The realities of educator support in a South African school district

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This paper explores support in primary schools in a single South African school district. The literature suggests an increased need for educator support in South Africa due to a myriad of curricular changes in the aftermath of apartheid, as well as a teacher corps that is ill-prepared for the demands posed by curricular reform. Documented research showed educator support that is inadequate, leaving educators feeling unsupported and ill-equipped to face the challenges presented by the new education system. A qualitative approach located in an interpretive paradigm was adopted for this study while the requisite data were gathered by means of both individual and focus group interviews involving twenty participants from three primary schools in one school district. In addition, documents were requested from the schools, meetings were observed, and a cluster workshop was attended. The main finding of the study was that there is limited evidence of support for primary school educators in the South African school district studied. A key recommendation was that more curriculum instructors and heads of department be employed to increase the capacity of support for primary school educators.

Keywords: educator support; professional development; organisational support; quality assurance; quality teaching and learning; teacher support

Introduction

Educator support is a vital ingredient in the work of education systems across the world. Generally, educators require support as they try to find their feet in the profession; make sense of reform initiatives; and implement policy. Systemic changes bring with them a myriad challenges, which educators cannot face without support. The literature suggests that countries across the world recognise the importance of educator support in order for educators to successfully implement reforms at the school level. In South Africa, the need for support became apparent after a consistent theme of confusion and implementation difficulties emerged among educators as they tried to make sense of and deliver a new curriculum in the aftermath of apartheid.

The political transformation that took place in 1994 in South Africa saw the introduction of a new legislative framework for education, including new statutory bodies and a range of new national policies (Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), 2015:5). For example, the Employment of Educators Act (EEA) 76 of 1998 (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1998) stipulates that employers (office-based educators) have the right to concern themselves with the quality of the work of employees (school-based educators). Similarly, the Foundations for Learning (FFL) Campaign (Department of Education (DoE), 2008:22) specifies that "education district officials are obliged to visit all schools within the district at least once per term, with more frequent visits to schools requiring stronger support for monitoring, guidance, assist schools to improve their performance and work towards the agreed targets." In addition, Goal Number 27 of the Action Plan to 2014 (Department of Basic Education (DBE), Republic of South Africa, 2011:9) states that the objective of the DBE is to "improve the frequency and quality of the monitoring and support services provided by district offices to schools."

The National Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (National Education Evaluation & Development Unit, 2013:15) prescribes that education districts and circuit offices are required to conduct "school visits, classroom observation, consultation, cluster meetings, suitable feedback reports and other means; providing an enabling environment and organising provision and support for the professional development of managers, educators and administrative staff members; and holding education institutions in a district area to account for their performance." Legislation and policy, however, simply provide a framework and communicate intent. The reality of providing and receiving support seems to be far removed from legislation and policy, as suggested by available literature (De Clercq, 2007; Jansen, 1998; Van der Berg, Spaull, Wills, Gustafsson & Kotzé, 2016). Thus, the primary aim of the authors was to explore the provision of support to primary school educators and how they experience support from internal and external sources.

Literature

Educator support is variously described as mentoring, coaching, professional development and feedback upon lesson observations. The realities of educator support were explored within a hybrid framework, consisting of organisational support theory and the policy framework for improving the quality of teaching and learning. King-McKenzie, Bantwini and Bogan (2013:30) have pointed out that educators in South Africa have been bombarded with reform after reform, as well as one new educational policy after another, where to date, four curriculum reviews have been introduced by the DBE within the space of 15 years – between 1997 and 2012. The Curriculum 2005 (C2005) was introduced in 1997, the Revised National Curriculum Statements (RNCS) in 2002, the National Curriculum Statements (NCS) in 2011, and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements

(CAPS) in 2012. The current CAPS provide educators with "clear, succinct and unambiguous curriculum and assessment statements that enable them to improve the numeracy and literacy skills of learners effectively" (DBE, Republic of South Africa, 2012:6, 2013:8).

Literature suggests that support for educators in South Africa mainly takes place during training workshops organised by the subject advisors. According to policy, the school management teams (SMTs) and developmental support groups (DSGs) constitute the internal sources of support for educators in schools. However, the majority of the South African studies (De Clercq, 2007; Jansen, 1998; Mahlo, 2011; Mashau, Steyn, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2008; Narsee, 2006; Ramolefe, 2004; Sivhabu, 2002; Smith, 2011) reveal that educators do not receive thorough, appropriate, and/or sufficient support in the schools. Almost two decades ago, Jansen (1998:6) described support for South African educators facing curricular reform as "uneven, fragmented and, for many teachers, simply non-existing." Recently, Van der Berg et al. (2016:26) echoed this concern by stating that "teacher support is far from adequate in most public education systems." In the Annual Performance Plan 2014–2015 (DBE, Republic of South Africa, 2014:22), the DBE also acknowledged that school visits from district officials do not focus on areas of support.

The literature shows that high performing countries such as Finland, Australia, Japan and United States made significant investments in teacher training, teacher induction, teacher development, and professional development with considerable emphasis on collaboration among schools in some countries (Abbott, Middlewood & Robinson, 2014; Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2012; Li & Zhang, 2015; Moore, 2016). School systems in the USA and Australia experimented with individual or teams of teacher specialists and coaches to provide support at the school level (Dominguez, Nichols & Storandt, 2006; Monrad, May & Amsterdam, 2002; Ransford, Greensburg, Domitrovich, Small & Jacobson, 2009; Sumner, 2011). There appears to be a marked departure from offsite to onsite support in these countries.

The Study

This study was exploratory in nature, seeking to understand how educators experienced support and how they expect to be supported by internal and external sources in one South African school district. The literature suggests that educator support in South Africa is characterised as provincial or district officials explaining curricular changes to educators, mainly during offsite workshops. The educator support has been described as both inadequate and provided by sources lacking the required knowledge and/or skills to help educators make sense of the various changes to the curriculum. The following research questions underpinned the study:

1) How do primary school educators expect to be supported by external sources in a South African school district?
2) How do primary school educators experience support from external sources in a South African school district?
3) How do primary school educators expect to be supported by internal sources in a South African school district?
4) How do primary school educators experience support from internal sources in a South African school district?

Research Design

A qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate for the purposes of this study as it is "inductive and allows the researcher to describe and understand the particular situations, experiences and meanings of people and groups before developing and/or testing more general theories and explanations" (Frankel & Devers, 2000:253). A case study design was adopted, based on its provision for the use of multiple sources and techniques during the data gathering process. McMillan and Schumacher (2006:316) indicated that a case study design focuses on one phenomenon in order to understand that phenomenon in depth, regardless of the number of persons or sites.

This study was conducted in three primary schools in one circuit office in the Nkangala School District in the Mpumalanga Province. There are four school districts in the Mpumalanga Province, namely, Bohlabela District, Ehlanzeni District, Gert Sibande District, and Nkangala District. These districts differ in terms of the geographical location, but they all represent the population groups of South Africa. The three schools in the sample were purposively sampled "to gain insight about the research questions based on their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought" (Cohen, Manion & Morisson, 2007:115). Only the schools offering the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3), Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6), and Senior Phase (Grades 7–9) were included in the sample. School A is a semi-urban school, which consists of learners of African descent; School B is a suburban school consists mostly the White population; and School C is a township school consisting of learners of African descent. Thus, the three schools in the sample represent a cross-section of the population from various socio-economic backgrounds drawn from different geographical locations. The rationale for selecting the schools with different characteristics was to obtain "maximum variation", which would encompass complexity, subtlety and even contradictions (Denscombe, 2003:168).

The participants in the study were three principals, eight heads of department and nine Post Level 1 educators (the South African term used to define teachers on the entry level of the teaching career). The three principals were selected based on their role as managers of schools, while the heads of departments (HODs) and Post Level 1 educators were purposively sampled by the principals as information-rich participants. The rationale for enabling the principals to select the HODs and Post Level 1 educators was to avoid selecting "quiet, uncooperative or inarticulate individuals" (Shenton, 2004:65). To guard against bias and preference, the principals were requested to identify HODs and Post Level 1 educators based on their knowledge and requisite experience on matters of support in their schools. Thus, all the participants selected were knowledgeable about the subject being studied and provided more elaborated responses and prompts on matters affecting the Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase and Senior Phase. The biographical information of the principals is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1 The biographical information of the principals as developed by the author

School	A	B	C
Type	Semi-urban	Urban	Township
Learner enrolment	345	754	926
Participant	P1	P2	P3
Gender	Female (F)	Female (F)	Male (M)
Age	45	60	60
Race	African (A)	White (W)	African (A)
Qualifications	BEd Hon; ACE; JPTD	FDE, HED	BA Ed Hon; BA; SED and SEC.
Total number of years as a principal	4 years	1 year	38 years

As shown in Table 1 above, P1, P2 and P3 stand for respective principals. These principals consisted of two females and one male, with the racial make-up of two African people and one white person. All the three principals had appropriate professional qualifications. P3 had adequate experience as the principal; only P1 and P2 were less experienced in their positions as principals. The biographical information of the HODs is presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2 The biographical information of the heads of department as developed by the author

School	A			B			C		
Type	Semi-urban			Urban			Township		
Learner enrolment	345			754			926		
Participant	HOD 1	HOD 2	HOD 3	HOD 4	HOD 5	HOD 6	HOD 7	HOD 8	HOD 9
Gender	F	M	N/A	F	F	M	F	F	F
Age	58	50	N/A	42	49	41	32	53	52
Race	A	A	N/A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Qualifications	SPTD	HDE	N/A	ACE, SPTD	ACE, JPTD	B.Ed.	B.Ed.	B.Ed. Hon & JPTD	SPTD
Total number of years as an HOD	Acting	10	N/A	1	6	5	2	29	Acting

As shown in Table 2 above, HOD 1 to HOD 8 represent heads of departments. There were only two HODs employed in school due to the small size of the school, with a total enrolment of 345 learners. All the HODs in the sample were entirely African people and predominantly females, with the exception of two males. All the eight HODs had professional qualifications and were suitably qualified. Most HODs in the sample were primarily experienced HODs. The biographical information of Post Level 1 educators is presented in Table 3 below.

As shown in Table 3 below, T1 to T9 represents Post Level 1 educators. The sample of Post Level 1 educators consisted entirely of females and the racial make-up of eight Africans and one white. All the Post Level 1 educators were suitably qualified and their teaching experience ranges from six years to 29 years. Thus, the sample comprised primarily experienced Post Level 1 educators.

Data Collection

The study followed strict ethical conduct, based on permitted access and consent to participation, as well as ensured protection of participants and secured data. The three data collection techniques used to collect the requisite data were the interviews, document retrieval and non-participation observation. The individual interviews were conducted with the principals in their own offices. The focus group interviews of the HODs were

conducted in the offices of the HODs; while the focus group interviews with the Post Level 1 educators took place in specialised centres, including the library in School A, laboratory in School B and media centre in School C. The rationale for conducting the focus group interviews with the HODs and post-Level 1 educators was informed by the argument that "having more than one interviewee present provides two versions of events, a cross-check, and one can complement the other with additional points, leading to a more complete and reliable record" (Arksey & Knight, 1999:76). Each interview session, which comprised of the semi-structured interviews, lasted between 40–60 minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. All the participants participated voluntarily in the interviews and without any compensation such as stipend or gift.

Table 3 The biographical information of the Post Level 1 educators as developed by the author

School	A			B			C		
Type	Semi-urban			Urban			Township		
Learner enrolment	345			754			926		
Participant	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Age	49	44	46	51	44	43	58	40	55
Race	A	A	A	W	A	A	A	A	A
Qualifications	BEd Hon; ACE; SPTD	ACE, FDE, STD	ACE, JPTD	HED, SPTD	BEd Hon, FDE, JPTD	BEd Hon	ACE, JPTD	SPTD	BTech
Total number of years	13	22	6	29	20	20	25	11	29

The second stage of data collection was the sourcing of documents such as the school improvement plans (SIPs), whole school evaluation (WSE) reports, and Annual National Assessments (ANA). The purpose of retrieving the documents from the schools was to establish the documented support provided to primary school educators. The third phase of data collection was non-participant observation, which included the observation of three phase meetings (one phase meeting in each school) and one cluster group workshop for educators teaching Mathematics in Grade Nine. The purpose of attending the phase meetings and a cluster workshop was to determine the frequency and the type of support provided to primary educators during these encounters.

Data Analysis

The data that had been collected from the interviews, documents and observation were subjected to content analysis. Leedy and Ormrod (2013:148) defined content analysis as "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases." Cohen et al. (2007:475) described content analysis as the "process of summarising and reporting written data – the main contents of data and their messages." Cohen et al. (2007:476) further stated that, content analysis "can be undertaken with any written material, from documents to interview transcriptions, from media products to personal interviews."

Using the four research questions and conceptual framework as an analysis framework, an iterative process, as suggested by Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004:104-109) and Roberts, Walton and Viechtbauer (2006:43) was followed.

The process, according to Cohen et al. (2007:476) involves coding, categorising, looking for recurring patterns, similarities, inconsistencies or contradictions. Each data segment or unit was considered against the overarching question of how participants expected to be supported and how they experienced support. Codes were then assigned to the specific units or segments of related meaning identified in the transcripts. The codes identified included, workshop or school visit frequency, types and sources of support, participant views and concerns about support. The codes were categorised to establish the emergent nature of themes, trends and patterns that were cross-referenced with the research questions to ensure that the researcher did not lose focus (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993:480). The analysis process was further informed by probing questions aimed at identifying thematic relationships between the various categories. The qualitative analysis process was concluded with a description of the thematic relationships and patterns that had emerged. The categories, patterns and emerging themes were then linked to the research questions and discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Findings

Four distinct themes, consistent with the four research questions, emerged from the interview data. They were: 1) expectations of support from external sources; 2) participant experiences of support from external sources; 3) expectations of support from internal sources; and, 4) participant experiences of support from internal sources. Several sub-themes made up each main theme. Table 4 below shows the four main themes and the sub-themes.

Table 4 Emerging themes and sub-themes as developed by the author

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	
Theme 1: Expectations of support from external sources	a)	Notification about offsite workshops and school visits
	b)	Timing, amount and frequency of external support
	c)	Follow-up and support at school level
Theme 2: Participant experiences of support from external sources	a)	Sources of external support
	b)	Types of external support
	c)	Amount and frequency of external support
	d)	Views on external support
Theme 3: Expectations of support from internal sources	a)	A need to employ more HODs
	b)	Additional opportunities for professional learning for educators teaching the core subjects
	c)	A need for educators to take responsibility for their own learning or development
Theme 4: Participant experiences of support from internal sources	a)	SMT and HODs are sources of internal support
	b)	Unrealistic expectations of HODs
	c)	Lack of HOD manpower

Theme 1: Expectations of Support from External Sources

Responses are provided here verbatim. Participants across the research sites indicated how they would like to be supported by external sources by raising concerns and offering ways in which those concerns could be addressed. The majority of the participants expressed appreciation for the support they received both onsite and offsite but lamented the fact that district officials schedule offsite workshops without considering the schools' schedules or they show up at schools at in-opportune times. They were concerned that poor planning on the side of district officials lead to the disruption of the school schedule and valuable instructional time is lost when educators attend offsite workshops. HOD 1 illustrated this concern when she noted that "*many times the CIs* [curriculum implementers] *come at the time we least expect them, or they will call us to a workshop* [...] *without considering our plans.*"

Participants from one research site expressed the wish that subject advisors conduct the curriculum support workshops during the school holidays (break) instead of taking educator participants offsite during the school day. When educators attend offsite workshops, their learners have to be supervised by educators who remain at the school. Those educators thus have to shoulder a heavier workload. T7 captures this concern very well with the following statement:

> *Take, for instance, this year, we attended the MST* [Maths, Science and Technology] *workshop for three days. However, their timing was wrong because we left learners under the supervision of a few staff members – those who were not part of the workshop. It would have been better if such a workshop was conducted during school holidays.*

Appeals to conduct the curriculum workshops during school holidays have increased since the introduction of the DBE's '1+4 teacher develop-ment' programme designed to train educators teaching Mathematics in Grade Nine on Monday on the content they teach on Tuesday to Friday. In this regard, HOD 8 surmised that:

> *The 1 + 4 approach of the Department of Education to support Grade Nine teachers every Monday poses a threat because these teachers do not only teach Maths in our schools, they teach other subjects in other grades as well. As a result, the other subjects taught by these teachers suffer because there is no catch-up plan in place. It would be better if such training were conducted during school holidays.*

Some participants expressed the wish for an increased amount and frequency of support from external sources. One participant suggested that the purpose of 'outreach visits' be changed from an assessment of the school's readiness for teaching and learning on the first day of school to a more sustained form of support. One of the principal participants argued that subject advisors need to increase the amount of time they spend providing support to primary school educators in their respective schools. Several participants indicated that the number of support workshops offered per year be increased in order to help educators adapt to curricular changes. The comment from T5, helped explain why participants were in favour of increased workshops: "*The workshops are very informative and we gain a lot, it is just that they are normally conducted once a year per subject and this robs us of an opportunity to gain more information.*" In addition, P1 mentioned that, "*The teachers need more time and training; not the once-off thing or twice a year because we have just started this CAPS thing. If they can do it quarterly, they can master it.*"

Participants frequently noted that officials do not come back to 'check' whether they are on the right path as far as classroom implementation of changes goes. In this regard, T1, noted that "*when*

we come back to school, we are on our own until [...] *they call us into another workshop.*" Similarly, T9 mentioned that: "*As much as the CIs visit us in schools* [...] *if support is not provided continuously, it does not serve any purpose.*"

Theme 2: Experience of Support from External Sources

Four (4) sub-themes were identified within this main theme, namely: sources of external support; types of external support; amount and frequency of external support; and views on external support. Overall, sources of external support for primary school educators were identified as provincial and district officials, circuit managers, subject advisors (curriculum implementers), cluster leaders and teacher unions.

Although participants expressed positive views on the support from external sources, they also raised concerns about external support. Principal participants spoke in glowing terms about the support they receive from their circuit managers but indicated that they would prefer curriculum implementers to provide similar support to the rest of educators in schools. P2 noted that, "*My basic support comes from the Circuit Manager during the principals' meetings that provide us the opportunity to make inputs and share good practice from our own schools. I must also say that the support from some of the CIs is wonderful and I really wish we could see every CI visiting our school every term.*" Participants also expressed concern about the level of competence of some CIs. Some received support from more than one CI and may have had varied experiences. An example is T2, who had the following to say about one CI:

> *The support I get from my CI does not meet my expectation. She is not knowledgeable enough on the subject. Every time we attend her workshop, we come out without knowing what to do. I think it is a disadvantage to have a CI who does not know his story.*

The data showed that the majority of primary school educators receive support primarily from CIs during curriculum support workshops particularly on content coverage, lesson preparation, assessment techniques, and guidance on setting examination question papers. P 3 noted that:

> *The subject advisors conduct workshops and train teachers on setting standardised question papers. They supply teachers with intervention guides and the CAPS policy. They also provide one-on-one support to teachers at the school.*

The teacher participants made frequent references to lesson planning and content as areas of focus in workshops offered by CIs. In this regard, T2 mentioned that:

> *From my CI, the support I receive is through the content itself. She usually organises people who are knowledgeable in a subject and also provides us with lesson plans for every quarter.*

Participants across groups and schools indicated that they received and benefitted from cluster support. HOD 7 noted that, "*Cluster leaders conduct the workshops to help teachers to share information on specific topics and lesson presentations and to overcome challenges in their learning areas.*" Thus, the focus of cluster support is of a pedagogical nature.

Participants appeared to experience curriculum workshops and visits by CIs differently because a majority of the participants in this study considered the purpose of their school visits to be surveillance or checking for compliance. In this regard, T3 stated that, "*When the CIs come to our schools, it is just monitoring and looking for mistakes, it is not for support. Most of the CIs monitor compliance but do not provide support. To me, the CIs come to schools for their own records to prove to the Department of Education that they are visiting schools and not for the purpose of supporting the teachers in the schools.*" Participant P1 shared a similar sentiment by stating that, "*The Department of Education is just monitoring the implementation of the curriculum, not providing support, because, if you support somebody, you make sure that he is supported continuously and you check progress throughout.*"

All the participants indicated that they received training on the national intervention strategies from the district officials. In addition, the HODs and post-Level 1 educators indicated that curriculum implementers 'check' the implementation of the national intervention strategies every time they visit educators in schools. However, participants noted that the shortage of CIs makes it almost impossible for CIs to provide a sufficient amount of support to educators in schools. HOD 7 explained that, "*The support from the CIs is very limited because they have many schools to support and they cannot be in all the schools all the time.*" Participant T9 echoed this sentiment by stating that: "*Some CIs try their level best to conduct workshops and visit schools, but they are very few to provide the required support to teachers in schools.*"

Theme 3: Expectations of Support from Internal Sources

Regarding the support educators expected from internal sources, the broad themes that emerged from the interview data were: a) a need to employ more HODs; b) additional opportunities for professional learning for educators teaching the core subjects; and, c) a need for educators to take responsibility for their own learning or development. Participants expressed a concern about the fact that, in general, HODs have a wide scope of responsibilities, which ultimately compromises the quality of support provided to educators. In addition, the participants mentioned that it is

virtually impossible for one HOD to provide adequate support to all the subjects offered in primary schools since educators in South Africa specialises in two or three subjects during teacher training. To remedy the situation, participants across research sites expressed the desire to see more HODs employed in schools, particularly in the Foundation Phase. The views of the participants in this regard were clearly articulated by T5 that, "*The Department of Education must appoint enough HODs because, currently, there is one HOD for the Foundation Phase in our school.*" The expectation was that a sufficient number of HODs per school would translate into adequate support.

The majority of the participants in this study expected additional opportunities for professional learning for educators teaching what they termed, core subjects, referring to Mathematics, Life Science and Technology. HOD 9 suggested that, "*Teachers teaching subjects like Maths, Life Science and Technology should be supported by means of the skills development courses of the Department of Education and non-governmental organisations* [NGO] *programmes.*" The primary school educators in this school district had not been selected to participate in the skills development courses of the DBE or NGO programmes such as the Mpumalanga Secondary School Initiative (MSSI) project, Dinaledi Project, Khanyisa Programme and Integrated Education Project (IEP) offered in certain sectors in some provinces in South Africa. This suggests a need for opportunities to acquire subject or content knowledge and instructional delivery skills.

The principal and HOD participants expressed the view that educators who participated in teacher preparation programmes ought to receive minimal support on the basis that they are trained to be subject specialists. Thus, the principals and HODs expected Post Level 1 educators to be experts in the subjects they teach. HOD 1 puts it this way: "*We cannot be apologetic for poor performance and place the blame on somebody else all the time. Competence and knowledge are cornerstones of teaching and, if such elements are in place, support from other people should not be an issue.*"

It emerged from the interview responses that some of the educators do not fully cooperate when supported by the school management. For instance, P1 indicated that, "*I perceive support as a give-and-take process of helping each other, but most of the teachers do not cooperate on the aspects of support.*" Another concern raised by the principal and HOD participants was that post-Level 1 educators do not take initiative or responsibility for their own learning. Instead, they wait for an external or internal source to provide support. HOD 1 indicated that, "*I would like to see teachers reflect more on their practices and acknowledge if there are areas in which they need to improve.*"

Theme 4: Experience of Support from Internal Sources

All the participants agreed that the internal support for primary school educators is the collective responsibility of the School Management Team (SMT), consisting of the principal, deputy principals and HODs. Of these SMT members, HODs emerged as a key source in the provision of internal support. Participants across the research sites indicated more positive experiences of internal support than they did with external support. They indicated that the SMT members are familiar with the environment, the challenges and the behaviour of the learners, and are able to monitor progress and improvement on a daily basis. The views of the participants in this regard were encapsulated in the following statement by P 2:

> I personally do not think that somebody coming from outside the school can make much improvement in the school – effective support must come within the school from the principal and the staff.

Similarly, T 4 supported this view by stating that:

> I think the support that we get internally is the one which is effective because the HODs know the situation of the school – unlike people who are coming from outside who do not know what is happening in the school and how the learners are behaving. The person who is inside the school is able to see the difference and the loopholes and provides solutions.

The participants indicated that the internal support for primary school educators entails curriculum support, monitoring of portfolios for educators and learners and classroom visits. P1 pointed out that: "*As the SMT, we support educators collectively to manage the curriculum, check teachers' portfolios and learners' books, conduct class visits, and provide feedback to the circuit office.*" Similarly, HOD 1 noted that, "*As HODs, we conduct internal workshops and monitor that teachers use previous ANA question papers for internal assessment in order to familiarise learners with the national standard of benchmark.*" This suggests an over-reliance on the national intervention strategies to improve the ANA results in primary schools.

Principal and post-Level 1 participants indicated that HODs hold phase and subject meetings to support educators in schools. In addition, HODs conduct class visits to observe teaching in class and check learners' books and portfolios. Participants in all the research sites indicated that the main challenge of internal support is the shortage of HODs and unrealistic expectations of them due to the dual role they have to fulfil. T3 expressed the following view:

> I can say, the SMT members are trying their best to support us but we do not have enough HODs in every department. For example, we have one HOD for the Intermediate and Senior Phases in our school. I am the language teacher, he is the Maths

and Science teacher, and his knowledge is limited to his area of specialisation.

HOD 2 also made reference to the shortage of HODs, insufficient time and the heavy workload of HODs in primary schools by noting: "*Take for instance in our school, we are few as HODs, we do not have sufficient time to support educators and we have more work to do.*"

The participants blamed the learner-educator ratio system of the DBE for the shortage of HODs in schools. In this regard, HOD 5 argued:

> *I personally think the government is failing us with the pupil-teacher ratio when it comes to the allocation of posts in schools. Imagine, I am the only HOD in the Intermediate Phase and, definitely, I am not able to provide support to all the six learning areas* [subjects]. *Nobody is a specialist in all the subjects. Even if I try to stretch myself to the limit, I still have a class to teach and I am expected to be effective in the classroom.*

The Foundation Phase participants also made reference to the dual role of the HODs, that of being full time teachers and performing administrative duties. HOD 4 said: "*In the Foundation Phase, I do not have sufficient time to support teachers because I am also a full time class teacher.*" Similarly, T1 affirmed that: "*Our HOD tries her level best to support us but the challenge is that she is also a full-time teacher with her own class to teach, like all of us. If she has to provide support to a particular educator, it means she must leave her own class unattended.*"

HOD participants noted that they are unable to support educators after school hours because of extra-mural activities. HOD 4 explained that: "*We do not have enough time to support educators because there is athletics in the first term, music competitions in the second term and sport activities in the third term.*"

None of the participants in this study experienced support from the Development Support Group (DSG) – one of the internal sources responsible for supporting and developing educators in schools (Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), 2008:4; Mpumalanga DoE, 2005:5). P1 clarified that: "*The role of the DSGs is to identify areas of development for teachers during the implementation of the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), but have no role to play on matters of curriculum support for educators.*" A similar concern was raised by HOD 1 that: "*The DSGs are not proactive in the area of support for educators. They only conduct class visits to individual teachers for the purpose of summative scores in the IQMS.*" Thus, like activities performed by district and circuit officials, considered to be external support, this aspect of internal support is perceived to be an exercise in compliance.

Discussion

The most frequent response from the majority of the participants was that they experienced the site visits from district officials as surveillance intended mostly to ensure compliance with prescripts that seldom focused on areas of support. Participants argued that representatives from the district and national offices focused on the output rather than the input, thus missing the vital point of supporting educators. This finding is consistent with studies by De Clercq and Shalem (2014), Mavuso (2013) and Van der Berg, Taylor, Gustafsson, Spaull and Armstrong (2011), reporting that the visits of subject advisors and district officials tend to fulfil an almost exclusively monitoring role and are, therefore, often ineffective in terms of providing a systematic support in the form of advice, coaching and mentoring to teachers at the classroom level. A lack of human resources in the form of subject advisors and HODs to provide the desired support for primary school educators emerged as one of the realities of educator support. Not only did a shortage of HODs exist; they were also stretched thin in the sense that they had to guide several Post Level 1 teachers in subject areas of which they had no or limited knowledge. They were obliged to do this while shouldering the responsibility for teaching their own classes. This finding is consistent with that of research conducted by Bipath and Nkabinde (2015) and Blandford (2000), showing that HODs in the Foundation Phase are faced with the dilemma of coping with the competing demands of their administrative duties and teaching responsibilities.

The concern raised by the majority of participants was the timing of offsite workshops. Across research sites, participants voiced concern about workshops that were scheduled to take place during the school day, sometimes more than one day: thereby, taking away instructional time and disadvantaging learners. The literature did not really reveal a concern about the timing of offsite workshops. It showed that educators expressed a preference to receive support at school while they attempt implementation.

Participants also voiced concern about the amount and frequency of support educators received from both external and internal sources. Their main concern was the lack of uniformity in the support provided, as well as the lack of follow-up after classroom visits and observations. These concerns fed into participants' perception of district officials visiting their classrooms to 'find fault.'

Conclusion/Recommendations

Overall, this study revealed an initial confusion of district officials' and, to a limited extent, school-based leaders' efforts to comply with policy

directives, with educator support. While responding to interview questions, participants appeared to come to the realisation that what they considered to be support, was in fact an introduction to and explanation of curricular changes. Participants expressed their appreciation for the few instances where district officials and school-based leaders provided actual support and shared what they have gained from these interactions.

The concerns that were raised included disruption of the school schedule and operations, due to the expectation that educators attend offsite curriculum workshops on short notice; the heavy workload of CIs and HODs; and the quality of the support provided. It is recommended that more CIs and HODs be employed; that off-site workshops be offered during school breaks and that the support provided be of a sustained nature. Greater insight into this topic can be achieved through solicitation of the views of district officials, circuit managers and subject advisors (curriculum implementers). In addition, a comprehensive study exploring how newly appointed/promoted educators experience support in the absence of a clearly defined support structure for educators in public schools in South Africa could contribute to establishing a framework for induction and support at all levels of the education system.

Note
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