

## The Views of Education Development Officers on Their Educational Leadership Practices

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**ABSTRACT** There is no significant improvement in South African learner outcomes. This is particularly so in provinces such as the Eastern Cape where grade 12 results always lag behind those of other South African provinces, and literacy levels continue to plummet. This paper therefore investigated how Education Development Officers in Eastern Cape view the practice of school visits. Six Education Development Officers in two education districts were purposively selected. This study was premised on the qualitative research approach and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The findings revealed that the purpose of Education Development Officers' school visits was mainly to check if teachers performed their teaching duties. It also emerged from the data that visits to schools were mainly for the purpose of controlling policy implementation. This means that there was no coherent supportive strategy for school visits. This study recommends that the Department of Basic Education develop a framework for more supportive school visits.

### INTRODUCTION

It is a known fact that education is the instrument for economic empowerment and the development of a sustainable economy; and that the national education goals in all countries are the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies to equip the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society (Nwangwu 2007). There has been an enduring goal of research in education worldwide which focuses on identifying programmes that can work to improve the system (Penuel et al. 2011). These programmes vary from place to place. However, they have yielded no positive results in improving the system. Furthermore, there has been a lot of emphasis on scaling up of these programmes, even though, the scaling up of these programmes has not been adequate to improve the quality of education (Penuel et al. 2011).

For any education system to improve, rigorous, well aligned and coordinated teams and organisational units within a complex institutional ecology are required (Penuel et al. 2011). The support given to schools, therefore, should be an undisputable requirement. This support concentrates on ways to involve learners more effectively in schools as both learners and as

participants in the teaching and learning process (James and Pollard 2006). For education to serve a nation, it must be a well-planned and well thought out activity that relieves the nation of its socio-economic burdens. Dienne (2011:15) argues that "good teaching, teacher training, effective supervision, curriculum reviews, the provision of clear learning targets and entrepreneurial education are required for the stimulation of national economic and social development".

In spite of the school support visits by Education Development Officers (EDOs), learner results in the Eastern Cape, South Africa have not improved significantly. EDOs are the district officials who are tasked with leading and managing schools through the provision of resources and professional support to educators (Mavuso 2013; Department of Education 2008). These officials are managers at the local level of the education system. In the South African Province of the Eastern Cape, the improvement of Grade 12 results has been very slow, with a margin of just 16.4 percent from 1994 to 2014 (48.5 to 64.9). There has been an up and down movement of grade 12 results, particularly in the first twelve years of the fifteen years of democracy. (Department of Education 2006; State of the Province Address 2014). Secondly learners' literacy levels in South Africa continue to lag behind those in other countries (Wessels and

Mnkeni-Sourombe 2012). This study therefore aimed to investigate how effective EDOs' school support visits have been in enhancing learner performance.

### **Background to the Study**

In countries such as Kenya, EDOs are called school inspectors, and their role is to maintain educational standards by ensuring that learners perform well in their academic work (Harrison 2012). In Nigeria, for instance, school inspection is about ensuring that the education industry carries out its functions of developing quality human capital through checks and balances, by regular and effective supervision and inspection (Ochuba 2009). Tanzania also has school inspectors, and their role is to ensure adherence to set policies, laws and regulations. They inspect all schools and write reports, with a view to advising the Commissioner on matters requiring a decision (UNESCO 2011). They conduct educational research and disseminate the information for the purpose of improving teaching standards in schools.

In South Africa, the label school inspector was banned and replaced by EDO for the reason that inspection had an undemocratic connotation. Supervision of instruction in schools began as a process of external inspection, where department officials were appointed to inspect both what teachers teach and what students learn. Inspection was to remain firmly embedded in the practice of supervision. For instance, during the apartheid era school inspectors were sent to ascertain that government policies were implemented (Ndlovu 2006).

With the advent of democracy, the title of school inspectors has been changed to that of EDOs. Their role includes the management of administration and pedagogical issues in schools (Mavuso 2013; Department of Education 2008). This means that they are like general managers who have to ensure that schools run efficiently and effectively. On the one hand, EDOs have to monitor the basic functionality of schools, which includes ensuring that the schools have policies, rules and regulations that are implemented and observed. They have to ensure that schools are well resourced in terms of material and human resources. They also have to oversee school governance and ensure that school finances are properly managed. Lastly, EDOs have

to ensure the establishment of a sound relationship between each school and its community (Department of Education 2008). On the other hand, EDOs also have to handle professional issues that include management of the curriculum and learners' achievement. Concerning management of the curriculum, EDOs have to ensure that teachers deliver the curriculum in schools, in line with departmental policies (Department of Education 2008). Education Development Officers are basically tasked with ensuring that educational institutions within their circuits function in all respects. This includes management of the delivery of the curriculum and implantation and implementation of the Integrated Quality Management System. Though EDOs are tasked with supporting schools in achieving their educational goals, there seems to be low levels of learner performance in Eastern Cape schools. There is a serious problem of widespread drop-out before Grade 12, and over time, more pupils seem to be choosing less demanding exam subjects. The proportion of pupils taking mathematics (as opposed to maths literacy) has fallen from 56 per cent to 45 per cent, as more pupils opt for the easier maths (Spaull 2013). "As far as educational outcomes go, South Africa has the worst education system of all middle-income countries that participate in the cross-national assessments of educational achievement. What is more, we perform worse than many low-income African countries" (Spaull 2013:3). This study, therefore, sought to explore how school support visits by EDOs impact on teaching and learning.

### **Research Question**

What are the views of EDOs on their school support visits?

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study was guided by the qualitative research approach. The qualitative research approach is about describing life from the inside out; from the point of view of participants. It takes note of the views of participants and the subjective and social construct of their world (Flick et al. 2004; Leedy and Ormrod 2005). This study took account of the views of the EDOs about their school support visits. Interviews and semi-structured questionnaire were used in

which the EDOs were able to describe their school support visits. Six EDOs in two Education districts were purposively selected. The purposive or judgemental sampling method is about selecting participants on the basis of their relevance or appropriateness to the researched topic (Flick et al. 2004). The EDOs were selected because they are the most appropriate district officials in the school support visit phenomenon.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Research like any other profession has its principles or ethics (Corey and Callanan 1993). Kumar (2005) notes that ethics are the accepted principles of the code of conduct for a particular profession to accommodate the ever changing ethos, values, needs and expectations of that particular profession. Ethical issues relevant to this study were observed. These were seeking permission, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity and voluntary participation

### **Educational Leadership**

There are different leadership theories such as transactional, transformational, distributive leadership and so on. Teaching and learning, the core business of the education system in any country demands the provision of effective leadership. Since education is always the most precious service in most countries of the world, including South Africa, educational leaders need to have certain qualities which are consistent with what they do. This means that not just any leadership theory or style can be congruent with education. Mazurkiewicz (2011) argues that educational leaders should be aware of the importance of experience and knowledge of the surroundings in which they work for the learning process to be designed properly. Furthermore, leading in education requires a serious effort by those charged with leading.

Leading in education is “to ensure conditions for the education process to proceed and to jointly direct further actions, to take decisions, to lead the change and above all to support people in development, to help them discover their own potential” (Mazurkiewicz 2011: 88). An educational leader, therefore, is a person who, above all, has the power to persuade others and reveal their potential. Educational leaders should understand that learning is a cultural and emo-

tional process (Fink 2005) and, for that reason, they should adopt an attitude which is along cultural and emotional lines. This means that leadership in education is about the behaviour of the leaders and the led. Mazurkiewicz (2011) further argues that, “It is a combination of all possible ways of being with others and influencing others, not by primitively steering their behaviour but rather through a deep, personal contact” (Mazurkiewicz 2011:88). It is the ability to influence the led and tap into their ability to perform tasks as much as they can with a sense of reasonableness (Blanchard 2007). Educational leaders are distributive leaders in that, they share their power. They are motivators who are both transformational and transforming (Reinhartz and Beach 2004). This means that the educational leaders, in striving for educational excellence, encourage others to use their own potential in cooperating to be the best.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section gives an account of what EDOs say they do when they conduct school support visits. In South Africa, the rationale behind the establishment of district offices was to bring education authorities closer to schools and it was expected that their role would make schools more effective and efficient by providing educational resources and professional support (Penuel et al. 2011; Narsee 2006). When participants were asked about their understanding, experiences and their practice of school support visits they gave different responses. When asked about what their visits were mainly about one EDO (participant 1) indicated that:

*“They are about finding out about the problems that the schools have, check curriculum delivery, if teaching and learning has been done and challenge schools encounter.”*

From this excerpt, it can be deduced that this EDO regards quality management in teaching and learning as something that can be achieved more effectively through the monitoring of the performance of institutions and the implementation of policies, rather than by giving support and guidance in the teaching and learning process itself, despite Mazurkiewicz’s (2011) assertion that leadership in education is about supporting people in development and leading change. What became clear according to this EDO was that education leaders should check if

educational policies are implemented. Though this EDO indicated that he checked if teaching had been done, there was no elaboration on how he supports teachers in their work at the classroom level. Another EDO (participant 2) reported:

*“My visits are about school management which includes school governance. I also visit schools for curriculum management. I check if the SMT manages curriculum delivery. I check financial management and resources management and human resource management. I also look into the issues of HIV/AIDS management. Those are my key performance areas.”*

This means that these visits were dominated by administrative issues; support for teaching and learning was a matter of ensuring the efficiency of schools and staff in terms of reaching the educational outcomes. According to him there was nothing better than ensuring that systems for the support of teaching and learning were in place. Like participant 1, participant 2 did not touch on issues of giving pedagogic assistance and support to teachers at school level despite the assertion made by Penuel et al. (2011) that any effort to improve schools' systems of teaching and learning requires the alignment and coordination of the actions of people and teams.

Gallucci et al. (2010) argue that the implementation of support strategies by instructional leaders needs to focus on the coordination of school-linked services to improve learner outcomes. With regard to supporting teaching and learning in schools, participant 1 indicated that what is needed is the provision of resources to schools for them to utilise during the teaching and learning process. Though (Blanchard 2007) suggests that educational leadership is the ability to influence the led, and tap or elicit their ability to perform tasks as much as they can, there was no indication that EDOs, when visiting schools, focus on tapping the abilities of the school principals and teachers with a view to enhancing the teaching and learning process.

Participant 3 noted that most of the schools do not have resources. Even when they need to make copies of documents, they have to come to me to provide the service. From this participant's point of view, educational leadership is about efforts by district officials to provide the resources that schools need. According to participant 1 provision of resources constitute support for teaching and learning and the role of

district officials should be that of ensuring that resources are adequately provided to schools. This could therefore mean that participant 1 viewed quality teaching and learning as something that could be achieved merely through the provision of resources to schools. If the resources provided are designed to support teaching and learning then they are an important part of support for teaching and learning. Participant 1, however, went further to elaborate that:

*“I gather the SMT and we sit around the table. I check if basic things are there. For instance their learning programmes their schedules. I also look at their school policy and if they have a school timetable. I also look if they supervise the work of other educators.”*

It appears from the above quote that this participant has in mind more than resources when he makes reference to 'basic things' that have to do with 'learning programmes' and 'school timetable' as well as 'school policy'. Support, from this point of view also means the monitoring role of the district office. It also appears that participant 4 understands support for teaching and learning as ensuring that SMTs monitor the work of educators. He noted that supporting teaching and learning involves taking good practices from one school and sharing it with other schools.

Participant 4 further commented that:

*“When you are an Education Development Officer you oversee many schools. You are able to compare what is happening from one school to another. You are able to share the good practices of one school with the other schools. So it is not always a kind of advice that comes to you. Sometimes you pick up good practices from other schools. When you pick up something that is not good, something that might have repercussion from one school you also warn other schools about it as a precautionary measure. You develop other schools with something that you have picked up from one school.”*

It can be argued from participant 4's point of view that the idea of sharing good practice across schools, as stated in the above quotation, is one way to support schools. However, whatever good practice is disseminated must be translated into enhancing teaching and learning. This is in line with what Lugaz and De Grauwe (2010) referred to as inspection where the local office head in Benin gathers teachers and principals in regular meetings to share good prac-

tices. One of the practices that can be shared relates to curriculum management, which appears to be the focus of participant 4. It also appeared that participant 5 pinpoints missteps from other schools, and makes them precautionary measures for subsequent learning for other schools. This means that participant 5 viewed support for teaching and learning as something that could be achieved through learning from previous mistakes.

Participant 5 further reported that:

*“When I manage the curriculum, I speak to the school managers. I insist that principals should not work alone but should involve the HODs and senior teachers and even other experienced teachers. This I believe will help him to manage and go deeper in curriculum delivery as this is the core business of the school. I meet with the SMT. I assist the SMTs in planning the management in a manner that ensures the expectations of each subjects are met and that the syllabus coverage keeps pace with the district specifics. I don’t necessarily go to the classroom as that is the role of the Subject Advisors. Mine is overall management of the curriculum. I ensure that the principal and the SMT check that teachers go to the classroom and teach. I ensure that teachers are on their toes in as far as assessment is concerned, that teachers are ready for CASS moderation.”*

The emphasis on curriculum management, for participant 5, was important for ensuring that teaching and learning take place and that district expectations of each subject are met. She saw her support role as one of assisting “the SMTs in planning the management in order to ensure that teachers are in the classroom and teaching.” However, participant 5 admitted that he does not actually go to the classroom. He leaves that role to Subject Advisors.

However, participant 3 and participant 6 reported that educators are de-motivated and as EDOs they motivate them in their work. Both EDOs cited problems of overloading caused by multi-grade teaching, redeployment and financial problems as factors that have a negative impact on teachers’ morale. Participant 6 indicated that:

*“I make them perform better by supplying them resources. I assist them on policy and I check if they plan. I check if work schedules are done and learners are doing their work as per policy. Where there are gaps I try to fill*

*those gaps. As a person who once served as Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) Coordinator I try to organise workshops through the IQMS section so that teachers are capacitated. We also sit in the IQMS District Task Team and analyse educators development needs. I also go to schools with motivational speakers as educators are demotivated. Some educators are so overloaded that they resist going to their class. We go there to boost their morale.”*

It can be seen from this excerpt that participant 6 viewed support for teaching and learning as the activity of supplying schools with resources so that educators can perform better in making learners achieve educational goals. It can also be seen from the above quotation that this EDO viewed the training of educators on their developmental needs as something that can bring about quality teaching and learning in schools.

## CONCLUSION

It can be deduced from the above discussion that EDOs in most cases are transactional leaders as their work is predominantly checking on teachers rather supporting them and the teaching and learning process. It can also be concluded that EDOs do not apply the participative leadership style as they do not take into account what others have as input. This means therefore that EDOs do not give an opportunity to subordinates to enjoy a sense of ownership with a view to enhancing active collaborative participation within and across the schools. The plummeting teaching standards in many of the schools in South Africa may, among other things, be attributed to the fact that EDOs do not focus on the teaching and learning process that happens.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings the study recommends that the Department of Basic Education develop a guide which will help make school visits supportive of schools rather than just checking policy implementation. This should entail EDOs, when they visit schools, focusing on teacher involvement and taking into account teachers views on how best teaching and learning can be enhanced. This study also recommends that EDOs’ dealings with schools be a

two way traffic by which their school support visits are informed by teachers concerns. It is further recommended that EDOs always tap teachers' abilities and allow them to influence the direction in which the schools run in improving learner academic performance. This paper recommends that further research be conducted on how of school principals and teachers view Education Development Officers' school support visits.

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