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The principal's role in managing curriculum change: Implications for the provision of quality education

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Drawing mainly on Lewin's 3-Phase Process of Change framework, in the study reported on here we explored the role of principals in facilitating curriculum reforms. A case study design within an interpretivist paradigm was employed to determine the experiences and perceptions of principals, school management teams (SMTs) and teachers of how principals managed curriculum changes in their schools. Change is deemed a necessary and significant component of educational praxis. Principals, as instructional leaders, are compelled to be the driving force in managing curriculum reforms, ensuring that changes are conscientiously aligned to high learner achievement. Data were gathered through personal and focus-group interviews using a purposeful sample comprising of 4 principals, 13 SMT members and 9 teachers. Findings reveal that principals were not directly involved in the facilitation of curriculum changes but delegated this to deputy principals and heads of departments. For SMTs and principals to effectively manage curriculum changes, a collaborative culture must exist in schools. It is recommended that principals should make a paradigm shift by placing high priority to the procurement of adequate resources, providing support and development to teachers, and keeping abreast with latest trends in teaching. This approach will result in high learner achievement and educational standards.

Keywords: collaborative cultures; curriculum change; distributive leadership; instructional leadership; management; professional development; school management team

Introduction

Van Deventer and Kruger (2003) assert that school principals as internal change agents are expected to facilitate and implement curriculum changes mandated by education authorities. Huber and West (2002) posit that a principal is most often cited as the key person in school development, either blocking or promoting curriculum changes, acting as change agent, and overseeing the processes of curriculum growth and renewal. As rapid curriculum change makes its way into schools, there is insurmountable pressure for principals to take on more of an instructional leadership role as opposed to a managerial role (Smith, Mestry & Bambie, 2013). It is interesting to note that principals appointed prior to 1994 have gone through four curriculum reforms placing them under severe pressure. These principals required regular training, orientation and skills development during each curriculum review phase to enable them to successfully implement curriculum reforms. Thus, as South Africa continues to emphasise curriculum innovation, principals are expected to pay particular attention to effectively lead the process of curriculum facilitation through instructional leadership. Researchers such as Drysdale and Gurr (2011) and Walker and Dimmock (2008) argue that there is a general belief that the foundation of a good school is the result of the principal being an effective instructional leader.

Olibie (2013) and Supovitz, Sirinides and May (2010) posit that more recently principals are unable to focus on instructional-related matters, and continue to battle with unmanageable workloads, time constraints, and a poor understanding of their instructional leadership tasks (Budhal, 2000; Caldwell, 2002; Edwards, 2002). Research conducted by Bush, Joubert, Kiggundu and Van Rooyen (2010) show that principals have a weak grasp of the curriculum, more especially, the delivery of curriculum. They contend that principals often have a lack of understanding of structures and processes involved in evaluating, monitoring, and implementing curriculum changes. Furthermore, fulfilling the responsibilities required in the facilitation of curriculum changes is challenging and demanding on principals since it requires of them to have thorough knowledge and a comprehensive understanding of curriculum developments and policies (Carl, 2002; Gultig, Hoadley & Jansen, 2002). To further support this, Hoadley and Jansen (2011) assert that one of the many difficulties of managing curriculum changes is that principals take time to easily accept and adapt to these changes and find difficulty understanding new ways of reflecting on education.

Undoubtedly, curriculum changes since 1994 have had detrimental effects on school performance (Jaruszewicz, 2005). The 2011 Annual National Assessment (ANA) results released by the Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa (2015) provide evidence of the low levels of performance by learners. A report by the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (2012) revealed that fewer learners reached Grade 12 (Matric), and fewer still achieved a bachelor's pass which is a prerequisite for university entrance. The Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (2012) further revealed that although the Senior Certificate Examinations (Grade 12) percentage pass rate showed an improvement, the overall learner performance in various core subjects such as mathematics and physical science is still an on-going challenge. South Africa's participation in several international tests such as the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for

Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS) is further testimony of the low educational standards. For example, the release of the SACMEQ test results in 2011 reflect that South Africa featured the worst of all countries that participated. In addition to this dismal picture, 2011 TIMSS and PIRLS results also reflect that South Africa was placed the lowest among many African and Western countries (Spaull, 2013:4). We acknowledge that more recently, improvements in basic education have been noted, however, the academic standards of poorer schools should be fast tracked.

A growing body of research suggests that instructional leadership of a principal is essential for the effective facilitation of curriculum changes in schools (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Du Plessis, 2013; Olibie, 2013; Marishane, Botha & Du Plessis, 2011; Mestry, Moonsammy-Koopasammy & Schmidt, 2013; Robinson, 2007; Walker & Dimmock, 2008). However, in many South African schools, principals lack comprehensive understanding of instructional leadership practices, and they perceive this to be outside of their core function. We concur with several researchers (Cotton, 2003; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004) that the principal's instructional leadership role has a strong influence on learner performance. Robinson (2007) asserts that learner performance is likely to be greater where there is direct principal leadership involvement in curriculum planning and professional development. They stress that the closer principals are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on effectively managing curriculum changes, and ultimately on learner performance and overall school improvement. To facilitate curriculum changes that will improve the provision of quality teaching and learning, principals, as instructional leaders, must understand their instructional leadership role.

The research question was thus be stated as: What is the role of principals as instructional leaders in managing curriculum changes? It is against this background that we explored the perceptions and lived experiences of principals as instructional leaders in the facilitation of curriculum changes.

Rationale of the Study

As school principals grapple with the demands of facilitating curriculum changes, it is important to reflect on the instructional leadership roles that society expects of them, whether there is an apparent gap between the desired instructional leadership role of the principal and current practice; and what can be done to enhance the capacity to diminish such gaps in the future. For principals, understanding the instructional responsibilities under conditions of

complex and rapid curriculum changes is crucial. Thus, one must underscore the importance of the principal's instructional leadership responsibilities, especially when curriculum changes are mandated by education authorities. Hence, the general aim of this study was to examine the instructional leadership role of principals during curriculum reforms and the implications this has on the provision of quality education.

The following were the specific objectives with this research:

- To determine the nature and essence of instructional leadership performed by principals with respect to curriculum changes at school level; and
- To determine the perceptions and lived experiences of principals of their role in managing curriculum changes.

This research has relevance to local and international school leaders who are confronted with major curriculum reforms in their respective countries. The study can reduce anxiety and stress levels of educators in schools and motivate practicing and aspiring principals to confidently manage curriculum changes. It will also raise awareness and interest among policymakers and Ministries of Education who intend making major curriculum reforms on the importance of training and developing principals prior to the implementation of curriculum changes.

In the section that follows, we provide a literature review of principal's core leadership practices in effectively leading and managing major curriculum changes.

Core Leadership Practices of Principals in Effectively Facilitating Curriculum Changes

The concept "instructional leadership" includes all those actions related to teaching and learning that a principal (or his/her delegate) takes on, to ensure the provision of quality teaching and learning. Mestry et al. (2013) posit that when principals adopt an instructional leadership role, they are most likely to develop a shared vision for the school, empower and inspire teachers, and initiate strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Jenkins and Keefe (2002) refer to instructional leadership as providing directions, resources and support to the teaching and learning programmes offered in schools. It can be argued that instructional leadership involves the role that principals assume to influence teachers to use their expertise and skills to implement curriculum or the changes hereof towards the attainment of improved learner outcomes.

Van der Westhuizen (2003) asserts that principals as instructional leaders are expected to initiate, facilitate and implement curriculum changes. Many authors (Blase & Blase, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Jazzar & Alogozzine, 2006) highlight the positive influence that principals exert on effective instructional programmes through

curriculum change planning. Instructional leaders (principals) are expected to participate in all curriculum matters to ensure that teachers understand the importance of implementing curriculum changes which ought to be well-planned and aligned to resources. They are further involved in setting goals, allocating resources, managing and monitoring curriculum programmes and developing professional development for teachers. As leaders of change, it is imperative for principals to maintain and improve the academic standards of learners (Glanz, 2006). Chell (2011, in Marishane et al., 2011) concurs by stating that an effective instructional leader exercises supervision, evaluates instruction, promotes teachers' development activities, oversees curriculum change development, initiates and implement teacher professional development, promotes action research, develops a positive school climate, and creates links between school and community.

According to the Department of Education ([DoE], 2000), principals as instructional leaders need to understand the principles on which a new and revised curriculum is introduced to ensure that curriculum changes are successfully implemented. Hence, we argue that principals are responsible for showing a definite connection between content, values and skills associated with curriculum, more especially with curriculum changes. Effective instructional leaders motivate teachers to introduce changes strategically and effectively so that learners feel comfortable and motivated to achieve higher standards. Glanz (2006) asserts that curriculum development is a dynamic, interactive, and complex process that serves as the foundation for good teaching practice. He states that principals as instructional leaders must be proactive in matters related to the curriculum leadership process. Furthermore, having an in-depth understanding and comprehensive knowledge of the curriculum is an essential foundation to ensuring the effective implementation of curriculum changes (Glatthorn, Boschee, Whiteheads & Boschee, 2012). Brundret and Duncan (2011) concur that to ensure that successful implementation of curriculum changes is maintained and sustained, instructional leaders are required to research a wide range of possible curriculum models before changes are trialled and implemented. According to Wiles and Bondi (2007), instructional leaders must be skilled at translating intended curriculum changes into practice. It is asserted that instructional leadership development programmes should develop principals' skills that will enable them to coordinate and monitor curriculum reforms. Bush (2013) advocates that curriculum leadership programmes should be designed such that there is strong focus on practice. In the context of curriculum restructuring, the instructional programme should consist of a series of

integrated and context-bound teaching, learning and assessment activities (Du Plessis, 2013).

The theoretical framework for this study is discussed next.

Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by three models, Murphy's Framework of Instructional Leadership (1985), Weber's Model (1996) and Lewin's Change Theory. Murphy (1990) created a framework that consists of four basic dimensions of instructional leadership: developing a mission and goals; managing the instructional programmes; promoting quality instruction and monitoring learner progress; and promoting a positive school environment. Although one of the fundamental features of this framework is developing a school's mission, Murphy extended the notion of promoting a positive school climate with clear focus on enhancing a supportive work environment. Weber's Model (1996) was built on Murphy's model (1990) to establish the need for instructional leadership, regardless of the school's organisational structure. He identified five essential domains for which principals are responsible: defining the school's mission; managing curriculum and instruction; promoting a positive learning climate; observing and improving instruction; and assessing the instructional programme. These two models emphasise the role that instructional leaders play in managing curriculum, including curriculum reforms.

Educational changes generally occur with the intention of improving existing practices and systems, and the expectation, therefore, is to effectively manage the change process. Because most principals routinely face multiple challenges in facilitating curriculum changes and feel that they lack skills to manage change, Lewin's 3-Phase Change Model (Burnes, 2019) was pertinent for studying the principal's role in managing curriculum reforms. It provides an outline that will assist principals to visualise, plan and manage curriculum changes. In the unfreezing phase of change, it is understood in theory that individual actions are built on prior learning and cultural influences. Unfreezing is seen as the replacement of old ideas and practices by new ones within a school. In the context of curriculum reforms in the education system, there is a relevant need to look at the way in which principals are prepared for these reforms by leaving behind set curriculum practices and focusing on new ones. The movement stage involves acting on the results of the unfreezing that Lewin advocates. In this stage, new behaviour, values, and attitudes are established through creating changes in organisational structures and processes. Van Der Westhuizen (2003) concurs that moving involves the development of new norms, values, attitudes, and

behaviour through identification of changes in the structure. In the context of curriculum changes, this stage is significant in that principals need to have a comprehensive view of the new curriculum to clearly identify gaps found between the past and present curriculum and that of the proposed curriculum. The final refreezing stage, according to Nieuwenhuis and Mokoena (2001), seeks to stabilise the organisation to a new state of equilibrium that will ensure new ways of working which are relatively safe from regression. Van der Westhuizen (2003) adds that what was achieved during the unfreezing and movement stages is now practiced. If the unfreezing and moving stages have been properly managed, the refreezing stage requires minimal coaching using support structures which include organisational culture or climate, norms, policies, and practices.

Research Methodology

A qualitative case study was used to investigate and explore the role of the principal as instructional leader, especially during the curriculum change process. By employing a qualitative research approach, the potential for providing an in-depth description of the principal's instructional leadership role during the curriculum change process is increased (Mertens, 2010). We use the case study design to explore the lived experiences of how principals responded to curriculum changes (Hancock & Alogozzine, 2006; Maldonado, Rhoads & Buenavista, 2005; Yin, 2011).

The population of this study comprised 20 primary and high schools in the Johannesburg East education district of the Gauteng province. The sample included four principals, SMT members and teachers who were purposively selected from four schools. One of the criteria used to select the participants was that principal participants should have served for at least 3 years at their respective schools. Furthermore, the size of the school dictated the extent to which principals' effectively served as instructional leaders in facilitating curriculum changes. For instance, Clabo (2010) found that principals can be directly involved in matters of curriculum when the school is smaller in size as opposed to a larger school where the principal, as instructional leader, assumes a more indirect role.

In this study we set out to use both, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, and focus-group interviews, with the aim of providing participants with the opportunity to share their experiences. All interviews were video recorded with the permission of all participants. In this way we could obtain deeper insight into issues related to principals performing their instructional leadership role in leading and managing the curriculum change process. Some insightful questions posed to individual participants included the following:

- What are your views about the numerous curriculum changes made by the Department of Education in South Africa?
- Explain how you set about facilitating curriculum changes at your school.
- Explain your role in leading and managing teaching and learning at your school.
- What are some of the challenges/obstacles that directly hindered you in managing curriculum changes at your school?

Focus-group interviews with eight participants were conducted at two of the selected schools. In the focus-group interviews, three SMT members and five teachers were purposefully selected to determine the principal's role of instructional leadership. Some questions asked at the focus-group interviews included:

- What is the role of the principal in leading and managing curriculum changes?
- How would you describe your working relationship with each other in the facilitation of curriculum changes?
- How are curriculum changes effected in your school?
- What are the main challenges that directly hinder the facilitation of curriculum changes at your school as well as the successes experienced in implementing curriculum changes at your school?

We used Tesch's approach (Creswell, 2009) of data analysis which included an inductive process of examining, selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting data which, in this case, related to the transcriptions of the interviews with principals, SMTs, and teachers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Lincoln and Guba's norms of trustworthiness, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2009) were observed in this study. Prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks and peer debriefing were used to promote confidence that we had accurately recorded the phenomena under investigation (credibility). Transferability was addressed through purposive sampling and through the provision of rich descriptions, which allowed us to have a proper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Member checks were done with the participants to ensure the accuracy of data collection, that is, a transcription of their interview was given to each participant to verify (Creswell, 2009).

The Ethics Committee of the University approved the ethical stance of this study. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality to conduct the study were observed. The participants were assured that the aim of the research was not to judge or evaluate their leadership and management skills but rather to determine their perceptions and experiences in respect of instructional leadership. Consent was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) and the principals of the selected schools. Principals were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To

preserve anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms (where applicable) and symbols were used for participants (e.g., T1 represents Teacher 1, T2 is Teacher 2, etc.; HOD1 represents Head of Department 1, HOD 2 is Head of Department 2, etc.; PA represents Principal of School A, PB is Principal of School B).

Findings

Various themes identified from the data are discussed below and supported with relevant quotations from the interviews. The following themes highlight that instructional leadership is crucial in ensuring school effectiveness and is key to organisational success and effective curriculum change management.

Theme 1: The Complex Role of Principals

Changes in education, more especially curriculum changes, present several challenges and places immense demands on school principals. How principals associate and respond to some of these challenges and demands depend mainly on them exercising their role as instructional leaders. With this theme we looked at how principals, SMT members and teachers understood what instructional leadership meant, and at contributing factors in effective facilitation of curriculum changes.

Teachers' perceptions of the role of principals as instructional leaders varied. T2 from School B explained that instructional leadership encompassed all those actions that principals carried out to develop effective teaching and learning.

To me, instructional leadership is the system where the principal puts actions in place to ensure that teaching and learning remains a core function of the school and its quality standards are maintained. The principal needs to provide the teachers with knowledge and materials related to curriculum changes.

T2 of School B provided another perspective highlighting that key curriculum decisions come from the principal, and it is the principal's responsibility to manage curriculum changes.

The principal is the instructional leader because he is responsible and accountable for the curriculum, from managing curriculum changes, facilitating the implementation process to monitoring the curriculum to keep abreast on all curriculum innovations. Most of the decisions regarding the curriculum should come from the school principal. We should do what the principal instructs us to do when it comes to the curriculum.

Moreover, HOD1 from School C considered instructional leadership to focus on curriculum and instruction when she stated the following:

Instructional leadership refers to the management that focuses on the quality of curriculum and instruction in schools. With this leadership approach, priority is put on regular monitoring of teaching and learning, curriculum delivery and on the allocation of resources to promote academic

progress.

When it came to characterising themselves as instructional leaders through indirect questioning, principals responded and described their duties as instructional leaders in various ways. Two of the four principals were comfortable regarding themselves as instructional leaders, while the remaining two principals hesitated in acknowledging that they were instructional leaders. It seems that the two principals that hesitated were worried that they would be expected to be knowledgeable on all curriculum matters in the school. This was determined by the following responses:

Well, I guess principals are seen as instructional leaders, but we also fulfil other roles and responsibilities. I know it is expected of me to manage the curriculum and facilitate curriculum changes but if I have to just do this, then who becomes responsible for the daily operations of the school? (PA)

Uhhh ... I really do try to get involved in the curriculum. I ensure that my staff get the necessary training. I rely on my deputy principal to oversee all instructional matters. When curriculum changes are introduced, I rely on my deputy to handle everything. (PB)

From the four principals' responses it was clear that they felt that an important part of their duty as principals was to be involved in curriculum matters in their schools. Through instructional leadership, the principal provides direction, resources and support to teachers and learners when it comes to facilitating curriculum changes. We discovered that although the principals understood the concept of instructional leadership and the need for them to be fully involved as instructional leaders in managing and facilitating curriculum changes, this was seldom practiced by principals. PA asserted that her days were consumed by administrative duties and admitted that she lacked the training and the skills when it came to facilitating curriculum changes.

In order for me to succeed in managing curriculum changes, I need to be trained, work-shopped and acquire variety of skills. Generally, my school days are consumed with administrative duties, dealing with learner issues, parent queries and complaints and the everyday operations of the school. I unfortunately do not always have the time to ensure that my staff are implementing the proposed curriculum changes effectively.

PC held a similar view and stressed the fact that he struggled to fully grasp all the different subject matter due to time constraints.

Unfortunately, I do not have the time or the expertise to fully comprehend all subject matter to offer my support when it comes to changes in the curriculum. A change in the curriculum calls for a complete revamp of current systems and sometimes it is just too much to handle. I barely have time in the day to see to the day-to-day operations of the school. Further, the amount of administrative work required by the GDE is sometimes overwhelming.

Our observations confirmed this, and we found that while the principals acknowledged the importance of managing curriculum changes and accepted that they were in fact instructional leaders, it was evident that principals used the distributive leadership style and delegated curriculum matters to middle managers and deputy principals. The teachers, deputy principals and HODs hesitated to confirm that the principals in their schools were actively involved in facilitating curriculum changes, outlining their role a bit differently than what the principals suggested. The participants in the focus group felt that principals should assume the role of instructional leaders. It can be inferred from the various responses that the management of curriculum and instructional programmes was not a shared responsibility among principals, deputy principals and heads of departments. This view was highlighted by Teacher 1 of School A:

In our school, it is not the principal that manage, monitor, supervise and evaluates the curriculum and instructional programs ... but it is the HODs and deputy principal. Mostly the HOD and the deputy principals are the ones checking teachers' weekly lesson plans.

Emerging from the data, principals revealed that curriculum changes introduced over the last decade has brought about some imposed additional responsibilities that added to the significant challenges they already experienced. Responsibilities related to curriculum facilitation amounted to confronting curriculum demands; implementing changes at various levels of the schooling system; positively influencing teacher attitudes towards curriculum change; preparing teachers to embrace curriculum changes through teacher training; and changing teaching and learning policies to reflect the newly introduced curriculum changes. Stringer and Blaik Hourani (2015) confirm that principals' roles are now multi-dimensional which encompass complex duties and responsibilities. Principals essentially described their functions as managerial with very little emphasis on curriculum matters. This finding concurs with Hargreaves (2009) who states that principals grapple with discarding their managerial role for an instructional leadership role. Furthermore, Taylor, Van der Berg and Mabogoane (2013) assert that the main role of a principal is that of an instructional leader who is responsible for ensuring that effective teaching and learning takes place and that curriculum changes are implemented successfully.

Theme 2 – Professional Instructional Leadership Development of Principals

Principals claim that their ever-changing roles and responsibilities are challenging and necessitate them acquiring new knowledge and skills. The result of the study reveal that although principals received a once-off generic or one-size-fits-all training session

on curriculum changes, they still required skills and knowledge to successfully facilitate curriculum changes. Principals were mostly involved at the curriculum planning stage and not in the process of implementing and monitoring curriculum changes. The planning stage is mainly the compliance of regulations set by the DoE. PD quite indignantly claimed that there were no transition workshops that guided principles on how to manage curriculum changes *per se*:

Yes, I was a part of the management team prior to becoming the principal at the school but I did not realise all the intricacies involved in managing the curriculum, let alone curriculum changes. No one really tells you what to expect.

PB had a similar response: *"I don't think that there are enough workshops out there for principals on how to manage curriculum changes and how to deal with the issues we encounter daily."*

From the focus-group interviews it was evident that teachers and HODs were of the view that principals should take overall responsibility of instructional leadership. These participants understood the importance of principals acquiring specific skills for them to effectively manage curriculum changes. Participants felt that principals should be skilled in curriculum management and that they should be the ones facilitating internal staff development workshops for teachers. In elaborating on this, T2 of School A commented as follows:

As much as we teachers love to attend external workshops, this is not always possible. Most of the workshops are scheduled for half past two, this is the time my teaching day ends. By this time, we are exhausted, and the thought of driving 30 km just doesn't help. My personal feeling is that the principal and the deputy principals should be the ones going on these workshops and they then should share what they have learnt with the rest of the staff. Their times are much more flexible.

With curriculum changes taking place on an on-going basis, principals should give teachers time to adjust to new content material, innovative teaching methods, curriculum planning and assessment. PC felt strongly about this

Well, I mentioned earlier on, we need on-going training. Implementing curriculum changes is not a once-off process. It requires monitoring, it requires time for teachers to adjust to new ways of planning and assessing and we need support and the resources to go with. But, I also think that it is important for the new curriculum to not be too rigid. Teacher's creativity should not be stifled. I also feel that curriculum changes are happening rather fast and it is confusing us in such a way that we do not know whether to use one method or resort to the old method of teaching that teachers used to.

Similarly, PD commented on the various challenges experienced when curriculum changes are introduced and stressed the importance of teachers receiving the necessary support. This is what PD had to say:

I think that the main challenge has been a lack of on-going curriculum training, the lack of financial resources remains a challenge and poor communication continues to be a stumbling block. I think this has already been covered but are definitely common challenges. We are expected to ensure that new innovations are implemented in our schools, but the DoE do not provide us with support. It makes our task that more difficult as we are not guided on curriculum expectations.

Principals further proposed that training and development of principals should take place on an on-going basis and should not only be structured on curriculum challenges that teachers experience but also on new developments in school education. Principals in this study expressed the need for them to receive training on how to lead and manage curriculum changes. It can be inferred from principals' responses that principals were not adequately trained to fulfil their roles and responsibilities when it came to curriculum change management. In this regard, PC made an interesting and valid statement:

For me, personally, I need support on how I can manage my time first before I can help with the facilitation and monitoring of curriculum changes. Once I am able to manage my time, I would like to get more involved with the actual teaching and learning practices. The entire SMT requires training for the effective implementation of change.

The inferences that are drawn from the above responses is that if principals are to be successful in fulfilling their role as instructional leaders facilitating curriculum changes, then workshops and courses must be redesigned and restructured to provide them with the relevant theoretical and pedagogical knowledge that are currently lacking.

Theme 3: Lack of Curriculum Support from the Department of Education (DoE)

The lack of support from the DoE with regard to facilitating curriculum changes featured prominently in the interviews with the principals. Responding to the question on the level of support that the DoE provides to principals, all four principals indicated that they did not receive adequate support from the Department about policy implementation and more specifically, curriculum matters. The participants in the study voiced their frustrations regarding the DoE enforcing curriculum changes without being able to address the implementation realities that are faced in schools. Principal participants suggested that they required different forms of support from the DoE which incorporates workshops and even formal mentorship programmes for them and their teachers. District officials should provide tailor-made programmes by them identifying principals' specific needs. This could be complemented with an on-going mentoring programme or through informal advising and coaching (Louis, Dretzke & Wahlstrom, 2010). PC

made the following suggestion regarding the level of support they should receive from the DoE:

Curriculum managers in the DoE have a significant role to play in supporting schools when new curriculum is introduced. Firstly, they must support principals and teachers by guiding them through a mind-shift. Secondly, they must provide on-going training for principals in the new curriculum, and thirdly, they have to monitor and support them. Finally, district officials are also responsible for evaluating the curriculum change.

The principals were unanimous in that the various curriculum changes were not well thought out by the DoE and this created problems and gaps in the implementation programme. In the interviews principals frequently pointed out that they were not part of the policy making or curriculum planning process. PD was critical of the DoE frequently introducing new curriculum without involving teachers and principals:

I think that everything that the Department does, they are up there, way above us making decisions and some of the people making these decisions have never ever been in the classroom. Curriculum managers at education district offices should play a more prominent role in curriculum matters, especially when the Department introduces curriculum changes. They should be making frequent school visits, engaging with the principal, middle managers and teachers regarding all matters pertaining to the curriculum including changes made.

Although the DoE does not provide adequate support to principals, middle managers, and teachers, many school managers make a concerted effort of attending curriculum training programmes provided by tertiary institutions and non-governmental organisations at their own cost.

Discussion

Principals as instructional leaders are highly contested in the academic environment. The proponents of principals as instructional leaders believe that principals play a crucial role in raising education standards and ensuring high learner achievement. Although the complex demands of principals' responsibilities were increasingly recognised, they were compelled to focus on their instructional leadership role (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006; Louis et al., 2010). By mapping out the experiences, views and suggestions of participants gathered through interviews, the findings reveal that while principals agree with the need for curriculum changes and were positive about the purpose and benefits of curriculum change initiatives, they faced on-going challenges with several aspects in the curriculum change programme. Among the most prominent were their limited time and skills deficit, the rapid pace and disconnectedness of the curriculum change initiatives, poor implementation

plans and overwhelming administrative tasks. From their own experiences in dealing with curriculum changes, the principals proposed various practical suggestions for improvement and these centred on managing curriculum changes effectively through curriculum change planning, monitoring, and supporting curriculum change delivery and managing curriculum change resistance.

The findings reveal that principals devoted most of their time managing financial matters, learner discipline and parents' concerns. The principal participants were unanimous about their multifarious and complex tasks and found that the vast administrative workload prevented them from taking on their core responsibility of leading instruction or curriculum matters. Principals chose to apply the distributive leadership style by delegating instructional issues to middle managers. They put forward a range of collaborative practices such as teamwork, collegiality, effective communication, motivation, and the creation of committees to manage curriculum changes. However, teachers and middle managers opposed the idea that principals relinquish their instructional leadership role, and thus there was little collaboration among principals, SMT members and teachers when curriculum changes were introduced. Likewise, it was found that the DoE did not support principals, middle managers, and teachers when curriculum changes were introduced resulting in lowering the educational standards and learner performance. It is thus imperative that principals give deliberate and thought-out consideration to the development of collaborative school cultures in their schools, especially when curriculum changes are introduced.

About curriculum planning, it was found that SMT members were not provided with curriculum change guidelines on what to monitor, how to monitor and when to monitor curriculum changes. Curriculum change planning was listed as an essential function of instructional leadership which was covered as part of managing the instructional programme in Hallinger and Murphy's instructional leadership model (1985). Principals interviewed never mentioned a curriculum management model, and although there was consensus that they were aware that it existed, their responses indicated that they were not engaged with it.

A significant challenge raised by the principals was related to professional leadership development for successful adoption and execution of curriculum change initiatives. Findings reveal that the lack of on-going professional leadership development programmes was the result of the DoE not emphasising principal instructional leadership as priority. Oliva (2009) found that the DoE placed little importance on the training and development of principals on curriculum matters. The four participating principals indicated that professional

leadership development was very important, and they subscribed to the notion that they should be continuously trained on curriculum matters. The professional leadership development of principals as part of change management is a prominent theme in the research literature. Caldwell (2002) and Hallinger (2003) indicate that schools are more in need of on-going support and capacity development instead of direct control. Thus, principals depend on the support of the DoE to effectively manage curriculum changes at school level.

Conclusion

In the past 24 years the education authorities in South Africa have made four major curriculum changes to school education and this has negatively impacted on the educational standards and learner performance of many schools (Mandukwini, 2016). In this study we examined the principals' roles as instructional leaders in managing curriculum changes. One of the main reasons attributed to the low learner performance is the principals' ineffective leadership in managing curriculum changes. The complex and multifarious tasks of principals such as managing school finances, fulfilling a plethora of administrative matters, and managing learner discipline restricted them from focusing on curriculum planning, exposing teachers to creative teaching methods, or effectively managing learner assessments. Key findings reveal that although there are job description frameworks and models on what principals are required to do as instructional leaders, there is little consideration given to the reality of the work they do daily. Principals devote considerable time and effort on administrative matters and very limited support is offered to them by curriculum managers at education district level. Training and development for principals on curriculum matters, more especially in the field of curriculum changes, has been sorely neglected by educational authorities resulting in low teacher performance in classrooms.

The principal has the power to influence learners' learning outcomes by setting the school's goals and promoting effective instructional practices. The core of instructional leadership is to transform schools into conducive environments where teachers and learners reach their full potential. It is thus essential for the DoE to reconceptualise the functions of principals. The core function of principals is to take on an instructional leadership role so that effective teaching and learning takes place at their schools.

Authors' Contributions

V. Govindasamy collected the research data, analysed the data and undertook the literature review. R. Mestry contributed to the literature review and analysis of data and wrote the manuscript.

Notes

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- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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