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The role of departmental heads in curriculum transformation: Implications for the provision of quality education in South African public schools

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Abstract
South Africa has made significant strides to address children's access to education and provide equitable funding to historically disadvantaged schools. However, several challenges such as ineffective curriculum management, lack of educational resources, overcrowded classrooms, and appointment of unqualified teachers, still exist. This has serious implications for the provision of acceptable standards of education. Departmental heads (DHs), as instructional leaders, should play crucial roles in curriculum transformation. They are compelled to evaluate and reimagine the transformation of teaching and learning and come up with sustainable educational platforms that are aligned with current and future societal needs. DHs should reframe the curriculum, interrogate underlying assumptions that shape curriculum norms, and re-evaluate the performance of learners, especially from historically disadvantaged communities. Using a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological research design, I explored the perceptions and experiences of 6 DHs of public schools in the Limpopo Province of South Africa about their role in curriculum transformation. The findings revealed that due to their heavy administrative and managerial workloads, DHs pay very little attention to their core responsibilities of instructional leadership such as providing professional development for teachers. This has serious implications for high learner achievement and acceptable educational standards.

Keywords: curriculum transformation; departmental heads; instructional leadership; professional development; quality management systems

Introduction and Background to the Problem
South Africa has made significant strides to provide children access to schooling. The current South African statistics reflect that 98.8% of children, aged from 7 to 14 years, are enrolled in 25,851 schools (Hall, 2024). However, the country grapples to provide quality education to most learners in public schooling (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], n.d.). For example, the analysis of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study ([PIRLS], U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences (IES], National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023) reveals that 81% of grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language, compared to the other 33 countries/regions who participated in the test (Lucwaba, 2024; Mahlangu & Mtshali, 2024; U.S. Department of Education. IES, NCES, 2023). South Africa also performed poorly in the 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) test (Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2024). The outcomes show that 65% of grade 5 learners could not add and subtract whole numbers.

Nationally, the annual National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination results have shown marginal improvement over the past 5 years. In 2023 results, only 40.9% of learners managed to secure university admission passes (Jet Education Services, 2024). The analysis of the NSC results reflect that at least 50% of learners exit the school system because they are not equipped with basic skills and core competencies to complete studies at tertiary institutions (Ntema, 2022; Spaull, 2015) or succeed in the workplace, more specifically, in highly competitive global markets (Graham, Williams & Chisoro, 2019). The low socio-economic status (SES) and its correlates, such as lower educational achievement, poverty and poor health, ultimately affect the South African society and invariably threatens national stability, development, and democracy (Bernstein, 2023).

One of the underlying causes for the low educational standards include poorly trained teachers who lack content and pedagogical knowledge, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of parental support (Majeed & Kareem, 2025). Studies show that a large sector of teachers, particularly those who teach in subjects such as mathematics or science, lack sufficient subject knowledge compared to their peers in other countries (Shepherd, 2019). Similarly, the Foundation Phase teachers (Grades 1–3) are not competent to systematically teach literacy (reading) and numeracy (Mojapelo, 2023). Teachers cannot be solely blamed for the dismal learner performance in all grades or even low educational standards in the country. School management teams (SMTs) (principals, deputy principals and DHs) are equally denunciated. SMTs, as instructional leaders, are accountable to parents, the education ministries and learners for the provision of quality teaching and learning (Maifala, 2024; Mataboge & Mahlangu, 2024). In this study I focused on the roles of DHs (also referred to as heads of departments or middle leaders) in curriculum transformation. Curriculum transformation is defined as education changes in the 21st century that require a curriculum that moves beyond content delivery and focuses on

developing core competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication (Edwin, Widiana, Lasmawan & Suharta, 2025).

Research reveals that many DHs experience immense difficulty in performing their professional duties to competently lead and manage their departments/phases[i] (Nhlumayo & Ngubane, 2025). Due to heavy teaching workloads and multifarious managerial and administrative responsibilities, they are unable to balance these responsibilities with their core functions of instructional leadership (Prestoza & Naldoza, 2025). DHs face serious challenges such as their inability to balance their workloads, manage their time, and procure and implement effective educational resources and facilities (Tapala, Van Niekerk & Mentz, 2021). Some studies show the inability of DHs to adequately supervise teachers in their departments/phases, and to provide these teachers with opportunities to engage in professional development (Eroglu & Kaya, 2021). The very essence of DHs as instructional leaders is to transform schools into environments where teachers and learners can reach their full potential (Kalane & Rambuda, 2022).

In a South African context, the ambiguity of DHs' roles compounded with numerous challenges they encounter, including their own knowledge and skill deficits, has resulted in many DHs inadequately executing their core responsibilities of teaching and learning. According to Madonsela and Proches (2022), several DHs lack subject knowledge – especially if they are not specialists in the subjects that they are tasked to supervise. The rising expectation that educational leaders divide their attention between academic responsibilities and administrative management, places DHs in a challenging position. They are expected to drive 21st century goals for learner and teacher development, while simultaneously meeting the administrative demands imposed by principals and education district officials. This tension of competing priorities results in DHs striving to balance visionary leadership with routine managerial duties, such as monitoring teacher compliance.

The main research question in this study was: What is the role of DHs in curriculum transformation in public schools? To address the main research question, the following sub-question was formulated: What are the perceptions and experiences of DHs about their roles in curriculum transformation?

Significance of the Study

This research has relevance for national and international DHs (middle leaders/managers) who are consistently confronted with poor educational standards and low learner achievements. The study raises concerns about the role that DHs play in curriculum transformation. As instructional leaders, they should alert teachers of latest trends in education and inspire teachers to teach creatively. This study also raises awareness and interest of ministries of education to provide training and development for teachers in the implementation of curriculum transformation. This research can inform policy and practice by guiding institutional leaders in empowering DHs and improving curriculum governance.

Theoretical Framework

It was appropriate to frame this study using Lewin's three-phase model of change (Bell, 2025). DHs are expected to craft the process of curriculum transformation through knowledge-sharing with departmental/phase members (Hussain, Lei, Akram, Haider, Hussain & Ali, 2018).

The first stage of the model involves preparing individuals for curriculum transformation by identifying the need for change (Hussain et al., 2018). The theory assumes that teacher actions are built on prior learning and cultural influences. Hussain et al. (2018) and Van der Westhuizen (2014) aver that DHs must ensure that outdated teaching practices are critically reviewed and discarded when they no longer align with democratic values. Within the framework of curriculum reforms DHs need to be adequately prepared for such transitions. The movement stage builds upon the outcomes of the unfreezing stage (Van der Westhuizen, 2014) where new behaviour, values and attitudes are cultivated by reshaping school structures and processes. Moving entails embedding new norms and perspectives through the recognition and acceptance of structural changes. In the context of curriculum changes, it is crucial for DHs to develop a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum, assessment and policy statements (CAPS). This enables them to clearly identify gaps between current pedagogical approaches and the intended pedagogy outlined in the current curriculum.

DHs can apply the refreezing stage by institutionalising new curriculum practices, reinforcing them through policy and culture, and ensuring long-term sustainability through professional development (Hussain et al., 2018). According to Nieuwenhuis and Mokoena (2001), DHs seek to stabilise the school in a new state of equilibrium and to ensure that new ways of working are relatively safe from regression. If the unfreezing and moving stages are properly managed, the refreezing stage demands limited guidance, relying instead on supportive frameworks such as organisational culture or climate, norms, policies, and practices.

Lewin's model thus offers a structured pathway that enables DHs to envision, design,

guide, oversee and manage curriculum transformation. By adopting these three clearly defined stages of change, DHs, in their roles as instructional leaders, can strategically plan and implement the curriculum process with greater effectiveness. The initial stage involves establishing the justification for change by emphasising its purpose and significance (unfreezing). This is followed by guiding the transition through fostering clear channels of communication and equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to confidently adopt perspectives and practices (movement). The final stage is achieved when DHs consolidate a stable school environment (refreezing), which provides the foundation for change initiatives.

This three-phase framework highlights the pivotal role that DHs play in directing and supporting curriculum transformation within their schools, reinforcing the importance of their instructional leadership responsibilities.

Literature Review

Legislative framework

The Employment of Educators Act (RSA, 1998) stipulates that DHs should engage in teaching and take charge of a subject/phase. They are essentially responsible for the effective functioning of their department/staff such as managing budgets, stocks, textbooks, and equipment. Moreover, they should provide and coordinate guidance on the latest ideas on approaches to the subject, method, techniques, evaluation, educational aids and effectively convey these to the staff members concerned.

The Norms and Standards for Educators (Department of Education, RSA, 2000) stipulates that educators (DHs, deputy-principals, and principals) have seven roles to fulfil. For DHs to support teachers to achieve these expected roles, they should have sound knowledge and skills in their subject and be capable of conveying them to teachers in their departments (Ghavifekr & Ibrahim, 2014). They should help teachers mediate learning in a manner which is sensitive to the diverse needs of learners, including those with barriers to learning. Teachers should understand, interpret and design original learning programmes, identify the requirements for specific contexts of learning and select and prepare suitable textual and visual resources for learning. DHs are responsible for supporting teachers in managing classroom learning., handling administrative tasks effectively and engaging in school governing structures.

DHs should create avenues for teachers to pursue continuous personal, academic, occupational and professional growth through pursuing reflective practice and research in their subject areas. Equally important is ensuring that teachers possess a solid foundation of knowledge, skills, values, principles, methods, and procedures, relevant to their discipline, subject, learning area, phase of study, or professional or occupational practice. Furthermore, DHs should encourage teachers to explore diverse approaches and strategies to teaching and learning and guide them in applying these approaches in ways that suit the learners and the specific educational contexts.

The Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (DBE, RSA, 2016) specify that DHs should be responsible for ensuring the efficient operation of the department/phase and for co-ordinating appropriate extra-curricular activities. These efforts should promote the subject, learning area or phase, and advance the overall education of learners in a meaningful and effective way. DHs are required to collaborate with teachers in their departments/phases to effectively implement the curriculum. They are strategically positioned to implement the principles and practices of instructional leadership to improve teaching and learning directly. They should thus be equipped with the specialised knowledge and skills for instructional leadership.

A Quality Management System (QMS) was implemented by the DBE, RSA (2016) in public schools with the purpose of improving teacher proficiency and enhancing school improvement (Mathura, 2024). DHs are mandated to take full responsibility for the advocacy, management and implementation of QMS (DBE, RSA, 2022). QMS is a practical and reliable tool for DHs to measure teacher performance impartially and consistently (Education Labour Relations Council [ELRC], 2020). Evidence-based feedback mechanisms are built into the QMS model. Each educator (teacher, DH, deputy principal and principal) is subjected to two formal evaluations annually.

It is imperative for DHs to have a thorough understanding of the QMS model to ensure that the purpose, guiding principles, and the process are clearly disseminated to teachers (DBE, RSA, 2021a). The assessment process of teachers includes self-appraisal where teachers reflect deeply on their teaching performance and critically consider their development goals; hold pre-discussion meetings between the DH and teacher before lesson observation and post-discussion meetings after the lessons (ELRC, 2020; Mamabolo, Malatji & Mphahlele, 2022); and finally, the verification process. The DH plays an important role in lesson observation and post-lesson delivery of teachers, and the feedback the DH provides to the teacher (DBE, RSA, 2022). The important principle underlying QMS is the accountability of DHs and teachers, where both are responsible for decisions taken. Moreover, both parties must perform according to their job descriptions as stipulated in the PAM document (DBE, RSA, 2021b).

Instructional leadership

DHs play a critical role in leading and managing curriculum matters. Kalane and Rambuda (2022) and Syharath (2012) affirm that DHs oversee the teaching of specific subjects/phases, as well as coordinate and supervise all educational programmes in compliance with established norms and standards set out by the DBE. They act as key change agents within the internal locus of control, manage the implementation of curriculum transformation, monitor teaching and learning practices, and provide continuing professional development for teachers. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) aver that narrative researchers share a foundational belief that stories told by DHs is a fundamental unit for understanding human experiences.

It is pertinent to mention Jika iMfundo, a South African programme that aims to improve teaching and learning by increasing curriculum coverage (Pillay, 2018). Jika Mfundo (which can be translated as "turn education around"), was implemented in selected education districts and focused on increased curriculum coverage as a lever for improving learning outcomes (Maphalala & Mphahlele, 2023). Conceptually, the programme focuses on the instructional core for sustainable education change and is supported by the view that practical classroom activities with visible effects on learning is likely to change teachers' classroom practices. Teachers welcomed the level of structure of the programme. They knew exactly what was to be done, and how and when to do it. This may be of particular significance in developing contexts with limited resources and where schools frequently perform poorly. The programme identifies the DH's instructional leadership role (Pillay, 2018) as follows:

- Curriculum tracking, by checking whether the teacher uses the tracker (which is a document that details exactly what content and assessment teachers need to cover every day), is on track with coverage of the curriculum, and has lesson plans.
- Examining teachers planned and conducted assessments.
- Managing each teacher's attendance at phase or departmental meetings, class visits conducted, workbooks checked to determine whether workbooks match what is in the teacher's tracker, and number of lessons that the teacher missed.

DHs are usually appointed based on their leadership and managerial skills to oversee teams of teachers who focus on phases (Foundation, Intermediatory or Senior) or specific subjects (mathematics, science, accounting) (Ogina, 2017; Tapala et al., 2021). It is imperative that they collaborate with colleagues to maintain good teaching standards and progress among the learners (Mampane, 2017). Seobi and Wood (2016) support the notion that instructional leaders should establish good relationships and enrich collaboration among teachers and learners to create conducive school climates.

Research Methodology

A phenomenological design within an interpretivist paradigm foregrounded this qualitative research. The primary focus was to understand the subjective experiences of individuals (phenomenology) while acknowledging that these experiences are inherently interpreted and constructed within a social context (interpretivism), essentially, studying how people make sense of their lived experiences within their unique worldviews and situations. Phenomenological research design offers deep insights of how individuals experience and interpret specific phenomena, making it ideal for exploring subjective meaning and lived experiences (Rajasinghe, Garvey, Burt, Barosa-Pereira & Clutterbuck, 2024). More specifically, with the phenomenological design we explored the essence of DHs' experiences in curriculum transformation and the meaning they attributed to these experiences (Gasparyan, 2021).

Thirteen participants who had at least 3 years' experience as DHs were purposefully sampled. They were part of the Limpopo Department of Education's (LDEs) initiative to provide continuing professional development (CPD) for 50 DHs. They were selected from various primary and secondary schools, located mainly in rural areas and townships, to study the Advanced Diploma School Leadership and Management (AdvDipSLM) course part-time at a comprehensive university. Consent for participation in the study was requested from the principals and DHs of the selected schools. The participants were ensured of their anonymity and were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time.

Semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes were conducted individually with participants after school hours. Generally, participants relayed their concerns relating to balancing their workloads, their own professional development, instructional responsibilities, and challenges faced in leading and managing teachers in their departments (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Kvale, 2007). The data were analysed thematically through open coding. Through this process I identified patterns of DHs' roles in curriculum transformation. The six phases in thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012) were used: Familiarising the data by listening to the audio recordings intently; Identifying descriptive or semantic codes obtained from the contents; Reviewing coded data and searching for themes; Repeating the process of reviewing themes in relation to the coded data as quality check; Defining and naming themes (and sub-themes); and interpreting the analysis of data which is supported by empirical evidence.

The data were examined for content, primarily through Tesch's open coding method (Creswell, 2014). This approach offers a structured framework for analysing qualitative information. The review focused on assessing the value, depth and richness of the data. Transcriptions were carefully read focussing on recurring patterns and commonalities, ensuring credibility of the finding. The analysis was then aligned with the research aim and objectives to determine whether they have been met. The process included identifying key topics, organising codes into categories, and allowing themes and sub-themes to emerge.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) three norms of trustworthiness, namely, credibility, confirmability and transferability, were applied (Shenton, 2004). Prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks and peer debriefing were used to accurately record the phenomena under investigation (credibility). Transferability was addressed through purposive sampling and through the provision of rich descriptions to ensure that I gained proper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 reflects themes and sub-themes that emanated from the data analysis. To ensure anonymity, participants were named as DH1 (Departmental Head at School 1), DH2 (Departmental Head at School 2), et cetera.

Table 1 Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
1) Core responsibility of instructional leadership	• Conceptual understanding of instructional leadership • Implementation of new or amended policies on curriculum issues • Oversight functions relating to curriculum issues
2) Curriculum transformation: A prerequisite for effective teaching and learning	• Paradigm shift from traditional to vibrant approaches to teaching and learning • Generating new ideas through collaboration
3) Professional development of teachers	• Continuing professional development for DHs • Creating and sustaining a culture of professional development for teachers

Theme 1: Core Responsibility of Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is defined as actions and processes that support teaching and learning. Drawing on Ng's (2019) interpretation, instructional leadership is best described in dimensions: framing and communicating departmental goals; coordinating the curriculum; supervising teachers and evaluating instruction; monitoring learner progress; protecting instructional time; providing incentives for teachers and learners; and promoting professional development.

There is both congruence and dissonance between the research findings and existing literature on instructional leadership. While many scholars agree on core elements like improving teaching and learning, there are notable differences in how instructional leadership is conceptualised across contexts and studies. This concept has evolved from a narrow focus on classroom supervision to a broader, more complex role encompassing curriculum development, teacher support and school culture. See the seminal works of Hallinger and Murphy (1985) who laid the foundation by defining instructional leadership as actions that directly affect teaching quality and student learning.

In the first sub-theme, participants were asked to explain their perspectives and experiences of instructional leadership.

Conceptual understanding of instructional leadership

All the participants had good conceptual understanding of instructional leadership and acknowledged that leading teaching and learning were their core responsibility. DH1 clearly delineated instructional leadership as

> *… the practices and actions of school leaders aimed at improving teaching and learning. It emphasises creating a vision for academic success, fostering a collaborative environment, supporting teachers, and ensuring effective instructional strategies are implemented. Instructional leaders focus on curriculum development, assessment, and professional development, all with the goal of enhancing learner outcomes.*

The concept "instructional leadership" is more precisely and practically defined by DH9:

> *Instructional leadership focuses on guiding and improving the quality of teaching and learning within a school. It involves fostering a learning environment where educators are supported, instructional strategies are aligned with curriculum goals, and learner outcomes are continuously monitored and enhanced.*

DH13 affirmed the meaning of instructional leadership:

> *The DH acts as an instructional leader by taking active interest in the monitoring and improvement of instructional programmes. For this, well-defined goals have to be chalked out, classroom practices to be closely monitored, teaching outcomes evaluated, and teachers are to be supported*

through mentoring, coaching, and other resource that are needed.

Ogina (2017) argues that the definition and characteristics of instructional leadership should be reimagined in the 21st century to include school leaders modelling instructional behaviour; collaborating and coaching teachers; encouraging teachers to network; and develop leadership skills through distributive leadership practices, instead of the conventional controlling and monitoring of teaching practices. DHs are responsible for communicating curriculum issues and monitoring teaching and learning through proper planning and instructional delivery. DHs invariably influence teacher practice, team development, school reforms and professional learning (Sukoco, Lestari, Susanto, Nasution & Usman, 2022).

Implementation of new or amended policies on curriculum issues

Participants conceded that they complied with curriculum directives from the DBE and LDE. They must monitor the progress of teachers' curriculum delivery; provide guidance on lesson preparation and presentations; analyse learner assessment; develop strategic plans; and consistently evaluate the curriculum. Most participants emphasised that effective communication with their teachers about policy and regulation changes is vital for successful implementation. DH7 explained how new policies were "*integrated into existing policies and how metrics were established for evaluating the implementation of amended or new policies*." DH10 explained the process followed at their school to implement and monitor policy directives instituted by the LDE:

> *I would review and analyse, in consultation with other SMT members, new curriculum policy directives from DBE or LDE; develop an implementation plan with timelines; communicate clearly all curriculum changes to department members and monitor teachers' implementation of amended policies.*

DH13 provided a detailed process that he followed:

> *I ensure that my team and I first internalise and understand the policy changes from the LDE through workshops and meetings. We then apply those in contextual settings of our subjects by aligning them with the already established practices or adapting them wherever it was necessary. Since clear communication with the teachers is paramount, I guide them on how to infuse the new policies into their lesson planning, learner assessments, and classroom management.*

It is critical for DHs to align departmental goals and the broader curriculum vision and effectively bridge the gap between school leadership and classroom practices (Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022). They are expected to give support to teachers and learners and have a good understanding of departmental policies and legislation, and all times be well-equipped to perform their duties with confidence (Naidoo & Petersen, 2015).

Oversight functions relating to curriculum issues

Most DHs applied similar oversight functions to monitor their departments'/phases' teaching and learning programmes. They frequently supervised teachers' records and learners' workbooks and assessment reports.

DH1 collaborated with teachers to develop termly and annual teaching plans (ATPs) aligned with the LDE's policy imperatives.

> *I make regular classroom observations to ensure teachers' lessons are aligned with curriculum goals and standards. I ensure that teachers maintain accurate records of lesson plans, learner assessment and progress reports and ensure assessments (formative and summative) are aligned with curriculum and policy guidelines.*

DH13 outlined his oversight functions:

> *I coordinate regular assessment to track the progress of learners with the assurance that what is delivered will meet educational goals. We do keep detailed records of curriculum coverage, lesson plans, and learner performance data to keep ourselves accountable. Secondly, frequent departmental meetings are held to review teachers' records, identify gaps, and develop strategies accordingly. Curriculum reporting is about communicating progress: challenges and successes to parents and LDE.*

The DH plays a crucial role in providing guidance and support to teachers in his/her departments/phases. It is incumbent for them to hold regular strategic planning meetings where aspects such as lesson plans, learner assessment, curriculum progress and curriculum evaluation are addressed. Undoubtedly, success hinges on DHs frequently collaboration with team members, guiding them and providing professional development for teachers under their care. Some acknowledged that their own workloads were barriers to effectively managing their departments/phases. However, many DHs provided in-depth analysis of their oversight functions. DH12 explained his role in lesson planning and curriculum monitoring:

> *I guide my team on best practices, model lesson planning, and effectively sequence lessons within the lesson planning guide. We also hold regular planning sessions where we discuss subject content, share good ideas, and offer support to those teachers who may need a little guidance in structuring a lesson or two. This should help maintain consistency and high standards within the department. Monitoring the curriculum programme of teachers in my department has involved working together with my team to ensure consistency and effectiveness in curriculum delivery. We review lesson plans, pacing guides, and teaching materials for consistency with the curriculum objectives. I have also conducted some classroom observations,*

> *giving feedback that allows me to judge the implementation of the curriculum.*

DH2 and DH8 had similar perspectives of their roles in learner assessment. DH2 focused on setting clear frameworks that are in line with the curriculum. DH8 on the other hand, pursued complementary strategies that reinforced the same goals while leveraging the teachers' own strengths and contexts. DH2 planned and scheduled formative and summative assessment and guided teachers on the design of assessment instruments that have appropriate validity to ensure that intended learning outcomes and skills are measured.

Theme 2: Curriculum Transformation: A Prerequisite for Effective Teaching and Learning

In this study, curriculum transformation does not entail replacing one curriculum (e.g., the Revised National Curriculum Statement [RNCS]) with another (e.g., Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements [CAPS]). Instead, it is about how DHs manage content and cultural changes, adopt transformative approaches to reframing the curriculum, and interrogating underlying assumptions that shape curriculum norms. Curriculum transformation is considered a prerequisite for effective teaching and learning because it lays the foundation for a responsive, inclusive and future-oriented education system. Traditional curricula emphasise rote memorisation over critical thinking. Transformation promotes active learning, creativity and problem-solving by focusing on the learners' experience. Curriculum transformation encourages teachers to adopt new methods such as project-based learning, digital tools, and interdisciplinary approaches. Moreover, a flexible curriculum empowers educators to tailor instruction to student needs.

Paradigm shift from traditional to vibrant approaches of teaching and learning

It is imperative that DHs make paradigm shifts from the traditional culture of managing teaching and learning to more invigorated leadership approaches. Within the constantly shifting realm of education, leadership holds a crucial position in influencing the experiences and achievements of learners, educators, and wider communities (Sharma & Adeoye, 2024). The demand for visionary and transformative leadership has become increasingly urgent as we enter a new era defined by swift technological progress, profound societal changes, and heightened global interconnectedness.

DHs should reimagine and reinvent creative, cutting edge or ground-breaking strategies to design and implement the latest trends in pedagogical and curriculum issues so that learners are provided with quality education (Sharma & Adeoye, 2024). DHs should inspire teachers and encourage them to be critical and guide them to apply vibrant approaches to teaching and learning instead of traditional ways, where teachers remain sole sources and senders of knowledge through "chalk-and-talk" methods (Moorthy & Arulsamy, 2014). Learners become mere recipients of teacher's instruction charactered classrooms with insufficient interaction.

DH1 applied flexible approaches to implementing the curriculum. Teachers are allowed to experiment and adapt their curriculum delivery to learners' needs:

> *We use the data, mostly from the analysis of learner results, to set goals. To ensure that teachers are teaching effectively, I encourage them to be innovative in their teaching methods and make available to them diverse teaching tools so that teachers are encouraged to integrate blended learning approaches. I must be fair and consistent and thus make decisions of how best to allocate teaching aids and technological tool based on teacher and learner needs and the potential impact that this can come from it. To build a supportive culture, I foster teamwork and create an open environment where teachers can express ideas freely and feel supported in experimenting with new strategies. While the LDE prescribes how the curriculum is to be implemented, I adopt a more flexible approach by allowing teachers to experiment and adapt the curriculum delivery based on our learners' needs. As DH, I anticipate future challenges and monitor the educational trends and latest policies locally and internationally.*

In curriculum transformation, DHs should provide and co-ordinate guidance in respect of the latest knowledge, ideas or approaches to subjects, methods of teaching, pedagogy, assessment, and educational aids in their field to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Bourn & Soysal, 2021). They should have in-depth knowledge of syllabuses, schemes of work, homework, practical work, remedial work and enrichment programmes.

Generating creative ideas through collaboration

Participants indicated that teachers were encouraged to integrate information and communication technology (ICT) in their teaching. ICT equips teachers with resources to create personalised learning experiences, tailor instructions to the needs of each learner, and strengthen their knowledge retention. It also enhances the clarity of assessment practices and fosters effective communication among teachers, learners, and parents. DH2 explained:

> *I foster a collaborative environment and empower teachers with new instructional tools to facilitate personalised learning experiences, adapt to the unique needs of each learner, and enhance knowledge retention. In addition, it improves the transparency of attendance and grading processes, facilitating communication among teachers, students, and parents' strategies.*

DH9 said the following:

> *I promote innovation and creativity by encouraging teachers to adopt new teaching methods, such as integrating technology into lessons. I lead curriculum enhancements by fostering collaboration in lesson planning, and I implement regular professional development programmes to ensure that teachers are up to date with educational trends. I introduce targeted intervention strategies based on data analysis and create an open feedback culture to continuously refine practices and adapt to their needs.*

A widely-held perception exists that DHs have infinite decision-making powers, with the freedom and skills to make sweeping changes at will (Buckner-Capone, 2019). However, in a South African context, this is simply not the case. DHs have limited powers to set policies and are often unable to make autonomous decisions. They are compelled to take on a compliant management role, bound by provincial and national legislation and policies. They are further limited by their own underdeveloped skillsets.

Theme 3: Professional Development of Teachers

DHs' successful achievement of curriculum transformation is dependent on the teachers who are directly involved in the teaching process. Using the adage that "no person knows it all", teachers, irrespective of their qualifications and teaching experience, have the capacity to improve their praxis. DHs can actively reflect on and critically analyse their own teaching practices, identify areas for improvement, and then take action to enhance their effectiveness as middle leaders through CPD.

Continuing professional development for DHs

Ogina (2017) argues that DHs should receive appropriate training and development so that they can build a repertoire of knowledge and skills that will enable them to lead and manage their departments/phases effectively. DH5 explained as follows:

> *I believe that the LDE should provide opportunities for us to receive intensive and standardised training that will support us to have expert subject knowledge and skills so that we can become better mentors for our teachers. Just as there are structures for monitoring and controlling the teachers' work, there should also be structures and guidelines that DHs can follow in the continuing professional development (CPD) of our teachers.*

Currently, many higher education institutions offer the AdvDipSLM as part of CPD for school leaders. DH11 explained:

> *I enrolled for this course because it will help me become a DH with solid knowledge and skills of the subjects so that I can teach, lead and manage teaching and learning in my department effectively. Educational authorities are creating opportunities – they provided me with a bursary to do the AdvDipSLM as a conduit for my CPD.*

DH4 concurred with DH11:

> *I am expected to have expert subject knowledge of the CAPS curriculum and pedagogical content knowledge. This AdvDipSLM helps me support and develop teachers regarding the proper application of teaching resources, balancing heavy workloads and overcrowded classrooms. I play a crucial role in motivating teachers, eliminating high teacher absenteeism and reducing unnecessary paperwork. I have developed some strategies that teachers could use to address challenges such as engaging in discussions with colleagues to collectively find solutions.*

It is imperative that newly appointed DHs are provided with well-structured induction programmes. They should be familiar with their responsibilities and be prepared when confronted with challenges during the transition (Madonsela & Proches, 2022). Most DHs learn on the job to monitor teaching and teachers' records, checking teachers' lesson plans, doing class visits, checking learners' workbooks and assessment tasks. Lassonde and Israel (2010) defines professional development as engaging in opportunities that lead to the acquisition of new knowledge, deeper understanding, practical skills, and effective strategies, all of which strengthen and expand upon teachers' existing expertise.

To empower teachers, DHs should provide tailor-made and not one-size-fits-all CPD programmes for them. To do this, it is essential to identify gaps in skills and knowledge of teachers, and this can be undertaken through teachers' self-reflection, classroom observations, scrutinising teacher records or monitoring learners' workbooks and assessment (Sari, Ilham, Hasbi & Mardhiah, 2025).

Creating and sustaining a culture of professional development for teachers

The DH7 explained how she instilled the importance of CPD in teachers:

> *Effective teaching and learning in my department are encouraged by my ability to motivate, inspire, and support staff. Being a transformational leader, I know that only motivated and engaged teachers promote a positive learning environment. I offer constant encouragement and recognition of their efforts, building trust and collaboration, in which teachers know they are valued and empowered. I listen to their concerns actively, always taking their input to add to the decision-making process. This fosters an environment where there is ownership and commitment toward shared goals. I also support professional development opportunities that enhance their skills and show my investment in their growth. This creates individual effectiveness of teachers, is translated into improved student outcomes, and finally, creates a vital atmosphere in education in which both the staff and learners can flourish.*

Buthelezi, Mhlongo and Msweli (2020) aver that teachers must know how to manage large classes and deal with special needs learners. In this regard,

based on contextual needs of schools, teachers are requested to teach subjects and grades outside their scope of expertise. There is a strong need for teachers to strengthen both their subject matter expertise and pedagogical skills. Professional training on a new curriculum initiative is essential to equip teachers with the necessary competencies (Kolobe & Mihai, 2023). While resource kits are provided in some learning areas, teachers must also be guided on how to use these materials effectively and how to critically reflect on them after each instructional activity.

The findings of this study are closely linked to Lewin's theory of change. This three-stage model explains how middle managers (DHs) and schools adapt to new practices. DHs often recognise the need for change of misalignment with curriculum goals or inconsistent teaching practices. DHs usually identify gaps in instructional delivery or create urgency among staff to adopt new frameworks (unfreezing). Once the need for change is accepted, DHs move into the transition phase which requires strong leadership and support systems (movement). DHs act as change agents, guiding the team through uncertainty and resistance. After new practices are adopted, the focus shifts to embedding them into daily routines (refreezing).

Limitations of the Study

Due to the small sample size, the findings may not be generalised to all DHs or institutions in South Africa. With fewer participants, individual perspectives (especially dominant voices) might disproportionately influence the results.

Conclusion

The role of DHs in curriculum transformation is pivotal. As frontline curriculum leaders, they serve as catalysts for change, bridging the school's vision with classroom realities. DHs' ability to interpret policy, mobilise resources and align curriculum with evolving educational demands place them at the heart of curriculum transformation. The complex and multifarious tasks of DHs such as fulfilling a plethora of administrative or managerial matters and managing learner discipline confine them to focus on instructional matters such as curriculum planning, exposing teachers to creative teaching methods, or effectively managing learner assessments. Key findings reveal that although DHs have a good understanding of instructional leadership, they are unable to give their full attention as instructional leaders. It is imperative for DHs to encourage teachers to introduce innovative ideas and apply ICT in their teaching. ICT can provide teachers with appropriate tools to facilitate learning experiences, adapt to the unique needs of each learner, and enhance their knowledge retention.

It is critical for DHs to provide teachers with training and professional development for them to improve their classroom practice. DHs hold the authority to shape learners' outcomes by establishing clear goals for the department/phase and fostering effective instructional practices. At its essence, instructional leadership seeks to transform schools into supportive environments where both teachers and learners can realise their full potential.

Notes

i. Phases are groupings of grades (Foundation Phase: Grade R to Grade 3), while subjects are specific courses of study (mathematics, science, accounting, etc.).

ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

iii. DATES: Received: 7 March 2025; Revised: 22 October 2025; Accepted: 30 November 2025; Published: 30 November 2025.

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