

André du Plessis

South African Heads of Department on Their Role in Teacher Development: Unexpected Patterns in an Unequal System

Abstract

The Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa, 2011-2015 (ISPFTEd) aims to achieve dramatic improvement in the quality of learning and teaching in schools which have diverse socio-economic contexts. Together with calls that a rigorous assessment of the competencies required for the position of Head of Department (HOD) should be introduced, this study attempts to provide understanding of how HODs develop teachers within the context of their schools and subject departments. Responses of HODs are presented and discussed by referring to the organizational structure of subject departments, their understanding of professional development, training to do professional development, professional development strategies used by HODs, support they receive to do professional development, the extent to which HODs are pro-active in professional development and the factors inhibiting them to do professional development. Unexpected patterns are uncovered which challenges the assumption that professional development of teachers is more likely to occur in well-resourced schools than in under-resourced schools. On the one hand it brings a message of hope, but on the other hand a message of concern.

Keywords: professional development, distributed leadership, heads of departments, subject departments, school leadership

Introduction

One of the challenges identified during the Teacher Summit of 2009 and the resultant Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa, 2011-2015 (ISPFTEd) is the failure of the system to achieve dramatic improvement in the quality of learning and teaching in schools (DBE, 2012). The National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa acknowledges that strong leadership and good management in schools are needed and that professional development activities must relate directly to the classroom responsibilities of teachers (RSA, 2007).

Heads of Department (HODs) and Subject Departments

Brown, Rutherford and Boyle (2000, p. 243) argue that the subject department must be the key focus for change in a school in that HODs, with responsibility for a manageable group of people, can enable successful change within the group and thus contribute to whole school improvement. They also feel that HODs and members of their departments share subject loyalty and expertise as well as “*micro-political*” interests, and therefore form units which can be crucial agents of change in schools. HODs may perform an important mentoring and supervisory leadership function in order to facilitate the professional development of their colleagues (De

Lima, 2008, p. 160). This point of view is acknowledged by the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) in their 2012 National Report when they declare that HODs are the only teachers that are in a position to offer sustained and frequent assistance to effect changes in classroom practice (NEEDU, 2013, p. 81). This focuses on the role of the HOD as being developmental in nature in that the intention is to improve teaching, learning and achievement in the department. This requires HODs to be up to date with recent curriculum developments and to be more than competent teachers if they wish to have credibility among their colleagues.

Turner (2003a, p. 42) used four themes to illustrate the distinctiveness of subject departments and how they could have an impact on how HODs function. Firstly, he refers to Busher and Harris (2000) who distinguish between different categories of departments and highlight the wide range of subject related contexts in which HODs work (Turner, 2003a, p. 42; Turner, 2003b, p. 215). Distinctions are made between: ‘*federal*’ (e.g. science and humanities, where broadly similar subjects may be grouped together); ‘*confederate*’ (e.g. services, which contain a loosely knit heterogeneous group of subjects) or ‘*unitary*’ (e.g. English and Mathematics which are single subject fields). Gunter (2001, p. 108) explains that HODs of single-subject departments have a “*shared disciplinary identity and expertise*” with colleagues in the department, whilst a HOD of a multi-subject department is disconnected from this knowledge base. Secondly, the nature of the subject(s) themselves can influence the ways in which the HOD performs his or her role. A third theme is that HODs are usually recruited on the basis of being specialists for the reason that they are well qualified and experienced in their subject. Lastly, the notion of “*subject paradigm*” can be used to understand how HODs view the subjects they teach (Turner, 2003a, pp. 43-45). An example would be how teachers teaching natural sciences view their role, as compared to teachers teaching social sciences.

In South Africa the allocation of promotion posts to public schools (deputy-principals and HODs) do not necessarily correspond with the curriculum offered by the school and is based on enrolment numbers. The higher the learner enrolment, the more teachers and by implication, more HODs are allocated to a school. Principals are then expected to allocate HODs to subject departments according to the needs of the school and the availability of expertise. In ordinary secondary schools, the twelfth (12th) and twenty-fifth (25th) teaching posts are allocated to Deputy Principals, whilst the fourth (4th), sixth (6th), thirteenth (13th), twenty-first (21st), twenty-eighth (28th), thirty-second (32nd), thirty-sixth (36th), fortieth (40th) and forty-fifth (45th) teaching posts are allocated to HODs (GDE, 2013).

The Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) as determined in terms of section 4 of the Employment of Educators Act (RSA, 1998) prescribes three years as the minimum experience required for appointment to promotion posts.

Research question

The main purpose of the study was to gain insight into the role of heads of department in the professional development of educators within their situational context. The research question was: “How do heads of department in four secondary schools in the Gauteng province professionally develop the teachers in their departments?” However, this paper does not report on the findings related to the

main research question, but on unexpected patterns which were uncovered, challenging the assumption that teacher professional development is more likely to occur in well-resourced schools than in under-resourced schools.

Theoretical framework of the study

This study was undertaken from a distributed leadership perspective and for the purpose of this study distributed leadership was defined as the purposeful distribution of leadership functions relating to the professional development of teachers by heads of department (HODs) as a group of people with formal leadership roles. This conceptualization is in line with previous research conducted (Hulpia & Devos, 2010, p. 4) and is acknowledged in *The National Report 2012: The State of Literacy, Teaching and Learning in the Foundation Phase* which was published in 2013. This report specifically refer to the establishment of a division of labor in which teacher professional development must be formally distributed to senior members of staff, including HODs (NEEDU, 2013, p. 72). This is supported by Grant, Gardner, Kajee, Moodley and Somaroo (2010, p. 401) who argue that distributed leadership is “*implicit in official documentation in the South African Education system post 1994, which emphasizes a move towards a more shared and participatory approach to the practice of leadership and management in schools*”.

Research design and methodology

In the descriptive qualitative study on which this paper reports, content analysis was applied after interviews were conducted with eight HODs from four different schools. The underlying proposition of this study was that, due to differences in school and subject department contexts, differences may occur in the way HODs professionally develop teachers in their departments.

Taylor (2008, p. 4) argues that there are massive disparities in performance between schools within the South African system. The Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) was created with the aim to facilitate the expansion of quality education in Sub-Saharan Africa by providing the necessary data to monitor educational quality (Spaull, 2011, p. 3). SACMEQ III was a survey conducted in 2007 in South Africa on primary school learner performance. The data indicated definite inequalities in educational performance. Fee-paying schools, forming the wealthiest quintile of schools (quintile 5), far outperforms the lower quintiles “*to the extent that one might think that this graph was depicting two educational systems and not one*” (Spaull, 2011, p. 18). Therefore, maximal variation sampling required that both fee-paying (Schools A and B) and non-fee-paying (Schools C and D) schools be sampled.

In addition, HODs were selected in order to represent single subject (unitary) departments and multi-subject (federal or confederate) departments.

Presentation of data

Distributed leadership is particularly discernible in the subject departments of School A and School D, School A been a fee-paying school and School D being a non-fee-paying school. It is noteworthy that in both these schools, the HODs

reported considerable support by the senior management of their schools who create conditions in which professional development can take place. Distributed leadership is least evident in School B and School C. Significantly, the HODs of these two schools also reported a low level of support by senior management.

Generally HODs indicated that professional development should result in the acquisition of new skills, concepts, appropriate knowledge and processes related to the act of teaching. Aspects such as pastoral care, giving direction to staff and the building of commitment and confidence relate to the descriptors as contained in Performance Standard 9 of the Development Appraisal Instrument used in the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS). The IQMS is an integrated system consisting of three programs (Development Appraisal, Performance Measurement and Whole School Evaluation) aimed at enhancing and monitoring performance of the education system (ELRC, 2003, p. 1).

Variations occur in the understanding of professional development among the participants which can be attributed to the situational contexts in which HODs are operating. An example would be HOD 3 (School B), who views emotional support as an aspect of professional development. This could be ascribed to her perceived lack of support from the senior management of the school. A second example is HOD 5 (School C), who views motivation as an important aspect of professional development. He experiences difficulties in implementing professional development in his department because:

... if you try to help them, they will look at you as if you are inspecting or following them and you want to find fault.

A third example is HOD 8 (School D), who is required to spend much effort on familiarizing members of her department about Life Orientation and introducing the subject to them.

HOD 6 (School C) views professional development as developing aspects related to the teaching of their subject. She sees herself as the leader in the department and describes her role as follows:

I have to show them the little light they are looking for. I need to make sure that at all times they feel at ease so that they can perform to their utmost.

She also refers to the role she plays regarding inexperienced and novice educators by stating the following:

... teachers these days are being micro-waved ... we are expected to oven-bake them.

Generally the participants indicated that they were not trained to do professional development in their departments and that they relied on their own experience and what they have learnt from HODs under whom they have worked as Post Level 1 teachers. This is a concern as Performance Standard 9 of the Development Appraisal Instrument has as specific expectation that HODs perform staff development functions. This indicates that the potential value of the IQMS as a developmental tool has not been fully recognized or accepted. The exception is in School D where the participants mentioned the acting principal who provided substantial training on how to utilize the IQMS as a tool to conduct professional development in their departments.

Departmental and subject meetings are the most common developmental tool and all the participants mentioned that they use these meetings to conduct

professional development to some extent. Generally, these meetings are held on a regular basis. The participants use these meetings to do micro-planning with the teachers in their departments and to exercise control. HOD 1 and HOD 2 (School A) specifically mention that they utilize check-list forms to assist them in this regard. Teachers in their departments who have attended in-service courses and workshops are also required to give feedback at these meetings. It is therefore evident that these participants perceive routine management functions as valuable opportunities to conduct professional development and their departments could be described as communities of practice.

The IQMS as a development strategy is only mentioned by participants from Schools A and D and it is evident that it is viewed as the primary developmental strategy in their schools. Here class visits are regarded as being a very valuable strategy. The participants of School B (HOD 3 and HOD 4) do not utilize class visits at all and it can thus be assumed that the IQMS is not used at all as a developmental strategy. This is underlined when HOD 4 says:

A person does not really know where to start and how to go about it ... there is nobody that actually gives you background ...

Significantly, the two schools which use the IQMS as a developmental strategy (School A and School D), are also the two schools in which distributed leadership characteristics in subject departments, are the most apparent. The use of Development Appraisal Instrument and Personal Growth Plans (PGP's) as development tools is significantly absent in School B and School C.

Strategies aimed at inexperienced and beginner teachers receive a fair amount of attention. These include attempts at mentoring, coaching and an induction or orientation program. This aspect is most prevalent in School A and School D, whilst the participants from School B and School C pay attention to this aspect to a lesser extent. It is again significant that the two schools that feature the strongest in terms of distributed leadership also have the most structured programs to develop the inexperienced and beginner teachers.

The participants from School A and School D describe the support they receive from the senior management of their schools as very supportive. The opposite sentiment is, however, expressed by the participants from School B and School C, who describe the support they receive from the senior management as minimal. It is once again significant that the participants of the two schools in which distributed leadership is most evident, perceive themselves as being strongly supported by senior management. On the other hand, the participants of the two schools in which distributed leadership is least evident, participants feel they are not supported in professional development. This is worthy of mention in the context of the expectation as expressed in Performance Standard 9 of the Development Appraisal Instrument which specifically requires principals, deputy-principals and HODs to, apart from implementing training and mentoring programs, provide pastoral care and leadership.

Pro-activeness with regard to professional development is most obvious among the participants of School A. HOD 1 refers to inexperienced teachers being teamed up with more experienced colleagues and class visits are planned in such a manner that inexperienced teachers are visited first. HOD 2 mentions that he has a development plan for each teacher in his department and that they aim at preparing

the inexperienced teachers to teach Grade 12 classes. School C is the least pro-active and it is noticeable that very little opportunity is given to teachers to develop leadership and management skills.

A distinction can be made between School A and School D on the one hand and School B and School C on the other hand, with regard to the factors inhibiting professional development. The participants from School A both see the lack of time as the primary constraint on professional development in their department. This is linked to their heavy involvement in extra-mural activities offered by their school. Although not specifically mentioning the availability of time as an inhibiting factor, the rest of the participants alluded to it when asked how many periods they teach per day.

In contrast to School A and School D, the participants from School B and School C refer to a lack of know-how, inadequately qualified teachers and a lack of motivation as the factors inhibiting professional development in their schools. This is particularly perturbing as these HODs are all very experienced teachers. It is striking that in these two schools distributed leadership is the least prominent, whilst being quite discernible in School A and School D.

Conclusion

An unexpected pattern emerged which challenges the assumption that professional development of teachers is less likely to take place in non-fee-paying schools which are under-resourced. The data clearly show that in School D, being a non-fee-paying school with limited resources, have well-structured teacher development strategies in place. Although having limited physical resources, there is a clear commitment to professionally develop staff. The opposite could be said of School B, which is a well-resourced fee-paying school. Here low levels of motivation and a lack of commitment to professional development were uncovered. One could therefore conclude that being a well-resourced school does not necessarily equate to well-structured in-school professional development. In addition, one cannot assume that poorly resourced schools are unable to implement well-structured and effective in-school professional development programs.

This point to the impact of leadership in organizational improvement and underscores the notion that quality leadership is associated with organizational improvement. In the South African situation there is furthermore a definite expectation that leadership must be distributed to HODs as indicated in Performance Standard 9 of the Development Appraisal Instrument as agreed on in Resolution 8 of 2003 of the Education Labor Relations Council (ELRC, 2003, p. 43). Distributed leadership has a "*leader plus*" aspect, which recognizes that leading and managing schools can involve multiple individuals, and a "*practice*" aspect, which implies that the practice of leadership is shared and realized within extended groupings and networks of which some would be formal and others informal (Spillane, 2009, p. 70). This could be manifested through the work of subject departments.

References

- Brown, M., Rutherford, D. & Boyle, B. (2000): Leadership for School Improvement: The Role of the Head of Department in UK Secondary Schools. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 11(2), 237-258.
- De Lima, J. Á. (2008): Department networks and distributed leadership in schools. *School Leadership & Management: Formerly School Organisation*, 28(2), 159-187.
- DBE (2012): *Memorandum of Agreement between The Department of Basic Education and The Teacher Unions on Professional Development for Teachers*. www.education.gov.za (Accessed: 21/07/2013).
- ELRC (2003): *Collective Agreement No. 8 of 2003*.
- GDE (2013): *Educator Post Establishment and Promotion Policy*. Human Resource Management and Development Unit, District Tshwane South, Gauteng Department of Education, Pretoria.
- Grant, C., Gardner, K., Kajee, F., Moodley, R. & Somaroo, S. (2010): Teacher leadership: a survey analysis of Kwa-Zulu-Natal teachers' perceptions. *South African Journal of Education*, 30, 401-419.
- Gunter, H. M. (2001): *Leaders and Leadership in Education*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hulpia, H. & Devos, G. (2010): How distributed leadership can make a difference in teachers' organizational commitment? A qualitative study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 3, 565-575.
- NEEDU (2013): *National Report 2012. The State of Literacy Teaching and Learning in the Foundation Phase*. www.education.gov.za (Accessed: 29/07/2013).
- RSA (2007): *National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- RSA (1998): *Employment of Educators Act, No. 76 of 1998*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Spaull, N. (2011): Primary School performance in Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa. *Working paper 8, SACMEQ*.
- Spillane, J. P. (2009): Managing to lead: Reframing School Leadership and Management. *Kappan*, 91(3), 70-73.
- Taylor, N. (2008): What's Wrong with South African Schools? Presentation to the Conference: What's Working in School Development? JET Education Services, 28-29 February, 2008.
- Turner, C. (2003a): The Distinctiveness of the Subject Being Taught and the Work of Subject HODs in Managing the Quality of Classroom Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools in Wales. *School Leadership & Management*, 23(1), 41-57.
- Turner, C. (2003b): A Critical Review of Research on Subject Leaders in Secondary Schools. *School Leadership & Management*, 23(2), 209-227.