

How Heads of Departments Understand Their Roles as Instructional Leaders: A South African Study

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on a qualitative study that explored instructional leadership in selected schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Numerous studies emphasize the principals' role as an instructional leader and the influence of instructional leadership on learner achievement. The researcher's premise is that instructional leadership is not limited to the principal but extends to heads of departments. The study focuses on how heads of departments understand their instructional leadership role; how they lead the teachers in their departments; and what they do to ensure effective teaching and learning. Data were generated using semi-structured interviews with nine heads of departments. The findings revealed that the heads of departments perceived their instructional leadership responsibilities as task-oriented focusing on monitoring and controlling teachers' work. Their leadership involved modelling, motivating teachers and establishing good interpersonal relationships. The strategies used by the heads of departments varied due to the absence of standardized training.

INTRODUCTION

Instructional leadership can be described as supervision and evaluation of instruction, curriculum coordination and monitoring of learner performance (Shoma et al. 2016). Instructional leaders focus on achieving school goals, curriculum implementation and teaching and learning (Hallinger and Walker 2014). Through instructional leadership teachers are developed by networking with other teachers or registering for formal courses to become competent in and confident of their teaching strategies and to use teaching and learning resources effectively (Donkor and Asante 2016). The definition and the characteristics of instructional leadership have changed over the years and a twenty-first century understanding of instructional leadership includes modelling instructional behavior, collaborating and coaching teachers. Instead of controlling and monitoring teaching practices, instructional leaders encourage teachers to network and develop leadership skills through distributive leadership practices (Valle et al. 2015). The reality is that not all aspects of instructional leadership are practiced in different schools. For example, some principals focus on supervision, support and development of teachers; others concentrate more on curriculum planning and

implementation, which is regarded as the traditional definition of instructional leadership (Donkor and Asante 2016). Furthermore, despite the numerous studies that emphasize the role of the school principal as an instructional leader, some principals are not experts in teaching and learning - which is at the core of instructional leadership (Hallinger and Walker 2014). Other principals are more inclined to administrative work and pay little attention to teaching, learning and other instructional activities.

A study by Donkor and Asante (2016) found that principals as instructional leaders are responsible for communicating curriculum issues and monitoring teaching and learning by ensuring proper planning and instruction delivery. In their study on the relationship between the instructional behavior of high school principals and teachers' organizational commitment, Sarikaya and Erdogan (2016) found that teachers felt that principals focused on bureaucratic tasks more than supporting and developing them. The study also indicated that principals concentrated on setting and sharing goals rather than establishing positive relationships with the teachers (Sarikaya and Erdogan 2016). In such schools, the effect of the principal's instructional leadership on teaching and learning may be considered to have an indirect influence

on teaching and learning. In this paper, it is argued that heads of departments in schools also work closely with the teachers in implementing the curriculum and they are better positioned to implement the principles and practices of instructional leadership to improve teaching and learning directly. For this reason, they should be equipped with the knowledge and skills for instructional leadership.

In the South African context, heads of departments and, in some cases, subject heads are members of School Management Teams (SMTs) and they form part of the leadership team which assumes a role in instructional leadership. The instructional leadership role of the head of department is to ensure effective teaching and learning and promote and develop teachers to ensure that ongoing professional growth (Ghavifekr and Ibrahim 2014). Seobi and Wood (2016) reported in their study that heads of departments used team work and the involvement of all stakeholders to improve teaching and learning in their schools. The approach to instructional leadership in their study was based on establishing good relationships that enriched collaboration among the different stakeholders and created a school climate that supported teaching and learning (Seobi and Wood 2016). These findings (Seobi and Wood 2016) are congruent with the Norms and Standards for Educators Act No. 27 (South Africa 1996) which stipulates that heads of department as instructional leaders are leaders in curriculum development and implementation, leaders in appraising and supervising teachers as well as in the professional development of teachers. These expectations balance the task and relationship responsibilities expected of the head of department. In order for heads of department to perform the expected roles, they should have knowledge of and skills in their subject and be capable of transferring them to the teachers in their departments to enhance the latter's competency and enable an improvement in learner achievement (Ghavifekr and Ibrahim 2014). Apart from being experts in their field, Smith et al. (2013) assert that heads of department should also be committed to professional growth and the development of people skills to improve interpersonal relationships with and among their teachers. Thus, they need to develop leadership and management skills to fulfill the expectations associated with their changing role.

In another study, Smith et al. (2013) explored how role-players experienced and perceived the role of heads of departments as instructional leaders in selected secondary schools in the Johannesburg South school district. The study found that in their role as instructional leaders, heads of departments experienced challenges in performing multiple tasks which are time consuming. Some of their functions included checking the schemes of work, lesson plans, class journals and subjects' logbooks. Manaseh (2016) asserts that, despite the administrative work of the heads of departments, checking the planning of teaching does not guarantee completion of the syllabi within the school year nor effective teaching and learning. Ghavifekr and Ibrahim (2014) found that apart from supervising the administrative work of the teachers, heads of departments also mentor teachers in teaching skills, improve teachers' professional competencies and enable them to access professional development resources. However, what was missing in the aforementioned study by Ghavifekr and Ibrahim (2014) was the development of good communication skills that could enhance the leadership of heads of departments. The role-players in the study by Smith et al. (2013) also perceived a lack of experience among heads of department who need training to support their teachers effectively. A lack of competency of heads of department in subject areas was also reported as a limitation on their ability to guide their teachers in effective teaching skills and subject knowledge (Smith et al. 2013).

In some South African schools, the role of the heads of department in developing teachers is also affected by radical and inconsistent changes in government policy and lack of support in terms of training by the Department of Education (Smith et al. 2013). Such changes affect both curriculum implementation and the leadership skills of heads of department. Heads of departments need appropriate, ongoing training and support to be good instructional leaders who can implement the curriculum effectively and encourage the professional development of their teachers (Smith et al. 2013). The main question posed in this paper is: without the necessary training, what are the heads of departments doing in their schools regarding instructional leadership?

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm (Creswell 2013). Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the issues being researched from the participants' perspectives (Cohen et al. 2011). The qualitative approach used in this study enabled the researcher to generate data related to the lived experiences of the participants and the meanings they drew from their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with nine heads of department from three schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study employed purposeful and convenient sampling as a method of obtaining the required sample for the study (Cohen et al. 2011). All the participants had more than three years' experience as heads of department. The researcher aimed at collecting information and rich in-depth data from participants who had knowledge and experience of the position of head of department.

The research questions posed to participants were as follows:

- ♦ In your opinion what is your role as an instructional and teacher leader?
- ♦ How do you lead teachers in your department?
- ♦ How do you ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place?

The interviews were conducted after school hours at a place convenient to the participants who gave written consent to participate in the study. The duration of interviews was between 45 and 60 minutes; interviews were digitally audio-recorded where afterwards they were transcribed. Data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed by a content analysis approach. The transcripts of the interviews were coded and categorized and then the different categories were merged to form themes (Neuman 2014). To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the research processes and data were peer reviewed. Member-checking was also carried out by asking the participants to comment on the categories and themes that emerged from the data (Creswell 2013) and to add or delete information in the transcripts. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time and how the findings of the study would be used (Newman 2014).

RESULTS

Perceptions of Heads of Department of their Instructional Role and Teacher Leadership

In this study the researcher wanted to establish how heads of department perceived their role as instructional and teacher leaders. Different perceptions of the leadership role of heads of department emerged from the interviews. Although the participants were comfortable discussing the concept of teacher leadership, their descriptions how they fulfilled their leadership role disclosed an imbalance between the functions of leadership and management which is reflected in the following comments:

I check that teaching and learning takes place in the classrooms. I also check the performance of learners. Poor performance of learning means that the teacher needs help. I also check a sample of ten percent of the learners' work (HOD 1).

I monitor and supervise them [teachers]. I check the test they give the learners for faults (HOD 6).

I check the learners' books and the teachers' work. I set exam timetables and moderate the question papers and the marked work. I mark two exam scripts from every teacher (HOD 9).

Monitoring and controlling the work done by teachers is regarded by some of the heads of department as their main responsibility, although they are aware of the expectations related to their role as teacher leaders. The participants responded to the question concerning their perceptions of their leadership role as follows:

I can say that, in my view, teacher leadership should focus on uplifting people in the department. I have to ensure that the teaching and learning goes on as expected in the department. When there are needs in my department, I report to the principal who supports us. I have a strong bond with my teachers (HOD 5).

I think that teacher leadership is about guiding people and giving them direction (HOD 6).

The above quotation implies that HoDs perceive their role as encouraging and supporting teachers to reach higher levels of competency to extend themselves.

How Heads of Department Lead the Teachers in their Schools

Heads of department are expected to be leaders in curriculum implementation and pedagogy.

In this study the researcher asked the heads of department to describe how they lead the teachers in their departments. Responses from the participants illustrate the different ways in which the heads of department play their role as leaders:

I lead by example. I expect them to do things that I do. For example: submission of marks. I am the first one to submit the marks. I believe in 'leading from the front'. We have a meeting to recap on what happens in our classes. We have the meeting every morning. Teachers state their challenges and we talk about them (HOD 3).

I lead by example. If the teachers are having problems with filing, I call them and show them how to do the filing then if it is still not right I fix the file for the teacher. I encourage my teachers to give extra lessons four hours every Saturday morning and afternoon extra classes for the learners to catch-up with the work and the teachers also get opportunity to assist learners who are struggling. We have a time-table for the extra lessons and I am also involved in teaching the extra lessons. The HODs are like the 'Generals' and the teachers are 'foot soldiers' (HOD 8).

The extracts show how some heads of department assume the role of mentor which enables them to influence the behavior of their teachers positively. The heads of department related how they motivate teachers to do extra work in order to improve learner performance, not only by giving teachers' instructions and schedules but also by participating themselves in a rigorous programme of extra lessons after school hours. Apart from providing strong role models for the teachers to emulate, some of their leadership skills involve increasing contact and communication with the teachers to foster interpersonal relationships as demonstrated by the following quotations.

My leadership involves frequent meetings. I meet with my teachers after SMT meetings. We discuss the issues that emerge during the management meetings. Sometimes I involve subject advisors to help my maths teachers. We also have subject heads to help other teachers (HOD 5).

I lead the teachers in my department by establishing a good relationship with them. The communication between the HOD and the teachers must be good. This creates a positive teaching culture (HOD 9).

In addition to face to face communication, HODs use information technology to transmit important instructions quickly and efficiently to their teachers. They also highlighted the value of clearly formulated departmental policies as a point of reference in communicating professional expectations to teachers.

I lead teachers through e-mail and SMS that I send during break time. When I get information from the Subject Advisor I send it to my teachers via email and SMS. I take the leadership role in implementing changes in the curriculum and moderate exam papers. I supervise curriculum implementation (HOD 2).

We have drawn a departmental policy that was tabled with them. We then follow the policy. Any deviant behavior is addressed. For example, adherence to timeframe of tasks. We keep on reminding them. We ask question about the cause of the delay in submissions of marks. Task loses meaning if brought back late (HOD 4).

The variety in the leadership strategies mentioned by participants suggests individual innovation, diligence and authentic concern about teacher support in the interests of learner achievement. However, as instructional leaders heads of departments did not demonstrate an overall, intentional and comprehensive strategy. Possibly this is the result of the lack of standardized leadership training for heads of department.

Ensuring Effective Teaching and Learning

Curriculum implementation remains an important responsibility of heads of department. The heads of department who participated in this study described the different means they use to ensure effective teaching and learning in their schools. One strategy is to encourage teachers to communicate openly with the head of department and thus, to inspire greater teacher commitment to excellence in teaching and learning. This is highlighted by the following remarks:

In our meeting we talk about teaching and learning. We talk about an atmosphere in which the love of learning can grow. We encourage teachers to prepare themselves in order not to be surprised. We only see subject advisors once a year. Effective teaching and learning happens because of 'the love of teaching' (HOD 3).

I believe in an 'open door policy.' The teachers can come to me any time if they need my assistance. I do assist them immediately. I keep

my diary and I phone my teachers to share the latest developments in the subject. I believe in 'doing it today' (HOD 2).

The process of ensuring effective teaching and learning relies on the leadership and management skills of the heads of department. They play a leadership role in motivating teachers to develop their teaching and learning strategies so that the performance of their learners can also improve. Ownership of learner achievement is encouraged as a way of ensuring effective teaching and learning. HOD 4 commented:

I motivate my teachers. I analyse results and motivate them to improve in cases where the results are below average. We use a rotation teaching strategy in which one teacher takes the learners through from Grade 10 to Grade 12 in the FET phase and the GET phase (Grades 8 and 9). I tell the teachers that the results of Grade 12s are their results and nobody else's work and results.

Apart from stressing teacher accountability for learner performance, some of the heads of departments value clarity on what is expected of the teachers and regular, frequent collaboration in planning and implementing the curriculum as strategies that contribute to effective teaching and learning. Examples of their comments are the following:

I make sure that the teachers know what is expected of them. They must be doing what they are supposed to do. We plan together and agree on how to draw up lesson plans, do assessments and exams. We meet every Thursday to discuss the challenges and success experienced by the teachers. We also discuss submission due dates for lesson plans, files checklist, learners' books and portfolios. On Tuesdays and Thursdays we have informal test periods (HOD 8).

What I do to ensure that teaching and learning takes place is that I involve the teachers in my department in three levels of planning. The first level is the lesson preparation that we do every Monday. The second one is work schedules and the third phase is learning programmes. All the teachers are part of this exercise. What work well are the monthly test and the target learning areas. Our average is above sixty percent in all subjects (HOD 9).

Furthermore, the heads of department talked of their role in controlling and checking what the teachers do in class in the light of teaching and learning:

It is unfortunate but I must say that teachers do not like teaching. I have to walk around during lesson time to see what is happening in the classrooms. I do class visits and I also sample 10% of the learners' work, like test papers. I re-mark and moderate the test scripts. I ask the teachers about how they are progressing in terms of covering the syllabus. I provide guidance where there are problems such as when the teacher is struggling to teach a particular topic (HOD 5).

I pray to God that they do their work. If I have a free period, I go to one teacher a week. I check work but I do not police them. If there is a problem, I assist immediately. Monthly test and target learning areas works well. We target to get an average performance of above 60% in the subject (HOD 3).

Monitoring and controlling the teachers' work concerning curriculum implementation through regular classroom visits, sampling learners' work and providing prompt assistance where teachers have problems emerged as components of the role of the heads of department in this study. These findings show that the heads of departments are more aware of and committed to the management aspect of their role as heads of department compared to the leadership aspect.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to investigate how heads of department in the selected schools understand their instructional leadership role; how they lead the teachers in their departments; and what they do to ensure effective teaching and learning. The South Africa Department of Education (2006) stipulates that heads of department should assume leadership and management roles in their departments; they are held accountable for setting and advancing departmental strategies to realise their schools' strategic goals. The findings of this study show that the heads of department perceive their role as being accountable for the teaching and learning that takes place in their departments as they emphasized checking teachers' work during classroom observation, weekly plans and moderating learners' books. The monitoring and controlling of teachers' work seems to be regarded by most heads of department as their key responsibility. The heads of departments per-

ceived their key responsibility as managing tasks, which was done in a mechanical and rigid manner. Manaseh (2016) reported similar findings: the heads of schools in his study monitored teaching and learning by checking the schemes of work, lesson plans, subject logbooks and class journals. The underlying assumption in such findings is that teachers' competence is primarily demonstrated by doing administrative work that relates to teaching and learning. Effective teaching and learning is measured through the analysis of the paper work presented by the teachers. This focus on the administrative tasks could be due to the fact that it is structured and provides guidelines on what is expected and what should be achieved within a certain timeframe.

The responses of the participants in this study regarding their leadership role revealed several strategies such as motivating teachers, commitment to extra work and acting as role models, mentors and effective communicators which included the use of technology. In another study Seobi and Wood (2016) also reported that the heads of departments were people-oriented and established positive and sound relationships that motivated their teachers who felt appreciated; this inspired commitment to their work. Establishing a positive instructional relationship with the teachers in the absence of training may be as a result of personality of the heads of departments, self-confidence in being a good role model, mentor and communicator. However, heads of departments who do not have such attributes may not be in a position to establish positive relationships with their teachers and it could result in ineffective leadership.

The different findings on what heads of departments do as instructional leaders affirm a need for standardized training to acquire the knowledge and skills to fulfill the role of instructional leader in the twenty-first century. Valle et al. (2015) assert that, in the current context, instructional leaders require multiple intelligences and should establish effective relationships as mentors and coaches to develop teachers. Instructional leadership calls for school leaders to re-think their conventional role and be creative in developing the knowledge and skills that teachers need to be effective. In addition, the absence of policy guidelines for development of instructional leadership knowledge and skills and continuous support for the instructional

leaders further creates a gap between what is expected in the leadership of teaching and learning and what is happening in reality.

The findings of this study regarding instructional leadership of the head of department and effective teaching and learners emphasized goal setting, teacher accountability, ownership of learner achievement and open communication as factors that contribute to effective teaching and learning. The listed strategies require teamwork and collaboration between the heads of departments and the teachers and among the teachers. Stating achievement goals and objectives should be reinforced by empowering teachers and supporting them in achieving the set goals (Shoma et al. 2016). The development of people skills to establish sound interpersonal relationship is crucial if heads of departments are to create a positive teaching and learning environment (Smith et al. 2013). Furthermore, the findings of this study also revealed how the heads of department exercise their power of authority and their expertise in their subjects in managing their departments. This finding affirms the statement by Valle et al. (2015) that an instructional leader in the twenty-first century should develop human capital through modelling instructional behavior to improve learner achievement.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show how heads of departments perceive their roles and what they do as leaders in their schools. The heads of departments described their roles mainly as monitoring and controlling what teachers do in their classes and other teaching-related activities outside the classroom. Their leadership roles include modelling professional behavior, motivating teachers and establishing good interpersonal relationships with teachers to enhance teaching and learning. The strategies used by the heads of departments who participated in this study differ from one to another. The reason for such variety could be attributed to the lack of standardized training for heads of department and policies on teacher development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- ♦ Although it seems that all the participant heads of departments in this study are passionate about monitoring and controlling of the work done by their teachers, there should be more emphasis on identifying the professional development needs of teachers in the process of monitoring and controlling their work.
- ♦ Heads of departments should be developed in terms of appropriate training so that they are able to develop their teachers. Just as there are structures for monitoring and controlling the teachers' work, there should also be structures and guidelines that heads of departments can follow in the professional development of their teachers.
- ♦ Collaboration and effective communication that were cited by the heads of departments in this study should be used as a starting point in developing their skills as effective instructional leaders.
- ♦ Intensive and standardised training should be instituted for heads of department in terms of subject knowledge and skills for them to become better mentors for their teachers. As suggested by HOD 8: *A competent 'General' will be in a position to lead his/her 'foot soldiers' better than a less competent 'General'*.
- ♦ The use of technology in the instructional leadership of heads of department should be part of the training for HoDs. Available tools, like WhatsApp, should be used to discuss and share different aspects related to subject content in different departments. Most teachers in South Africa have cell phones; therefore, they are in a position to use phone applications creatively in education.

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