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Teachers as curriculum leaders in secondary schools in Vhembe district, South Africa

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In the study reported on here we investigated how teachers exercised their role as curriculum leaders in secondary schools in South Africa. The study was conducted in 4 schools (2 semi-urban and 2 rural) in the Vhembe district of South Africa. Semi-structured individual interviews, focus-group discussions (FGDs), and lesson and meeting observations were used to generate data from 20 teachers. This study was framed within Grant's (2012) model of teacher leadership. We engaged an exploratory multiple-case study, and 20 teachers were purposively and conveniently sampled. The findings reveal that teachers executed their role as curriculum leaders through engagement in instructional, school-based curriculum development (SBCE) for curriculum implementation and curriculum activities in the schools and in the communities. From the outcome we recommend the provision of sufficient resources and infrastructure to enhance learner-centred pedagogy, thus maximising learner's learning.

Keywords: community engagement; curriculum; instructional activities; leaders; leadership; secondary schools; teacher

Introduction

Curriculum leadership is important in curriculum implementation, a process which is conducted by teachers (the most important role players in curriculum implementation) in the classroom (Heng, Ratanam-Lim & Tan, 2017). Interest on how teachers lead both within (curriculum implementation) and beyond the classroom is on the rise (Harris, Jones & Crick, 2020). Researchers have emphasised the need to effectively lead the curriculum (Heng et al., 2017). It is, therefore, crucial that studies are conducted to determine the effectiveness of teachers' roles in curriculum implementation as curriculum leaders.

Sorenson, Goldsmith, Méndez and Maxwell (2011) define curriculum leadership as a process that connects curriculum, instruction, assessment and evaluation with the aim of improving learning and understanding. To Tapala (2019), curriculum leadership is the leadership and management of all activities taking place in a school to attain teaching and learning, as well as planned and documented experiences of learners and teachers within the school that are intended for developing learners' general knowledge and skills. Research shows that teachers play diverse roles as curriculum leaders in curriculum implementation. These, among others, include classroom managers (Kaur, 2019), facilitators (Otukile-Mongwaketse, 2018), role models (Zombwe, 2015), assessors (Sultana, 2019), and subject specialists (Gleeson & Davison, 2016). Teachers in the South African school context engage in these diverse curriculum-leading activities to improve quality of education in the country (De Villiers & Pretorius, 2011; Driescher, 2016; Pillay, 2015).

However, other stakeholders are concerned about how teachers enact their curriculum leadership roles. Edgerton and Desimone (2018) report on the rising dissatisfaction with the quality of standards implementation in the United States of America (USA), a notion which Loveless (2020) and Polikoff (2020) linked with long-standing performance gaps. In the Chinese context, Shan (2021) attests that it is important to examine how teachers make instructional decisions following decentralisation in education in the country and internationally. Similar concerns are expressed in Zimbabwe relating to the implementation of guidance and counselling, human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV and AIDS) and life skills education curriculum (Gudyanga, De Lange & Khau, 2019). Concerns on how teachers conduct their curriculum practices further surfaced in a study by Ramnarain and Hlatswayo (2018) on the practices of inquiry-based learning by South African physical sciences teachers.

The findings of this study could be applicable and beneficial especially to teachers of emerging economies with similar characteristics of limited resources (finance, human, and material) as South Africa. With this study we contribute to knowledge by confirming and strengthening the corpus of knowledge on teacher leadership in schools, locally and internationally; we also support debates on collaboration as a pedagogic enhancing strategy.

Gumede and Biyase (2016) state that, since the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the country's fragmented post-apartheid education system has received attention on aspects ranging from teacher deployment, financial resources, governance, curriculum reforms, and implementation of new ways of delivering the curriculum. Nonetheless, the country continues to face challenges in the quality of its education as is evident in learners' performance in international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 1995, 1999, 2002 and 2011; Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) – Grade 8 in 2011 (Spaull, 2013); and the Southern African Consortium for the Measurement of Education Quality (SACMEQ) (Moloi & Chetty, 2010).

Researchers in South Africa have also expressed concerns about the abilities of National Senior Certificate (NSC) holders (Modisaotsile, 2012; Schöer, Ntuli, Rankin, Sebastiao & Hunt, 2010). In line with these concerns, The Ministerial Task Team Report of 2014 recommends a raise in the overall minimum pass

requirements (40% and 30% in some subjects) for each level of pass in the promotion requirements of the NSC (Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2014).

Teachers' roles as curriculum leaders fall within the ambit of teacher leadership. Speaking from a South African context, Grant (2010) defines teacher leadership as the awareness by all classroom-based teachers of taking up informal leadership roles within and beyond the classroom, working in collaboration, mutual respect, and trust with other stakeholders towards the common goals of the school. On the other hand, to Duncan (2014) of the USA, teacher leadership means teachers having a voice in the policies and decisions that impact on their students, their daily work, and profession.

The Department of Education (DoE) in South Africa continues its efforts to augment the quality of education in the country through enhanced school leadership. This includes the implementation of the Advanced Certificate in Education Leadership (ACE) to improve principals' leadership skills (Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2011); and the roll-out in 1994 of the school feeding scheme in most rural areas to improve learner concentration and learning outcomes (Muvhango, 2016). However, the way in which teachers execute their role as curriculum leaders has not been exploited as a possible contributing factor to improving the quality of education in South Africa. We set out to fill this gap in the literature with this study. A further motivation for this study was Grant's (2019) assertion that empirical studies on the concept of teacher leadership in the South African context are relatively few (De Villiers & Pretorius, 2011; Grant, Gardner, Kajee, Moodley & Somaroo, 2010; Pillay, 2015).

Literature Review

We investigate teacher leadership in curriculum matters such as instruction, school-based curriculum development (SBCD) for effective curriculum implementation, and community engagement.

Research from Argentina, Hong Kong, and South Africa reports various ways in which teachers execute their role of leading the curriculum in schools (Banegas, 2019; Driescher, 2016). These include teachers' engagement in instructional activities (Carl, 2012), in SBCD for effective curriculum implementation (Law, Galton & Wan, 2010) and curriculum activities within the community (Lau, Li & Rao, 2011; RSA, 1996).

Teachers as curriculum leaders in instructional activities

A South African study by Carl (2012) shows that teachers perform instructional activities by

facilitating learner acquisition of the planned curriculum. In the classroom, the teacher, as the curriculum leader, directs or facilitates the transfer of the learning content through a planned lesson, assessing the effectiveness of learners' learning (Carl, 2012). This study is supported by Gülcan (2012) who states that teachers adopt various pedagogic strategies, based on learners' interests, needs, and contexts. In a mixed-methods study in Istanbul, Turkey, Altintas and Özdemir (2015) evaluated teachers' use of a differentiated approach to both gifted and non-gifted learners, reporting that learner achievement improved significantly. Similarly, in the south of Argentina, Banegas (2019) reports that learners' motivation improved when teachers used a context-responsive bottom-up curriculum in which learners participated in lesson design and implementation. On the contrary, findings by De Jager, Coetzee, Maulana, Helms-Lorenz and Van de Grift (2017) in South Africa, and Otukile-Mongwaketse (2018) in Botswana, indicate that teacher-centred pedagogy still dominates some classroom practices. This results from the examination-oriented curriculum, resource shortages, and overcrowding. The implication is that, given sufficient resources and infrastructure, teachers adopt desired pedagogic strategies for optimal learner outcome.

Our opinion is that, as curriculum leaders in instructional activities, teachers endeavour to create a conducive teaching and learning environment to enhance student learning. Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven and Dochy (2010) reviewed a student-centred learning environment as a teaching strategy. The researchers found that, when learners have a positive perception of their learning environment, they become motivated. Learners gain self-confidence, feel self-efficacious, and they more readily adopt a deep-learning approach. This atmosphere that enables instructional activities is made possible by both the leadership of teachers and the motivation that triggers independent learning (Zajda, 2018).

Providing professional development to peers is another way that teachers engage in instructional activities. Teachers' roles as curriculum leaders in instructional activities is also confirmed in Mayfield's (2018) finding. Mayfield reveals that teachers perform instructional leadership roles such as performance evaluation, professional development of colleagues, and monitoring of instructional practices. It seems clear from Mayfield's study that teachers are professional developers of their peers.

After action research on peer coaching by 15 teachers in Endeavor, New Jersey (USA), Pollara (2012) reports that peer coaching improves instructional practices in classroom management, thus improving the teaching and learning atmosphere.

Continued professional development policy guidelines in South Africa are articulated in several policy documents. The Personnel Administration Measures ([PAM] DoE, 1998) articulates educators' attendance and participation at workshops, meetings, seminars and conferences for professional development. Resolution 8 of the Education Labour Relations Council ([ELRC], 2003) puts in place some professional development support structures for teachers such as the Integrated Quality Management Systems (IQMS) and the staff development team (SDT). The SDT facilitates developmental plans for individual educators who are underperforming. The SDT and the school management team support each other in matters related to IQMS (ELRC, 2003). There is also the developmental support group (DSG) which serves as an educator's appraisal panel. It is composed of the immediate senior and another educator chosen by an educator based on their expertise as indicated in the needs area of the personal growth plan of the educator who is being evaluated. The IQMS sets the performance standards for educators. The National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (DoE, 2006) has as main aim to ensure that teachers are able to continually enhance their professional competence and performance.

Musundire (2021), in a mixed-method study, investigated the perceptions of 301 school-based managers regarding the link between the peer supervision teacher development model and quality of teaching through teamwork in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The findings indicate participants' strong belief that the peer supervision model is a possible tool for improving quality of teaching – a component lacking in the South African peer evaluation approach, IQMS. An earlier finding from a qualitative study of five KwaZulu-Natal principals by Ngema and Lekhetho (2019) indicate that principals lack comprehensive knowledge of how to implement the IQMS, the only tool they implore to identify training needs of their staff.

Teachers as curriculum leaders in school-based curriculum development (SBCD)

We consider SBCD in light of teachers in a school adapting a national curriculum to their local school context to facilitate implementation of the curriculum. Teachers as curriculum leaders perform their leadership responsibilities at school level. This has been demonstrated by several studies. In South Africa, SBCD are the formal and informal contents and processes (curricular and co-curricular activities) that aid learners to acquire skills, knowledge, values, understanding, and attitudes while at school (Carl, 2012). In Singapore, the SBCD appears as shared decision-making among teachers, students, and others on school projects,

subject-related innovations, values, norms, roles, and procedures (Chen, Wang & Neo, 2015). In China, SBCD activities take into consideration the interests and needs of students (Xu & Wong, 2011). In Namibia and the USA teachers engage in effective curriculum implementation through joint lesson planning, delivery, and assessment of student learning, during which they identify and assist struggling students (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2010; Hamatwi, 2015). These teachers engage as curriculum leaders for knowledge enhancement through reflective teaching. In SBCD, teachers also enact their role as curriculum leaders when they engage in action research. Law et al. (2010), in Hong Kong, reveal teachers' engagement in action research through systematic inquiry and classroom experimentation. These researchers adopt context-specific resolutions to improve student learning. Similarly, Makoelle (2014), engaged in a collaborative qualitative action research process with 15 teachers in a South African high school aimed at changing teacher beliefs and conceptions about inclusion. The findings indicate that teacher research skills, collaboration, and reflection in developing inclusive classroom practices had improved. These aspects were almost absent at the start of the research process. The findings also suggest that change through participation is crucial and requires local context-relevant practices that teachers can relate to. In addition, in 2018, Khoza carried out critical action research on whether teachers' reflections on digital and curriculum resources can generate lessons. During the qualitative study, the six teacher participants in the Gauteng province of South Africa reflected on their experiences and practices of digital resources in teaching Grade 12 mathematics as prescribed in the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). The findings reveal that ideological-ware resources and critical reflection enabled the teachers to overcome the curriculum challenges that affected their teaching practice.

Teachers as curriculum leaders in the community

Teachers engage with members of the community in different ways to enhance curriculum implementation. Beyond the school, teachers engage with parents in a variety of ways such as parent-teacher conferences, in a bid to provide parents with information about their children (RSA, 1996). A South African study by Blease and Condy (2014) indicates non-parental involvement, in contrast with findings by Lau et al. (2011) that reveal involvement of Hong Kong and Shenzhen parents. Furthermore, in the teachers' quest to continuously improve on their practice and influence others to do the same, teachers network in professional learning communities (PLCs) with colleagues both within and outside the school

(Ainscow, 2010; Steyn, 2015). A PLC is a community which recognises that learning by its members is key to student learning. The PLC, therefore, creates opportunities to strengthen teacher professionalism (Cereseto, 2016) for better curriculum implementation.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

In her model of teacher leadership, Grant argues that teachers lead activities in four different zones (the classroom, within the school, in whole-school development, and across schools and the community). This model describes teacher leadership as practised in the form of various roles, with indicators in these zones or places. In Zone 1, within the boundaries of the classroom, teachers lead as they continue to teach and improve on their teaching. Zone 2 is found outside the classroom but within the school, in which teachers interact with learners and fellow teachers in curricular and co-curricular activities. Zone 3 incorporates whole-school development: teachers, as curriculum leaders, take part in evaluating school practices for possible improvement of emphasis on grey areas. Teachers also take part in school decision-making processes, including in the SBCD. In Zone 4 the teachers' roles as curriculum leaders occur between schools, within the cluster, within the circuit, district, province, and even at national level on curriculum development aspects, as well as in the community, in building partnerships of learning communities.

Research sites

The research sites in this study were four schools in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo province of South Africa. For anonymity and confidentiality purposes the schools and participants were allocated pseudonyms (Schools A–D and Teachers T1–T5), where T1A refers to Teacher 1 of School A, et cetera). Schools C and D were rural, no-fee-paying schools whose learners benefited from the government feeding scheme. School A was a former Model C school. This school type falls under state schools in South Africa that were previously for White children only. However, Model C schools are now open to children from every race. School A and B were semi-urban fee-paying schools. The population of learners (L) and teachers (T) per school was as follows: A: 720 L and 55 T; B: 802 L and 30 T; C: 1,313 L and 40 T; and D: 376 L and 14 T.

Methodology

This study was based on data generated from 20 teachers (seven female and 13 male) from semi-urban and rural schools in the Vhembe district. The participants' ages ranged between 26 and 54, with the majority being between 45 and 54 years old. Four participants were between 26 and 35 years,

two participants between 36 and 44 years, 13 participants between 45 and 54 years and one participant above 55 years old. Of the 20 participants, five were Whites and 15 Africans (Blacks). The lowest qualification was a Junior Teacher Diploma, while the highest was a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. Teaching experience ranged between 4 and 26 years. No criteria were in place for participants' backgrounds and years of experience because we considered that leadership agency should be assumed by teachers irrespective of their background or teaching experience. Ten participants were from semi-urban schools (T1A–T5A and T1B–T5B), and 10 from rural schools (T1C–T5C and T1D–T5D).

We used convenience sampling to select the four schools offering Grades 8 to 12, based on willingness to participate in the study and easy accessibility to the schools. We would have had to make multiple visits to each participant establishing a relationship that enabled us to obtain data as comprehensively as possible (Creswell, 2009). We employed the purposive sampling technique. With the assistance of the school principals of the four schools, we selected five participants per school. Participants had the potential to provide rich data (McMillan, 2012) on their experiences of performing their role as curriculum leaders in schools.

The study was guided by the question: How do teachers exercise their role as curriculum leaders in secondary schools?

The aim of this qualitative study was to understand how teachers performed their role as curriculum leaders in schools. Creswell (2013) confirms that a qualitative approach is suitable when little or no knowledge exists about a phenomenon. The interactive nature of the approach allows probing by the researcher and further explanations from participants, producing rich data. There is relatively little empirical knowledge on how teachers execute their role as curriculum leaders within the South African context. This type of approach is a systematic and subjective approach. It is a form of social action with emphasis on the way in which people interpret and make sense of others' experiences, thus understanding the social reality of individuals (Mohajan, 2018).

We used a combination of qualitative data-generation methods including semi-structured individual interviews, FGDs, observations of lessons and curriculum-related meetings to obtain in-depth knowledge of participants' experiences of how they performed their role as curriculum leaders in schools. Guided by the literature and the research question, we formulated the questions in the semi-structured interview instrument and drew up the lesson observation template. We also formulated the FGD instrument from issues that

arose from individual interviews and lesson observations. All 20 interview sessions, four FGDs, and 15 lesson observations were conducted at the schools at different times of day, depending on the availability and convenience of each participant. Individual interviews and lesson observations were conducted before the FGDs to allow for the incorporation of important issues that arose from individual interviews into the FGD document. All interviews and FGDs were conducted in English, and audio-recorded; most lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. We allowed the interviewees to tell their stories; this, to an extent, determined the flow of the dialogue (David & Sutton, 2011). Data were generated from July to October 2019.

We listened to each audio interview multiple times to understand participants' responses before documenting the verbatim transcriptions. At the end of each transcribed interview, the data were also read repeatedly while listening to the audio tapes. This was to ascertain that we had understood and recorded participants' responses correctly. From these responses, we derived thick descriptions with verbatim quotations. For data analysis, we coded the data, derived categories from the codes by combining codes, and noted themes emerging from the categories (Creswell, 2013). We analysed participants' responses and made use of verbatim quotations where necessary to support inferences.

Trustworthiness of the Findings

To ensure trustworthiness of the study, we conducted interviews towards the end of numerous visits to each school between July and October 2019. This fairly prolonged engagement allowed some time for participants to gain familiarity with and trust in us. Such engagement reduced the effect of our presence and increased the participants' honesty in providing information (Anney, 2014; Lietz & Zayas, 2010). We triangulated data from the different sources to improve trustworthiness of the study (Maree, 2010). Furthermore, we conducted member checking: we sent transcribed data to participants to evaluate. We adjusted documentation according to feedback from participants to enhance the credibility of the study (Anney, 2014). Case studies are intentionally not transferable. However, we ensured thick description of results and contexts so that interested researchers or participants may possibly be able to apply results to their contexts. This may ease replication of findings (Anney, 2014; Kumar, 2011).

To cater for dependability, we used a code-recode strategy (coding the same data twice) to gain a deep understanding of data patterns. We prepared an account of research decisions and activities for a possible audit trail, and safely stored raw data and observation notes for replication

(Anney, 2014; Kumar, 2011; Lietz & Zayas, 2010). For confirmability purposes, we based the study findings only on the data obtained from the individual interviews, FGDs, and lesson and meeting observations, checking for possible bias (Wagner, Kawulich & Garner, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria (number EM 19/03/01). Permissions were obtained from the Limpopo Provincial DoE, and the Vhembe District Office. Signed informed consent was obtained from all study participants prior to their participation. Privacy of the participants was respected and we protected participants' interests by employing the strategy of confidentiality (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). As mentioned earlier, we used pseudonyms (codes) to refer to the schools and participants to conceal their identity.

Findings

The findings of this study answer the question: How do teachers exercise their role as curriculum leaders in secondary schools? This main question is also answered through the following three sub-questions: a) How do teachers perform their role as curriculum leaders in instructional activities? b) How do teachers perform their role as curriculum leaders in school-based curriculum development? c) How do teachers perform their role as curriculum leaders within the community?

We present the participants' responses under the following three themes: teachers as curriculum leaders in instructional activities, teachers as curriculum leaders in SBCD for effective curriculum implementation, and teachers as curriculum leaders among other stakeholders in the community.

Teachers' Role as Curriculum Leaders in Instructional Activities

The findings in this theme show that teachers' roles in instructional activities include dissemination of subject content knowledge, creating a beneficial teaching and learning environment, teaching and learning strategies, and the professional development of themselves and other teachers.

In executing their role in the dissemination of subject content knowledge, teachers as curriculum leaders plan and prepare their lessons to effectively share the subject content knowledge with learners (the role in dissemination of subject content knowledge). A participant in this study explained:

... whatever, we need to teach learners, it needs to be planned first. Then after planning, I need to teach to them, we work together ... I must check whether they understood what I taught them, that is to evaluate. If maybe they didn't, it means I must

go back to that content, and I do it in a way that they must understand. (T5D)

Lesson observation data for T2B correlates with the statement above. We observed and noted that the teacher had a lesson plan for the lesson. The objective of the technology lesson on resistors, colour bands and component symbols was articulated verbally (learners should be able to associate the component symbols with the relevant resistors). The teacher exhibited good evidence of preparation in presenting a coherent lesson. Some teaching aids used during the lesson included samples of different switches, light resistors, a textbook, and lesson preparation notebook (lesson observation notes T2B 15/08/2019).

These findings imply that teachers were aware of their responsibility to enable learners to acquire planned knowledge as determined in the formal curriculum. By researching to remain abreast of any changes in subject content, teachers accepted accountability for the transformation of learners – the essence of education.

The participants also talked about creating a conducive teaching and learning environment: the school, particularly the classroom, is like a second home to learners. Teaching and learning can only be guaranteed in a positive environment. The onus rests on teachers to create safe learning havens for learners. A teacher indicated: “... *if I prepare well, when I go to the class this may also solve the problem of discipline ... I think this is to the benefit of the learners because there will be minimal problems in the class*” (T4D).

In addition, data collected during lesson observations portray teachers’ attempts to create a favourable teaching and learning environment. During T5A’s lesson we observed that the teacher respected and addressed learners politely. Learners felt comfortable asking questions and interacting with the teacher. There were many charts depicting mathematical equations or formulas as well as inspiring quotes on the classroom walls, for example, “Today is the day to learn something new”, “The person who does the work, learns”, “The only way to learn mathematics is to do it” (lesson observation notes T5A - 07/08/2019).

A welcoming, orderly atmosphere in class motivates and reminds learners that they are entering a learning space. It may help to build learner confidence and create in learners’ minds the cooperation and performance that the teacher expects of them.

Participants described their pedagogic role – knowledge of teaching and learning strategies as invaluable to the art of teaching. Pre-service and in-service professional development for student teachers and practising teachers is supported by their pedagogy. Certain subjects, by nature, contradict the traditional method of teacher talk

throughout a lesson. The following excerpts portray this:

I’ll draw quickly something to make it easy for them ... I’m also new in the subject in Grade 10 so ... the way I made it clear to myself I will give to the learners ... I feel they really benefit than rather just standing there and saying this and this and this is the facts. (T2A)

... when they give learners extra activities, for example, to say let us have a debate in class about 1, 2, 3, and ... here is a scenario, let’s dramatize it ... (T2C).

The findings reveal that, for effective teaching and learning to take place, there is no “one-size-fits-all.” Teachers meet learners of different aptitudes and different learning styles. Therefore, different strategies are needed to motivate learners’ learning. As curriculum leaders in instructional activities, teachers employ a variety of teaching strategies depending on the grade level, aptitude, learning styles, and interests of learners.

Another role was that of teachers’ professional development in which the teachers experienced professional growth within and beyond the school. Teachers in this study engaged in team teaching within or across subjects within the school. Teachers mentor and coach pre-service teachers from universities and participate in performance evaluation of their peers. Some teachers in this study had this to say:

... agriculture is a science ... there are certain things that need a science educator ... if I have something that I don’t understand, I ask any science teacher to help me ... by teaching me or by going with me to the classroom so that he can explain those things ... to learners.... (T3C)

... When is time for IQMS, we also do peer assessment, we only do it just to show that we sign those papers not for development (T5C).

... training them (student teachers) ... the first week of ... arrival, we used – to go (to class) with them, you first teach while, they are there seeing how is the teaching taking place. From there maybe 2 to 3 days you go with him or her; she or he teaches while you are there ... From there, she used to go there alone. But when she do have a problem with the lesson, she may ask. (T2D)

Participating teachers emphasised the importance of professional development and skill building in the teaching career. Teachers in this study were aware that they were agents of change in schools. These teachers were geared towards ensuring effective teaching and learning in a bid to improve the quality of secondary education in South Africa. However, the findings suggest that teachers preferred professional development opportunities where their teaching was informally assessed by their colleagues, rather than undergoing the formal IQMS exercise. This may be because informal professional development exercises are self-initiated and target specific areas of challenges.

In addition, the reality with the IQMS exercise may be that it simply ticks the box. The observed teachers do not, as is expected, receive any meaningful feedback from the observers to help improve their practice. Observers may possibly not single out any performance standard as lacking in order not to deprive the observed teacher of the 1% salary increase which teachers already consider too small. This points out a deficiency in the school DSG.

Beyond the school, teachers seek professional development for themselves and their colleagues through collaboration with teachers at other schools, engaging in PLC/cluster discussions. Such clusters are initiated by teachers themselves or by the circuit. Teachers participate in workshops organised by the circuit, set, moderate, and mark examinations at different levels. Two of the participants expressed this as follows:

... we have a group of teachers ... Uhm, some of the teachers I work with is not, even in our district; but we have a group on WhatsApp ... we interact on that group and try and help each other. (T3A)

... all agric educators at a cluster level meet and discuss how far are we with our syllabus, the challenges, how to resolve them, whether to find someone who can assist us as a cluster ... (T5D).

The findings illustrate that teachers are interested in their profession, seeking to improve their practice through upgrading their knowledge, skills and attitudes. The DoE recognises the importance of collaborating with teachers to attain meaningful development for teachers.

Teachers' Role as Curriculum Leaders in School-based Curriculum Development

This theme addresses the role of teachers in adapting the national curriculum for a particular school's context. Teachers in this study expressed that they initiated school projects. Teachers participated in decision-making at subject committee meetings and in whole school meetings to adopt school projects, rules, and procedures which guided school curricular activities. This was accentuated by some of the teacher participants:

Uhm ... we have the 50% as pass rate we try to encourage our learners ... to work hard to get the 50% because 50% in life is better than 30% (T3A-FGD).

... our learners are not very much engaged in education ... we agreed with parents ... these 3 weeks they are writing preparatory exam, they are not going home. We cook for them here, they bath here ... whatever they want is happening here. To take them away ... from the street so that they can ... study. (T2D)

The teachers' expressions above correlate with our observation notes from a meeting of the Department of Languages (English & Tshivenda) in School C. In order to solve the problem of poor performance in English in the school, teachers adopted a number of strategies like encouraging

learners to read widely in English. The teachers also did not require learners to read aloud in class, as this discouraged struggling learners. The head of department (HoD) had to insist on other subject teachers to teach in English, avoiding lengthy explanations in the mother tongue as was the practice at the time (meeting observation notes 21/08/2019).

The findings show that the DoE policies such as South African Schools Act ([SASA] RSA, 1996) and those on programme and promotion requirements (DBE, 2012) provide guidelines or minimum requirements according to which schools should operate. Each school is expected to adapt or develop its own curriculum based on its context, aspired values, learners' needs and interests. Each school is best placed to make decisions to optimise its teaching and learning processes and learner achievement.

Teachers' Role as Curriculum Leaders in the Community

Teachers perform their role as curriculum leaders even in the community itself in order to enhance curriculum implementation. The comments below show how participating teachers attempted to engage with the community.

We've got parent evenings and have a lot of parents' numbers. What I do when I see a learner is struggling, or doesn't do his work, I actually contact them and say 'Ma'am, Sir, please help ...' (T4A).

... at our church ... on Sundays immediately after church ... we talk about morals, we also offer some of the lessons ... now even those learners who are not members of our church, they do come and attend (T5C).

... when this child is troublesome at school and you call them ... They don't come ... (T4C).

... I go to ... the traditional court, and then ... telling the parents ... to become involved in their learners' education ... I attend civic meetings, wherever they are talking about issues like service delivery, I ... say hey! ... education in order to overcome this ... let's go and tell our learners to be serious in their education ... yeah. (T1D)

Apart from providing curriculum development knowledge to parents of learners of their own schools as SASA (RSA, 1996) requires, teacher participants in this study went out of their way to involve other learners and parents in the community. In so doing, teachers involved everyone who should contribute in improving the quality of education in the country.

Discussion

The way in which teachers execute their role as curriculum leaders in schools was analysed according to Grant's (2012) model of teacher leadership. We discussed the study findings with particular attention to ways in which teachers executed their role in instructional activities, as

curriculum developers at school and as curriculum leaders among other stakeholders in the community.

Teachers as Curriculum Leaders in Instructional Activities Disseminate the Subject Content to Learners

As curriculum leaders, teachers plan and prepare lessons, use relevant resources, and employ appropriate teaching and learning strategies to convey the prescribed curriculum content to learners. Grant (2012) describes teacher curriculum-leading through dissemination of content knowledge as the centrality of expert practice. These findings support Carl's (2012) view of teachers facilitating transfer of the planned curriculum from scripts to learners. This is the pivotal role of teachers as curriculum leaders, without which there is no schooling.

Literature on teachers' roles in instructional activities affirms that teachers employ several methods to create conducive teaching and learning environments. This is what Gülcan (2012) calls optimal teaching and learning situations. The findings in our study are consistent with literature in that, during lesson observations, we noticed that participants respected the learners. Zajda (2018) reports that an advantageous learning environment motivates learners. A welcoming classroom atmosphere possibly tunes learners' minds and prepares them for learning, thereby maximising opportunities for effective teaching and learning.

The findings of this study further reveal that teachers execute their roles in leading instructional activities by demonstrating their pedagogic knowledge. Teachers in this study engaged in appropriate teaching and learning strategies such as making ample use of visual aids and explanations to enable learners to visualise concepts, performing practical experiments and role playing. This aligns with Role 1, Indicator 3 within Zone 1 of Grant's model (2012). Within the classroom, teachers design learning activities, improvising when a planned activity seems not to work. Teachers make appropriate use of resources to bring about effective teaching and learning. However, in this study, as with those of De Jager et al. (2017) and Otukile-Mongwaketse (2018), we found minimal use of the learner-centred approach or use of differentiation as a pedagogic strategy. This is in contrast with the views of Altintas and Özdemir (2015) and Baeten et al. (2010) that teaching strategies should be appropriate to learners' learning styles and abilities. The use of differentiation as a teaching strategy may be difficult to implement in the South African context for reasons that include overcrowding, limited teaching and learning materials, and heavy teacher workloads, among other challenges.

Previous studies (Driescher, 2016; DuFour et al., 2010; Law et al., 2010; Mayfield, 2018; Pollara, 2012) established teacher engagement in professional development of their peers and novice teachers during execution of their role in instructional activities such as modelling lessons and coaching. In corroboration with the literature, we found that teachers engaged in team-teaching in clusters to build skills and confidence in others (Ainscow, 2010; Steyn, 2015). Teachers coach, mentor, and induct student teachers, while conducting performance evaluation of their peers. Such include IQMS evaluations: Indicator 1, Role 4 within Zone 2 of Grant's model (2012). Teacher engagement in professional development activities, whether the teacher is developing others or is being developed, comes with exchange of ideas and skills, thus, affirming teachers as lifelong learners.

Teachers' Role as Curriculum Leaders in School-based Curriculum Development

The findings in our study indicate that teachers executed their role as curriculum leaders by engaging in SBCD. Some teachers in this study adapted teaching and learning materials for their school; others initiated a language improvement project for their school. This supports the aspect of problem identification and resolution (Indicator 3, Role 6 within Zone 3) in Grant's model (2012). Such adaptation aligns with the views of Carl (2012), and Xu and Wong, (2011), that SBCD includes formal and informal decisions and projects in learners' interests that enable learners to gain knowledge, skills, and aptitude. Also, one school agreed on a 50% pass as its minimum pass mark for all subjects. This reflects the notion of school-based planning and decision-making (Indicator 5, Role 6 within Zone 3) in Grant's model (2012). This school-based decision was antithetical to the National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R–12 (DBE, 2012) which sets acceptable minimum requirements as 40% in mathematics and home language, and 30% in any other three subjects. In our opinion, the school that raised its performance bar did so to motivate learners to work harder. Conversely, the decision by the DBE (2012) might have been adopted to enable more learners to obtain the NSC.

Teachers as Curriculum Leaders in the Community Research has established that, in addition to executing their role as curriculum leaders beyond the school in PLCs, teachers execute their role as curriculum leaders by providing curriculum development knowledge to parents and other learners in the community. In Grant's model (2012), Indicators 2 and 3, Role 2 within Zone 4 relate to teachers engaging with parents on

curriculum issues. The SASA (RSA, 1996) requires of teachers to provide parents with curriculum information about their children; in so doing, parents and teachers collaborate for the learners' benefit. In this study we noted that teachers disseminated content knowledge to learners in general in the communities, irrespective of the school they attended. A teaching career is one in which people are called to serve humanity without borders, as long as humanity requires the services of teachers in curriculum matters.

We also found a deficiency of parental involvement in learners' education. One study (Blease & Condy, 2014) reported that parental involvement was almost non-existent. Contrary to the findings in our study, a Chinese study by Lau et al. (2011) in Hong Kong and Shenzhen reported positive parental involvement in their children's education. The findings in our study may be attributed to poverty and low levels of parental literacy. However, the negative impact of the lack of parental involvement in the education of their children cannot be overlooked.

Teachers worldwide seek different strategies to better perform their role as curriculum leaders. Although based on a South African multiple-case study, the findings of this study could be applicable and beneficial to teachers worldwide and more so to teachers of emerging economies with similar characteristics of limited resources (finance, human, and material) like South Africa. Teachers in other emerging economies can easily adapt these strategies based on learners' interests, needs, and individual contexts (Gülcan, 2012).

Conclusion

With this study we set out to explore ways in which teachers executed their roles as curriculum leaders in secondary schools in the Vhembe district of South Africa. The data were generated from individual interviews, FGDs, and lessons and meeting observations of 20 teachers in four schools in both semi-urban and rural areas of South Africa. The study findings indicate that teachers executed their role as curriculum leaders through engagement in instructional activities by creating conducive teaching and learning environments, using appropriate teaching styles, and engaging in professional development.

In performing their role as curriculum leaders through SBCD activities for effective curriculum implementation, teachers engaged in action research, adopted projects, and made school decisions to adapt the national curriculum to their local contexts.

Teachers also enacted their role as curriculum leaders for effective curriculum implementation by participating in activities beyond the school in the communities.

Teachers participated in activities of PLCs and engaged with parents on ways to assist their children that would eventually contribute to effective curriculum implementation in schools.

For teachers to improve on their engagement in efficient pedagogic practices for optimal student learning, we recommend that the DoE should ensure sufficient resources and infrastructure in schools, as well as sensitise parents and the local community regularly on the importance of parental involvement in children's education.

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Authors' Contributions

RB conducted the interviews, conducted data analyses, wrote the manuscript and TO reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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