Support for heads of departments in managing teacher professional development in under-resourced schools

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the efficiency of school- and district-based support given to heads of departments in managing teacher professional development in under-resourced schools in the Nkangala Education District of Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. A deliberate sampling technique was used to recruit six Foundation Phase heads of departments in three primary schools. Organisational effectiveness theory was adopted as a theoretical lens, while thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data obtained from interviews. The first finding revealed that being classroom-bound for large parts of the school day, without an assistant to relieve them, restricted Foundation Phase heads of departments from fully executing their teacher support duties and prevented them from sharing knowledge with their fellow heads of departments. The second finding revealed that interventions by school leadership to support Foundation Phase heads of departments in executing their teacher support duties often failed to respond to the challenges curtailing their productivity. The third finding pointed to inconsistencies in the extension of district-based support systems, especially the provision of induction programmes for newly appointed heads of departments and customised training geared towards enhancing their role. Lastly, the continuous skills development training offered by non-governmental organisations proved very insightful and kept heads of departments afloat at a time when their schools and districts could not offer them responsive, effective, and consistent strategic support. The findings have implications for the review of school- and district-based support systems geared towards heads of departments.

Keywords: *Foundation Phase, heads of departments, strategic support, teacher professional development, under-resourced schools*

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1. Introduction

Teachers are the core of every education system. The wave effect of their role in societies around the world is evident to such an extent that teaching is seen as an altruistic calling and the "mother of all professions." "World Teachers' Day," an international commemoration annually held on 5 October, is another example of how teachers are revered as custodians of the future of a nation. It is often said that "teachers impact learners differently" (Araujo et al., 2016, p. 1415) and "the quality [of their articulation of pedagogical content knowledge] is one of the most important factors which has a direct influence on the quality [and dynamism] of teaching and learning" (National Education Evaluation and Development Unit [NEEDU], 2018, p. 1). Similarly, governments, especially in low- and middle-income schooling systems where the standards of learner performance are below average (Popova et al., 2022), are cognisant of the importance of reskilling their teaching workforce. They pin their hopes on teacher professional development (TPD) as a strategy to enable schools to produce future-ready learners who will steer their national economies on the path to prosperity and sustainable development. This commitment is mirrored in investments worth billions in research intended to generate best practices and proactive models for TPD (Boylan & Demack, 2018; Dawson et al., 2018).

NEEDU (2018) defines TPD as a structured, professional learning series intended to transform teachers' teaching and classroom management practices and maximise learner achievement and school effectiveness. Havea and Mohanty (2020) consider TPD to be an in-service learning intervention geared towards transferring professional skills to teachers to enable them to learn how to learn, eradicate counterproductive practices, and correctly apply their knowledge in practice, to enhance learners' learning experiences and academic success rates, and the quality of support mechanisms. Simply put, TPD constitutes any kind of continuous learning opportunity for teachers to equip them with a myriad of skills which, when accurately applied, can translate into effective teaching and assessment practices, leading to improved learner performance (Schwartz, 2023). In all these definitions, what comes across explicitly is that the ideal of TPD is to equip teachers with knowledge, skills, and best practices to enable them to improve learners' academic performance, special needs, character development, and overall wellbeing. This ideal aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which grounds the holistic wellbeing and development of a child

on the imperative for schooling systems to promote universal access to quality, inclusive teaching and provide context-specific learner support (Nkambule, 2023a).

Research shows that lack of resources (Tapala et al., 2020), heavy workload (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020), lack of support from school leadership (Nkambule, 2023b), inadequate support from the school-community (Baloyi & Khumalo, 2024), and underwhelming district-based assistance (Nkambule, 2018) are some of the barriers experienced by Head of Departments (HODs) in South African schools. These findings engender a view that the districts do not play a proactive role in mitigating some of the aforementioned barriers. As local hubs of Provincial Education Departments, district offices have the power to influence school management processes by providing the vital lines of communication between the provincial head office and the schools in their care (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2025). The effectiveness of district-based support is deemed responsive when officials regularly coordinate and conduct training for HODs and monitor the level of support they receive from school leadership (Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). This support involves assigning assistant teachers to the HODs' classes, allowing them sufficient time to observe their peers in the classroom and fully engage in their professional development responsibilities.

The South African education sector's insistence on using TPD to bridge skills gaps is consistent with international practices. All over the world, public servants in the education sector, including teachers, HODs, and principals, are obligated to engage in continuous professional development for the duration of their careers (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Schwartz, 2023). Sellen (2016) observes that education districts in England engage teachers in TPD activities (i.e., courses, workshops, conferences, seminars, observation visits, or other types of in-service training) for a minimum of 10.5 days annually. Further afield, in the United States, the government insists on approximately 19 days of TPD-related events per academic year (The New Teacher Project [TNTP], 2015). Similarly, to intensify the rate of TPD activities in South Africa, the South African Council for Educators (SACE) has rolled out the Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) system, which awards points for every training programme attended. Each teacher is expected to accumulate 150 points across three activity streams, teacher-originated, school-originated, and externally originated training, every three years (Department of Education [DoE], 2006). The significance of TPD became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when education districts worldwide, in both developed and developing countries, made extensive efforts to transition to various digital

platforms. During that period, digital platforms such as WhatsApp were used to host synchronous and asynchronous professional development and learning meetings (Cronjé & van Zyl, 2022; Mpungose, 2020; Rabotapi & Matope, 2024), as were MS Teams (Stolte, 2021; Wijayanto & Sumarwati, 2021) and Zoom (Kim, 2020; Williams, 2021).

Much of what has been discussed proves that TPD programmes are hailed as strategies for enhancing teachers' classroom management skills, perspectives on curriculum manuals and policy interpretation, methods for ensuring learner discipline, and the implementation of inclusive teaching and assessment practices. At present, teachers perceive TPD as necessary for sustaining life-long professional skills and keeping abreast of trends and legislative reforms in teaching practice (Harsha & Newman, 2021). Despite these noble intentions, there is a dark cloud over the implementation of TPD in resource-constrained education systems, particularly in schools across sub-Saharan Africa (Mitchell et al., 2024), including South Africa. The extent of this problem is rather difficult to measure due to the scantiness of multi-layered local evidence detailing the subjective perspectives of HODs on their TPD role (Nkambule, 2023b). Several scholars (i.e., Jugdav, 2018; Tapala, 2019; Tapala et al., 2020) have observed that a large corpus of studies centres on the curriculum leadership role of the principal and, to a lesser extent, that of HoDs. Given this background, the researchers formulated the following research question:

RQ1: *How do Foundation Phase HoDs perceive the efficiency of school- and district-based support given to them in managing teacher professional development in under-resourced public schools?*

The question posed in the study was intended to identify the conditions and processes that either facilitate or hinder effective TPD (Mitchell et al., 2024), based on the viewpoints of Foundation Phase HoDs. The study contributes a new perspective on school leadership, particularly in under-resourced educational systems in the Global South, where the marginalisation of Foundation Phase HoDs in policy and practice is poised to diminish their curriculum leadership efficacy. Effective learner performance is often attributed to teachers and principals, with HODs receiving less recognition (Nkambule, 2023b). This lack of acknowledgment largely arises from a limited understanding of the significance of their roles in TPD and learner achievement (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020; Tapala et al., 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Curriculum Leadership Role of HODs

For years, in South African schools, curriculum leadership was an exclusive function of principals. Their roles have increasingly evolved, however, to include heavy loads of administrative functions, meaning that a significant number of curriculum leadership duties have become the occupational purview of HODs (Naidoo & Mestry, 2019), who currently juggle these duties with teaching in the classroom (Jugdav, 2018; Nkambule, 2023b; Mahome & Mphahlele, 2024a; Tapala, 2019). Synonymously called departmental heads (Baloyi & Khumalo, 2024; Mahome & Mphahlele, 2024a; Mdabe, 2019; Tapala, 2019; Tapala et al., 2020; Tapala et al., 2021), in each school, HODs occupy a middle-management status which automatically secures them a position on the school management team (SMT). There, they work alongside the principal and deputy principal(s) to determine operational strategy and oversee policy implementation processes. Hierarchically, HODs are one position above teachers, one position below deputy principals, and two positions below principals. Line function protocols require them to report directly to deputy principals (Baloyi & Khumalo, 2024).

Their central role in teaching and learning implies that HODs are key to managing and promoting effective curriculum delivery practices while overseeing departmental functions, coordinating extra-curricular programmes, assisting teachers in every way possible, instilling law and order in the school, and providing learner support interventions. More comprehensively, HODs' role is lucidly documented in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document (DBE, 2022, pp. 38–40) as follows:

Teaching and assessing learners as per workload and the requirements of the school

Performing miscellaneous administrative duties, including planning and management of stock, budget, timetabling, the collection of fees and other monies, and the coordination of staff welfare programmes

Conducting personnel duties, including workload allocation and chairing or writing minutes in committee meetings

Participating in subordinate staff appraisal processes as a means of measuring the effectiveness of their professional practice

Forming linkages with sporting, social, cultural, and community organisations to enrich learners' education through co-curricular programmes

The above list of key performance areas attached to the role of HODs signals that they are anchors of the TPD process at the school level. Mdabe (2019) advocates that all stakeholders in the web of ecologies of schools should maximally support HODs to enable them to apply a positive mindset as they take on the key performance areas of this role. Moreover, research shows that managing teaching and learning in public educational institutions is a demanding assignment (Jugdav, 2018; Williams et al., 2024). Their position is highly regulated by internal and external stakeholders, making them susceptible to intense pressure and accountability, especially in under-resourced schools where teachers might not be effective in teaching the curriculum, and learners might fail to meet the required academic standards (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020; Mashiane-Nkabinde et al., 2023; Nkabinde, 2012; Nkambule, 2020, 2023b; Tapala et al., 2021). Nonetheless, effective HODs surmount crisis situations by applying a combination of personality traits, past experiences, and communication skills to motivate teachers to adapt to teaching under difficult conditions, and somehow still remain productive (Mahlangu, 2023; Tapala, 2019, 2023; Tapala et al., 2020; Tapala et al., 2021).

2.2. Challenges Encountered by HODs in Under-Resourced Schools

As the former South African Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga, affirmed, the National Development Plan recognises the critical importance of access to quality foundational learning programmes in the early years of a child's life (van der Walt, 2024). Despite this, there is the misguided public perception that Foundation Phase teachers have the simplest and least strenuous job (Petersen & Gravett, 2014). In truth, their role is just as demanding as those of teachers in the Intermediate and Senior Phases of schooling (Nkambule, 2020). Generally, Foundation Phase TPD support tends to be neglected due to the perception that senior-grade learning deserves more attention (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020). The Foundation Phase (also referred to as Early Childhood Development [Britto, 2012] or Early Grade Learning [Mahlomaholo et al., 2023; Petersen & Gravett, 2014]) covers Grade R to Grade 3, and thus children aged between five and nine (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; DBE, 2014; Mtshatsha & Omodan, 2022). De Hoyos (2024) defines the Foundation Phase as the initial four levels of children's formal schooling in which they are taught basic literacy, numeracy, and transferable skills that will prepare them for much deeper learning in their pre-teen years through to adulthood. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO,

2022) identifies this age bracket as offering a perfect window of opportunity for conditioning a child's brain with foundational learning in preparation for later years of intensive learning. Unlike in successive phases (Intermediate, Senior, and Further Education and Training), where teachers teach according to their areas of specialisation, and where learners are taught by different teachers each day of schooling, Foundation Phase teachers teach all the available learning areas/subjects to one class for the entire academic year. Although this phase constitutes a very important level in any child's cognitive development, evidence suggests that their teachers are largely deprived of TPD as a support mechanism for effective teaching (Nkambule, 2020).

The PAM document (DBE, 2016, p. 27) stipulates that the key functions of HODs are "to engage in class teaching, be responsible for [the] effective functioning of the department, and to organise relevant/related extra-curricular activities so as to ensure that the subject, learning area or phase, and the education of the learner [are] promoted in a proper manner." In their capacity as middle managers in schools, HODs are mandated to improve the quality of teaching and learning by frequently supervising and moderating teachers' teaching practices and their administration of the curriculum (Cheruiyot et al., 2020; Mpisane, 2015). On the contrary, research shows that more often than not, HODs fail to consistently monitor teachers' curriculum coverage (Mthiyane et al., 2019) and neglect their TPD duties (Williams et al., 2024). Mashiane-Nkabinde (2020) and Nkambule (2023b), respectively, established that the duality of the HODs' role, which straddles teaching, assessment, the marking of scripts, and the management of departmental and miscellaneous areas of school operations, made it extremely difficult for them to provide regular curriculum support to Foundation Phase teachers.

Another body of empirical evidence suggests that HODs are extremely overworked and do not receive optimal support from the school leadership and district offices (see Bipath & Nkabinde, 2018; Jugdav, 2018; Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020; Nkambule, 2018; Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). Other findings revealed that teachers' lack of content knowledge, inadequate learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) (Madonsela & Proches, 2022), and teacher absenteeism (Baloyi & Khumalo, 2024; Mpisane, 2015; Mahome & Mphahlele, 2024b) had a detrimental impact on HODs' curriculum management capabilities. In South African schools, HODs are situated full-time in the classroom, without teacher assistants, and have to teach all four prescribed Foundation.

Much of what has been discussed in the literature review indicates that HODs' involvement in TPD is complex, and their success heavily depends on the support they receive from both the school and the district. It also became apparent that local literature focusing on HODs' TPD role remains scant, thus accentuating the need for further research.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

As per the norm, empirical research is conducted using a particular theory as a frame of reference. Sreekumar (2023) defines a theoretical framework as a blueprint that researchers employ as a lens to develop and focus their research inquiry within the objectives it aims to achieve. It enables researchers to lay a theoretical foundation for conducting research, and to analyse and contextualise the findings in line with set objectives (Sreekumar, 2023). That said, the study adopted Hannan and Freeman's (1977) organisational effectiveness theory (henceforth OET) as a theoretical framework.

OET presupposes that the effectiveness of an organisation is contingent on the solidity of the collaborative culture among its members. The theory defines organisational ecology as a web of (internal and external) role players who have the capability to influence adaptation, which is the ability of an organisational ecology to sustain and reinvent itself. As Wenting and Frenken (2011) note, adaptation is contingent on the formulation of a collaborative or goal-oriented agile strategy to identify and moderate "organisational inertia" (i.e., factors that prevent the organisation from developing the means to remain productive amid resource scarcity).

The ecology of any school comprises role players with different professional skill sets and socioeconomic backgrounds. These include teachers, middle managers, school leaders (i.e., principals and deputy principals), school governing bodies, education district/provincial/national education departments, communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), industry, faith-based organisations, and parents. This explains OET's emphasis on using all the role players within such an ecology as a resourceful strategic constituency to sustain its effectiveness and agility, thereby enabling the school to adapt to volatile contextual situations (Ashraf, 2012). This aligns with the stated aim of understanding the conditions and processes that can support TPD in under-resourced schools (Mestry et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2024). Furthermore, OET formed the basis for understanding the

importance of collegial, stakeholder-oriented, and transparent dialogue among all the identified role players.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

A qualitative, multiple case study research approach was adopted. Unlike quantitative research, which measures the effect of the research problem, qualitative research goes deeper than the superficial layer of the problem to interrogate the root causes thereof, as well as the extent to which the problem interfaces with the lives of the participants in a naturalistic setting. This view is supported by Mathipa and Gumbo (2015), who assert that qualitative research is unrivaled when it comes to finding out how a research problem affects the research participants. The ethos of qualitative research is drawn from the interpretive paradigm (Blandford et al., 2016), which illuminates the researchers' sense-making and their understanding of the research context and how it interfaces with the research problem (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

The Ekangala Education District has a significant number of under-resourced schools. Most of the schools are situated in towns and rural areas where families live below the breadline. These schools do not charge tuition fees and provide free lunch meals to learners, as many arrive at school hungry due to family poverty. According to Wills and Hofmeyer (2018), "no-fee schools constitute the poorest 60% of schools in South Africa, based on income, unemployment, and illiteracy of the surrounding area (p. 4)." Most of these schools have overcrowded classrooms with high teacher-to-student ratios (Nkambule, 2020), and teachers in those schools are in dire need of early grade learning support and TPD (Mahlomaholo et al., 2023).

3.2. Study Participants and Sampling Procedure

A deliberate sampling technique was employed to recruit participants of interest, namely six Foundation Phase HODs drawn from three selected schools in Nkangala Education District in Mpumalanga Province. Deliberate sampling seeks to extract "information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest" from smaller samples and justify why people are either selected or excluded from the study (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 553).

Table 1 shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 1

Participant's criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Occupational rank	Participants had to be permanently appointed HoDs	Participants who occupied the position in an acting or temporary capacity
Average socioeconomic status in the locality of the school	Participants had to be stationed/employed in an under-resourced school (i.e. quantile 2 or 3)	Participants who taught in resourced schools (i.e., quintile 4 or 5)
Type of school	Participants had to be stationed in a public township school	Participants who were HoDs in private township or suburban schools
Teaching phase	Participants had to be HoDs in the Foundation Phase	Participants who were HoDs in the Intermediate, Senior and FET phases

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Processes

Data collection and analysis are different but interrelated research activities, enabling researchers to collect and interpret research data to answer "the research questions" and, in the process, achieve the study's "objectives" (Karunarathna et al., 2024, p. 1). Semi-structured interviews constituted the backbone of data collection in the study. However, "because data triangulation adds depth to the data that are collected" (Fusch et al., 2018, p. 19), document analysis and literature review were incorporated into the data collection process to help the researcher cross-check the semi-structured interview data against the objectives of the study. Policy documents governing the basic education sector were perused, particularly the Personnel Administrative Measures (2016) and the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (ISPFTED, 2011), to understand the scope of HoDs' roles and their implications for TPD at the school level. In addition, a literature review was conducted to enable the researchers to justify the study's objective by highlighting the "gaps, inconsistencies, or unanswered questions in the existing literature," thereby establishing the study's rationale and novelty while also comparing the study's findings with pre-existing ones (Adallah, 2024, p. 1).

Data analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages of thematic data analysis, namely: 1) acquainting oneself with the structure of the body of data, 2) initiating the coding of data by identifying recurring patterns, 3) drafting preliminary themes, 4) reviewing the suitability of the themes, 5) finalizing the naming of the themes, and 6) using the formally endorsed themes to headline the reporting of the overarching findings.

3.4. Ethical Considerations for the Study

According to Tulyakul and Meepring (2020), education researchers are duty-bound to conduct themselves ethically, including showing respect for their participants. In this study, the researchers infused ethics into their actions throughout the cycle of the inquiry. This included seeking ethical clearance from the ethical review committee at the higher education institution where both authors undertook their postgraduate studies and subsequently worked. Participants were inducted on the objectives of the investigation and informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of penalty. Furthermore, the researchers ensured that the participants were guaranteed anonymity: instead of using personal names, participants were coded as HoD1–6.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Classroom Relief Support

Foundation Phase HODs operate in a unique setup than their counterparts in other phases. Depending on the curriculum delivery capacity of the school, HODs in other phases (i.e., Intermediate, Senior and Further Education and Training) have a lighter teaching workload. By contrast, Foundation Phase HODs teach all the subjects (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020), which translates into 90 per cent classroom-bound teaching time, versus ten per cent administrative and TPD time (Nkabinde, 2012). Thus, when asked to describe their strategies in fulfilling outbound duties such as TPD in teachers' classrooms and office-related commitments, the following comments were made:

> *"I must stay in class because I must be here to check the books of learners, check the work teachers submit to me. I am in class 24/7."* [HoD2]
>
> *"I have a year programme for Foundation Phase class visits, and I always share the programme with teachers, yet I can't even attend all these class visits."* [HoD 6]

"You can't leave learners by themselves. So, when I do find someone who is willing to look after my class for a while, then I go to do my other duties." [HoD3]

Based on these narratives, clearly, the unique situation in which these HODs found themselves was not taken into consideration when they were brought to task for poor learner performance and teachers' low productivity. The finding replicates that of Seabi (2019), whose study problematised the absence of classroom-bound assistant teachers to support and enable HODs to fully engage with the other facets of their role, including TPD. Nkambule and Amsterdam (2018) describe this situation as a spillover effect resulting from the unresponsiveness of district officials. Their absence implies that no oversight is conducted to assess the extent to which school leaders arrange for HODs to have sufficient time to observe teachers in their classrooms and to fully meet their TPD responsibilities. Montgomery (2024) observed that having assistant teachers can help free up HODs to focus on supervising curriculum delivery without compromising their teaching duties. Navarro (2015) found that schooling systems that deploy assistant teachers in classrooms enabled teachers and HODs to have classroom support and assistance with administrative and planning tasks, allowing them more time for their core responsibilities.

4.2. Support from the School Management Team

In South Africa, SMTs are recognised as part of the school leadership. Harris and Jones (2023) assert that effective school leadership has a positive and lasting impact on the performance of subordinate staff members. Gudyanga and Banda (2025) concur, emphasising the importance of having school leadership that makes rational decisions and acts in the best interests of all staff. The HOD participants considered their respective school leaders as not sufficiently responsive to address issues that diminish the effectiveness of their TPD role. As some participants noted:

"SMT members are not skilled to solve problems of teacher non-compliance and negative attitude. They need to be developed in these areas." [HoD1]

"I am expected to assist teachers in teaching learners with different learning barriers, and with finding intervention strategies. I do this alone most of the time, when[ever] the deputy principal decides to come, there is no solution or solid advice he brings to the table." [HoD5]

"The principal does not think out of the box when tackling [the] ill-discipline and misconduct of teachers for not performing." [HoD 4]

Botha (2004) observes that, although in the main the professionalisation of school operations has positively reinforced the basic education sector, it has equally provided a safety net for school leaders to shy away from confronting the structural and contextual challenges in their schools. In this instance, it was apparent that school leaders did not devote time to assess the uniqueness of each challenge the HODs identified as limiting their TPD role, nor did they propose adaptive strategies or context-specific solutions (Nkambule, 2020). It stands to reason that such school leaders are ineffective as problem solvers and crisis managers. The behaviour of the senior ranking members of the SMTs (i.e., the deputy principals and principals) appears to be inconsistent with the prescripts of the PAM (2016) document, which classifies the provision of ongoing support to HODs as one of their core duties. Similarly, Pritchett and Beatty (2015) found that challenges associated with unsupportive school leadership are rampant in low-income and developing schooling systems, owing to the lack of professional development opportunities and inadequacy of district-based support systems for school leaders.

4.3. The Quality of District-Based Support

The National Development Plan stresses the need for the education ministry to identify the areas in which teaching personnel need further development. Furthermore, the *Protocol Document on Teacher Diagnostic Assessments* (Department of Basic Education, 2021) expresses the need for teachers to improve their knowledge of the subjects they teach and puts the responsibility of internal teacher support on the shoulders of HODs while putting the external teacher support on the shoulders of the district, provincial, and national arms of the education department and NGOs. When asked for their perceptions, the participants had the following to say:

"Since I was appointed as Foundation Phase HoD, I have not attended any training on leadership and management." [HoD1]

"We are attending maybe twice per term. But the training does not help much because it is focused on curriculum teaching only." [HoD2]

"The last time I attended induction was in 2014 after my appointment, and that was it." [HoD3]

"No, I have not received any training from the department." [HoD4]

"No [the last time] I received […] training was the second year after I was appointed back in 1997." [HoD6]

"There is zero support from the department, especially with leadership and management skills." [HoD5]

"The achievement of effective teaching and learning in public schools generally requires middle managers such as HODs to be trained continuously" (Mampane, 2017, p. 143). Hence, the PAM (DBE, 2016) stipulates that district-based personnel are constitutionally mandated to support schools in whatever way possible, to work efficiently. This includes rolling out continuous professional development initiatives, to equip personnel to perform to the best of their ability. Yet participants lamented the inconsistent and incoherent rolling out of district-based strategic support, especially the provision of induction programmes for newly appointed HODs and customised training geared towards harnessing their TPD role. Consequently, as noted by Seabi (2019), HODs are forced "to learn the skills required for their job on their own to make up for the lack of training" (p. 24) and to rely on external support agents such as NGOs. A study by Muriuki et al. (2020) found that many HODs in Kenya lack the necessary skills to effectively perform their responsibilities. This is mainly due to insufficient support from their districts and a lack of professional development opportunities. As a result, these HODs often perceive their roles as ambiguous and overly burdensome (Muriuki et al., 2020).

4.4. Appreciation for Non-Governmental Support

In the developing world, particularly in socially and economically disfranchised communities, the role of NGOs carries human rights implications for primary and secondary education (Shah, 2015). The quality of early-grade learning and TPD constitutes one of the key areas of interest in the work NGOs do in public schools. Although these NGOs have good intentions, they are sometimes met with resentment as they are perceived to be taking over the responsibilities of South African education officials. Volmink and van der Elst (2017, p. 22) observed that "the bureaucratic nature of government and its unwillingness to embrace change can make it difficult for NGOs to influence policy and policy implementation." Nombo and Nyangarika (2020) observed that although in Tanzanian villages, there has been a significant increase in the number of NGOs, public participation in the educational projects offered by

most NGOs remains very low. The study found that this was primarily due to a lack of stakeholder involvement and insufficient awareness of the intended goals of these projects (Nombo & Nyangarika, 2020). In another study, Zarestky and Ray (2019) concluded that international NGOs operating in non-Western contexts are likely to struggle to attract a significant number of participants for their educational programmes if they do not adapt to the social and economic realities of the communities they serve and actively build partnerships with local individuals. By contrast, the study participants were appreciative of the role played by the NGOs in respect of TPD. They commented as follows:

> *"We do receive training from the company Kagiso Trust. Their training is very good for our development."* [HoD4]
>
> *"We were trained in general and social issues. They are coming again soon to train us on curriculum and management-related topics."* [HoD1]
>
> *"A local mining company provided training on teamwork, classroom practices, and how to teach children."* [HoD3]
>
> *"Yes [we do get trained]. In fact, we are going to start another module on curriculum management and conflict resolution."* [HoD6]

These comments portray the positive influence that NGOs have on HODs' multi-layered TPD role. As reported, the provision of continuous professional learning support, facilitated by NGOs, proved very meaningful and kept HODs going through turbulent times when school-based and district support were lacking. This finding validates the point made by Volmink and van der Elst (2017), that for many decades during and after apartheid, NGOs were proactively championing the quality of education in schooling contexts where their support is needed most. Khandpekar (2016) noted a similar trend throughout India, where NGOs play a vital role in addressing inefficiencies in the public education system by providing supplementary professional development training, deploying qualified teachers to underserved schools, and equipping schools with essential resources.

5. Conclusion

The study examined the internal and external support provided to six HODs in the Foundation Phase at three under-resourced schools in South Africa. In this context, internal support refers to assistance from the SMT to the HODs, while external support includes assistance from the district and other stakeholders, such as NGOs. The first finding revealed

that Foundation Phase HODs are unable to conduct proper monitoring, when assistant teachers, dedicated to relieving them, would enable them to support teachers and enter into collegial engagements with fellow HODs from other phases. The second finding revealed that interventions by school leadership, to address concerns raised by the participating HODs, tended to be more after-the-fact and generic than pragmatic and context-specific. The third finding pointed to inconsistencies in the extension of district-based strategic support, especially the provision of induction programmes for newly appointed HODs, and customised training geared towards harnessing their management of TPD. The fourth finding was that continuous professional learning programmes facilitated by the NGOs proved invaluable at a time when schools and districts could not offer them responsive, effective, and consistent strategic support.

Form a theoretical point of view, OET enabled the researchers to appreciate that schools operate as organs comprised of internal and external role players (with different yet intersecting responsibilities): teachers; middle managers; school leaders (i.e., principals and deputy principals); school governing bodies; education district, provincial and national education departments; communities; NGOs; the business sector; faith-based organisations; and parents. From that point of departure, the researchers ascertained that the weakness of systemic support created a convenience for school leaders to negate their duty of supporting HoDs in their TPD role. Furthermore, OET enabled the researchers to determine that, from the policy perspective, the district's lack of oversight and visibility in schools violates the PAM (2016), which mandates school leadership to support HODs in their TPD and curriculum management role. Additionally, the study findings call on policymakers to utilise these findings to pinpoint areas of policy that are unclear; revise them to clearly emphasize the importance of both vertical and horizontal monitoring of school programmes including the monitoring of TPD and the responsiveness of support provided to Foundation Phase HODs.

These challenges indicate that internal and external support given to HODs needs to be improved speedily to enhance their capacity to optimise school-based teacher curriculum support. As such, the study forwards the following recommendations:

Teacher assistants must be appointed to enable Foundation Phase HODs to carry out their multi-layered duties optimally, including TPD, and to engage in meaningful social interactions with their fellow HODs from other phases of teaching.

School leaders must assess the merit of every issue their HODs raise, and take timeous, context-specific remedial action.

The district should conduct a needs assessment of the challenges HODs confront in their TPD role, and design and facilitate programmes to capacitate them continuously.

NGOs' involvement in HODs' professional learning must be further strengthened.

The findings of the study contribute a new perspective on school leadership, particularly in under-resourced educational systems in the Global South, where the marginalisation of Foundation Phase HODs in policy and practice is poised to diminish their curriculum leadership efficacy. Effective learner performance is often attributed to teachers and principals, with HODs receiving less recognition (Nkambule, 2023b). This lack of acknowledgment largely arises from a limited understanding of the significance of their roles in TPD and learner achievement (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020; Tapala et al., 2020).

6. Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The study involved a sample of six schools in the Nkangala Education District, which has more than 100 schools. The limitation stems from the fact that the sample was far too small to give a holistic overview of the state of the Foundation Phase HODs' TPD roles across all schools in the district. Participants were focused in three schools, which limits the findings' representation of the dynamics across all schools in the district.

Also worth noting is that all the sampled participants were female. In South Africa, as in many other African countries, early grade teaching is predominantly carried out by women. Additionally, it is often considered culturally unacceptable for men to hold HOD positions in the foundation phase (Moosa & Bhana, 2017; Petersen, 2014). As a result, the study lacked diverse gender perspectives and specific subjective experiences related to gender. It is suggested that prospective researchers undertake quantitative research to back up this study, to generate statistical data on the factors influencing the effectiveness of Foundation Phase HODs' management of TPD in under-resourced schools across the district. The study proposes that researchers should consider examining the correlation between HOD's workload and learner achievement across all the school circuits in the Nkangala Education District to draw a comparison and propose a model for best practices.

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