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Teachers' and middle managers' experiences of principals' instructional leadership towards improving curriculum delivery in schools

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Background: This study was designed to explore teachers' and middle managers' experiences regarding their principals' instructional leadership practices aimed at improving curriculum delivery in schools. Literature on instructional leadership indicates how failing schools can be turned around to become successful if principals consider instructional leadership to be their primary role within schools. The authors, therefore, argue that it is the responsibility of principals to ensure that learners' results are improved through intervention and support provided by the principals to capacitate teachers and middle managers in delivering the curriculum effectively. Globally, literature promotes the significance of the continued professional development of teachers, and many scholars allude to the pivotal role principals or school heads play in teachers' skills advancement.

Aim: The aim of this article was to identify principals' instructional practices that improve curriculum delivery in schools, which are examined through the experiences of teachers and middle managers.

Setting: The study was conducted in two schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

Method: The researchers employed a qualitative approach, utilising three domains of instructional leadership as its framework, and these are defining the school mission statement, managing the instructional programme and promoting a positive school learning climate. Four teachers and four middle managers were purposefully selected at two schools for data collection conducted through semi-structured individual interviews, which were analysed using thematic content analysis.

Results: Three themes emerged, namely, understanding good instructional leadership practices, teacher development as an instructional practice and instructional resource provisioning.

Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of teachers and middle managers in understanding that principals are merely not school managers or administrators, but rather instructional leaders whose primary role is to direct teaching and learning processes in schools. Principals need to create time within their constricted schedules to become instructional leaders, which is their main purpose in schools. If the roles and responsibilities of middle managers are not explicit, their ability to simultaneously perform the dual task of being teachers and middle managers will be compromised.

Keywords: teacher; principal; curriculum; leadership practice; middle managers; instructional leadership.

Introduction

Globally, principals' instructional leadership is critical to the development and sustainability of successful schools (Baker-Gardner 2016; Sim 2011; Spaull 2013; Steyn 2011). Effective instructional leaders successfully influence others to utilise appropriate instructional practices with their exceptional knowledge of the relevant subject matter. In well-functioning schools, the focus is always on improved student outcomes (Al Hosani 2015; Cardno et al. 2019). To this end, principals need to ensure that teachers are provided with relevant and continued professional development.

Mendels (2012) made the point that principals who regard themselves as effective leaders do not solely focus on management and administrative matters; their main concern is instructional practice. According to the Wallace Foundation (2013), the key responsibility of principals is to improve 'instruction' in order to assist teachers to teach in a manner that enables learners to

achieve their best academic results. Barrett and Breyer (2014) noted the importance of instilling motivation in teachers in order for them to become passionate about effective curriculum delivery. The overwhelming challenges that teachers and middle managers encounter can sometimes result in a loss of interest in teaching, which is further exacerbated by a lack of structured support from principals.

Historical background to instructional leadership

Instructional leadership as a concept emerged in the 1960s and progressed to the 1970s and 1980s. In the latter decade, the concept of instructional leadership came to the fore at the time when scholars identified a need to conduct research on factors responsible for the creation of effective schools. According to Hallinger (2011) and Jenkins (2009), principals who assume the most important role of instructional leaders are considered to be effective principals in the 21st century.

The major findings of a study conducted by Ndoziya (2014) showed that principals reported spending most of their time on administrative functions and disciplining learners. Overseeing teaching and learning and supervising teachers were not functions that principals felt they needed to perform. Instructional leadership was highlighted as being an important role every principal is encouraged to demonstrate as it turns failing schools into successful and effective ones according to Liu, Hallinger and Feng (2016). In addition, a study conducted by Abdullah et al. (2019:1140) in Malaysia revealed that principals needed to empower middle managers with instructional practices in order to share the responsibilities as instructional leaders. Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi (2011) argued that principals need to relook at their roles as 'professional leaders', where their main focus should be on becoming leaders who direct learning.

Towards understanding instructional leadership

What does instructional leadership in the 21st century entail? The definition of instructional leadership varies greatly between scholars and researchers. Sim (2011) conceptualised instructional leadership as leadership that is directed at teaching and learning processes that generate interactions regarding the curriculum between teachers and learners, whilst Mestry (2013) referred to instructional leadership as the actions that principals take or delegate in order to promote quality instruction in their schools. Calik et al. (2012) defined instructional leadership as the behaviour displayed by principals, which directly or indirectly affects teaching and learning. Jenkins (2009) elaborated school efficacy by indicating that principals who play an instructional leadership role are considered to be effective in the 21st century.

Our study emphasises the crucial dual role played by middle managers (Syharath 2012): firstly, as teachers and, secondly, as middle managers; they manage and lead other teachers who work in a particular department under their management. Additionally, this investigation describes middle managers as persons who manage the performance of learners and the knowledge and skills of teachers and are subject specialists heading departments, leading curriculum matters and being responsible for leading teachers within the department that they oversee (Mampane 2017). The findings of this study are in line with Hoadley et al. (2009) who found that principals shift instructional leadership responsibilities to the hands of middle managers and, to a large extent, abdicate their responsibilities to this core role as Naidoo and Petersen (2015) explain. Although principals receive training on instructional leadership, they do not to an extent clearly understand, articulate or execute their roles as instructional leaders.

We allude to instructional leadership being defined as all the activities and processes that principals execute in order to support teachers' enrichment of curriculum delivery. According to Naidoo and Petersen (2015), this is the core business of schools.

Conceptual framework: The three domains of instructional leadership

Hallinger and Murphy (1987), Hallinger (2011) and Ng (2019) outlined three domains of instructional leadership. These domains include defining the school's mission statement, managing the instructional programme and promoting a positive learning climate in the school. These domains offer a clear explanation of the functions of general instructional leadership, which principals should adopt in order to assist teachers and middle managers in improving curriculum delivery as well as improving learner results across the whole school. Hallinger (2011) outlined the domains of instructional leadership with its extended functions.

The *first domain*, defining the school's mission statement, consists of two functions, namely, framing the school's goals and communicating these goals. Hoadley et al. (2009) believed that principals are able to positively impact their schools' results by providing the direction in which the school should move. In the past two decades, the mission and vision statements of schools have been regarded as being important components of effective leadership (Bush & Glover 2014). It becomes easier for teachers and middle managers to follow the direction provided by their principal. Teachers and middle managers need to be informed and reminded at all times of the mission and vision statements, and the goals that the school aims to accomplish. This can be achieved by ensuring that the mission statement is made visible throughout the school (Hallinger 2003; Ng 2019). Bush and Glover (2014) argued that the school mission statement should be visible to teachers and middle managers, and teachers should be involved in the processes of formulating these vision and mission statements. In so doing, adverse effects such as exclusion, which can have negative effects in the implementation process, will be avoided. By including teachers and middle managers in these processes, the staff

will exert their 'ownership' of these processes and the implementation thereof.

The *second domain*, managing the instructional programme, includes the following three functions: coordinating the curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction and monitoring learner progress (Hallinger 2011). Principals are expected to interrogate learner results in order to assist teachers in improving their pedagogical practices. Quality instruction needs to be promoted at all times in order to positively influence learner results. Mafuwane (2011) and Naidoo and Petersen (2015) asserted that the core business of schools is teaching and learning, and the core activity is the successful implementation of the curriculum. Thus, more effort needs to be invested in ensuring that this takes place in the most effective way. The direct involvement of principals in the curriculum and the manner of its delivery need to be prioritised by all principals (Naidoo & Petersen 2015).

The *third domain*, creating a positive school learning climate, incorporates the five functions of instructional leadership. These functions are as follows: to protect instructional time, to provide incentives for teachers, to provide incentives for learners, to promote professional development and to maintain a high visibility of principals. For the purpose of this study, the third function, the provision of incentives to learners, will be excluded from this discussion as the researcher is of the opinion that this factor is irrelevant to the teachers' and middle managers' experiences of principals' instructional leadership. According to Mathunyane (2013), the 21st century principals are expected to conduct frequent visits to classrooms in order to ascertain and manage the teaching and learning that takes place in those classrooms. This practice also helps principals interact and engage with teachers and middle managers who are then able to contribute to the discussion on how things could be performed in order to improve efficiency at schools. Principals need to motivate teachers and middle managers to constantly meet for the purpose of knowledge-sharing sessions. The culture of a 'community of learning' (COL) needs to be created within schools so that a culture of learning from one another and working collaboratively as a team can be inculcated within the teaching staff. Ndoziya (2014) asserted that principals need to encourage relationships amongst teachers as this is considered to be a task of instructional leaders.

How does legislation in South Africa define the role of principals, middle managers and teachers?

The role of principals is legislated in the *South African School's Act* No. 84 of 1996, Section 16A. Pertinent to this study are three functions that principals are required to perform, namely, undertake the implementation of all the educational programmes and curriculum activities, manage all educators and manage the use of learning support material. In addition, Moorosi (2020:9) highlighted eight key areas on standards for South African school principals. Relevant to this study is that principals are required to:

> [L]ead teaching and learning in the school; shape the direction and development of the school; manage the quality of teaching and learning and securing accountability; develop and empower staff and others.

Cardno et al. (2019) claimed that principals practise instructional leadership, which is considered important in improving teachers' curriculum delivery capacity, which ultimately enhances learner performance. High learner performance is dependent on teachers' mastery of content and pedagogical knowledge, and how they utilise this knowledge to enhance learners' academic results (Mathunyane 2013). A lack of instructional support from school principals will result in teachers failing to perform to their maximum potential; hence, demotivation may occur, which would affect their efforts to produce better learner outcomes (Josanov-Vrgovic & Pavlovic 2014; Mathunyane 2013; Mestry 2013; Vilakazi 2016). Principals, as instructional leaders, are expected to work closely with teachers and middle managers to improve the culture of teaching and learning; this will enhance learner performance. Botha (2004) believes that principals as instructional leaders need to ensure that teachers and middle managers receive instructional guidance and support and build teams (Krasnoff 2015), which would enable them to teach effectively. Almost two decades later, scholars such as Cardno et al. (2019) and Abdullah et al. (2019) alluded to the significance of principals creating a culture of shared responsibility of instructional leadership duties with middle managers to improve curriculum delivery.

Vilakazi (2016) claimed that when principals fail to dedicate adequate time towards managing teaching and learning by creating conducive environments, teachers lack the enthusiasm to go the 'extra mile', which results in learners producing mediocre work or results. It becomes difficult for teachers to improve on learner performance by themselves. According to Al Hosani (2015), teachers require the support of their principals and school management teams. Principals are required by law (Horng & Loeb 2010) to make provision in their annual budget for the purchasing of instructional materials that will enhance teachers' curriculum delivery. Mupa and Chinooneka (2015) asserted that quality learning materials improve instruction in schools, and principals are, therefore, required to provide a school climate that is conducive to effective curriculum delivery.

A research study conducted by Spaull (2013) indicated that a lack of instructional support to teachers has a negative effect on curriculum delivery in South Africa. Principals are advised not to solely rely on workshops that are occasionally provided by district officials (Mathunyane 2013), whilst Vilakazi (2016) alleged that these workshops do not address the needs of individual schools and are of a substandard quality. Moonsammy-Koopasammy (2012) made the point that principals often claim that managerial responsibilities and activities and other administrative works consume much

of their time, hence their roles as instructional leaders are compromised and this overpowers teaching and learning. The role of principals as instructional leaders will develop teachers and middle managers who are motivated and better able to impact learner performances (Baker-Gardner 2016). Maponya (2015) suggested that principals need to pay more attention to the instructional leadership matters, as effective instructional leaders are committed to leadership, which enables teachers to recognise that instructional approaches will enhance their teaching (Graham 2014).

Effective principals work towards creating and managing the school environment in a manner that allows for effective teaching and learning to take place (Bendikson et al. 2012). In their empirical study on instructional leadership, Naidoo and Petersen (2015) advanced the argument that principals who display effective instructional leadership behaviour in their schools are able to transform their schools into high-performing institutions and further indicated that it is the responsibility of principals to ensure that the school curriculum is effectively implemented, as this will lead to high-performing schools.

We were guided by the following overarching research question: what are teachers' and middle managers' experiences regarding their principals' instructional leadership role towards improving curriculum delivery?

Methods

A research paradigm is described by Guba and Lincoln (1994:107) as 'a set of basic beliefs that deals with ultimates or first principles.' The interpretive research paradigm chosen for this investigation focused on understanding the phenomenon from the participants' point of view. We aligned ourselves to Thanh and Thanh (2015) who claimed that interpretivist researchers seek to discover reality through the views of participants concerning their own experiences and backgrounds. The study was executed through a qualitative research method conceptualised by Merriam (2009) as a research design used to understand a person's world and experiences. The focus was on understanding the experiences of participants in their natural settings (Creswell 2009a, 2014), and relevant to this investigation were the perceptions and experiences of teachers and middle managers regarding their principals' instructional leadership practices in improving the curriculum delivery.

Participants, research sites and data collection

Using purposive sampling (Creswell 2009a), the researchers identified two post level 1 teachers who had 5 or more years of teaching experience in the relevant phase. Two post level 2 middle managers with 5 or more years of leadership and management experience in the two schools were also part of this sample. The authors adhered to the criteria of 5 years' experience, which prompted 'rich data' from all the participants. According to Devers and Frankel (2000:264), 'purposive sampling strategies are designed to enhance

understandings of selected individuals or groups' experience(s) or for developing theories and concepts.' This sample enabled the researchers to best understand the research problem and the research question (Creswell 2009a, 2009b). The two research sites constituted one combined school (School A with grades 1–12 learners) and one primary school (School B with grades 1–7 learners) in the Johannesburg South District. Preliminary discussions with the principals of both schools provided us with vital information regarding the research sites. Both schools had well-established departments/phases (teachers and middle managers working together for more than 5 years). This experience was crucial to our study. The research was conducted with participants from the primary division of School A, focusing on the teachers and middle managers who worked with learners from grades 1 to 7. The principals and the respective school governing bodies supported the researchers in securing the participants who assisted the researchers to best understand the experiences and perceptions of teachers and middle managers regarding their principals' instructional leadership role, and how this practice contributed towards improving curriculum delivery in their respective schools. The post levels of the participants are as follows: MM1, MM2, MM3 and MM4 were middle managers, whilst T1, T2, T3 and T4 were post level 1 teachers.

The first author, who has more than 10 years of teaching and 3 years of middle management experience, conducted the interviews. The second author served as a non-participating observer (Creswell 2009a) at the interviews. Their personal interaction with the participants allowed them the opportunity to gain the participants' first-hand experiences regarding their principals' instructional leadership practices and roles within their own workplaces (Creswell 2009a; Merriam & Tisdell 2015). The first author's dual experience was useful in interpreting the participants' words, phrases, sentences and quotes.

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with the eight participants at their respective workplaces, at a time most convenient for each, which did not interfere with the normal contact time for learners. According to Creswell (2014), interviews enable the participants to provide historical information on the research question. This method of data collection was most suitable for this study because additional knowledge of the participants' experiences was obtained (Marshall & Rossman 2014). The intention of using interviews was to expose the participants' understanding, perceptions and thoughts in their natural settings (Creswell 2009a). Interviews are carried out in order to discover a depth of information that cannot be obtained through observation, as thoughts, feelings, and meanings cannot be observed (Creswell 2009b).

All interviews were audio recorded with the written permission of the participants (Creswell 2009a). The recordings were made available to the participants for verification and auditing purposes. In addition to using a recording device, the researchers made notes in the event that the tape recorder malfunctioned. Having used an interview protocol, which was piloted with one teacher and

one middle manager for reliability (Patton 2002), content validity (Merriam 2009) and authenticity, the researchers also maintained an audit trail, also referred to as a chain of evidence (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Merriam 2009) of all the research procedures and processes applied in this research. Data collected were secured and safely stored throughout the research process. We ensured that data collected from teachers corroborated the data obtained from the middle managers in each school. This was helpful because teachers and middle managers were selected from the same phases in each school.

Data analysis

Data were analysed by means of content analysis techniques (Babbie & Mouton 2001; Creswell 2009a, 2014) that look for insights whereby 'situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances are key topics' (Merriam 2009:205). The researchers used the following procedures outlined by Henning et al. (2004): firstly, we read through the data sets numerous times to obtain a 'feel' for the data and gain an understanding of the thoughts, feelings and opinions or views of the participants. Then, a search ensued for common ideas, phrases, words and judgements articulated by the participants. Data were analysed until data saturation was reached. The researchers clustered or grouped related ideas that addressed common issues, and coded and categorised these into related themes (Henning et al. 2004). The analysis of the data according to themes made it easier for the researchers to understand and interpret the results of the study (Nieuwenhuis 2007), whilst the literature review served as a crucial additional avenue to contextualise the findings.

Findings

The researchers noted the emergence of three themes in the participants' discourse when analysing the results. Here follows a report on these themes supported with quotations and excerpts from the literature.

Understanding good instructional leadership practices

Because the job specifications of middle managers and teachers differ, we expected a different engagement between principals and middle managers and between principals and teachers. Middle managers execute a leadership and management role in a specified phase or department, overseeing teaching and learning processes, teachers' lesson planning, evaluations and reporting, etc., whereas teachers are involved in subject area specialisation pedagogies (Education Labour Relations Council 2003:C66–69). We observed that teachers and middle managers in both schools demonstrated varying levels of understanding on what instructional leadership entails, and this construct impacted on curriculum delivery in their schools. By engaging with the data, it became evident that the participants had some understanding of the concept of 'instructional leadership.' The researchers assumed that the principals in the two research sites had an understanding of the concept of

'instructional leadership.' However, Dongo (2016) believed that principals experience varying levels of difficulty in practising instructional leadership. In the empirical study conducted by Mestry (2013), it became clear that many principals fail to understand the tenets of instructional leadership.

MM1 explained that the principal as 'the head of the institution promotes growth in student learning.' Mestry (2013) supported this view and believed that the actions of the principal as an instructional leader, when initiating or delegating duties to others, promote a growth in learners' learning through effective teaching and learning. T1, in agreement with MM1, mentioned that 'it is about monitoring that curriculum is delivered.' MM2 indicated that 'as a manager, you need to ask, are the teachers delivering what they are supposed to do, are they teaching and is learning taking place?' T2 and MM3 concurred with the above three participants by indicating that the principal 'as a leader ensures that teaching and learning takes place in the school.' Dongo (2016) is in agreement with these views and highlights the supervision of teaching as being one of the important roles that a principal needs to transmit as an instructional leader.

The data highlighted several good instructional leadership practices displayed by the principals of the two research sites. Hallinger (2011) maintained that school goals, as well as the mission and vision statements, need to be communicated to all stakeholders at all times. It is the responsibility of the principal to set school goals and let teachers and middle managers work towards realising these goals. Ng (2019) believed this to be one of the three domains of instructional leadership. School goals that are communicated are easily owned by deputy principals, middle managers and teachers, in such a way that they are able to assume the responsibilities that principals delegate to them. MM1, T3 and MM4 all concurred that the purpose and goals of the school need to be identified by the principal. He or she should set 'school goals and communicate such' (MM1), including the 'mission and the vision statements' (T3) of the school to the staff members, particularly teachers and middle managers, in order for them 'to be able to teach effectively and achieve these outcomes' (MM4). T1 alluded to the principal informing them 'what is expected of them as teachers.' MM4 purported that their principal not only tells teachers what to do but also reminds them 'of the mission and vision statements of the school.'

When defining instructional leadership, Mestry (2013) stated that an effective instructional leader needs to delegate activities to other staff members in order to ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place in schools. T4 and MM3 concurred on the role of the principal, 'instructional leadership is where you delegate some of the work to others.' The participants further stated that if the principal delegates work to the school management team, it will 'lower his workload', and this, in turn, will result in the 'school functioning more smoothly than when everything is accomplished solely by the principal.' MM2, MM3 and T4 alluded to their principals practising distributive leadership,

which Naicker and Mestry (2011:12) regarded as having 'much' to offer schools. Participants MM2, MM3 and T4 concurred that their principals are practising distributive leadership, as they 'delegate work to others, so that the school can run smoothly.' This ensures the deputising of tasks. The authors assert that principals can easily strive towards accomplishing school goals if they delegate curriculum-related activities to other staff members, especially teachers, middle managers and deputy principals. MM2 pointed out that 'there are two deputies in the school and the principal is utilising them in curriculum matters.'

It is important for principals to create a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning to take place and ensure that teaching contact time is not misused with irrelevant activities (Maponya 2015). The authors noted that T3, MM3 and T1 agreed with Maponya (2015) and declared that their principals conduct staff meetings before classes commence and emphasised that should a staff meeting not take place in the morning, it would be convened when the learners are dismissed, thus avoiding any loss of teaching time. The first author observed that once all the learners and teachers were in their respective classes, teaching and learning activities and outcomes were heightened. Barrett and Breyer (2014) argued that motivated teachers execute their teaching responsibilities diligently. MM2 indicated that his principal was always 'immersed in teaching and learning activities and always willing to support teachers in their teaching and learning.' T2 stated, 'he starts during breaks, he will go to the staff room and let all the educators go to the classroom.' The principals' presence serves as a deterrent to teachers who may linger on beyond their lunch hour. T4 was in agreement with T3 and stated that 'our principal runs around the school checking the classrooms that each teacher is in the classroom and not roaming around and/or nothing.' The above practices undertaken by the principals indicate that teaching and learning is their priority. When teachers are reminded of their core responsibilities, to go to class and teach, a minimum of contact time is wasted.

T1 pointed out that her principal monitored the learners' books to ascertain how much of the curriculum was completed. The task of monitoring teaching and learning is also delegated to middle managers and deputy principals in School A. MM4 mentioned a directive from her principal and outlined, 'I visit the class to check if teachers are not bunking the class … I check learners' books [to see if] teachers are following the curriculum.' Class visitations, in order to check whether teachers are implementing the curriculum correctly, seem to be one of the primary tasks that all middle managers carry out in order to monitor the progress of teachers in terms of curriculum delivery. This practice also corroborates with the progress made by learners in any specific term. MM1 asserted, 'monitoring the children's notebooks, monitoring the classes, reporting to classes timeously, observe teaching and learning' are the responsibilities of school management teams. MM4 indicated that as a middle manager, she 'see[s] to it that teachers are doing their duties.' MM2, highlighted:

'I make sure that the teachers are providing the learners with relevant work in their books; I check if they are giving what they are supposed to give the children.'

She added, 'I am one person that will go with the teacher to the class.' T2 confirmed that 'his middle manager does not leave the teachers on their own, as she conducts class visit[s] to check if they are working during contact teaching time'. T4 graciously said: 'Our HOD also comes to check that we are following the ATP (Annual Teaching Plan) … [that] we are on the right track and we are happy.'

T1 from School A mentioned that their principal asks the deputy principals to go to the classes to monitor teachers. MM1, a middle manager at School A, indicated that he is 'always willing to assist to make it easier to work with me, you are not going to be shut down with anything.' With regard to the above comments, the researchers assume that teachers and middle managers feel encouraged to work with a principal who shows an interest in their work and also feel that it is important that principals encourage collaboration between teachers and middle managers. MM1 alluded to 'visiting teachers in their classrooms, where discussions are held and this assists in implementing new strategies'. T1 and T3 both pointed out that 'teachers assist one another to ensure that learners are in their classes on time and that teaching and learning activities take place without compromising the contact time'.

Teacher development as an instructional practice

Li (2014) highly commended principals who prioritise the improvement of teacher capability to effectively deliver the curriculum. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) noted that principals who regard themselves as instructional leaders, and who are aiming to improve learner results, work endlessly to create an environment in which maximum learning potential is advocated.

Data revealed that the principals of the two research sites relied upon the Department of Education for the development of their teachers and middle managers. It is evident that the principals rarely initiated any formal teacher development workshops to develop teachers within their schools. MM4 indicated that she ensures that the teachers in her department are assisted in all matters that they struggle with. MM1 and MM3 concurred, 'we go to any workshops that are convened by the department to ensure that we are kept up to date with curriculum issues.' MM3 stated that 'we attend the developmental meetings and the developmental workshops', adding, 'the facilitators have been coming and supporting us. I think we are getting much support from the district officials.' These comments suggest that the principals of both schools are reliant on district officials to develop teachers and middle managers.

In a situation where MM1 is unable to assist teachers, 'I ensure that there is a senior teacher who is able to assist them.' MM2 spoke about the 'many opportunities' that arose for them in terms of pedagogical content knowledge development. The participant indicated that his middle manager encourages him

to attend workshops so that he is able to address any challenges that he may come across whilst in the class. It is evident that principals leave it up to the middle managers to ensure teachers' pedagogical content knowledge is developed. T2 declared, 'he [*the principal*] always encourages HODs to develop teachers to help them.' This sentiment is confirmed by MM1:

'[*I*]f, for example … an educator does not know [*a*] certain concept and asks me to come in and teach it, and so I do there [*sic*] so that they can observe how it is being taught and even conduct a one-on-one meeting to explain certain concepts to the educator.'

Mampane (2017) asserted that it is an instructional practice of the principal to ensure that teacher development workshops are initiated, even though this is not solely the domain of principals but education department's as well.

The researchers contend that it remains the role of the principal to identify key ideas for developing teachers and organise internal teacher development programmes that can be implemented on a formal basis within the school. This should not be left only to middle managers, as was confirmed at the two research sites. Maponya (2015) showed that there is evidence of improved curriculum delivery by teachers and middle managers in schools where principals consider teacher development as one of their main roles as instructional leaders. The researchers believe that formal, organised teacher development workshops can be monitored by the principal, as opposed to informal ones, which are only implemented when struggling teachers approach their middle managers. For example, a new and struggling teacher found herself in a situation whereby she devised a plan to assist herself. T1 recalled:

'… I got very close to the two teachers who have [*sic*] been here for fifteen, ten years, they will tell me what I should do, they will just give me frequent advice on how to approach some of the topics when I am teaching.'

In agreeing with T1, T2 stated that she, personally, had come across challenges with regard to curriculum delivery: 'I do have an instance where I had to ask an educator to come to [*sic*] teach for me in my first-year of teaching.'

Liu et al. (2016) encouraged principals to organise in-school workshops as they believed that there is immense knowledge and skills that teachers can share with one another, rather than relying solely on outside knowledge. The authors concur with Li et al. (2016) believing that teacher development programmes are appropriate vehicles to address the challenges that teachers experience within schools. Relying only on district interventions can be misguiding and irrelevant, as Vilakazi (2016) claimed that workshops planned by district officials do not always address the needs of individual schools.

Instructional resource provisioning as an instructional practice

Principals are required to allocate provisioning for instructional materials that will improve teacher curriculum delivery (Horng & Loeb 2010). Li et al. (2016) added that principals have access to form relationships with people in the community who matter. This can be extended to include relationships with successful companies in order to request funding for the provision of teaching and learning resources required by teachers to improve on curriculum delivery. Participants from School A reported that their principal goes to great lengths to ensure that teaching and learning resources are made available. Although there is a shortfall in some areas, the principal is always willing to assist. Participants claimed that this shortfall is attributed to the annual non-return of school resources (especially textbooks) by learners. The participants made a mention of a new strategy initiated this year, whereby learners and parents sign a loan agreement with the school, confirming their receipt of textbooks. MM1 stated, 'he [*the principal*] has his hands on with regard to resources.' T1 claimed, 'and also with the textbooks, learners' textbooks, he always asks whether every learner has a textbook.' According to T2, the principal also encourages his teachers to identify other resources to supplement the resources provided by the Department of Education. The participants from School A associated very good instructional practices with their principal. MM1 indicated that as a middle manager, she is allowed to procure additional resources to improve teaching practices.

Participants from School B presented the provisioning of teaching and learning resources from a different perspective to that provided by the participants from School A. T4 remarked, 'the LTSM (Learning and Teaching Support Materials) committee gives us what we need for our resources.' It was evident that the duty of allocating textbooks and other teaching materials had been delegated by the principal to the LTSM committee, which works with the procurement and distribution of resources in the school. The participant also highlighted the fact that even though these duties had been delegated to the committee, the principal still showed an interest in what teachers required in terms of teaching resources. It became obvious that middle managers from School B collaboratively work with the LTSM committee to ensure teachers receive teaching and learning resources. T4 claimed, 'our leaders, the principal and also the LTSM staff they [*sic*] are making sure that we've got everything, the charts, everything that you need for teaching.' MM3 pointed out that the principal 'makes sure that we've got all the resources that we need.' MM3 did not mention the LTSM committee but mentioned that the school had enough resources as a result of the stringent measures adopted by the LTSM committee. MM4, in agreement with T4, indicated that the LTSM committee ensures that teaching and learning occurs successfully with the appropriate resources. MM4 stated that 'some resources come from the department workshops' and confirmed as an LTSM coordinator that they do not have non-conformist learners when it comes to the loan system adopted in the school. MM4 boasted of having 'a one hundred percent textbook retrieval system', which has worked well for many years.

Discussion

How do teachers and middle managers perceive their principals' instructional leadership practices?

The study findings indicate that teachers see themselves as being at the forefront of transmitting knowledge to learners and acknowledge the role played by principals in curriculum delivery. Teachers agree that it is difficult for them to improve learner performance without the support of their principals. The participants' discourse corroborated the studies of Barrett and Breyer (2014) and Al Hosani (2015) who acknowledge that teachers being supported by their principals is fundamental to improving teachers' delivery of the curriculum. Teachers in both schools felt honoured and praised their principals for creating an environment that enables them to teach effectively. The visibility and availability of the principal to the school community as well as teachers and middle managers were enabling for both groups of participants.

When comparing this study conducted in South Africa with the research conducted by Ndoziya (2014) in Zimbabwe, the authors found that teachers in Zimbabwe were against principals' interventions and suggestions, as they believed the support was not judiciously provided for developmental purposes but rather the intention was to find fault or highlight the wrong actions of teachers (Ndoziya 2014). We note in this study that principals who desired better learner outcomes with an overall improvement on the curriculum delivery provided teachers with constructive feedback, conducted class visits and provided adequate appropriate teaching resources. Teachers, therefore, valued the presence and visibility of principals if this occurred for good reasons such as support, development, motivation and encouragement.

Protection of contact time, supervision and evaluation of instruction and monitoring of learner performance

We noted another good instructional practice being the protection of instructional contact time with learners where, according to Belle's (2009) study, teachers alluded to loosing constructive teaching time that is misused by dealing with disciplinary issues. We highlight the research conducted by Vilakazi (2016) who stated that teachers also contribute to wasting teaching time when they choose to visit one another, leaving learners unattended and unsupervised. Our findings indicated that teachers in both schools concurred on their principals supervising, evaluating instruction and monitoring learner' progress and performance, purported by Steyn (2011), as an important instructional practice of principals. The principals of both schools were commended for 'constantly checking learners' books' for progress and curriculum coverage.

This research also highlighted what Al Hosani (2015) referred to as instructional leadership being grounded in the principle of supporting teachers and providing learning opportunities that will make a positive impact on learner results in the classrooms. In the same vein, principals should provide teaching and learning resources that will result in the effective delivery of the curriculum as well as the smooth administration of staff development programmes, which in turn positively impact curriculum delivery according to Herrera (2010).

Encouragement of teacher development

Our study validates previous studies conducted by Li et al. (2016) and Liu et al. (2016) who emphasised the role of the principal in creating a supportive environment for teacher development, being the key factor for improving teacher instruction for quality teaching and learning in schools. Notwithstanding the fact that principals as instructional leaders cannot be perceived as singular role-players who initiate professional development programmes for teachers, but rather principals should be working alongside other school management team members in order to ensure that professional development is accomplished. Additionally, we argue that the responsibility of enhancing curriculum delivery by creating opportunities for professional development, therefore, rests with the principal together with the school management team. The participants' discourse is reflective of this important role played by the head of the institution (Horng & Loeb 2010). It is clear from our findings that any school improvement effort is not a 1-day initiative, and principals need to reduce time spent on managerial activities and invest more time on tasks that improve teaching and learning (Graham 2014; Moonsammy-Koopsammy 2012; Ndoziya 2014).

Provision of teaching and learning materials

Principals are in a position of influence, to the extent that they are capable of accessing learning resources, which teachers can use to enhance their teaching. Li et al. (2016) and Mafuwane (2011) asserted that principals can readily gain access to resources and channel these to their schools by exerting an influential advantage when communicating with external stakeholders in order to access learning materials for the benefit of their schools. This suggests the necessity for a healthy relationship between school principals and other stakeholders that exist within the surrounding school community.

Conclusion and recommendations

In response to our guiding research question, which was 'What are teachers' and middle managers' experiences regarding their principals' instructional leadership role towards improving curriculum delivery?', this study highlights the importance of teachers' and middle managers' understanding that their principals are not merely school managers or administrators but rather instructional leaders whose primary role is to direct teaching and learning processes in schools. Principals need to create time within their constricted schedules to become instructional leaders, which is their main purpose in schools. Principals need to work closely with middle managers in order to bridge the gap between teachers and the senior management of the school, which include the

principal and deputy principals. If the roles and responsibilities of middle managers are not explicit, their ability to simultaneously perform the dual task of being teachers and managers will be compromised. The principal's role, amongst others, is to manage the various relationships within the school so that a harmonious and productive teaching and learning environment prevails.

Globally, a number of studies have been conducted on instructional leadership. Most studies conducted in South Africa and abroad focus on the principal as an instructional leader, with no focus being attributed to the role of middle managers and teachers in this process. The findings of this study on middle managers' and teachers' experiences of principals' instructional leadership towards improving curriculum delivery suggest the following areas for further study: exploring principals' instructional leadership in special schools, promoting instructional leadership roles to novice teachers and supporting middle managers in accomplishing teaching and management roles and responsibilities.

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