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Heads of Department challenges: Supervision of Social Sciences teachers in map work teaching and learning in uMgungundlovu District, KwaZulu-Natal

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly agreed that learners perform poorly in map work because of teachers' limited content knowledge. Heads of Department (HoDs) within schools supervise teachers to improve instruction for enhanced learner performance. However, due to a small number of curriculum specialists, HoDs in schools often fail to contribute to better performance through their supervision of Social Sciences teachers. This study explores the challenges faced by HoDs when supervising Social Sciences teachers in map work teaching and learning, using the case study of uMgungundlovu District, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study adopts an interpretive paradigm and uses a single case study design approach. Purposive sample was undertaken of eight HoDs and eight Social Sciences teachers in their schools, and data collected through interviews that were analysed thematically. The results indicate that HoDs experience workload and map work knowledge and skills challenges that limit their ability to supervise teachers. Teachers also highlight the constraints that HoDs experience but that they do not provide them with adequate support for map work instruction. It is recommended that curriculum specialists and HoDs knowledgeable in map work should supervise map work teaching and learning, and that the Department of Education should provide sufficient teaching and learning resources to enable adequate instruction.

Keywords: Heads of Department, Instructional leadership, Learner performance, Map work, Supervision challenges



INTRODUCTION

Heads of Department (HoDs) are school-based leaders responsible for supporting teachers in improving classroom instruction, with the ultimate aim of enhancing learner performance (Filgona et al., 2020; Harju, 2020). The type of educational leadership HoDs demonstrate to support teachers is termed instructional leadership (Murphy et al., 2007). However, this leadership may be compromised if HoDs have a lack of training on the subject matter, on curriculum leadership and personnel management (Quebec Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Tapala et al., 2020), or if they are overloaded in their other administrative duties (Chukwuemeka et al., 2021). Instructional supervision involves all school-based strategies undertaken to support teachers to improve their instruction to learners (Zewdu, 2018; Ahiaku et al., 2019; Denzin & Erdener, 2020). The impact of this supervision on teachers' instructional skills is highly variable, however, with some studies suggesting this has a significant impact and others not (Abonyi, 2020; Chukwuemeka et al., 2021). As examples, Ashun (2022) explored the instructional supervision provided to Social Studies teachers in Ghana, where the main challenges identified were insufficient knowledge and skills, and financial constraints. Dubale (2021) investigated the strategies used to improve supervision in secondary schools in Ethiopia. Challenges identified included a lack of experience and training of HoDs in supervisory tasks, the lack of a collaborative approach to supervision, and teachers' negative attitudes towards supervision. Muchiri & Mwaniki (2019) investigated challenges that teachers experience when preparing Geography instructional activities in secondary schools in Kenya. The main finding was that there was little or no support provided to the teachers, and insufficient resources limited their ability to design quality instructional activities. In South Africa, Maepa (2017) found that some HoDs lacked Social Sciences content knowledge to support their learners in a changing curriculum. Other studies in South African schools identified that HoDs experience work overload, lack of time, lack of resources, and lack of professional development (Ahiaku et al., 2019; Tshepo et al., 2020).

Instructional leadership consists of three dimensions, which are defining school vision, mission and goals, managing instructional programme, and developing the school learning climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). In collaboration with teachers, HoDs develop departmental goals and policies aimed at improving learner performance. Moreover, they manage instructional programme by supervising teachers' work (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) and providing in-service training (DBE, 2022). Since the school context is a source of constraints and opportunities within which HoDs interact with teachers, instructional supervision may be shaped by the size, resources and dynamics of the school environment (Hallinger, 2005; Spillane et al., 2004). Consequently, some of the HoDs' instructional leadership practices may not be efficiently performed.

The study's objectives are to establish the challenges HoDs experience when supervising Social Sciences teachers in map work teaching and learning. This is undertaken using a case study approach of HoDs and Social Sciences teachers from eight selected secondary schools in the uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretive paradigm to understand and interpret the challenges HoDs experience when supervising teachers in map work teaching and learning. A qualitative case study design was selected to obtain in-depth details of the studied phenomenon (Gamira, 2019). The population for this study consists of HoDs and Social Sciences teachers who teach Geography in eight of the 128 public secondary schools of uMgungundlovu District, KwaZulu-Natal. Schools were purposively sampled for this study. The HoDs chosen were only those who led the departments within which Social Sciences fell, and only senior Social Sciences teachers were selected to participate. Data were collected using face-to-face semi-structured interviews with different interview schedules used for the two participant groups. Confidentiality and informed consent were explained to the participants. As part of their willingness to partake in the research, the participants read and signed consent forms, understanding that their participation in the research was voluntary.

With consent, the interviews were audio-recorded. Thematic analysis was used on interview transcripts as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), based on data coding followed by the generation and analysis of themes and subthemes. Ethics clearance for this study was granted from the Durban University of Technology (DUT) Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), clearance number IREC 238/22.

RESULTS

Responses from HoDs are abbreviated as HoD1 to HoD8, and Social Sciences teachers are referred to as SST1 to SST8. Most participants reported that their schools were under-resourced, especially in relation to maps for grade 8 and 9 learners. Many participants indicated that the shortage of maps was the main reason for poor learner performance in map work. Some participants also reported that the challenge of map shortages was beyond HoDs' control because it resulted from schools being under-resourced. HoD7 said:

'Our school is under resourced and is a no-fee paying school. Sometimes, we have challenges in terms of the number of maps that we need to use, especially in grades 8 and 9. So, the challenge begins when they are writing tests because we don't have enough maps. The challenge that we normally face is that it is difficult for us as the school—if the map is a colour map, it becomes dark, and then it becomes a problem.'

SST7 said that a shortage of maps meant that learners had to share these resources in groups of four. SST3 said that they can only produce maps for learners in black and white as they do not have access to a colour printer, and this is seen as a factor inhibiting learner understanding.

Half of the interviewed HoDs specialised in History and did not do any map work in their tertiary studies. This means they encounter challenges when supervising teachers in map work due to their own insufficient knowledge and skills, as reported by HoD8. Likewise, HoD6, a Geography specialist, experienced difficulties when assigning History specialists to teach map work because they do not have insufficient map knowledge, and he does not always have enough time to assist them.

Most participants reported that while the Department of Education supplies sufficient maps for Grade 12 that was not the case with the other grades. Moreover, some participants reported that some General Education and Training (GET) Social Sciences curriculum specialists focus on Grade 7 and neglect grades 8 and 9. Furthermore, those Social Sciences curriculum specialists who attend to grades 8 and 9 map work teaching and learning were reported to lack sufficient map work knowledge. HoD2 said that the Department of Education needs to offer more map work support at the GET level because it serves as a foundation for map work in senior classes. HoD6 said that adequate support is not offered from GET supervisors or advisors. SST3 said that Grade 12 learners had sufficient maps while learners in the other grades experienced map shortages:

'Because the department provides the maps for [Grade 12]... when they write the March tests, they provide the maps. When they write the mid-year tests, they also provide the maps... but in the case of grades 8, 9, 10 and 11, we only rely on the budget of the school. Since the school is a no-fee paying school, it is very difficult for it to meet the curriculum needs.'

The number of classes taught by HoDs ranged from 4 to 8, and the number of teachers each HoD was responsible for was from 4 to more than 12. Apart from HoD5, all the others taught Grade 12. HoD4 taught all the grades (grades 8-12), teaching 618 learners in total. HoD4 was also responsible for more than 12 teachers. This resulted in work overload. HoD7 said that they do not have time to accompany Social Sciences teachers in their training because of their other teaching duties. HoD7 specialised in History and taught 158 learners in total, in four different classes, and was responsible for more than 9 teachers. Although this HoD was aware of challenges faced by Social Sciences teachers, she could not fully attend to them because of work overload. HoD3 said that she conducts class visits because it is one of the requirements of the Quality Management System (QMS) but was not able to observe classes when map work is taught because of her other duties. Thus, the capacity of HoDs to provide overview of Social Sciences teachers in map work is constrained by their skills, background, time available, and their other teaching duties.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the barriers experienced by HoDs in performing their instructional and supervisory roles in South African secondary schools. The major findings are that a lack of teaching and learning resources negatively affects the ability of Social Sciences teachers to teach map work effectively, including the availability of maps especially for grades 8 and 9. There are also problems when HoDs are not Geography specialists and

therefore also lack map work skills. These findings are similar to previous studies on the limitations of map work teaching in South African schools (Ahiaku et al., 2019; Tshepo et al., 2020). These issues collectively impact on the ability of learners to understand the maps or develop skills related to spatial analysis.

The study found that HoDs who do not specialise in Geography encounter challenges when supervising teachers in this area. This has been found in several previous studies (Maepa, 2017; Jaca, 2018), highlighting that most HoDs lacked knowledge of some of the subjects they supervised. The same situation also arises when Social Sciences teachers with other specialisms have to teach map work (Kwayi, 2022; Ndou, 2022). Such teachers require HoDs' individual attention but this may be constrained due to HoD work overload (Mthiyane et al., 2018; Malinga et al., 2021; Kubheka et al., 2025). Through individualised attention, HoDs can better understand teachers' needs and then provide them with suitable map work knowledge and resources (Nguyen et al., 2019).

The study found that the Department of Education inadequately supports grades 8 and 9 map work by not providing suitable or enough resources and this goes against the policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (DBE, 2016) that states that district officials should ensure that all learners have access to resources that will give them high-value education (Kalane & Rambuda, 2022). Workshops with curriculum specialists may also be insufficient if these specialists do not have the correct skills to train teachers (Mkhize, 2023). This has a bearing on the type of support that curriculum specialists can offer HoDs to supervise map work teaching and learning. This study showed that HoDs appeared willing to engage with their teachers but that they were constrained by their workload and lack of access to map resources provided by the Department of Education especially for grades 8 and 9. Despite these challenges, the HoDs in this study indicated resilience and a capacity to supervise teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

This study indicates that HoDs work in under-resourced schools with serious map shortages, especially for grade 8 and 9 learners. HoDs with insufficient map work knowledge experience difficulties when supervising teachers in map work. They also experience work overload and do not have time to supervise teachers, especially those lacking map work knowledge. Moreover, HoDs have insufficient support from the Department of Education for grades 8 and 9 and this hampers their instructional supervision. The Department of Education should foreground subject-specific knowledge and relevant teaching experience when appointing curriculum specialists. Moreover, they should introduce professional development programs for HoDs to improve their subject knowledge and enhance their instructional supervision skills. Training is also needed for Social Sciences teachers in their map work content and pedagogical knowledge.

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