

## Scratching the Outside? Perspectives of Subject Advisors on their Practices in Supporting Teaching and Learning in South African Schools

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**ABSTRACT** This paper investigated how Subject Advisors perceive their support for teaching and learning in schools. The qualitative research approach was used and two subject advisors were purposively selected from two underperforming Education Districts. Since this study was premised on the interpretive paradigm, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The qualitative data analysis method was used and data from different participants were simultaneously analyzed and categorized into themes. The data showed that Subject Advisors perceived support for teaching and learning as merely monitoring the progress in syllabus coverage. It also emerged that Subject Advisors sometimes identified areas where there are shortfalls and focused on how they can assist teachers to perform better in those areas. It can be concluded that their approach is top-down, as teachers did not have much input in the improvement of their own pedagogical as well as pedagogical content knowledge. This study recommends that Subject Advisors have pre-sessions with teachers in which they develop a coherent support program together.

### INTRODUCTION

For many years until 1994, South Africa went through the system of apartheid education in which different races were offered different types of education (Msila 2007). This fragmentation of the education system was designed to undermine the majority of the people in the country. Since 1994 there have been a number of curriculum innovations. This has been done to improve the education standards of the country and to rid it of any semblance of apartheid education. The South African government overhauled the apartheid education system by gradually phasing in an Outcomes-based Education (OBE) approach (Msila 2007). This bold step was taken to put the country in line with international trends, moving away from the content-driven curriculum, which emphasizes examination results, toward an emphasis on facilitating lifelong learning (Department of Education 1997; Le Grange 2007).

OBE was a departure from a teacher-centered apartheid curriculum and pedagogy to an integrated curriculum in which learners were active participants and teachers were facilitators (Taruvinga and Cross 2012). In 2011, the Department of Basic Education introduced the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). This was a move to repackage the existing

curriculum (Revised National Statement Grade R to 9 and National Curriculum Statement Grade 10 to 12) into the National Curriculum Statement Grade R to 12 (Department of Basic Education 2011).

This innovation in the curriculum was prompted by four factors, which are complaints about the implementation of the NCS, teachers who were overburdened with administrative matters the variations in the interpretation of the curriculum requirements, and the underperformance of learners (du Plessis 2013). The introduction of CAPS was a move to make the curriculum more accessible to teachers and to give the description and details for every subject in each grade and specifying the content that teachers ought to teach and assess (du Plessis 2013). In spite of the curriculum innovations after 1994, there is still no significant improvement in learner results and learners' literacy levels. This paper, therefore, sought to investigate the perception of Subject Advisors of their role in supporting teaching and learning.

The fact that matric results have not improved significantly in some South Africa provinces is a source of great concern to the Department of Basic Education (Department of Basic Education 2016). Literacy levels are also plummeting in these provinces. This is particularly evident in provinces such as the Eastern Cape,

KwaZulu Natal and Limpopo (Department of Basic Education 2014 and Department of Basic Education 2016). The unsatisfactory performance by the Grade 12 cohort has resulted in the National Department of Education introducing various measures to improve the situation. In-service development of practicing teachers is seen as one way to save the situation. Support for teaching and learning is a worldwide practice (European Commission 2013). Different countries have different labels for the officials tasked with supporting teachers. In European countries for instance, Subject Advisors are called Teacher Educators and are crucial role players in maintaining and improving the high quality of the teaching workforce ((European commission 2013). This means that these officials have a significant role in the enhancement of quality teaching and learning in schools. In South Africa the role of supporting teachers in their pedagogical work is in the hands of Subject Advisors (Department of Basic Education 2012). The Subject Advisors are mandated, among other things, to monitor and support the implementation of the curriculum in the relevant subject by providing and or sourcing relevant teaching and learning material through research, to improve performance in the subject. They are also expected to ensure that teachers have the entire requisite curriculum and assessment documents for the subject and the advisors have to support teachers in effectively delivering the curriculum in mainstream and special schools (Department of Basic Education 2012).

### **Background to the Study**

Professional development for teachers is often regarded as a way to bring about school improvement. There is evidence that suggests that progress in educational reform depends on teachers' individual and collective capacity and how this capacity impacts school-wide ability to promote the learners' academic performance. The evidence further suggests that investing in teacher professional development (in-service training) is a faster way towards effective education system reforms (Reyeneke et al. 2010; Stoll et al. 2006). Capacity in the teaching and learning context involves motivation, skills, positive learning, an organizational atmosphere and culture, resources and infrastructure (Stoll 2006). This means that those who are tasked with

support teaching and learning should first create an environment that is conducive to the teaching and learning process. They should do so by making the school a professional learning community.

However, in most countries the existing model of professional development has failed to improve teaching (Allen et al. 2005). For instance, in cities like Chicago, Milwaukee and Seattle in the United States of America, district officials are unable to improve, on a large scale, practice in schools (Allen et al. 2005). In these education districts policies and signals are non-specific regarding their intended effects on classroom teaching and learning, and the standards set by the central district offices specify only content, as they do not address pedagogy (Allen et al. 2005). This means that any form of support given to teachers to enhance the teaching and learning process should focus on what teachers do in their classrooms and how learners respond to the teaching process itself. In simple terms, the teaching process must facilitate the learning process. Any teaching process that does not enhance learning is a futile exercise.

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) argue that as people in education, one needs to understand the conditions in which teachers acquire and use new knowledge and skills. This gives a deeper insight into effective models of professional development. Teachers should not be seen as persons who just impart knowledge to learners. They should be seen as both learners and teachers. The idea that teachers should be co-workers in their own improvement was advocated by Lieberman (1995) and has since gained credence and some support in educational circles. Borko (2004) also argues that teacher development should not be one-sided. Any attempts to develop teachers need to be based on theories of professional development that include both the cognitive and social aspects of learning. They must not focus singularly on either cognitive or social perspectives, but must include both.

Teachers need opportunities to share what they know, to discuss what they want to learn and to connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts. "Support is also needed for teachers to reflect on their current practice and adapt new knowledge and beliefs to their own teaching contexts" (Lieberman 1995: 2). Lieberman (1995) further argues that for schools to be regarded as transformed

organizations, educationalists need to recognize that teachers and learners work together collectively to solve problems and that supporting teaching and learning is more than just inserting a new curriculum or a new program. It requires knowledge of how the content and the learning process can be redefined, so that teachers and learners are active in pursuit of the learning goals. Furthermore, any attempts to assist teachers in their work should not only focus on what teachers teach but should include teachers' pedagogical knowledge and their pedagogical content knowledge (Carpenter et al. 1988).

The National Department of Basic Education is taking various measures to improve learners' outcomes, and amongst these is the support that teachers should get from Subject Advisors. Dilotsohle et al. (2001) argue that the situation can primarily be improved by putting Subject Advisors at the center of existing teacher in-service development. The current practice is that policymakers adopt a program, and then wait to see if learners' achievement scores will improve. When they hear complaints that the policy is not working fully, for instance, about the terminology used in the curriculum, they immediately begin to consider alternatives to the existing curriculum. They meet, and soon there is a new recommendation, and then a change of curriculum.

This whole process goes on without stakeholders ever collecting data on whether or not the original program was correctly implemented in classrooms and how effective it was in promoting student learning. The education of learners has to take a specific direction that will allow them to become knowledgeable and skillful citizens and this is largely dependent on the effectiveness of teachers. In South Africa, the Subject Advisors' role is assumed to be that of making teachers effective in their dealings with learners during the teaching and learning process (Department of Education 2006; Mavuso 2013). This means that the role of Subject Advisors, like that of pedagogical Advisors, is to guide, tutor, coach, counsel, mentor, support and advise (Kass and Rajuan 2012).

In a democratic society educators are expected to teach the whole child, creating caring classrooms, building communities of learning where every learner has access to knowledge, and teaching students how to be active citizens (Goodlad and Keating 1994; Noddings 2002). Teachers have to work with students in a man-

ner that is collaborative rather than imposing, thereby promoting the understanding of different points of view and problem solving, resulting in action that is forward looking. This means, therefore, that in South Africa, as in any democratic country, Subject Advisors should embark on action that strives for professional learning communities. It is for this reason that this study sought to unearth how Subject Advisors provide professional support to teachers.

Fullan's (2006) change theory distinguishes between standard based district wide reform initiative theory and professional learning community theory. According to Fullan (2006), change theory or change knowledge can be meaningful and very powerful in informing education reform strategies and subsequently, get results only in the hands of people who have deep knowledge of the dynamics of how the factors in question operate to get particular results.

The Subject Advisor, as one of the key officials in the process of bringing about reforms that target the attainment of learner results is vital in any education initiative. The question, now, is whether their actions are inclined towards standard based initiatives or are more tilted towards a process that considers professional learning communities. The standard based district initiative on one hand, involves the identification of world-class standards, a system of assessments mapped on to the standards, the development of a curriculum based on the standards and assessments and more focused on a serious investment in ongoing professional development for school leaders and teachers. A professional learning community on the other hand involves developing communities of learners in which teachers and school leaders strive together to improve the learning conditions and results of learners (Fullan 2006).

The research question that this study sought to answer is:

*What are the practices of Subject Advisors in supporting teaching and learning in South African schools?*

## Objectives

The aim of this paper was to investigate the perceptions of Subject Advisors on their practices of supporting teaching and learning. This was done by investigating what Subject Advisors understood to be their role in supporting

teaching and learning in schools. This paper also explored the strategies that are employed by Subject Advisors in supporting teaching and learning in schools and how they assist to resource the teaching and learning process. It also sought to investigate how Subject Advisors motivate teachers in schools.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is an approach in which researchers are concerned with understanding the meaning, which people attach to their experiences or phenomena within their society (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). The researcher used qualitative research because this study was about exploring the perspectives of Subject Advisors on their practices of supporting teaching and learning in South African schools. Two Subject Advisors each from two underperforming Education Districts in the Eastern Cape were purposively sampled. In purposive sampling, people or other units are selected for a particular purpose. For instance, the researchers might choose people who they have decided are typical of a group or those who represent diverse perspective on an issue or phenomenon (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). Subject Advisors were selected because they were the officials tasked to support curriculum delivery in South African schools. Since this study was premised from interpretive paradigm the researcher used face-to-face interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of Subject Advisors on their practices of supporting teaching and learning in schools. The data was analyzed by means of the qualitative research method. As advised by Leedy and Ormrod (2005), the raw data was categorized into themes.

### Ethical Considerations

Issues of confidentiality were observed. Kumar (2005) argues that each profession has its set principles that change according to the expectations of the particular society it serves. Research, like any other profession, has its principles. 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. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) noted that

ethical issues involve looking into the implication of focusing on human beings in the research or investigation. Confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent were observed. The data was only used for the purpose of research and the names of the participants were not divulged. All participants were invited to participate in the study but none of them was forced to participate.

### RESULTS

#### Practices of Subject Advisors in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools

##### *Teacher Support, Involvement and Resourcing of Teaching and Learning Process*

The data revealed that Subject Advisors viewed working closely with teachers as supporting teaching and learning process. They reported that they conduct regular school visits. On their part, Subject Advisors confirmed that they work very closely with teachers. When asked how he supports teachers in schools, Subject Advisor 1 indicated that they (Subject Advisors) support teachers to be better teachers by assisting them in the work they are doing. He noted that:

*...We normally undertake the school support visit. The tools that we use are two-fold. First we monitor progress in the work schedules. That is where we have a better chance of identifying the areas where there are short falls and then once we identify those, we focus on how we can assist the educator so that the educator can perform better on those aspects.*

From this quotation, it is apparent that Subject Advisor 1 viewed support for teaching and learning as something that can be achieved through school support visits. However, according to this Subject Advisor there was nothing that took into consideration the practices of the teachers themselves and how they (teachers) think they can improve their situation. From these visits, it was obvious that Subject Advisor 1 intended to monitor the progress of teaching and learning activities in schools and the approach that he used to do this was reactive diagnosis, as he acted only when he found short falls in the monitored work of educators. This means that from Subject Advisor 1's point of view, visiting schools and assisting educators

in areas they identify through monitoring is the effective way of supporting teaching and learning. One could also see that Subject Advisor 1's efforts were concentrated on monitoring the work of teachers as he looked into the amount of work that had been covered by them in their work schedules. It emerged from this quote that Subject Advisor 1 regards support for teaching and learning as an activity that focuses on making teachers better teachers through the delivery of content to learners. Although from Subject advisor 1's point of view, teaching and learning support means monitoring the work of teachers and assisting teachers where there are gaps, Subject Advisor 2 indicated:

*...I support teachers in various ways. One is to workshop teachers, and two, I provide on-site support by visiting schools. So we are able to sit with teachers on a one-to-one basis. We also have meetings with teachers at cluster level, especially for the primary schools, because most teachers are not qualified in the subject I am supporting. You can feel that teachers really appreciate your support and that makes me feel that I am making a difference.*

Subject Advisor 2 viewed support for teachers in three ways. One was through workshops, the other was in the form of school visits and the third were cluster visits. With regard to workshops, although no elaboration was given, it can be assumed that these focus on matters relating to teaching and learning. The one-on-one interaction between Subject Advisor 2 and teacher during school visits allows for closer and personalized support, whereas cluster level meetings assume that teachers work in clusters to support one another. Subject Advisor 2 utilized these structures and events to deliver further input in terms of subject content and teaching strategies. Although Subject Advisor 2 was not clear about what normally transpires in a one-on-one session, it is assumed that teachers raise their individual problems, which they expect Subject Advisors to address. Subject Advisor 2 further indicated that teachers are clustered, and at cluster level they learn from each other.

Subject Advisor 1 further indicated:

*...To make sure that the educator, who is teaching that subject, is getting the necessary support, as not every educator is offering the subject that he or she is comfortable with because of the subject allocation and qualifica-*

*tion in the subject, but to boost that confidence, I think that support is very much necessary.*

It can be seen from this excerpt that Subject Advisor 1 emphasizes support for teachers in teaching and learning, and that he sees to it that teachers are comfortable with the subject they teach. Although he did not expand on how he makes teachers comfortable with their subjects, it could be assumed that he assists them in content mastery and pedagogy, which is the core business of schools.

Subject Advisor 1 also reported that he did not only support the teacher with the content but also with the methods of teaching a subject. He noted that some teachers had brilliant ideas and in-depth understanding of the content but lacked strategies and methods of transferring the content to the learners. He noted that when they encountered a grey area in a specific topic, the Subject Advisor would assist that particular teacher in his/her classroom by demonstrating the best approaches and methods for tackling that topic. He reported that he made use of other teachers who were good in a particular topic and who were confident enough to demonstrate it, and where there was no one confident enough, he took it upon himself to do it. Although Subject Advisor 1 showed much dedication to his work in terms of visiting teachers in their classrooms, he did not say anything relating to what teachers felt about their involvement in their own improvement. This means that some Subject Advisors do not see teachers as curriculum developers and as reflective practitioners in the teaching and learning process. Also, the Subject Advisors indicated that they support teachers by visiting them in schools. There was no indication of how they resource the teaching and learning process.

### **Teacher Motivation**

Subject Advisor 2 indicated that he motivated teachers and learners to do their work. He noted:

*...My job as Subject Advisor primarily is assisting teachers on subject content, and the other thing it goes with is motivating teachers to do their work. I also try to motivate learners sometimes especially when teachers are faced with a problem of discipline. Though the task of motivating learners is the task of the Education Development Officers (EDOs), we do it because it impacts curriculum delivery.*

It is noted from the above point of view that Subject Advisor 2 supports teachers in matters that relate to subject content and that from Subject Advisor 2's point of view EDOs are supposed to also motivate learners when they go about supporting teaching and learning in schools. Subject Advisors, as indicated in the above excerpt, play the role of motivating learners when they seem to be demotivated. All Subject Advisors indicated that they use an instrument to support teachers when they visit schools. They indicated that they check on the syllabus coverage and allow teachers to raise their problems relating to subject content. Subject Advisor 1 indicated:

*...Visits are mainly about curriculum coverage, that is, how much work we have covered per term as per requirement. We normally subdivide the work schedule into terms and we use an instrument that is called a pacesetter, so that an educator, who might be lagging far behind, might know where he should be when, so that the pace is sustained. So that by the end of the term when we are going for moderation, every item including assessment tasks are intact and then that educator can be assisted accordingly.*

From Subject Advisor 1's point of view when he visits schools he concentrates mainly on the work that has been covered by teachers. This could also mean that Subject Advisors 1's support for teaching and learning is informed by what he discovers in the work of teachers, which means therefore, that his support is tailor-made for specific circumstances.

The tool used by Subject Advisors that the researcher analyzed was for both monitoring and support. Whenever Subject Advisors visited a school, they would indicate the purpose of their visit in the tool, indicating whether it was for monitoring purposes or supporting purposes. Monitoring, according to the tool, involves checking if teachers are doing their work properly, and support means giving assistance to teachers in their work. From the tool, the researcher realized that classroom visits, demonstration lessons, cooperative planning teaching and school-based workshops are supposed to be done at school. However, none of the participants except for Subject Advisor 1 indicated that they conducted classroom visits to support teachers in their classroom. Instead, as has

been noted, teachers are reluctant to be visited in their classrooms.

All Subject Advisors indicated that teachers are demotivated. Through dealing with teachers, they realized the teachers' situation and were able to motivate them and encourage them during the sessions to do their work. Subject Advisor 1 reported:

*...It is very general to say this is what we are doing but we make sure that we make a space for a general motivation for teachers in our sessions. There is a sense that teachers generally are getting more and more demotivated. We need to have short pep talks with them so that they can feel that what they are experiencing is not unique to them but is a general issue and it is acknowledged. Under those circumstances we should not have high expectations of them. We should be realistic. In a way, it becomes a buy-in by the teachers because they might end up not even attending our sessions if we are looking to be hard on them by being unrealistic in our expectations. I think motivation is working. You should make sure that you make them understand that you also understand the situation that they are working under. For example, some of them had their contracts terminated at the beginning of the year and some are not citizens and they are not sure whether they are in the system. On the other side, we should maintain standards in our expectations of them. This helps develop trust between you and them.*

It can be seen from what was noted by Subject Advisor 1, that the work of supporting teaching and learning in schools is affected by the low morale amongst teachers. Support according to this point of view involves motivating teachers to do their work. Subject Advisor 1 had to engage in exercises that deal with relationships if he wanted to achieve his objective of making teachers master content and teaching methods. If support includes motivating teachers to do their work, then support for teaching and learning is a complex exercise, which is not just an emphasis on the mastery of content and teaching methods, but also an exercise that needs systematic application by those tasked with supporting teaching and learning, taking into consideration teachers' circumstances.

It can also be seen from this excerpt that Subject Advisor 1, because of the situations in which teachers find themselves, sometimes com-

promised his expectations, as he did not want to be unrealistic about fellow teachers. Both Subject Advisors indicated that their interest was in supporting the work of teachers. Subject Advisor 2 indicated that he feels great when he is able to make an impact on a wide range of learners through assisting teachers in different schools. Both of them indicated that they enjoyed visiting schools to assist teachers in their work at school level.

Subject Advisor 1 reported that being a Subject Advisor was a dream job for him. He noted that it was the best thing, so far, that he had experienced, and that it was also something that he wished to experience for a long time. He further argued that a Subject Advisor is a field worker. That is the basic job description. He reported that, normally Subject Advisors, assembled in the district office on Fridays, and Mondays to Thursdays, they were in the field. It also became clear that Subject Advisors are better positioned because they manage and identify where the problems are. Even when they report to their supervisors, they have firsthand information, which allows their supervisors to develop trust in them. Though this is clearly outlined, Subject Advisor 1 and Subject Advisor 2 seemed not to view support for teaching and learning as a process of establishing systems. However, it appeared that they do support teachers in terms of professional development and monitoring of inputs, though their support was mainly a reaction to content problems raised by teachers.

### DISCUSSION

With regards to Subject Advisors' practices of supporting teaching and learning in schools they conducted school visits and support teachers at school level. This is in line with what Lugaz and De Grauwe (2010) referred to as 'pedagogical support advice' where Pedagogical Advisors in the local education office visit schools to give pedagogical advice to educators at the school level. However, their support for teaching and learning was not reciprocal as there were no indications that teachers' views were considered in the Subject Advisors' planning. This approach indicates that Subject Advisors see themselves as experts and teachers as recipients of knowledge. This means, therefore, that the suggestion by Lieberman (1995) that teachers be coworkers in their own improvement was not followed by

Subject Advisors when they gave teachers support. Although support for teaching and learning was top-down, teachers at cluster level were allowed to interact and learn from one another. This was in line with what Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) referred to as teachers as both learners and teachers in the teaching and learning process.

What was noted by some other Subject Advisors in relation to motivating teachers to do their work and learners in their schoolwork was in line with the proposition by Hightower et al. (2011). Hightower et al (2011) noted that support involves placing before one something that is weakening or falling with the intention of giving life to it. However, there was no indication as suggested by Fullan (2006) of how Subject Advisors go deeper at classroom level and impact the teachers' pedagogical knowledge, since teaching and learning should occur in an atmosphere that is conducive to such activities, that is, where there is a high level of motivation and discipline.

In spite of Khosa's (2010) contention that the role of districts in provincial education systems is to support schools with resources, systems and professional development and to monitor their utilization of inputs and achievement of targets, there Subject Advisors did not indicate that they assist schools with resources and assist schools in establishing teaching and learning support systems.

### CONCLUSION

The data revealed that Subject Advisors perceive their practices of supporting teaching and learning as focusing on teachers, in order to improve learner outcomes. It can also be concluded that some Subject Advisors view teacher motivation as crucial in the process of supporting teaching and learning in schools. However, their support for teaching and learning was dominated by checking and control. Little if any attention was paid to how teachers teach their subjects, and there was no indication of any focus on how learners learn what is taught by teachers. Furthermore, the approach was top-down as there was no indication of whether teachers participate in the planning of their own support programs. This means that Subject Advisors' practices of supporting teaching and learning were based on inspection rather than coaching teachers at classroom level. It can also be concluded that Subject Advisors were not

involved in the resourcing of teaching and learning process, as there was no indication that they were helping teachers with the necessary teaching and learning material.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends that Subject Advisors have pre-sessions with teachers and develop a coherent support program together with their teachers. The paper also recommends that the authorities in the Department of Basic Education develop a model, which will inform the process of supporting teaching and learning in schools. This model should adopt a two-way traffic approach wherein teachers will be able to air their views on their teaching experiences and, in return, Subject Advisors will be able to plan and support teachers based on their needs. This means that Subject Advisors' instructional support be dominated by interactive sessions where teachers reflect on their context and are afforded opportunities to share what they know, discuss what they want to learn and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts. It is also recommended that Subject Advisors work with teachers to identify helpful teaching and learning material.

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