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CHALLENGES FACED BY PRINCIPALS IN EMPOWERING HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS TO EXECUTE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to examine the ways in which rural secondary school principals empower heads of departments (HODs) in executing their obligatory duties as instructional leaders. How principals can empower the (HODs) is the main thesis of this article. The emphasis will be on principals' experiences in executing their mandated instructional leadership responsibilities in the Tshwane-West District, in Gauteng province of South Africa. The thesis of this paper is that when principals are unable to adhere to their obligations of empowering the HODs, a culture of effective teaching and learning is compromised, and student performance is not enhanced. Therefore, it becomes an issue if the rural secondary school principal is not held accountable for effective teaching and learning in schools. Design, method, and strategy. A questionnaire was utilized to collect the data. A thorough application of the knowledge gathered from the literature review, and the questionnaire's content was made to hold up tightly. The pilot study was used to validate the questionnaires. The triangulation of data from many diverse sources, including focus-group interviews and the questionnaire, served as the foundational method of reliability in this study. Principals of rural secondary schools in South Africa's Gauteng province's Tshwane-West District made up the study's sample. All 55 secondary schools located in the Tshwane West District were included in the study using the total sample methodology.

Keywords: empowerment, instructional leadership, principals, head of departments, rural secondary schools

INTRODUCTION

The study examined how rural secondary school principals empower Heads of Departments (HODs) to fulfill their instructional leadership duties, focusing on their obligations set forth in tandem with the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996. Principals are expected to actively involve HODs in rural school management reforms, implement change, innovate, and empower them as instructional leaders to improve a culture of teaching and learning. However, fulfilling these mandated responsibilities poses challenges for principals, particularly in rural secondary schools. Additionally, principals are tasked with collaborating in formulating and communicating the school's vision and mission, which are essential for effective teaching, learning, and student performance. Effective leadership and management of teaching and learning are crucial in all schools, including those in rural areas, as evidenced by numerous studies. Principals should grant HODs autonomy and responsibility to monitor, guide, and support teachers with new teaching

methodologies in classrooms. However, many principals prioritize school financial matters, resource allocation, and policy imperatives over empowering HODs in instructional leadership, hindering the improvement of teaching and learning culture. The absence of a consistent culture of teaching and learning in many schools poses a significant challenge, leading to dysfunctional educational environments. To improve the quality of education in rural secondary schools, it is essential to hold principals accountable for empowering HODs as instructional leaders. Principals should support, guide, and mentor HODs by delegating strategic decision-making processes while ensuring accountability.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

This article seeks to examine the ways in which rural secondary school principals empower Heads of Departments (HODs) in executing their obligatory duties as instructional leaders. My aim is to determine whether rural secondary school principals are held accountable for empowering HODs with obligations regarding instructional leadership.

What challenges face rural secondary school principals in empowering HODs is the main thesis of this article? The article will be responding to question six on the interview protocol attached at the end of the article.

The question is stated below.

- *Explain the challenges you are faced with in empowering heads of departments (HODs) in executing their duties as an instructional leader in your school?*

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted in the Tshwane West District, Gauteng province, South Africa. Principals in this district are tasked with several responsibilities, including formulating clear curriculum objectives, guiding, and supporting HODs in implementing new teaching methodologies, ensuring proper guidance for teachers, maintaining fair, valid, and reliable assessment practices, and regularly meeting with HODs to discuss student progress and school academic performance. The sample consisted of 55 principals from schools in the Tshwane-West District.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Construct of Instructional Leadership

School principals play a crucial role in ensuring effective curriculum and instruction through instructional leadership, requiring consistent involvement in initiatives supporting student learning and development (Tracy-Bronson, 2024). They must cultivate positive relationships with HODs and teachers, provide guidance on new teaching methodologies, and support the development of competent HODs capable of leading and managing efficient teaching and learning (Stosich et al., 2024). Principals are expected to maintain dedication and commitment throughout to influence and improve student outcomes. Larsson & Löwstedt (2023). found that some principals merely place a secondary value on instructional leadership, with only a tiny fraction of principals' time focusing on curriculum activities. Therefore, principals must focus on

instruction and curriculum ahead of managerial responsibilities regarding their role as instructional leaders.

Challenges Facing Rural Secondary School Principals In Empowering HODs To Execute Their Duties As Instructional Leaders.

Eyana et al., (2024) maintain that empowering Heads of Departments (HODs) to act as instructional leaders poses challenges for rural secondary school principals not only within a specific regional context but also on a global educational landscape where various resource availability, contextual factors, and support structures influence their effectiveness. In the same vein, Ntuli et al., (2023) also maintain that the empowerment of HODs must be underpinned by a multifaceted dimension with strong discourse dependent on several factors such as instructional leadership and curriculum management, socio-economic conditions, and the demographic and geographical phenomena outside the classroom. As a result, Mbithe et al., (2022) advise that principals should offer professional and continuous development training to HODs in curriculum expertise, knowledge and skills that will increase the level of teaching and learning with the incorporation of new teaching methodologies.

Muhammad (2023) emphasise that HODs should be exposed to job-related knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to manage, support, monitor, and supervise teaching and learning. Undoubtedly, Awodiji & Naicker (2024) concur that HODs should be empowered and be exposed to requisite expertise and skills that relate to the realization of the vision and mission of the school. Therefore, principals as leaders and managers are expected to expose HODs to innovative strategies towards personal growth and knowledge of instructional leadership through empowerment of their respective subject departments. Swart et al., (2022) are of the view that HODs need to be empowered to acquire attributes that relate to values, goals, morals, and vision of the school. Thus, HODs, as leaders and managers ought to be decisive as decision-makers (Haase, 2023). They need to demonstrate leadership attributes that display a strong personality and be able to handle issues through problem-solving skills.

According to Martinez et al., (2023) each rural secondary school principal should serve as a mentor, change agent, role model, director of the educational institution, and manager of human resources in order to empower their HODs. Similarly, Raub et al., (2024) discovered a positive relationship between servant leadership and follower through a psychological empowerment and employee creativity with innovation. Academic success and school effectiveness can be improved in schools where the principal adopted a participatory leadership style and encouraged the HODs to accept sharing responsibility and decision-making processes as a measure of accountability. Therefore, Mataboge & Mahlangu (2023) assert that empowerment occurs when servant leaders are supportive and assist their followers towards personal growth and development which must include independent decision-making, information sharing, and be innovative in performing delegated tasks.

Lee et al. (2020) advises principals to demonstrate empowerment capabilities to inspire underperforming HODs in schools. This encourages HODs to emulate the principal's behavior and contribute positively to the school's culture of effective teaching and learning. Limon (2022) highlights key considerations for empowering HODs, including fostering trust through shared management structures, involving HODs in decision-making, granting autonomy, encouraging

innovation, providing support through delegated authority, and offering intellectual stimulation and recognition for achievements. The rural secondary school principal plays a crucial role as a positive role model, demonstrating qualities such as interest, enthusiasm, optimism, honesty, and approachability in interactions with HODs. Leadership success hinges on selecting and blending different leadership styles to suit specific situations and contexts (Brauckmann et al., 2023). Given the interconnectedness of contextual challenges with leadership actions, this article suggests that leadership preparation programs for HODs should be guided by democratic governance principles. This approach aims to address challenges faced by rural secondary school principals in empowering HODs within their institutions. The Department of Basic Education (2020) in South Africa advocated for a shift in principals' approach, urging them to be more supportive rather than directive, signaling a new way of conducting school affairs. Emphasizing change management, principals were encouraged to guide and support HODs in executing their instructional leadership duties within their subject departments. This approach aligns with the 2030 school vision. Kilag et al. (2024) highlight the importance of principals serving as instructional leaders, engaging in instructional activities, articulating the school's mission and vision with HODs, and cultivating an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning, thus enhancing the quality of education.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this article was collected through both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, including surveys, focus group discussions, and literature review. Field work followed a pilot study. Triangulation of data sources, such as literature review, focus groups, and questionnaires, ensured reliability. The sample comprised 55 principals from the Tshwane West District in Gauteng, South Africa. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics, frequencies, mean scores, explanatory methods, inferential statistics, factor analysis, and Cronbach's alpha.

Sampling Procedure

Principals encounter challenges when empowering Heads of Departments (HODs) to fulfill their roles as instructional leaders. With a sample of 55 principals selected purposefully for the study, the objective was to examine how rural secondary school principals empower HODs despite these challenges. Eligibility criteria were applied, and principals were chosen for focus group interviews based on their roles. This approach aligns with the recommendation by Nomatshila et al. (2022) to craft the sampling process to the study's objectives, restricting participation to principals.

Data Collection and Focus Group Discussions

The author utilized both the quantitative and qualitative strands of a mixed methods study (e.g., the quantitative link between the procedures and study aim/research questions) and were focusing on the core categories of specific mixed methods research criteria (Hirose & Creswell, 2023). Mixed method was used in collecting information and the focus group interview session was also used which lasted for about one hour. This was applied to learn more about the challenges in empowering HODs to execute instructional leadership duties and responsibilities. Open-ended, unstructured questions in accordance with the interview protocol were followed by

the author and the medium of communication was in English as understood by all the participants in the study. An audio tape recorder was utilized to record the conversations while the interviews proceeded. Verbatim transcription of data was done throughout and then followed data analysis as advised by scholars such as Nomatshila et al., (2022).

Data Analyses

According to Do (2023) thematic analysis for new data should involve creating new codes supported by researchers' interpretations and clear assertions. Data combined with literature review can inform decision-making. Nomatshila et al. (2022) emphasize drawing conclusions from recognizable themes and sub-themes. To ensure accurate interpretation, focus group interviews were transcribed immediately after completion, verbatim from recorded cassettes. Thematic analysis was employed. Recordings were played in short bursts for accuracy, and all meanings were included in transcripts. The author reviewed transcripts multiple times to understand data significance. Themes were drawn from clustered categories.

RESULTS

Principals in rural secondary schools face challenges in empowering heads of departments to execute instructional leadership due to limited resources, such as funding and staff, which impede professional development opportunities and effective communication. Additionally, geographical isolation, remoteness and community dynamics may pose barriers to implementing cohesive instructional strategies across departments, further complicating the role of instructional leadership. Similarly, HODs often face heavy administrative duties and teaching responsibilities, leaving them with limited time and energy to focus on instructional leadership tasks. They find it difficult to balance administrative tasks with instructional leadership in the resource-constrained contexts of rural schools.

DISCUSSION

The study, involving 55 principals from the Tshwane West District in Gauteng, South Africa, focused on the challenges rural secondary school principals encounter in empowering HODs as instructional leaders. Interviews, lasting an hour each, were conducted to gather data. Findings revealed several difficulties principals face in empowering HODs to fulfill their instructional leadership roles, including poor attitude, time constraints, lack of assertiveness, excessive workload, lack of interest and commitment, low morale, accountability issues, and insufficient self-development efforts.

Principal A said... *“I think what an important factor could be to note is low self-esteem and negative attitude when people show signs of lack of interest, lack of commitment and low morale”*.

The findings by Principal A are supported by Bhujel (2021) who found that HODs need advice and the principal must act as the guideline, change agent, role model, director of educational institution, and manager of human resources at every school level to influence the behaviour of the HODs so that the academic achievement of students can be enhanced.

Another way of empowering the HODs, which featured strongly in discussions of the focus group, was the creation of an atmosphere of peace and harmony. In empowering the HODs, the participants alluded to regular feedback. As pointed out by Principal F who said, allow them to take ownership and to give regular feedback.

Principal B said *“Lack of time to focus ..., in addition, I think lack of the correct attitude also is one of the attributes of some of the HODs members and most members of the HODs feel a burden when they are to control or monitor teacher’s work over an extended time after school, just to take one or two hours beyond their normal working hours”*. Principal B added and said, *“[the HODs] are not willing to take initiatives and responsibility or to be accountable”*. The ideas of principal B are supported by Limon (2022) who advised that principals must foster trust in HODs, to develop shared management structures, to ensure HODs participation in problem-solving and decision-making mechanisms, to enable HODs autonomy, encourage innovation, creativity, and risk-taking, offer support by delegating authority to HODs.

Principal C said *“most members would like to be pushed from behind due to lack of intrinsic motivation”*. Furthermore, Principals C, said, *“some HODs feel that they are overloaded with work, and this makes it difficult to assist them”*. The above challenge was confirmed by Lamsal (2022) who believes that principals must possess good morals and values such as self-initiative, assertiveness, high morale and set achievable goals, as well as vision. Also, resistance to change among stakeholders, including teachers and staff, can impede the empowerment of HODs as instructional leaders (Thompson, 2023).

The data revealed that the principals supported the HODs despite challenges that faced them through amongst others by delegation, displaying assertiveness, motivation, enthusiasm, accountability, equitable distribution of workload and allocation of subjects including positivity in carrying out allocated duties. This way of supporting the HODs included how to develop subject policies, how to conduct meetings, how to do administrative activities such as drafting, developing a school timetable and how to distribute the workload equally among the teachers.

Principal D, said, *“Some HODs feel very threatened to control teacher’s work including learner’s books... they lack self-initiative and are impressed by anything whether good or bad”*. The challenges were confirmed by Muyunda (2022) who recognized that the principal's leadership style has a crucial role in fostering the teaching and learning process. Motivation, monitoring, mentoring and participation in the activities of the school, delegation and meetings are mentioned as ways of guiding and supporting to enhance school performance. Jones et al., (2023) believe that the existing schools’ culture and hierarchical structures within them may pose challenges in delegating authority and empowering HODs as effective instructional leaders. Hence, Patel and Williams (2022) maintain that if there are unclear role definitions and overlapping responsibilities within the HODs that can create confusion and impede effective instructional leadership.

Principal E, said, *“my team of HODs largely comprises of people who do not take interest in self-development. The majority of these people do not even have a second degree that passes as an obstacle because self-development is important”*. *“They [HODs] are not able to draw the*

school assessment plan to equally distribute subject allocation and even to draw the school timetable. Principal E put it this way. "HODs as instructional leader should be honest, trustful and be a true leader with good leadership skills".

It appeared that the participants viewed mentoring and coaching from two angles: the principal as mentor and coach of the HODs and the HODs as mentors and coaches. Both these angles lead to empowerment of the HODs. Principal E had this to say, *"I will make sure that my HODs are exposed to seminars, symposiums and developmental workshops and team building societies and postgraduate programmes for qualification and empowerment."*

Principal D simply said, ... *"exposure to workshops and collaborative skills shared from others"*. This was affirmed by the Department of Basic Education (2020) in South Africa by urging principals to be more helpful than directive and by using new methods of mentoring and coaching. Also, Mahlatini (2023) found that the major factors that affected proper execution of instructional leadership roles by principals were the Covid-19 pandemic, learner discipline, school environment and rural area conditions.

Principal E spoke of meetings and subject policies when he said, *"allow them [the HODs] to develop policies like subject policies. The HODs must be allowed to chair meetings. Allow them to take charge of the subject in their different departments. Give them an opportunity to run meetings as I have indicated"*.

Principal F said, *"they must be fair and avoid biasness in dealing with their teachers to avoid conflicts. They must encourage good working relationships with trust and honesty"*. Principal D commented, ... *"enhance team spirit, conducive working environment, support teachers and learners, and provide feedback as well"*. Asked about provincial department activities the principals exposed their management teams as part of empowering the HODs. The participants referred to workshops, seminars, symposiums training sessions, conferences, and professional learning committees. HODs will be prone to stress if they will not improve their personal adaptive responses to the challenges and incidents and demand situation of their work. Their emotional state will affect them in carrying out their responsibilities because of the individual differences of HODs (Kula, 2023).

Tedla and Redda (2022) advise principals that they should function as decision-makers by exhibiting leadership qualities such a strong personality, the capacity to handle problems, and decision-making/problem-solving skills. Modern school leaders ought to oversee the intricate structures known as schools rather than just being "the principal instructor." concurs with the ways of empowering the HODs through coaching, mentoring, workshops, conferences, symposiums, and professional learning committees (PLCs). Principals must employ acceptable ways of empowering the HODs and this will augur well for the success of instructional leadership in schools and the coveted distributive leadership. Principals are willing to develop HODs, but they are not willing and prepared to take the opportunity provided. Perumalsamy et al., (2023) found that the appraisal of educators remains a contested issue as the process, which aims to provide support and development to them, it is generally assumed and considered a punitive measure for HODs. In support of the authors' findings, Mbua (2023) found that negative attitude and behaviors, lack of funding, inadequate facilities, untrained teachers and poor

collaboration between families and schools are some of the challenges faced by rural secondary school principals leadership in mentoring HODs in schools. The instructional leadership role of cultivating a culture of effective teaching and learning for HODs to execute their role was impeded by the above-mentioned challenges. Similarly, Smith & Brown (2023) found that the lack of access to quality training and professional development opportunities can limit principals' ability to empower their HODs with the skills and knowledge for instructional leadership .

CONCLUSIONS

The professional development activities to mitigate the challenges that rural secondary school principals faced in the empowerment of HODs as instructional leaders were the main topic of discussion. The Department of Basic Education, along with school principals, may use the study's conclusions and recommendations as a resource for understanding how principals engage in professional development activities that expose HODs in instructional leadership in schools. Policymakers and schools will then be able to review their policies and practices in order to strengthen them based on the article. When it comes to the principal's professional development efforts in empowering HODs in instructional leadership in schools, the study offers both a theoretical and empirical contribution to the body of literature. The information offered can supplement the body of knowledge already available on principals' professional development activities that empower HODs to instructional leadership in schools. Principals will make use of the renewed information and be in a position to build HODs credibility. In addition, they will be able to create shared management frameworks, ensure HODs involvement in problem-solving and decision-making, and promote innovation and creativity.

Due to their concern about being tormented, some principals were reluctant to speak their thoughts. HODs are in charge to execute duties of instructional leadership to improve a culture of effective teaching and learning. Regardless of the underperformance, the HODs must be held responsible for school effectiveness when things go wrong. HODs must be held accountable only insofar as their required instructional leadership responsibilities are concerned, for which they are answerable to the Department of Education. HODs must reduce the dangers of communication breakdown and collapse in classrooms. HODs need to be equipped with the necessary expertise in the field of education in order to address any difficulties that they may face in the area of instructional leadership. A teacher's ability to represent the mission of the school in all of their instructional activities should be supported by HODs. It is recommended that HODs perform the function of instructional leadership by directing, guiding, and influencing both their own work and the work of the teachers. In order to ensure the success of the schools, HODs are also expected to utilize their actions to communicate a vision, support teams, and ensure that their teachers are as productive as possible.

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Ethical Approval

The article emanated from a PhD study that was conducted in Tshwane West District in the Gauteng Province of South Africa and the request to do the study was sought from Gauteng Department of Education. The Northwest University was approached for ethical clearance (reference number: NWU-00284-18-A2) for permission. Informed consent with full details of the study and reporting channels was obtained from the participants, which allowed the researchers to tape-record the voice of the participants. Participants' names were not recorded to maintain confidentiality. Research records were kept at home in an external hard drive protected by a password. The identity of participants was not disclosed in any published material. The researcher ensured that no harm was caused to the participants. Those who refused to consent were not prejudiced by their choice. Information shared by participants was kept confidential. Respect for the dignity, safety and well-being of participants was given a priority. The participants had the right to participate or not to participate in the study, and none of them were coerced to participate in the study. Participants had the right to withdraw at any stage of the study and were not forced to answer all questions if they did not feel comfortable. The study was conducted in an ethical manner.

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