schooling which makes it easy for learners to leave schools before completion. As indicated in Chapter Six participants take turns visiting learner's homes to meet with their parents when there is a problem. Although, at times, when participants try to involve parents, they become victims. For example, DH **Langa** said: *"Parents are not taking part in assisting their children instead we are the parents' victims and targets when trying to involve them"*. In the same manner Principal **Gwala** argued that some parents are still young while other parents are all siblings. This is what she said: *"Most of all is lack of parental involvement most learners are all siblings at home, so some leave their homes to stay with friends and leave the school"*. Besides participants highlighted that other parents do not attend even when they are called in the school they will keep shouting swearing words through their children and victimise them up until it is too late. Departmental head **Nxasana** stated:

Parents are not fully involved in the children's school work and even fail to take care of their children in ensuring that they attend school accordingly when are called to school they will never show up instead they will keep shouting swearing words through their children and victimise us up until it is too late.

The existing literature that was reviewed and discussed in Chapter Two regarding parental involvement revealed that the support children receive from their parents encourages their persistence in school (Gobena, 2018). Gobena (2018) further elaborated that to increase learners' potential for schooling, it is imperative that they gain support from their parents. Consistent with the literature as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5, educating a learner is like a three-legged stool because learners' success depends on both teachers and parents (O'Sullivan et al., 2022). It appeared from the extracts that parents are not fully involved and do not take care of their children instead they will keep sending swearing words through their children. This is related to Mbokodi and Singh (2011) who described parental support in learners' education as an effective support but due to issues instigating from young parents and their poor education who are supposed to take part in their children education.

7.3.5 Reasons Related to Schools' Location

I found that some of the reasons that cause SMT members to lead for learner retention in the way that they do are the areas where their schools are located. Emerging as a concern from the majority of participants is that their schools are located in the townships but they cater for learners who come from nearby informal settlements areas. Consequently, participants noted that some learners inherited and displayed that behaviour in the school which makes them be unsuccessful in leading for learner retention. In confirming this **Zulu** stated that: *"The issue of where our school is located is a problem because our school is catering for learners coming from the nearby informal settlements. The majority of these kids come here with the social ills that they inherit and this makes us to be unsuccessful in leading for learner retention"*. Similarly, another participating **Khathide** voiced out that: *"The community that we are situated in they are doing bad things so some of the learners come here and display such bad behaviour causing problems that hold back us in leading for learner retention"*. For example, Principal **Lukhele** said: *"...there is a high rate of substance abuse so the learners copy that and use drugs and once addicted they leave the school"*. Further explaining, **Zulu** said: *"There is a proverb in isiZulu which says 'izambane elilodwa elibolile libolisa amaningi' (meaning a rotten potato spoils the whole bag) so we have no choice but to suspend all learners that use drugs in our school"*.

Generally, it is indicated here that participants are unsuccessful in their leading for learner retention because some learners display social ills from the community and influence other learners. The participants revealed that these areas are highly influenced by social ills such as drug abuse, alcohol and substance abuse therefore for the safety of the school those learners are suspended. Contrary, the DBE says learners should be kept in schools and supported. This suggests that the policy is either not available in schools or unclear to SMT members therefore learner support on drug abuse is compromised. This is consistent with what was stated by Mokgatle et al. (2020), that schools act as they please which involves expulsion when there is no policy with clear guidelines. In their study they found a lack of understanding about the National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools and struggles against substance abuse among learners in schools (Mokgatle et al., 2020). What clearly came out from participants' responses is that these behaviours are directly pulling learners out of the schooling system and putting their lives in danger.

7.3.6 SMT Members Fear for Their Lives

Another reason that emerged from participants' responses is that they lead for learner retention with no success because they fear for their lives. The participants indicated that they do not report drug dealers inside and outside schools including learners, because they can be victimised. The participants revealed that unemployed adults use learners to sell drugs in the school and pay them, so once they see money they leave the schools but they are afraid of reporting drug dealers. For example, DH **Nxasana** stated that they cannot expose these drug dealers for their safety in the community: "*...we are threatened even its not all of them but everyone seemed to be afraid of taking a risk of exposing them*". Similarly, DH **Shazi** indicated that fighting drug dealers is a risk as it may put SMT members' lives in danger. In her voice she noted: "*Schools are surrounded by drug dealers inside and outside schools including learners, and as teachers we cannot be able to solve such cases as we can be the victims, at risk and exposed to danger*". Echoing the same sentiment Principal **Gwala** said: "*The school is surrounded by unemployed adults who even take risks of selling drugs to our learners through the school fence. They even ask learners to sell drugs for them and pay them and once they see money they live the school*". While still on the issue of learners who are selling drugs, DP **Ntobela** voiced out a different view that there is a competition of interests among learners who sell drugs so they fight when one enters another groups' area to sell these drugs, "*There's competition in interests. If you are entering the space of other groups, then you are being chased or you are being followed and quit schooling*". In support of this point **Mncube** asserted:

“Learners will fight for their customers until they leave the school”. It also emerged from participants’ responses that parents are uncertain about their children safety because drug abuse in the schools make the schools looks bad and unsafe.

What also came out as a concern from the participants was that there are tuck shops nearby their schools that are used as cover up to sell drugs. This was how the participating Principal **Lukhele** expressed his frustrations in this regard: *“There is a shop around the school which sell drugs so that is maybe detrimental too, as it makes the school look bad and most of the learners may use drugs”*. The participants’ views here are a clear indication that participants in this study lead for learner retention to less achievement because they believed that some community members are the reasons for other learners to leave schools before completed their schooling. Hence, community members are supposed to work with the school in leading for learner retention. This was also highlighted in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5 that it cannot be a three-legged stool only, but the fourth leg is needed to add value (Gruber, 2018). This argument suggests the need to involve community as a fourth leg in leading for learner retention. Further explaining this, parents and the school might not be aware of what is happening with learners on their way from home to school so community members can be their eyes and ears. One example, as presented in Chapter Six, Section 6.2.5, participants reported that they made arrangements with the community members that when they see a learner in uniform out of the school premises during teaching hours they phone the principal or take the learner to the school. It also appeared from the participants’ responses that their schools are surrounded by unemployed adults who sell drugs to learners and even ask learners to sell drugs for them and pay them. According to participants, addressing these issues is beyond their powers because the criminals threatened to kill them. This shows that participants in this study see lack of safety in their schools as the reason they lead for learner retention in the way they do.

7.3.7 Learners Play the Roles of the Primary Caregivers

It came out from the participants that they lead for learner retention in the way that they do because some learners in their schools play the roles of being primary caregiver at their homes. This issue emerged as a concern across the majority of participants that some learners come from the homes where siblings are raised by other siblings. This indicates that in these homes children are the parent themselves and not under the guidance of the adults and that affects the retention of the school. Therefore, as SMT members they invite external support from other governments such as social development services. The participants also noted that it is not easy to retain learners from CHH as some of them do not get enough

support and they do as they please. Data sources in this study revealed that other children had to leave school early maybe to find jobs or to join thugs for a living. For example, this is what DP **Ntobela** stated: *“Another factor we are faced with is that most if not some of the households are headed by the children they are the parents and also the learners...”*. In support of DP **Ntobela**'s views, DH **Nxasana** noted that: *“We have a problem of child headed homes where you find that there are no adults staying with the children they are all siblings... and find that other children had to leave school early maybe to find jobs or to join thugs for a living”*. Similarly, DP **Ntobela** stated:

Another thing is that most if not some of the households are headed by the children they are the parents and also the learners they have to do some chores in the morning and end up coming late. What we are faced with is that some of the households are headed by the children they are the parents and also the learners.

To emphasise this point **Nxasana** said: *“To add on this some learners' families are headed by children which is siblings against siblings... it becomes difficult to control children when we try to force them they quit”*. In support of these views **Nxasana** said: *“We have a problem of child headed homes where you find that there are no adults staying with the children they are all siblings... and find that other children had to leave school early maybe to find jobs or to join thugs for a living”*.

What emerged clearly from the data sources is that participants see these CHH as a critical issue in their leadership for learner retention. The participants pointed out that it is difficult to control these children because if they forced them to cooperate they quit schooling. The issue of CHH was discussed further in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.3.4 and it points to the critical issue of CHH. The study carried out by Nyaradzo (2013) which indicates that the learners from CHH do as they please and no one is controlling them. Nyaradzo (2013) further revealed that most challenges facing learners from CHH are absenteeism, poor performance, sexual abuse, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy. In congruence, Pillay (2016) asserted that children coming from CHH are faced with the challenges of being disadvantaged, marginalised, and discriminated against in terms of their human rights by not having adult caregivers. Interestingly, it transpired that SMT members are doing their best to assist these learners by involving other government services such as the Health Department and DSD.

7.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter I presented and discussed the reasons that according to participants cause them to lead for

learner retention in the way that they do. The participants in this study revealed that some reasons are as a result of the policies, issues and practices that bring about positive changes, hence they are encouraged to enact leadership for learner retention in the way that they do in their schools. On the other hand, it was also discovered that some reasons derive from policies, issues and practices that bring about negative changes and inhibit leading for learner retention. For example, policies and guidelines imposed by the Department of Education and various issues related to schools, communities and learners' families. The data further showed further that leading for learner retention is contextual and specific to certain circumstances therefore it cannot be offered through an umbrella approach. The overall findings in this chapter show that even though SMT members exceed expectations in offering support and caring practices through following departmental procedures, but they still experience lack of sufficient support from the department in this regard. This can be noted from how they enact caring practices as indicated earlier in the previous chapter in that they even take risks as long as it helps in retaining learners in their schools. The data has also shown that their perceptions are related to what they adopt and do as well as their experiences of leading towards learner retention. This part is the section on the summary of findings that concluded this chapter. In the next Chapter Eight, I demonstrate how the findings in this study respond to the three key research questions in relation to the theories that guide this study.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore how SMT members in secondary schools lead for learner retention. I introduced this study by affirming everyone's rights to basic education as specified in terms of Act no. 29(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa No. 108, 1996. I demonstrated how South Africa is engaged in a non-racist post-apartheid era by setting goals such as the MDG, Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission, 2016). Unlike the preceding chapters, this chapter discusses the key findings drawing from the three theoretical frameworks of transformational leadership theory, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Maslow's theory of motivation. This chapter is organised as follows: I start off by reflecting on methodology and theoretical frameworks employed in this study. This section was followed by the discussion of the findings in this study where I present the summary of the whole study based on the following three key research questions of this study. (1) What meanings do secondary SMT members attach to learner retention and leadership for learner retention? (2) How do SMT members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention? (3) Why do SMT members in secondary schools enact leadership for learner retention the way they do? Since this chapter has been discussed in relation to theories employed in this study, discussions are followed by putting the theories together. Towards the end of the chapter, I discussed the contributions of this study and its implications and lastly I present my final words.

8.2 REFLECTION ON METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section I critically reflect on the choices I made on theoretical frameworks and on the type of methodology chosen for this study. According to Mortari (2015), reflectivity in research practice allows a researcher to critically evaluate the choices they make and how they contribute to the research outcomes. I have organised this chapter in the following manner: (1) Reflections on methodology and (2) reflection on the three theoretical frameworks.

8.2.1 Reflections on Methodology

This study used a qualitative research methodology because it is about understanding people's lived experiences. Oranga and Matere (2023) state that qualitative researchers put more emphasis on how

individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences to better understand the world in which they live. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) further noted that a qualitative approach is characterised by its aim to collect verbal, textual and visual data to provide an in-depth understanding of actions and meanings. Dominant to this methodology was to bring about in-depth information from a small number of SMT members. Given that participants in this study are school managers working as a team in leading to learner retention, I needed to use a methodology that would bring about rich data without participants being intimidated by each other. I therefore used individual semi-structured interviews as the main data generation method to investigate individual experiences according to (Cronje, 2014). According to Flick (2018), individual semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to pose follow-up questions to gain in-depth information from a small number of respondents.

I also needed more time with the participants to combine individuals' responses with groups' ideas to understand what they really know about this study. Accordingly, Goldkuhl (2019) noted that using numerous ways of data generation methods allows more time with the participants and it assisted in understanding what they really know and understand about the study in question. For this purpose, in this study I effectively used FGDs as a second data generation method to generate consistent data about their leading for learner retention. The participants from the three participating schools were all free and showed interest in sharing their experiences during FGDs and I was able to gather rich and in-depth data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This was despite the fact that there were concerns on whether all members would be willing to express their feelings as they share different levels. My methodological choices were effective in generating rich data even though it did not include SMT members from urban areas, whose experiences would be much different to the participants that were interviewed as they are from township areas.

8.2.2 Reflections on Theoretical Framework

I framed my thesis using Downton's transformational leadership theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and finally, Maslow's theory of motivation. Transformational leadership theory, according to Hult et al. (2011), is a way of encouraging and motivating followers to accomplish the vision and mission of the organisation. Also, it involves excellent practices of inspiration that change groups to achieve more than what is typically expected of them (Northouse, 2021). I needed to understand how SMT members in the participating secondary schools lead for learner retention. Thus, transformational leadership theory gave me a lens to understand the nature of leadership used by SMT members in leading

for learner retention. The transformational leadership theory is characterised by the four dimensions which assisted in understanding the nature of SMT members' leadership. For instance, transformational leaders display idealised influence as they continuously serve as models for learners to imitate and want to continue with their studies. They also use intellectual stimulation to push all stakeholders to explore new ideas within the school and beyond. They also challenge their learners to achieve more than they thought is possible through inspiring motivation and support on a continuous basis. While in individualised consideration they focus on the unique development of each learner by recognising and nurturing the potential.

Moreover, this study needed a lens that would assist in understanding how SMT members negotiate the learners' environment in intercultural education settings which lead them to enact leadership in the way that they do. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory was found effective in understanding how each system influences the individual's development and their school attendance. It also assisted in finding out how SMT members consider these environmental systems in enacting leadership for learner retention in the way they do. Gruber (2018) argues that it cannot be three legs only the fourth leg is needed to add value because the learner does not attend school in isolation but from their immediate families extended families, community members and the government. For instance, the participants perceived their leading for learner retention among other things as addressing multiple environmental factors that influence learners' educational experiences and outcomes. Data has shown that what affects learners' school attendance is directly and indirectly influenced by their contexts. Therefore, integrating Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in this study allows SMT members to adopt a comprehensive and systemic approach to improve learner retention.

Finally, Safa et al. (2020) and Munna and Kalam (2021) argue that people who are motivated carry out their responsibilities to the best of their ability and that motivation is a key to learning because through motivation learners would continuously like to be in the school. Accordingly, in this study I want to understand how in their leadership process of learner retention SMT members ensure that learners are motivated and supported to continue with schooling. From this perspective, various multiple motivation strategies created different practices for the participants in their process of motivating learners to want and enjoy to be in the school. For example, in employing different leadership styles and care practices participants consider ways of inspiring motivation and support. Hence, Maslow's theory of motivation was relevant as data showed that in their leadership SMT members consider doing things that motivate

and support learners such that they may be retained in their schools. Overall, the three theories enabled me to understand how SMT members enact leadership and their reasons of leading for learner retention the way they do.

8.3 LEARNING FROM THE FIELD: DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention and their reasons in the three selected secondary schools. In this section, I demonstrate how the findings have significantly responded to these key research questions using each question as a heading to organise these discussions. I have drawn both from the literature and the theories to make sense of these findings.

8.3.1 RQ1: What Meanings Do SMT Members Attach to Learner Retention and Leadership for Learner Retention?

This question was based on how the SMT members attach meanings of learner retention and leadership for learner retention in leading for learner retention. Nevertheless, the findings from this inquiry extend beyond this focus and cover several issues related to the importance of learner retention in the school.

8.3.1.1 Meanings Attached to Learner Retention

The DBE and other scholars defined learner retention in the South African educational system as a process of encouraging learners to stay in formal schooling and finish their basic education (Van Ameijde et al., 2018; Manyanga et al., 2017; DBE, 2011; DOE, 2008). Conflicting, the findings of this study revealed three sets of meanings that are attached to the concept of learner retention. For example, all participants understand learner retention as it means keeping learners in one school to complete all grades provided for the period they are supposed to be retained in that school. This meaning differs from literature in that it emphasises on keeping learners in one school without dropping out or changing schools. This suggests, if the SMT members understanding differ from the DBE as evident in this study then there are possibilities that they might be benefits that come with the number of learners enrolled in their schools. I argue that to these participants keeping learners specific in their school might be linked with allocation of funds based on the enrolment as described by the DOE (2004) in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.2.6. Keeping learners in one school until final grade could mean ensuring that they are still schooling. Although participants noted that they issue transfer cards, there is no evidence that they follow up on such learners leaving their schools to see if they are attending another school. The meaning given here

was evident to all participants, but few added that to them it also means keeping learners in the schooling system irrespective of the institutions until they complete their studies. This meaning is in line with how other scholars and the DBE defined learner retention as presented earlier, although it does not feature to the majority of participants. This means that the majority of participants draw from transformational leadership theory. According to Gomes (2014), transformational leaders use intellectual stimulation provide opportunities to tackle complex challenges and think critically about issues. Aligned to transformational leadership theory, SMT members came up with new ideas different from literature, insisting on keeping learners in one school to ensure that they remain schooling.

Drawing from the theory of transformational leadership as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 3.2.2 learner retention requires leaders who consider things that may inspire followers and communicate a vision (Pennell, 2023). Additionally, Maslow's theory of motivation is found suitable for this study since it offers motivation guidelines to managers and leaders (Maslow, 1943). Generally, what transpires from these meanings is that learner retention is the schools' ability to ensure that the number of learners who drop out is reduced, be it in the same school, or within the schooling system to complete their basic education. I therefore wonder if the SMT members in their understanding of learner retention consider how the Department of Basic Education describes learner retention as their employer. It is also argued that learner retention cannot be understood as the schools' ability only because there are also systems outside the schools such as home, neighbourhood, community and culture that have an impact in children's schooling. Linked to this argument, it was discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4.2 central to the ecological systems is the learner and each of these systems certainly interrelates and influences one another in all aspects of lives. This suggests that defining learner retention should involve these systems outside the schools as they influence each other in leading for learner retention.

Contrary to the two meanings, there were also some outliers whereby few participants looked at this concept as keeping learners to repeat the same grade when they do not meet the progression requirements which is called grade retention (Gallagher et al., 2021). This meaning is not regarded as learner retention but it also speaks about keeping learners. Although this meaning differs in the way it is described by the departmental policy as grade retention but when closely analysed, it makes sense to this study because it is a practice of keeping a learner as in other two meanings. In this study the focus is on retaining learners in the schooling system therefore it is important to always keep them motivated to want to be in the school. Yet this meaning may have a negative influence to some learners and feel less motivated and

leave the schooling system, according to the findings (Grossen et al., 2017). Drawing from Maslow's theory of motivation as discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4 it is indicated that motivation is a key to learning and learners would continuously like to be in the school if they are motivated (Munna & Kalam, 2021).

Furthermore, findings in this study revealed that the importance of learner retention for learners is understood as a means of developing learners' skills so that they succeed in their lives and contribute to their families and to the country. It was indicated in Chapter Three, Section 3.4.2 that Maslow's hierarchy of needs is still applicable nowadays when perceived as a guide to achieve educational goals (Dar & Sakthivel, 2022). Knowing that this study is about keeping secondary school learners in the school, it is therefore important to keep them motivated as they might lose interest. I believe that if learners needs are met during their process of schooling they will eventually reach their destination of becoming the most that one can be. Therefore, I employ Maslow's theory of hierarchical needs in this study because I want to know if SMT members in their leadership for learner retention are aware of its importance. It was discussed under Section 3.4.2.5 in Chapter Three that Maslow views the needs for self-actualisation in terms of human life as the point at which an individual has arrived at the destination for which they were created (Hopper, 2021). It also emerged that keeping learners in the school to complete their basic education can be a way to eliminate social ills such as crime and substance abuse, more so from becoming *amaphara*. Therefore, in their leadership SMT members must change their ways of doing things and take this into cognisance when leading for learner retention. In line with transformational leadership theory it appears in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.2.4 that transformational leadership is the ability to get individuals to want to change and improve beyond expectations (Busari et al., 2019). The next section analysis and discusses the meanings of leadership for learner retention.

8.3.1.2 Meaning of Leadership for Learner Retention

The findings of this study revealed multiple meanings that the SMT members attached to leadership for learner retention as discussed in Chapter Five. It emerged from the findings that to the participants in this study, leading for learner retention means taking care of all learners in the school system. It emerged from the findings that in their leadership for learner retention, the SMT members take good care for learners, making sure that learners are treated fairly and that they keep good relationships with them. I believe that in taking care of learners SMT members are aware that motivation plays a huge role in ensuring that people are taken care of. Caring makes everyone feel loved and belonging especially those

who are non-academics but showing skills. This meaning is linked to Maslow's hierarchy of needs in that children need to feel loved and belong. It was evident that these schools allow learners to show off their talents through talent shows (music and performing) and also do sports competitions. Identified experts are invited into the schools to assist in developing those individual learners' talents. Drawing from transformational leadership theory, it is evident in Chapter Three, under Section 3.2.2.4 that individualised consideration, learners may see themselves having an opportunity to achieve with the knowledge they receive from teachers and continue with schooling. I believe that adapting to these issues promote not love, caring and belonging only but also develop learners' self-esteem. It was obvious that in taking care of the learners, the SMT members adapt to the issues beyond learners' control and affect leading for learner retention. Such issues include CHH, where a child, is also a learner, must take care of other siblings and may fall behind in their work in school. Although it is not documented, adapting to these issues would give a learner a sense of belonging and develop self-esteem. This further suggests that as leaders SMT members must understand that in some situations education policies and school rules may need to be overlooked to accommodate all learners.

Moreover, it appeared that to all participants it means working together with other stakeholders most probably parents, Department of Education and community members. This gave rise to another meaning that leading for learner retention according to the findings is inclusive which means it cannot be a leadership responsibility only but it includes other stakeholders. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory leading for learner retention involves schools working together with outside partners. As discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.3 the most successful strategies for improving learner attendance involves working with the society, schools, policymakers, businesses, community leaders, health providers, parents and learners (Jordan et al., 2019). Furthermore, linked to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory it is indicated in Chapter Three, Section 3.3 children find themselves surrounded by various ecosystems, from home to the school system, and to the most generous system that includes society, values and culture. Also, Surapto et al. (2024) in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.3 argued that dropouts may not be observed in isolation but be treated as a person-in-context with other people.

It also appeared from all data sources that leadership for learner retention means working expectations and adapt to learners' context to ensure effective teaching and learning so that they become a school of

choice. So, leaders encourage teachers to work beyond the status quo by challenging them to be effective, innovative, and creative in their teaching. Linked to this study's focus, Casanova et al. (2018) stated that effective teaching and learning leads to a good academic performance which is the most dominant outcome in leading toward learner retention. This confirms the relevance of the transformational leadership theory to this study as indicated in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.4 that the overall success and changes are rooted in transformational leadership (Mhaga, 2019). It also transpired that it calls for every stakeholder to come on board and motivate learners to sustain schooling according to participants. Henceforth, it is necessary to consider that there are things that can make learners decide to remain or leave the school. As discussed in Section 3.3.2 of Chapter Three, there is evidence that in leading for learner retention there must be a strong connection between the school and learners' environment which actually has an influence on learner retention. For example, most of the things that make learners decide to leave the school are not coming from the school only but they also come from outside the schooling system. I used Bronfenbrenner's' ecological systems theory to look at the things that may promote or hinder learner retention. As discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2 the most common challenges that affect learner retention includes personal, family, school and the community (Fornander & Kearney, 2020).

Overall, in responding to this first question, I have discussed the findings and demonstrated how SMT members attach meanings to learner retention and leadership for learner retention. For instance, the findings show that learner retention means different things to different people as presented here. As such, it has multiple meanings that might actually clash and cause confusion in how they lead for learner retention. This suggests a need to re-think and rephrase this definition of learner retention and consider other concepts that are missing such as aspects outside the schooling system which can give a clear understanding of this concept. I argue that such concepts can be used to distinguish between the first two meanings about keeping learners in the school system and ignore the third meaning as it differs in that it is not in line with this study's focus. I believe, there could be one concept linked to this study' focus which is very clear that I am talking about retaining learners in the schooling system irrespective of the institutions. Hence, when learners are retained in the schools and complete their studies, it could bring about changes in their homes and society while increasing the economic, social and cultural standard of living in a country according to participants. I have also discussed meanings attached by SMT members to the concept leadership for learner retention. Findings showed that participants' understanding of the concept leadership for learner retention is multifocal. This suggests that participants demonstrated

different understandings of leadership for learner retention as discussed here.

8.3.2 RQ2: How Do SMT Members in secondary Schools Enact Leadership for Learner Retention?

This question was based on how the SMT members enact leadership for learner retention as secondary schools. The findings from this study show that participants from all three schools share common ways that they enact leadership for learner retention. Findings in this inquiry are discussed in the following section.

8.3.2.1 Participants' Leadership for Learner Retention

Having made certain of what the concept of learner retention and leadership for learner retention mean to SMT members, I explored how they enact leadership for learner retention in their schools. The findings regarding this revealed that they enact leadership for learner retention through (1) keeping learners motivated; (2) employing different leadership styles; (3) ensuring learner support.

8.3.2.1.1 Keeping Learners Motivated

It transpires from the findings that SMT have a responsibility to ensure that learners are kept motivated and appreciated to sustain schooling. Therefore, in this study I want to understand how then in their leadership SMT members display awareness of their responsibility in leading for learner retention. Findings revealed that in enacting leading for learner retention different motivational strategies are used by SMT members to keep learners interested in schooling. I argue that as secondary schools, learners in these ages may desperately require extrinsic motivation. Under Section 3.4.1 in Chapter Three it appears that every human being starts with intrinsic motivation but as time goes by, they gradually lose interest and require extrinsic motivation essential for long-term achievement (Khaliq, 2023). Drawing from Maslow's hierarchy of needs I wanted to understand how in their leadership SMT members motivate and cater for learners' needs. As discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4.2 this meaning aligns with the five basic groups of needs such as psychological, safety, love, self-esteem, and self-actualisation to satisfy the needs of a human being in confirming that people remain motivated (Omodan & Abejide, 2022). Maslow assumes that when the best initial needs of a human being are satisfied, all other requirements appear as motivation (Navy, 2020). Confirming the satisfaction of the physiological needs, it emerged as the main concern from the findings of this study that the introduction of the School Nutrition Programme by the Department of Education played a huge role in enhancing learner retention rates in the schools. A study by Lebesse et al. (2024) in Mahwelereng, Mpumalanga province, reported that the implementation of the

National School Nutrition Programmes contributed to a valuable learning environment and increased a number of learners who participate and complete schooling. It also transpires that in their leadership SMT members ensure that learners are safe within the schools. However, there is no evidence of how the participants ensured the safety of learners on their ways from home to school and vice versa. This is also in line with the transformational leadership theory in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.1.3 in that transformational leaders create necessary motivation strategies and appreciation within their followers (Ahmed & Simha, 2022). Under Section 3.2.2.1 in Chapter Three, Trmal et al. (2015) declared that transformational performances associated with leadership competence may effectively inspire motivation and drive change.

Moreover, linked to individualised consideration this study is focusing on understanding how SMT members deal with the individual teacher such that they feel recognised and teach learners in a way that they would always want to be in that school. Hence, it was unclear from the participants as to how SMT members motivate teachers since all participants were concerned about motivating learners. It is arguable that teachers need to be motivated as well to motivate learners as they are the ones closely connected to them. It also came out from the findings that learners' achievements are recognised publicly, provided with incentives in the form of awards, are entertained by given an opportunity to perform and be entertained. This shows that inspiring motivation can play a vital role in enhancing learner retention in secondary schools (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). As discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.5, it is important to recognise the achievement of each member publicly as it can provide role modelling to others to imitate, and this can create competition among people and surpassed expectations (Ali & Anwar, 2021). I also used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory because it talks about the influence of outside people in the school. In line with this theory, findings revealed that schools invite different people such as motivational speakers and people from different fields, learners from other school and government services to talk to learners. Confirming this SMT members often invite people from different outside such as priests, government services and motivational speakers to address learners. They also conduct religious assembly where teachers and other learners take turns to develop the social and spiritual being of everyone in the school. It also emerged from the findings that learners are given a chance to motivate one another in sharing an agreed upon topics. It is evident from these findings that SMT members in this study drew a lot from people within and outside the school.

8.3.2.1.2 Employing Different Leadership Styles

From the meanings of leadership for learner retention to how leadership for learner retention is enacted, it appears that it can be associated with the use of different leadership styles. Given that SMT members drew from different leadership styles I was tempted to understand the nature of leadership for learner retention. I found this finding in line with the theory of transformational leadership as discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.1.2 in that it is the ability to get people to want to transform and improve beyond expectations using different styles that will help individuals to change (Busari et al., 2019). Hence, I draw Maslow's theory of motivation to understand the nature of leadership that SMT members used in taking care for learners. It also appeared from all data sources that they involve government structures in caring for vulnerable learners. Jordan et al. (2019) argued that the most successful strategies for improving learner attendance involve working with society, schools, community, parents and learners in attending to the challenges. Therefore, I employ the ecological systems theory because I believe that learner retention is mainly affected by a number of things which are not school related such as families, culture, community and the circumstances that are beyond control as discussed under Section 3.3.2.2 in Chapter Three. Findings indicated that the use different styles are important because when one style is not working towards achieving the goals of retaining learners you change for the other. According to other academics regarding leadership styles, various styles cannot be deemed universal because they depend on the context and the individual's ability to achieve certain goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). For instance, findings revealed that participants still believe that they cannot survive with democratic leadership style only as they deal with children. This suggest that participants will always change from democracy to autocracy because they are dealing with children.

Also, the transformational leadership theory as discussed in Chapter Three revealed that the leaders adopt different leadership styles to develop individuals' skills (Gomes, 2014). Moreover, Hassan et al. (2019) postulated that each employee has needs and concerns that need to be attended to by leaders. This suggests that leadership styles adopted by SMT members must satisfy those individual needs to change their commitment to the school (Atasoy, 2020). Therefore, leadership styles cannot be one shoe fits all which further affirms that diversity is the key to learner retention. The participants believed that transformational leadership styles are needed because South Africa is faced with numerous changes after apartheid and there are many adjustments involved in the current education system. In line with the transformational leadership theory, the leadership styles can potentially contribute to a good change in leadership for learner retention (Kilicoglu, 2018). As a framework that guides this study transformational

leadership theory is more suitable to allow changes and flow of ideas from everyone involved and concerned about retaining learners in the school. For example, Emery (2020) explained that a transformational leadership style may motivate SMT members to grow and transform beyond their expectations to effectively lead for change. These findings suggest that motivation and transformational leadership theories are related to learner retention.

8.3.2.1.3 Ensuring Learner Support

Findings in this study revealed that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention by supporting learners especially those who may be in need to continue with schooling. This practice is in line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs as discussed under Section 3.4.2.1 in Chapter Three that the physiological requirements such as air, water, food, shelter and clothing are all critical for human survival (Hopper, 2021). Accordingly, findings in this study highlighted two ways of ensuring maximum learner support drawing from within the school and external school services. noticeable and of assistance in leading for learner retention. It emerged from the findings that learners are supported academically, psychologically, emotionally and socially through external services. Emerging from the findings was that SMT members support learners by liaising with relevant external services such as police stations, DSD, clinics, and have created a close relationship with them. I also employ Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to find out the connection between the schools and these outside services and their impact in keeping learners in the schools. However, it also came out that although these services assist learners but their support take too long to assist such that some parents lose hope and remove their children from school.

Moreover, under Section 3.3.2.5 it appears that the chronosystems level can be understood as overtime experiences such as poverty, parents' divorce, permanent job loss due to terminal illness and parents' death which influence the individual development (Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was also used to understand how SMT members in their leadership consider such overtime experiences to develop learners' interest to want to be in the school. In their discussions participants reveal that they believe that in leading for learner retention social problems should be addressed as a priority. This shows that they see the social wellbeing of the learners as critical in process of leading for learner retention. Interestingly, it transpired from the findings that all participating schools follow the same pattern of having desks where they attend to orphans and vulnerable learners' issues. This involves issues such as learners without food, clothing and those in CHH and those who are physically and sexually abused. For instance, findings highlighted that most girl learners are sexually

abused by relatives and parents would deny it and keep the learner at home. Therefore, in managing those suspicions they intervene and report to relevant structures.

In this section the findings have responded to the second key research questions. I have demonstrated how SMT members enact leading for learner retention. The findings indicated the nature of leadership that participants demonstrated in leading for learner retention. In the discussions it was clear that in their leadership for learner retention participants perform multiple roles as outlined in the norms and standards for educators' policy document (DOE, 1996). For example, it is clear that SMT members position their leadership for learner retention as caring beyond expectation even if it means risk-taking. What transpired each participants' enactment of leadership for learner retention varied from one school to the other although there are similarities. I argue that it is based on a number of things such as contexts and situations amongst others.

8.3.3 RQ3: Why do SMT Members in Secondary Schools Enact Leadership for Learner Retention in the Way They Do?

The findings of this study present multiple reasons that cause SMT members to enact leading for learner retention the way they do. In this section discussions are in line with the three theories that were found relevant to facilitate how SMT members lead for learner retention in the way they do.

8.3.3.1 Reasons Behind Leadership for Retention

Findings indicate that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention in the way that they do because reality can directly and indirectly influence the ways that people do things. Linked to this reason it was discussed in Chapter Three; Section 3.4.1 that Uri Bronfenbrenner developed the ecological systems theory considering the influences of these systems that impact the lived experiences of the individuals. Given that the contexts have an influence in the way that SMT members lead for learner retention, I found this reason in line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. I interpreted Bronfenbrenner's concepts to understand how the context can influence SMT members in leading for learner retention. One of the reasons that was highlighted entails leading for learner retention without specific policies. Instead they depend on policies intended to protect learners but not on how to prevent them from leaving schools. As discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.4 macrosystems are the combination of children's influences from broader issues such as cultural' values, beliefs, situations beyond control, policies and

economic structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). In relation to this reason, macrosystems are associated with the impact of policies used by schools. According to the findings, these policies indirectly push learners away from school and they may have a bad influence on other learners in the school who may copy them and do likewise. This indicates a need for the Department of Education to play a crucial role in developing education policy on learner retention as an area of concern (Hartnack, 2017).

Another reason highlighted in this study is the effect of some policies that come with numerous challenges in its implementation and practice. For example, the learner progression policy that allows learners who struggle with academic performance to progress to the next grade having not met the required standards. It transpired that progressed learners get frustrated as they are not ready as it gets more difficult for them and leave the schools. This study further emphasises about the inclusive education system as the reasons that causes them to lead in the way they do. Inclusive education suggests that all learners are included in the mainstream but learners with special needs require professional care by trained specialists. In my opinion situation that affects learner retention needs to be considered to ensure that whoever the learners are, the SMT members are able to keep the learner in the school. These findings suggest that SMT members have to change the ways that they do things to make sure that the learners are motivated and supported to remain schooling. Therefore, I used Maslow's' theory of hierarchical needs to understand how SMT members make these learners feel a sense of belong as indicated by the needs for love and belonging discussed in Chapter three, Section 3.4.2.3 and the needs for self-esteem as discussed in Section 3.4.2.4. In line with these needs it came out that schools promote sports, organise extra classes and remedial classes to accommodate these learners so that they develop self-esteem and a sense of belonging. It was indicated in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.2.4 that through individualised consideration leaders create new learning opportunities to support and accept individual differences and delegate activities to develop individuals' skills (Gomes, 2014).

Furthermore, this study highlighted the reasons caused by unavailability of government resource services, such as social workers, health nurses, police services, LSEN specialists and psychologists, in the school sites. These services are recognised as resource structures to work closely with the schools in terms of assisting vulnerable and abused learners to remain in the schools. These services take too long as they are outside the schools whereas in between, parents may decide to withdraw their children from school. Linked to this finding, Wolhuter (2014) found that learner retention is highly affected by the inaccessibility of resources within the schools which makes learners fall behind their work in the

and quit. Generally, I argue that in addressing the reasons that caused SMT members to lead for learner retention in the ways that they do, the ecological systems theory is of critical importance. As it is indicated in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.5 Bronfenbrenner (1994) asserted that chronosystems involve change of stability not only in the physical appearance of the person, but also of the background in which that person lives. This suggests the correlations between these systems and an influence they have on learners' behaviour. For instance, it was highlighted in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.1 that macrosystems are the combination of children's influences from broader situations beyond their control such as abuse and vulnerability (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

Findings revealed that the participating schools are located in the townships, but they serve the majority of learners from the neighbouring informal settlement areas. According to the findings these areas are highly influenced by social ills such as poverty, unemployment, drug abuse and crime so some learners inherited and displayed such behaviour in the school. It also came out that some learners are involved in selling drugs for adults in the community and once they see money they leave the schools. This further indicates a strong connection between the learners and their geographical location. This is to an extent that there is a competition of interests among these learners, so they fight each other when one enters other groups' area and involve outside drug dealers such that victimised learners have to quit school. This shows that leading for learner retention in these schools is mostly affected by such behaviours. Hence, SMT members revealed that addressing these issues is beyond their powers because when they reported such cases criminals threatened to kill them. As such they allow community members in combination with the police, social development and other government structures to deal with these issues in their leading for learner retention. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.2. Mesosystems are about learners' behaviour which can be influenced by their surroundings and home experiences and thus impact learner retention. Also, in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.1 there is evidence in research that microsystems examines the connection between children's homes and the immediate surroundings including schools that impact their developments such as the family and the community (Coetzee & Venter, 2016).

Another important finding in this study revealed that SMT members drew a lot from parents in their leadership for learner retention but they are faced with parents who are not taking full responsibility for their children instead they are victims. This finding is related to Mbokodi and Singh (2011) who stated that the lack of parental support in learners' education is due to issues instigating from young parents and

their poor education who could not to take part in their children education. I argue that South Africa is healing from the scars of post-apartheid therefore parents might not be aware of their role in leading for learner retention. Central to this finding, Lara and Saracosti (2019) state that parental involvement in schools is a key aspect of children's achievement and interest to be in school. This indicates contradictions and gaps around SMT members' leadership for learner retention and parental involvement. Therefore, I am curious to know if the SMT members have deliberate plans to ensure that parents are involved because that would be a sign that SMT members understand the influence of involving parents in their children's schooling. The study carried out by Runhare et al. (2021) found that the main tactics to enhance learner retention rate was the encouragement of parental involvement and the collaboration between the community and school leadership in monitoring learners. This suggests that there supposed to be lot of changes in the education system to ensure successful leadership for learner retention. I find the transformational leadership theory suitable for this study because lot of changes are involved.

Furthermore, under Section 3.3.2.1 in Chapter Three it appeared that there is evidence from research that there is connection between home and school and this connection has an influence on whether the learner is retained or not in the school. For instance, findings revealed that some learners are forced by circumstances to be caregivers and to head their own households due to serious illnesses and deaths in the families. Similarly, Lepheana and Alexander (2024) reveal that circumstances such as CHH may affect the learners to leave school before completion as they often experience social challenges. For example, it emerged that some learners come from the homes where siblings are raised by other siblings which is called CHH. It came out that it is difficult to control these children because if they are forced to co-operate they quit schooling. It also emerged as a concern in this study that some of these learners do not get enough support and they do as they please sometimes they had to leave school early to find jobs or to join thugs for a living. Pillay (2016) states that these children lack adequate food and school needs and this suggests that they are discriminated against in terms of their human rights by not having adult caregivers which makes them leave the schools before completion. Therefore, employing transformational leadership theory in this study allowed a clear understanding of how SMT members adapt to these issues such that learners feel accommodated.

Generally, findings indicate that SMT members enact leadership for learner retention in the way that they do because at times policy and practice can create a dilemma. Confirming this, in some instances where

they apply adopted policies in leadership for learner retention, they find it frustrating and pushes learners away from school. This shows that based on this inquiry that reality can directly and indirectly influence the ways that people are guided to do things. For example, the findings showed that there are situations where participants have to adapt to the context and situation to accommodate problematic issues that can make a learner decide to leave schooling.

8.4 PUTTING THE THEORIES TOGETHER

This chapter has been discussed in relation to three theories employed in this study namely Downton's transformational leadership theory, Maslow's theory of motivation, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Although the three theories provide different tools in understanding the phenomenon under study, but when they are put together they offer a more wide- ranging understanding of a phenomenon. I believe that Downton's transformational leadership theory can guide this study into understanding how within the nature of their leadership, SMT members demonstrate the role of motivation in both teachers and learners as key factors in ensuring learner retention. Initially through transformational leadership theory I am tempted to understand the nature of leadership that SMT members enact leading for learner retention. Hence, I want to find out how SMT members demonstrate their understanding of the role of motivation to both teachers and learners such that learners remain schooling. This theory comes in with an understanding of how in their leadership principals motivate SMT members to motivate teachers such that they are able to motivate learners to sustain schooling. While, within the nature of leadership there has to be evidence that in leading for learner retention we cannot focus only in the schools but also consider the issues beyond the school system and involve external systems.

8.5 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

This section demonstrates the contributions made by the study to existing knowledge. The findings in this study have responded to three key research questions. I drew from the existing literature and the three theories to be clear about how SMT members understanding of these concepts influence their leadership for learner retention. To start with, one of the contributions of this study lies in the SMT members understanding of the term learner retention and leadership for learner retention. For instance, the findings show that the participants have a broad understanding of learner retention as being keeping learners in one school to complete all grades provided by that institution. This suggests a gap between how SMT members' understanding compared to the definition by the Department of Basic Education and other

researchers. For instance, to them it means keeping learners in the schooling system irrespective of the institutions. However, this study is very clear as I am talking about retaining learners in the schooling system irrespective of the institution, as described by the Department of Education and other researched works. Linked to the findings in this study, I argue that their understanding could be influenced by the manner that funds are allocated to schools through the norms and standard which is calculated on the number of learners in that school. Therefore, in their leadership SMT members must consider changing the ways they understand learner retention and take the Department of Basic Education definition into cognisance when leading for learner retention.

Another contribution of this study lies in SMT members' ways of enacting leading for learner retention due to insufficient resources. I argue that the manner in which SMT members in this study enact leadership for learner retention is influenced by how they link these services to reality. It is apparent from this study that although schools can use other government structures such as health officials, social workers, psychologists and police services in dealing with vulnerable, abused learners and learners with special needs, but it serves the dual purposes in leading for learner retention. For instance, schools do not have these services on site therefore the process of these practices often take too long and often involves changes in their application, thus affecting the retention of learners. For example, the findings revealed that teachers at these schools apply a 'blanket' approach to all learners regardless of their abilities, because they are not specialists and were not trained in how to provide special education to learners with learning barriers. Also, there are insufficient resources to support learners with special needs in their schools while their classrooms are overcrowded. Accordingly, participants reported that in practice, once these learners are identified, parents are advised to send them to special schools far away from their homes. Consequently, many parents could not afford transportation and withdrew the learners from the schooling system. Occasionally, learners are taken away from school for their own security and to attend issues which sometimes take too long before parents decide to withdraw their children. I believe that it would be better for schools to have these services on the school site so that learner retention is not interrupted.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that in their leading for learner retention, SMT members adopt inappropriate policies such as those dealing with drug abuse and learners' pregnancy because there is no specific policy that comes with clear guidelines and procedures on how to lead for learner retention. This finding indicates that in the education sector, there are systems that operate without policies and that school leaders are exposed to limited support in their leadership for learner retention. This portrays a gap

in the efforts for SMT members' leadership for learner retention in the schools. However, the findings revealed that participants understand learner retention to be complex, for which there is no one size fits all solution. Rather it requires approaches that are circumstantial and contextual. What is interesting is that the participants are excited and understand this study as a wakeup call, thereby making another critical contribution in developing their own policies that will guide schools on improving learner retention.

Furthermore, the theories adopted to guide this study extended knowledge on the importance of becoming a transformational leader who satisfies all human needs and understands the influence of environmental systems in leading for learner retention. Findings further highlighted the absence of parents and that some homes are headed by siblings in the absent of parents who lack guidance and sometimes full support from the government. This contributes to a dilemma because findings demonstrate that SMT members see the support of parents, communities and external services linked to their leading for learner retention. Accordingly, they provide multiple non-academic support as presented in Chapter six in this study which are sometimes risky and unstructured drawing from within and beyond the school. Findings based on their reasons went further and explore the influence of nearby informal areas where these schools are located. In the findings it was reported that these schools cater for learners who come from nearby areas that are highly influenced by social ills such as drug abuse and crime. Consequently, some learners inherit and display such behaviour and influence other learner thus decide to leave or remain schooling or else expelled to ensure safety in the schools. This finding contributes to another new knowledge that in leading for learner retention schools lack a strong school-community partnership. Another critical contribution to this study entails the announcement of matric results through social media. Findings clarified that SMT members' reasons for working beyond the call of duty and ensuring effective teaching and learning by providing extra classes and other academic support is to attain highest matric pass rates. Based on the findings in this study when matric results are good the school becomes a school of choice thereby enhance learner retention. The logic here is that SMT members ensure that there is effective teaching and learning because matric results are announced through social media.

8.6 IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

Based on the importance of leading for learner retention the implications of this study are not only for education, but they spread over to the wider society. Hence, they are discussed as implications for policy, followed by implications for practice and the implications for future research.

8.6.1 Implications for Policy

Informed by the findings of this study which suggest that learner retention policies cannot be one size fits all, I support the participants' idea of developing their own policies regarding learner retention, but argue that they should alleviate the negative elements of the current departmental policies that protect learners from leaving the school. Generally, I recommend that these policies should be aimed at preventing learners from leaving the schools while specifying guidelines so that SMT members can follow up on those learners at risk. I believe that the policy will improve learner retention rates which in turn limit the rapid rise of *amaphara* and crime in the country. Lastly, the DBE can improve and update the current policy on safety and security in the schools to protect staff and learners. The findings revealed that there is evidence of drugs and substance abuse in their schools by the surrounding community and learners themselves. However, they could not report drug dealers because they fear for their safety in the school and in the community knowing that the school is community based (Section 7.3.6). However, schools are guided by the norms and standards of education such as providing safety, inclusivity and caring practices in line with the policies. While in their practice they lack a clear understanding of the policies as they are not capacitated and not provided with clear guidelines on how to follow up on learners who leave the school system. This suggests that SMT members have little or no support from the education department. Therefore, there should be continuous training or workshops offered to them in keeping with the time and changes. In my opinion the DBE should strengthen the safety and security within the schools to enhance learner retention rates and to prevent dangerous substances and weapons from entering the school premises.

8.6.2 Implications for Practice

In this study the implications for practice involve what SMT members should do to enhance learner retention. It was also obvious from the participants that policies cannot be one size fits all rather be contextual and keep with the changes and time. Informed by this study's findings

8.6.3 Implications for Future Research

Another important area for future research that I have identified as a gap in South Africa may include finding out the reasons for school leaving from dropouts themselves to address other issues of concern in the country such as high crime rates and the rise of *amaphara*. Therefore, further large-scale research studies should be conducted that include other education stakeholders to address aspects that might permeate successful leadership for learner retention in schools.

8.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Drawing from the findings of this study, there are still gaps in learner retention practices as this is a small-scale study. I also argue that findings in this study cannot be generalised or transferred to other contexts but can only apply to schools with similar features. Research in this study was limited to SMT members in three secondary schools located in townships near to informal settlements. This suggests that the findings of this study are context-based. For example, as indicated in section 1.8 the findings may not apply in contexts other than township areas, such as rural and urban areas.

8.8 MY FINAL WORD

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a discussion of this study in relation to the theoretical frameworks informing this study, to recap, in this study I want to understand how SMT members lead such that learners are retained in the schools. What came out from the findings of this study is that in leading for learner retention, transformational leaders need to understand that learners have needs to be satisfied by the school which are influenced by a variety of environmental systems, thereby revealed multiple meanings attached to leading to learner retention. This specifies that the concept of leading for learner retention means different things to different people. Accordingly, this says that these meanings can actually clash and create confusion in how SMT members lead for learner retention. In my opinion to match these meanings and come up with the meaning that is very clear as I am talking about retaining learners. Also, what emerged from the findings is that the enactment of leadership is multifocal because SMT members do things that will attract learners to decide if they are staying in their schools or not. In a nutshell, the findings of this study indicate that in the process of leading for learner retention SMT members are exposed to limited sometimes no support from within and outside the schooling system.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: A letter requesting informed consent for the study to be conducted in a school

School address

5 Falcon Drive Yellowwood Park 4004

..... /..... / 202

Dear Principal

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH PROJECT IN YOUR SCHOOL

I hereby request permission to conduct a research project with School Management Team members in your school. My name is Simangele Mary-Jane Mkhize (student no. 200402337) currently a teacher at Imbaliyethu Primary School under Umlazi District. In pursuit of my professional development, I have enrolled for a PhD Degree in the field of Leadership and Management at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As part of the prescribed procedures for completing this degree, I must conduct a research project. My research topic is: **Leading for Learner Retention: Learning from Three Secondary Schools' Management Team Members**. The purpose of this study is to explore SMT members' leadership practices for learner retention in secondary schools. My study will include a sample of yourself as a school principal and all available School Management Team members. The two methods that will be used in generating data are semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions. These interviews will be recorded but will not be video/audio taped to ensure confidentiality.

An interview schedule will be emailed upon request to participants before the interview. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality during and post the research project will be assured using pseudonyms. The findings of the study will be used for education purposes, which in this case it will be for PhD degree. The information generated in this research will be kept confidential and the participant's identities will not be revealed, even during my analysis of the data. When I need to refer, I will only use pseudonyms to identify participants. Their voice recordings will also be kept anonymous. Furthermore, participation is purely voluntary and thus participants will be at liberty to withdraw from the study at any time without incurring any negative consequences. Please take note that there will be no financial rewards and costs for participants in the research project,

it is purely on a voluntary basis. Arrangements with regards to date and time will be done well in advance with participants to ensure minimal infringement of their working hours.

I hope my request will reach your favourable consideration. Should the school grant permission for me to conduct the study you are kindly requested to complete the approval/ declaration attached in this letter. You may also use your school letter head and write your letter with a school stamp and signature. For more information, you are free to contact me, my supervisors or UKZN Ethics offices on the contact details listed below:

Simangele Mary-Jane Mkhize

QUALIFICATION: M Ed

CELL NUMBER: 0 [REDACTED]/

[REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Prof P. E. Myende

QUALIFICATION: PhD

CELL NUMBER: [REDACTED]

TELEPHONE NO: 031-260 5291

Email: Myendep@ukzn.ac.za

CO-SUPERVISOR: UKZN RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICES

NAME: Dr D, S. Khumalo

QUALIFICATION: PhD

CELL NUMBER: 0 [REDACTED]

TELEPHONE NUMBER: 031-2603017

TELEPHONE NUMBER: 031-2604557

FAX-NUMBER:031-2604609

Email: Hssrec@ukzn.ac.za

Email: KhumaloS13@ukzn.ac.za

Thanking you in advance.

Kind Regards

Simangele Mary-Jane Mkhize

Appendix B: Permission letter from KZN DoE to conduct research in KZN schools



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 392 1063

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Phindile Duma

Ref.:2/4/8/1813

Mrs SM Mkhize
5 Falcon Drive
DURBAN
4004

Dear Mrs Mkhize

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **LEADING FOR LEARNER RETENTION: 'LEARNING FROM THREE SECONDARY SCHOOLS' MANAGEMENT TEAM MEMBERS'**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 11 October 2021 to 13 September 2023.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

**UMLAZI DISTRICT
PINETOWN DISTRICT**


Dr MJB Mthembu
Acting Head of Department: Education
Date: 14 October 2021

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix C: A letter to grant permission to conduct research

School address:

Date:/... .. / 2021

Tel/Cell:

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Administration

Research Office, Westville Campus Govan

Mbeki Building

Private Bag x54001 Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal South Africa

Dear Madam

I....., (the principal)
of.....(School

name) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project and I grant permission for Simangele Mary-Jane Mkhize (Researcher's name) to conduct her Philosophy of Education research project at this school, by one on one semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions. I understand that all the information will be kept confidential and will only be used for the educational purposes of her Philosophy of Education degree.

.....(Principal)

Date:.....

SCHOOL STAMP

Appendix D: Ethical clearance certificate



09 February 2022.

Mary-Jane Mkhize (2.004003371)

Department of Education

Edgemoor Campus Dear

Ms Mkhize,

Reference number: HSSREC/00003817/2022

Project title: Learning for Learner Retention: Learning from Three Secondary Schools' Management

Members

Director: PhD

Approval Notification - Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 26 January 2022, in accordance with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been approved.

Any alteration/s to the approved Memorandum protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title, outline, Object, Location of the Study, Statement of Purpose and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have any queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/directory for a period of 5 years.

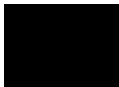
This approval is valid until 09 February 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate forum 2-3 months before the expiry date. A dose-related report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Committee (IIEC-MM14-040).

Yours sincerely,



Prof Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

P.O. Box 101, Pietermaritzburg, 6001. Durban, 4013. (031) 261-1111

Tel: +27 31 261 1111; Fax: +27 31 261 1112; Email: ethics@ukzn.ac.za; Website: <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ethics>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix F: Informed consent letter

..... High School
5 Falcon drive Yellowwood Park Durban 4004
..... / / 2021

Dear Participant

RE: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

My name is Simangele Mary-Jane Mkhize (student no. 200402337) currently a teacher at Imbaliyethu Primary School under Umlazi District. In pursuit of my professional development, I have enrolled for a PhD Degree in the field of Leadership and Management at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As part of the prescribed procedures for completing this degree, I must conduct a research project. My research topic is: **Leading for Learner Retention: Learning from Three Secondary Schools' Management Team Members**. My study will include a sample of School Management Team members within your school. The sample will involve the school principal, DP and DHs available in the school. The two methods that will be used in generate data are semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions. These interviews will be recorded but will not be video/audio taped to ensure confidentiality. An interview schedule will be emailed upon request to you before the interview. Anonymity and confidentiality during and post the research project will be assured using pseudonyms.

Kindly take note of the following regarding your participation:

- ❖ I will ensure that your identity remains anonymous and confidential by using pseudonyms (not using your real names).
- ❖ You will be free to use the language of your choice; with which you are comfortable.
- ❖ There are no financial benefits involved when participating in this study, contribution will be used for education purposes.
- ❖ You will respond to each question in a manner that will reflect your true personal feeling about the study, there are no right and wrong answers.
- ❖ You will not be forced to disclose any information if you feel not to disclose.
- ❖ There are no obligations, participation in this study is voluntary and you have a choice to participate and not to participate or withdraw during data collection.
- ❖ Any information given by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will

be used only for research purposes.

- ❖ Transcripts of all sessions will be made available to you and you are allowed to withdraw some of the information you will provide in the case of second thoughts.
- ❖ The information gathered in this study will be kept for five years in a secured and safe place at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, thereafter it will be completely destroyed.

I hope my request will reach your favourable consideration. For more information, you are free to contact me, my supervisors or UKZN Ethics offices on the contact details listed below:

Simangele Mary-Jane Mkhize

QUALIFICATION: M Ed

CELL NUMBER: [REDACTED]/
[REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Prof P. E. Myende

QUALIFICATION: PhD

CELL NUMBER: [REDACTED]
TELEPHONE NO: 031-260 5291

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CO-SUPERVISOR: UKZN RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICES

NAME: Dr D, S. Khumalo

QUALIFICATION: PhD

CELL NUMBER: [REDACTED]

TELEPHONE NUMBER: 031-2603017

TELEPHONE NUMBER: 031-2604557

FAX-NUMBER:031-2604609

Email: Hssrec@ukzn.ac.za

Email: KhumaloS13@ukzn.ac.za

Thanking you in advance.

Kind Regards

Simangele Mary-Jane Mkhize

Appendix G: Interview instruments

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PRINCIPALS, DEPUTY PRINCIPALS AND DEPARTMENTAL

HEADS. *(The questions below provide a guide for my discussions with School Management Team members participating in this study. The same questions are used for both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Additional questions will be probed as follow up questions which will be determined by the responses received from the participants that require to probe deeper).*

QUESTIONS

1. Would you share with me your own meaning of learner retention, what does learner retention means to you?
2. Why do you think it is important to retain learners in schools?
4. Would you regard the responsibility of retaining learners in the schools as a leadership responsibility? If yes, what does it mean to you to lead for learner retention?
5. How does the school leaders lead in such a way that the number of learners who leave the school is reduced?
6. Would you provide different styles/types of leadership that you use to ensure learner retention and maybe the reasons for using that style? Do you find these styles relevant and how?
7. Who is involved in the process of leading in such a way that learners do not leave the school and what are their responsibilities?
8. Are there any factors that you think affect the school leaders in leading for retention of learners? How do these factors in your experience enable or hinder leaders' practices of leading for learner retention?
9. One of the ways of reducing the number of learners to leave the school is providing learner support. Does your school have that support? If yes, would you please explain how learners are supported?
10. How do you ensure that learners are motivated to come and remain in the school until they finish?
11. Are there sufficient policies in place to assist your school in leading for learner retention? If yes, how do these policies in your own opinion enable school leaders to lead for the retention of learners effectively? That actually speak to learners.
12. What do you think the schools, learners, society and Department of Education lose if learners are not retained in schools
13. What else would you like to contribute concerning the need for increasing the rate of learners retained in the school.

Appendix H: Ethical clearance certificate (renewed)



24 May 2023

Simangele Mary-Jane Mkhize (200402337)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear SM-J Mkhize,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003817/2022

Project title: Leading for learner retention: Learning from three secondary schools' management team members municipality's development agenda

Approval Notification – Recertification Application

Your request for Recertification dated 23 May 2023 was received.

This letter confirms that you have been granted Recertification Approval for a period of one year from the date of this letter. This approval is based strictly on the research protocol submitted and approved in 2022.

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. Please quote the above reference number for all queries relating to this study.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years

This approval is valid for one year: 24 May 2024.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hialele (Chair)


/dd

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix I: Proof of language editing



Helen Bond
IMPELA EDITING SERVICES
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

31 October 2024

CERTIFICATE

Simangele Mkhize
[Redacted]

Dear Simangele

Thank you for using Impela Editing Services to edit your PhD thesis entitled "*Leading for Learner Retention: Learning from Secondary Schools' Management Team Members*".

I have proofread for errors of grammar, punctuation, spelling, syntax and typing mistakes. I have formatted your work and checked the references (this means checking the formatting) according to the Apa 7th edition referencing style.

I wish you all the best in your submission.

Kind regards
[Redacted]

Helen Bond (Bachelor of Arts, HDE)

Appendix J: Turnitin report

Leading for Learner Retention: Learning from Secondary Schools' Management Team Members

ORIGINALITY REPORT

7%	6%	2%	3%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Submitted to University of KwaZulu-Natal Student Paper	1%
2	researchspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	1%
3	hdl.handle.net Internet Source	<1%
4	eprints.nottingham.ac.uk Internet Source	<1%
5	Submitted to North West University Student Paper	<1%