

## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to explore principals' instructional leadership practices in improved-performing schools in challenging contexts. To collect data, twelve (12) teachers were interviewed for measuring principals' practices of instructional leadership. The main results suggested that in South Africa, there is a growing cohort of disadvantaged schools, which, despite of their socioeconomic challenges they face, display great degrees of resilience and perform better compared to the advantaged schools. In order to do this, I drew on theories of instructional leadership. Methodologically, I employed a qualitative approach. I purposively sampled the Johannesburg Central District public secondary schools, specifically, South Western Township (SOWETO) schools in the province of Gauteng, where I interviewed principals of three public secondary schools. In order to triangulate the data generated from the school principals, I also interviewed the HODs and teachers of the selected school principals. The main findings seem to indicate that a distributed form of instructional leadership is prevalent in these schools. There is a strong emphasis on academic success. Instructional time is greatly valued and maximally utilised. Moreover, there is a strong focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning to ensure the quality scholastic performance of learners. Our learning from this study point to a rethinking of instructional leadership practices which should be about shaping structures and the school cultures in response to the realities of the school community. This study contributes to the body of research on instructional leadership practices from the South African cultural context.

**Keywords:** Instructional leadership, school leadership, school principal, challenging contexts.