

Developing Teachers through School-Based Leadership: A Case Study of One Rural Primary School in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary thinking in scholarship observes that the framework of rural school teaching and leadership calls for customized attention owing to the contextual challenges that rural schools are faced with. This paper aimed to examine the use of school-based leadership to develop primary school teachers, in a selected rural context. Supported by the interpretive qualitative paradigm, data was generated through a focus group interview with seven teachers and an individual face-to-face interview with the school principal from one selected rural primary school. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that although the school principal used open and effective leadership strategies to develop teachers to improve teaching and learning conditions, teachers still needed structured professional development programmes to enhance their teaching and improve learner outcomes. In light of the findings, this paper recommends a combination of leadership strategies from the school principal that will enhance teaching and learning while providing structured professional development. The paper advocates for the dual use of school-based leadership by the school principal to improve teaching and learning and teacher professional development.

KEYWORDS

School-based leadership; rural primary schools; professional development; collaborative practices; leadership strategies.

INTRODUCTION

It is the responsibility of the school principal as an instructional leader to promote learning and success for both learners and teachers in the school (Lunenberg, 2010). The school as a learning organization for both learners and teachers (Easton, 2008), requires that teachers ceaselessly learn to learn and therefore implement their learning in their normal teaching practice to improve teaching and enhance learner outcomes. It is through teacher professional development that teachers continually learn in schools (Nhlumayo, 2020). Therefore, through their direct involvement and influence as leaders, school principals have to ensure that teachers are professionally developed to effectively meet the teaching and learning needs of learners. Ulfatin et al., (2022) define school-based leadership as the school principal leadership strategies that contribute directly and indirectly to improving school effectiveness and academic achievement through teacher professional development. Chabalala and Naidoo (2021) define school-based leadership as strategies of school principals to ensure the improvement of school results through capacitating and developing teachers for improved teacher practice.

According to Croft (2015) teachers in rural schools are confronted with a plethora of demanding expectations which include complex teaching loads, filling multiple roles and teaching several classes. In a study by Glover et al., (2016), the findings revealed that these contextual challenges could be addressed by professional development practices focusing on instruction delivery strategies. Therefore, Renihan and Noonan (2012) emphasize a school-based leader's role in creating a collaborative culture as a leadership strategy to enable the development of teachers in the school.

Problem Statement

School principals have a responsibility to ensure that schools are learning organizations for both learners and teachers. Leadership in rural schools involves a complexity of instructional and socio-economic influences in a geophysical, place-based context of schooling with the difficult task of developing teachers, improving communities, and enhancing learner outcomes (Lindle, 2022). Lindle (2022) further states due to the small communities that they serve, rural school leaders have a burden of high expectations as they are seen as public role models. The authors further state that these rural school leaders suffer from a lack of privacy since the schools are situated in small communities. Owing to the lack of teacher professional development, rural primary schools face the challenge of retaining young teachers (Liu, Liu & Wang, 2022). According to Omodan (2022), rural schools lack the necessary facilities, resources, and teaching aids, therefore this has a negative impact on teacher development and the role that the school principal has to play in exercising their leadership skills. Qin (2021) indicates that teacher development in rural primary schools is weakened by the contextual state of the school as well as the exercise of leadership by the school principal. Therefore, school principals need to play their role in developing their teachers through school-based leadership in rural contexts.

Review of Related Literature

In the literature review, this paper focused on school principals' current strategies for teacher development and perceptions of teachers on school principals' leadership for their development. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

School principals' current strategies for teacher development

There are several strategies that school principals can use to facilitate teacher professionalism in their schools, Admiraal et al., (2019) list the following: sharing the school vision of learning with the teachers, providing professional learning opportunities for teachers, working, and learning collaboratively, changing school organization, and provision of opportunities for learning leadership. The findings of Venter's (2022) study on South African principals' association with the professional development, indicate that due to school-based leadership practices, school principals were directly involved in the creation of a culture of collaboration and support which is a prerequisite for teacher development. It is important to note that teachers will always be at different professional development periods, and school principals need to meet them at these periods through their leadership skills (Avidov-Ungar, 2023). The author further states that school principals need to ensure that teacher development programmes are both structured and provided formally and informally. Tran's et al. (2020) study on conditions created by school principals for teacher professional development, found that school principals created conditions conducive for teacher development, and these included motivation, supervision, evaluation, and empowerment. In the practice of school-based leadership, McNamara and Rizzo (2023) note that school principals may be hindered by factors such as lack of knowledge, resources, and funding to advance the implementation of teacher development. Krasniqi's (2022) study findings on teachers' and principals' perspectives on teacher development revealed that workshops are the most normally used strategies for teacher development. It is worth noting that teachers' perceptions on how school principals practice their leadership skills in responding to their development needs so that teaching and learning may improve, is discussed in the following section.

Teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership strategies for teacher development

Research has shown that effective teacher development is sustained by a collaborative culture, continuity, and participation from relevant stakeholders (Parsons et al., 2019). Teachers also have ideas on what school principals should do regarding teacher development to improve teaching and learning in the school. In a study on teachers' perceptions of professional development, Parsons et al., (2019) indicate that teacher development programs must be structured and provide feedback. This speaks to the leadership style of the school principals who have a responsibility to structure teacher development provided in the school. In a study on the perceptions of teachers on the school principal's instructional leadership approaches, Blase and Blase (2002) found that teachers were interested in having their professional growth promoted by the school principal. They expected the school principal to promote collaborations and professional relationships among them. Teachers expect the school principal to share the

school's vision regarding their development (Leech et al., 2003). One of the strategies that the school principal can use is through modeling. Teachers want to see in their leaders what is expected of them. Supporting this view is Finley (2014) who asserts that there is a strong relationship between the school principal's instructional and transformational practices if they want to develop teachers in teaching and learning and improve learner outcomes.

Research question

This paper responded to the following research question:

How can school principals use school-based leadership to develop primary school teachers in rural contexts?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this paper is the Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This is a programme aimed at assisting professionals to improve and enhance their academic and professional knowledge and skills after their initial training and continually. CPD is an all-inclusive and wide-ranging approach to augment and strengthen employees' skills and proficiency during their careers. It describes the learning activities professionals engage in to develop and enhance their abilities on a continuing basis. According to Redfern (1993), the history of CPD dates back to World War II when institutions acknowledged that there was a need for structured learning after formal qualification. Faizuddin et al., (2022) indicate that school leaders need to use CPD as a tool to improve the academic performance of learners and institutional performance. Further to this, Lambrecht et al., (2022) assert that leadership practices of school principals must lead the professional development of their teachers for school effectiveness. The concept of CPD is appropriate for this paper since CPD is a continuous activity that is implanted differently in the roles of both the school principals and the teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Couched under the interpretive qualitative approach, this paper used a case study method as a research design. This was a case study of one selected rural primary school in KwaZulu-Natal. The case study was used to gain an in-depth understanding of how school principals can use school-based leadership to develop teachers in a rural primary school. When employed as research designs, case studies allow scholars to deeply explore the study's phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The researched primary school was purposively selected. The school principal assisted by gathering a group of seven teachers to form a focus group. I generated data using a focus group discussion with the seven teachers and an individual interview with the school principal. A semi-structured interview schedule was used. The focus group discussion and individual interviews lasted for one hour, and forty minutes respectively. The teachers were purposively selected because they all teach different subjects in different grades, ranging from Grades one to seven. To observe research ethics, I sought and obtained permission from the gatekeepers, I issued informed consent forms to the participants where I detailed the conditions

of participating in this study. These conditions included voluntary participation, no incentives, withdrawal from participation at any time, and no harm to be inflicted through participation. Participants were assured of privacy and confidentiality. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through thematic analysis, I was able to identify patterns and emerging themes by highlighting similarities between participants' responses. Data triangulation was achieved through generating data from various sources (focus group and the individual participant) and using different methods (FGD and individual interviews). One limitation of this research study is that this was a case study, and the findings could not be generalized to another school. However, the findings can be used to make inferences to other schools.

The following pseudonyms are used in this paper to indicate participants in the study, Funda Primary School (the research site), Participant 1 to Participant 7 = (P1 to P7), and School Principal (SP), as displayed in the following table.

Table1.

Profile of the participants

Name	Qualifications	Grades currently teaching	Years teaching In school
Participant 1	B.Ed. F. Phase	1	2
Participant 2	B.Ed. F. Phase	2	3
Participant 3	B.Ed. F. Phase	3	4
Participant 4	B.A. + PGCE	4	8
Participant 5	B.A. + PGCE	5	8
Participant 6	B.Ed. Int. Phase (English and History)	6	9
Participant 7	B.A. + UED	7	11
School Principal	M.Ed.	-	-

B.Ed.=Bachelor of Education, F. Phase=Foundation Phase, B.A.=Bachelor of Arts, PGCE=Postgraduate Certificate in Education, Int. Phase=Intermediate Phase, UED=University Education Diploma, M.Ed. = Master of Education.

Table 2.

The South African basic education structure

Phase	Grades
Foundation Phase	R to 3
Intermediate Phase	4 to 6
Senior Phase	7 to 9
Further Education and Training	10 to 12

Adopted from National Curriculum Statement (Department of Basic Education, 2014).

The information in Table 1 is important as it provides the demographic information of the researched site. From Table 1. It can be perceived that years in teaching at the school indicate that most teachers were a little experienced in their teaching, all the more reason for teacher development. Foundation Phase teachers had less than five years' experience of teaching in this school. Intermediate Phase teachers had less than ten years' experience of teaching in this school.

Table 2 shows the structuring of the South African basic education system.

FINDINGS

The following themes emerged from the data and are discussed using verbatim quotes from the participants: a need for school-based structured professional development programmes, building of a collaborative culture among teachers, use of resources and facilities to implement TPD programmes.

A need for school-based structured professional development programmes

In the discussion with participants in the FGD, from Funda Primary School, it emerged that the teachers needed school-based structured professional development programmes. This points to the leadership skills and strategies that the school principal needs to execute to ensure that structure teacher professional development takes place in the school. When asked about their internal school-based teacher professional development programmes, these were the teachers' views on the matter:

Right now we do not have our own programmes as the school where we can say we are developing one another, but there are teacher development programmes that are offered by the Department of Basic Education. P4

We attend workshops and also implement CPTD and QMS as part of our teacher professional development. P1

I can say that we still need to develop our own programmes because we rely on the DBE programmes, but maybe if our SMT can assist to develop programmes that we can use and implement here in the school because schools are not the same. The Department is always expecting positive results from all schools but schools are not the same and cannot perform the same. P2

I think we are trying because whatever the Department offers to us, we use it and we also attend workshops and come back and implement whatever we have been taught by our respective subject advisors. P3

On the same issue, the school principal revealed that his is to manage and lead the implementation of the teacher development programmes that are already in place. This was his view:

I, as a manager I have a duty to manage and report on the Departmental programmes for teacher development since we are also given timelines to complete parts of the programmes till the end of the year. As a school situated in a rural area, I can say that

maybe we still lack in that area where we develop customized programmes for the teachers in our school, because schools are not the same and their needs are not the same. SP

The findings reveal that there was a need to develop structured teacher development programmes. The teachers were looking unto the school principal to exercise his leadership skills to develop them through these school programmes. The school principal, through his leadership is the key role player in ensuring that teachers are constantly and accurately developed and do not solely rely on Departmental programmes for development. Some of the responsibilities of the school principal as the leader is to ensure that there are structured programmes that teachers are subjected to, these programmes need to be tailor-made and customized to the needs of the teachers and needs of the school. These structured programmes need to address the realities of the contextual factors that teachers are exposed to in rural schools. The findings from a study by Karacabey et al. (2022) indicate that principals' instructional and transformational leadership types are directly related to teacher professional development and collective teacher effectiveness. The study confirms that there is a relationship between principal leadership and teacher professional learning and practice.

Lack of a collaborative culture among teachers

Effective teacher development thrives in a collaborative culture (Postholm, 2016) and further has the potential to improve teacher performance and increase learner achievement (Jita & Ndlalane, 2009). In conversation with the focus group, it emerged that there was a lack of intra-school collaborative practice among teachers. Through their school-based leadership, school principals have to create an intraschool and interschool collaborative culture to facilitate teacher development and improvement of teaching and learning. When responding this is what they said:

Personally, I enjoy working individually, especially when I have all the materials that I need. P6

I have taught grad3 7 for 11 years, and my learners have been doing great over the years, I try to do all I can to the subjects I am responsible for. P7

However, not all participants shared the same view on collaborative practice in the Foundation phase. These participants concurred that the nature of their subjects demanded some form of collaboration on some topics. These are the views they shared:

Sometimes we do have some discussions regarding our teaching practices in the phase, the Departmental Head is very helpful on that, although most of the time it is informal. P3

I am new in teaching and any type of collaboration and teamwork could be beneficial to me, especially with Grade 1 teaching, it is not easy to make it on your own. I wish we had a weekly, maybe timetabled developmental meetings to help me especially in Mathematics and English. P1

We can really use some development time in the Foundation phase, particularly. The little that we do together as teachers goes a long way. It is not easy for us as teacher, just imagine how it is for learners. P2

When asked whether they were involved in inter-school collaborative practices with neighbouring schools, participants revealed that contextual factors which are unique to the rural area where their school is situated impede them from building collaborative practices with other schools with the aim of mutual development. This is the view they shared:

Our school is very remote from other schools and the road is not that good, so meeting with colleagues from other schools needs to be planned highly in advance, it is not that easy. P4

Most of the schools here do not have relevant resources or facilities and I think it would be a waste to just meet, but the school principals must procure these items that would make teaching and learning easier like ICT tools. P5

It is not easy to collaborate with colleagues from other schools, we only meet them during workshops, that is where we can discuss about how they teach whichever subject. P6

In conversation with the school principal on how he creates a culture of collaborative practice as a way to develop teachers, this is what he said:

The only way I can afford teachers to collaborate is to ensure that there are subject and phase meetings for all the phases, these meetings are chaired by the Departmental Heads and then they report back to me. With the Departmental programmes, I report to the District for my school. The issue of collaborating with neighbouring schools is a possibility but it is something that we have not yet explored so far, I think it is because the situatedness and geographic location of our schools as well as the lack of facilities and resources, but with support we can try and see if it can work. SP

This data reveals that there is a lack of intra-school and interschool collaboration among teachers. The school principal is responsible for creating a collaborative culture to develop teachers. Pitsoe and Maila (2012) indicate that teachers who work in rural schools usually define themselves according to the context in which they work, which is mostly characterized by working in isolation. The findings reveal that teachers and the school principal respond to the environment of the school and tend not to implement teacher development unless it is mandated by the Department of Education. The school principal tends to have an inspectorial role and does not apply his school-based leadership strategies and approaches to establish and maintain a collaborative culture which is a prerequisite of developing teachers for enhanced teacher practice and improved learner academic achievement.

The use of resources and facilities to implement TPD programmes.

Emerging from the data is that both teachers and the school principal use the lack of resources and facilities for the lack of development of teachers. When responding to how the location of the school in a rural context affects the role of the school principal in the development of teachers, the participants of the focus group responded:

The truth is we do not have a photocopier nor any equipment that would make life easier, I think our school has been let down by the community because we once had a photocopier and printer but were stolen by the members of the community who should be protecting the school. P7

Our school is very remote from other schools and the SMT tries because they do all they can so that we can make copies, even though we do not have the required facilities in our school, we do not even have an admin clerk, luckily two of our have been trained on SASAMS and that is also part of development, that is why we are able to survive. P6

Because of the lack of resources, equipment and some facilities, it is not easy to collaborate. We are not close to other schools, as you can see and we also have transport issues, as well. P2

The location of this school has many challenges, even the officials rarely come here because of the road, so we use whatever we have to make sure that learners are taught, at least with us teachers, we are able to attend workshops when the Department has invited us. P3

The school principal had this to say about the situatedness of the school and developing teachers using school-based leadership.

It is not easy to have meetings, whether for development purposes or just general, during teaching hours, so we have to wait until school is out. But there are transport challenges. As a leader, I have noticed that this challenge has led to more a number of stakeholders are do not wish to come to our school because of the nature of the road, and this is a problem for us, even subject advisors rarely come here to give support and check whether teachers implement what they learn in workshops, so I rely on the Departmental programmes to make sure that teachers are developed and submit timeously. SP

These findings reveal a restricted and limited understanding of school-based leadership on the part of the school principal. One of the effective characteristics of school-based leadership is resource acquisition to facilitate collaborative learning by the school-wide community (Daniëls et al., 2019). The school leader has to outsource assistance to ensure that school programs run smoothly. Understood as central to organizational performance, school-based leadership requires that school leaders mediate learner achievement through the procurement and provision of resources for quality instruction and teacher development. This implies that the school principal has a role in improving teaching and learning by ensuring that teacher development takes place. The participants claim that without resources and facilities, teaching and learning hardly take place.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Rural primary school teachers, as with other teachers, require continuous professional teacher development and the school principal has a responsibility to provide a kind of leadership that will ensure that teachers are developed to enhance their practice and eventually improve

learners' academic performance. The data revealed that the school principal and the teachers relied on departmentally driven programmes for teacher development. Teacher development programmes that are departmentally driven seem to be blanket programmes for all schools in the district. The data further revealed that there was a need for school-based teacher development programmes that were led by the school principal. These programmes need to be initiated by the teachers themselves so that they are tailored and customized to address teachers' and school's requirements. Mpahla and Okeke (2015) argue that teacher professional development in rural schools needs to be addressed differently to yield the desired results.

According to Svendsen (2016), Postholm (2016), and King (2016), teacher professional development flourishes on collaboration where teachers work together in professional partnerships and where collaboration is distinguished by collective responsibility and accountability for learners' successes and failures. The implication is that the school principal has a responsibility to create this collaborative culture among teachers. The school principal's support is central to thriving collaboration. Morris (2007) argues that the act of providing professional development for teachers is one of the leadership skills that the school principal can display to show support and define collaboration. The school principal also has to provide budgeting for all the resources necessary for a successful collaboration. Supporting this view is Meyer et al. (2022), who indicated that teacher collaboration is essential for successful schools and can assist teachers in predicting prospects for learner academic outcomes and school effectiveness. The authors further state that it is the school principals' responsibility to shape, strengthen, and promote teacher collaboration. In addition, collaborative leadership develops a sense of community and collective accountability, where teachers team up for a common cause to achieve success for the school.

One of the leadership strategies a school principal can use to develop teachers is to ensure that there are necessary resources and facilities to implement teacher professional development activities. Spillane and Sun (2020) assert that, for rural primary schools, principals need to build financial capital for their schools by involving stakeholders and guiding relationships with them so they can yield positive outcomes. Research has revealed that some rural schools are confronted with some infrastructural challenges that are unique to them. It is through these stakeholder relationships that the school principal may be able to obtain resources and facilities that would facilitate teacher professional development. In this way, school-based leadership is effective in enhancing teacher professional development, promoting teacher effectiveness, and improving learner academic outcomes (Yusof, 2019). Effective school-based leadership will make decisions that afford teachers the necessary support and resources to improve their instructional practices for the betterment of learner outcomes and school effectiveness. Further to this, research by Archibald et al., (2011) indicates that when school leaders have the self-sufficiency to distribute resources intentionally, they can invest in professional development programs designed to meet the needs of teachers.

Customized and continuing professional development (CPD) programmes directed at school-based leadership behaviors can enhance a positive work environment and steer teacher development and learning outcomes for learners. Kilag et al., (2023) assert that by investing in CPD, school principals enable teachers to implement research-based instructional strategies, resulting in improved academic outcomes for learners. In promoting the CPD of teachers as the conceptual framework of this paper, Phogat (2022) indicates that school leaders have a responsibility to structure professional development programmes and activities based on the needs and demands of teachers, to provide resources that support teacher development and to support all collaborative practices among teachers.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper has argued that effective school leaders can balance continuing professional teacher development which in turn enhances teaching and learning, yielding to positive academic outcomes for learners. School-based leadership demands a combination of leadership strategies to achieve this. Therefore, a school principal is an instructional leader who has to adapt and adjust to transformational practices to ensure teachers are developed, and teaching and learning yield desired academic outcomes for learners. Thus, this paper recommends that school principals implement a combination of leadership strategies that will provide structured teacher professional development while enhancing teaching and learning to improve learner outcomes. The school principal is in a unique position to influence teachers' learning and development in their schools. In their capacity as instructional leaders, school principals are better positioned to build teacher capacity as autonomous learners and practitioners for whole school development.

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