

THE NATURE OF PEDAGOGICAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY DEPARTMENTAL HEADS TO RECEPTION YEAR TEACHERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A CASE OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explored pedagogical leadership and its implementation by Departmental Heads (DHs) regarding the supervision and support of Reception year (Grade R) teachers in the Gauteng North District public schools, South Africa. Three objectives were framed for this study which applied the Atlas Ti software to analyse qualitative data. The research employed a descriptive single case study design. The population consisted of selected Reception year teachers and DHs. The purposive study sample comprised 13 DHs and 12 Reception year teachers. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory underpinned the study in line with pedagogical leadership principles regarding the supervision and support of Reception year teachers. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data from primary school DHs and teachers. The interpretative lens was selected to explore and understand DHs' responses regarding aspects of supervision and support. The findings revealed that pedagogical leadership was ineffective when supervising teaching practice. The follow-up processes of guidance, assistance, and support, which were previously provided, were now non-existent. This reflected a disconnected understanding among participants of pedagogical leadership support for Reception year teachers. The recommendations included the following: provision of relevant resources for Reception year teachers (and learners) to exploit the benefits of Early Childhood Care and Education; ECCE education officers must regularly provide support and training for DHs on the importance of pedagogical leadership and how to effectively implement them; and DHs need to collaborate with Reception year teachers to improve their pedagogical support.

Keywords: early childhood education, pedagogical leadership, reception year, scaffolding, socio-cultural theory, virtual simulation, zone of proximal development.

INTRODUCTION

Several watershed events changed how organisations operated in the past: namely, the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the post-Covid-19 pandemic and the excitement regarding the global utilisation of Artificial Intelligence (AI). These events transformed the way organisations like schools operate in a rapidly evolving global environment. However, there are also many organisations which are not performing according to the norms of best practice due to sub-standard leadership which fails to adapt to modern economic, social, and environmental trends. This underperformance, particularly in educational institutions, calls for innovative and effective pedagogical leadership interventions to align with modern institutional programmes.

Moreover, an institution's failure to provide sufficient relevant resources and academic materials for teachers hampers their effectiveness in fulfilling their responsibilities, resulting in failing to meet the Ministry of Education's pedagogical objectives (Rodriguez, Morales, Navarro, Salvador, Espinoza, & Hernandez, 2023). Two fundamental constructs (supervision and support) that are instrumental in pedagogical leadership were pertinent to this investigation. The crucial role of Departmental Heads (DHs) in supervising teachers is essential for quality curriculum delivery. Sengai's (2021) study highlights the impact of DHs' involvement in curriculum implementation in Zimbabwean secondary schools, while exposing inadequate supervision in Ghana which led to staff underperformance. To combat the situation, Mahome and Mphahlele (2024) recommend a formal induction programme for newly appointed DHs in South Africa which will engender effective leadership; hence, DHs who face challenges in their roles will be equipped to mentor teachers to promote quality all-round performance.

Further, the aspect of DHs' support involves technical assistance for Reception year teachers to uplift the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. This resonates with researchers who agree that improving the quality of teaching-learning needs support from the Government, not only in the form of facilities and infrastructure, but also in increasing professionalism, motivation, and the competency of Reception years teachers (Mustari & Muhammad, 2023). This support could include role-modelling in the classroom by DHs, colleagues, principals, Department of Education (DoE) officials, and experts in the field. The evolution of developments in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in South Africa post-1994 reflects a commitment to redress historical inequities and to prioritise the holistic development of all children.

The research by Van As, Excell and Shaik (2023) highlights the importance of ECCE in fostering children's wellbeing across various domains. Ogunode and Ojo (2021) emphasise the preparatory role of ECCE in primary education as it sets the foundation for young learners to succeed in formal schooling environments. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has now assumed the responsibility of overseeing ECCE which was previously managed by the Department of Social Development. The DBE has now introduced an additional compulsory year of schooling in the 'Reception Phase'. This shift is critical in early education which may influence child's life trajectory.

This study is rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, which stresses the significance of the gap between an individual's independent accomplishments and those achievable through collaboration with a more knowledgeable other (MKO). Lambright (2023) outlines the aim of such collaboration as providing opportunities for task accomplishment or translating theory into practice while preserving autonomy. The MKO has a higher ability level or a better understanding concerning a particular task, process, or concept. In context, the Reception year teachers' level of cognitive development will regulate what they could achieve when working individually, and what they could achieve when collaborating with DHs as their MKOs (supervisors). According to Yang (2023), Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the centrality of collaboration as an instrument for intellectual development. This highlights the importance of deliberations and reasoning with another individual through effective communication. Aptly, Vygotsky (1978) declares that we become ourselves through others.

Vygotsky's (1978) model was chosen for this study because it facilitates learning, including opportunities for developing intellectual and practical skills. In context, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and virtual (practical) simulation are essential for DHs to use in supervising and supporting activities involving Reception year teachers. Furthermore, ZPD and

virtual simulation would present Reception year teachers with opportunities to learn more about classroom practice than through other approaches which may be at an abstract level. In this regard, DHs must engage in practical demonstrations when mentoring Reception year teachers who may lack professional qualifications and knowledge of Reception year teaching methodologies.

To enhance teaching-learning experiences, DHs should apply strategic leadership skills and operational knowledge astutely. Consequently, DHs' supervision and support will positively affect Reception year teachers' practice, job-satisfaction, expertise, and learner outcomes. Teachers' expertise, self-education, professional development (internal and external), in-service training, and DH guidance are all recommended by Talukder, Green and Mamun-ur-Rashid (2021) who emphasise the designing, implementing, and delivery of curriculum in a qualitative manner to obtain better educational outcomes to meet international benchmarks. Hence, DHs must be familiar with and thoroughly prepared to demonstrate professional skills and competencies in their supervisory capacity. Since it is unclear to what extent and in what aspects DHs should support Reception year teachers, this study refers to their competencies as a bank of relevant knowledge, dispositions, and skills (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021). However, these elements will only be unearthed if DHs thoroughly understand the Reception year classroom curriculum and practices to efficiently support and supervise ECCE staff.

This current study is based on the researcher's completed doctoral thesis but extends to include the aspect of pedagogical leadership. Since this study investigated the nature of the supervision and support for Reception year teachers in the Gauteng North District in South Africa, the main research question sought to answer the following:

What is the nature of pedagogical support provided by Departmental Heads (DHs) to school-based Reception year teachers in the Gauteng North District of South Africa?

The following sub-questions arose:

- What quality of supervision and support do DHs provide to Reception year teachers?
- How effective is DHs' supervision and support of Reception year teachers' classroom practices?
- What interventions can be implemented to circumvent challenges as well as to follow-up on the support provided by DHs to Reception year teachers?

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Permission was obtained to conduct this study from the relevant body's Ethics Committee, gatekeepers, principals of the five schools, and the selected participants. All participants were purposively selected to establish credibility, and they were informed that they were at liberty to exit the study at any stage without being penalised in any way. All participants provided informed consent (signed) prior to the interview sessions, indicating that they voluntarily agreed to participate after being fully informed by the researcher about all the finer details of the study (Alotaibi, 2024). The researcher was the sole person with access to the password-protected e-file where all data and identities were stored (Miller, Lipscomb, & Hornik, 2024). The researcher guaranteed the confidentiality of all collected information and assured the protection of all the participants' identities by allocating codes/pseudonyms.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher adopted a qualitative case study approach by utilising the interpretivist paradigm to explore the nature of DHs' support for Reception year teachers in primary schools within Gauteng North district. This approach fostered an in-depth investigation of this phenomenon and its embedded meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this regard, it sought to discover and describe what people engage in daily, including their beliefs, interests, and perceptions. Sampling was conducted purposively, selecting 13 DHs (Five for individual interviews and Eight for focus group discussions) and 12 Reception year teachers (Five individual interviews and Seven focus group discussions).

The inclusion criteria were that 13 DHs with over three years' experience and Reception year teachers (Ryts) with similar term from five schools were chosen for participation. Participants were chosen for their ability to generate rich, contextualised information within natural settings (Noble & Neale, 2019). Interviews, lasting 45 to 60 minutes each, were conducted in English, considering participant comfort and language proficiency. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to capture verbatim responses, later transcribed for analysis. Member-checking was employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of their statements.

Additionally, coding, and thematic analysis were applied to assist with data analysis and discussion of data. The collected information from the interviews and the focus group discussions was compared to extract emerging themes. Through this approach, the data was meticulously compared and analysed, ultimately revealing emerging relevant themes. Following the guidelines outlined by Naeem, Ozuem, Howell and Ranfagni (2023), the researcher engaged in thematic analysis by immersing herself in the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Subsequently, the data was refined by selecting appropriate keywords and citations which facilitated the generation of codes. These codes were then systematically organised into categories based on shared characteristics.

In this study, this technique of organising and categorisation enabled the researcher to identify themes that captured the nature of support pertaining to Reception year teachers. These initial codes were created and then organised into corresponding sections which involved the interactive process of repetitive readings of all the collected data. The captured information was then merged and collapsed into defined themes that addressed the research questions. Where applicable, the findings emerging from the data analysis and interpretations were substantiated through relevant related literature.

The five research schools were coded as A, B, C, D and E. School A is a 'farm' school in the Cullinan Circuit where some learners are bused from nearby farms to the school. School B is also a 'farm' school in Bronkhorstspruit Circuit where some learners are also bused to the school. School C is situated in a rural community and is the only primary school in the area with no learners being bused to this school. School D is in a semi-urban area in ENkangala Circuit while School E is also in a semi-urban area in the Cullinan Circuit. The teachers were coded as 'Reception year teacher 1- School A (Ryt 1-School A) to Reception year teacher 7 School E (Ryt 7 - School C) and the DHs were coded according to their schools, for example, Departmental Head at school A as 'DH - SA' to 'DH-SE' respectively.

The teacher-learner ratio in all five schools ranged from 1:33 to 1:35. These ratios were above the stipulated number and may imply overcrowding because the recommended maximum ratio in a Reception year class is 1:30 (DBE, 2011). Given the nature of the schools referred to above and the research findings that follow, the quality of support and supervision for Reception year teachers becomes even more significant.

RESULTS

Three major themes emerged from the collected data, aligned with the study's aim, objectives, and research questions:

Theme 1: Nature of support provided to Reception year teachers by DHs.

Theme 2: Impact of DHs' Supervision on Teachers' Classroom Practice

Theme 3: Nature of follow-up as support provided by DHs to Reception year teachers.

The subsequent paragraphs present the findings from each theme, offering insights into the support provided by Departmental Heads to Reception year teachers, the impact of DHs' supervision on teachers' classroom practice, and the nature of follow-up support extended by DHs to Reception year teachers.

Theme 1: Nature of support provided to Reception Year teachers by DHs.

The study aimed to investigate the quality of support provided by DHs for Reception year teachers. This was aligned to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory by particularly focusing on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Findings from Reception Year teachers on the nature of support they receive.

From the Reception year teachers' individual interviews, they unanimously acknowledged that DHs in their schools were responsible for providing professional and material support. In describing and specifying the nature of support they received, they articulated different views. Four of the participants indicated that the support was minimal. Three indicated that they were not receiving support at all. Answering the question on what they considered as quality support, three Reception year teachers indicated getting help when experiencing classroom challenges. Four alluded to the fact that DHs need to learn about reception year practices. Three Reception year teachers revealed that collaboration amongst colleagues and respect for Reception year teachers were welcomed areas of support. All the participants agreed that the major support received was that of resource-provision (teaching materials), but a few Reception year teachers indicated that they could not utilise some resources due to lack of guidance on how. This provision of resources is supported by Shirke (2021) who sees the utilisation of teaching materials as being essential because they stimulate teaching to make learning more interesting. In congruence to related literature, the perception that emerged from this study showed that pedagogical leadership adequately supported Reception year teachers through the provision of learning and teaching materials (Penfold, 2019).

Further, resource-provision enhances practical teaching-learning processes to achieve better learner-performance. These must be utilised carefully for learners' maximum benefit regarding the specific lesson. According to the socio-cultural theory and the principle of scaffolding, support is tapered off at some point when it becomes unnecessary. The learner will then be able to complete the task again on his or her own (McLeod, 2019). This principle

applies to DHs and Reception year teachers who work as a team to enhance learner-performance. The struggle experienced by Reception year teachers in the Gauteng North District schools to carefully utilise teaching materials could be pointed at the solidification of teacher-centred teaching methods - this requires urgent DHs' in-house intervention to re-train such teachers to adapt to modern trends. Reception year teachers indicated that the nature of the support given to them was tilted mainly on the provision of material resources. Below are some examples of verbatim responses of participants during interviews:

Ryt 1 – School C: Yes, we sometimes receive support from the DHs who support us on issues of nutrition.

Ryt 2– School B: They buy groceries for the children, and when we are short of stationery they do buy.

Ryt 3 – School D: So far, I think I am getting support from my DH and the other officials.

Ryt 4 – School A: The support I receive is very minimal; not as I expect it to be.

Findings from Reception Year teachers' Focus Group Discussions on the Nature of support they receive.

During the discussion, the participants responded with mixed feelings; some displayed interest and others showed disinterest. Five Reception year teachers (Ryts) out of the seven were vocal, clearly articulating their views as they categorically revealed that they were disappointed that they were not receiving any sort of support from the DHs. Two Reception year teachers, however, indicated that the DHs in their schools do support them. Below are their verbatim responses:

Ryt 1 – School D: The support I receive is very minimal, not as I expect it to be.

Ryt 4 – School A: She is not concerned about our classes and the work we do.

Ryt 3 – School E: I can say I do not get any support; we have not seen anyone of them coming to our classes to help.

Three Reception year teachers believed their DHs should firstly understand the finer points of the Reception year programme to provide quality support. Another two Reception year teachers suggested that quality support involves collaborating regarding lesson planning, while two more defined quality support in line with regular class visits, one-on-one assistance, Reception year teachers' meetings, and internal workshops: Their articulations follow:

Ryt 1- School E: Good support is demonstrated when I have problems in my class or when I need assistance with something, and I get help.

Ryt 1 – School A: Providing the essential resources and assisting me with learners who are experiencing barriers.

Unanimously, Reception year teachers focused on aspects of teaching practice. Related to this aspect was Reception year teachers' struggles on how to plan and implement the core and local curricula. Given the dynamics within focus groups which can precipitate participant information-sharing, forming a single focus group may not have been a wise move. The responses could have been supplemented and tested by forming another focus group, if this was explored. The single focus group was used for confirming information elicited from the interviews. From the analysis of data, the nature of support preferred by Reception year teachers pertained to curriculum implementation. It emerged that the ideal strategy for

Reception year teachers to enhance their practice was to attend in-house training, and not to rely only on their previous training and teaching experience.

Findings from Departmental Heads (DHs) Focus group interviews

A question that was posed to the focus group DHs concerned how they provide Reception year teachers with quality supervision and support. The participants' responses to this question were found to be like those of the individual DH interviews. In their responses, participants agreed that DHs generally support Reception year teachers by providing adequate teaching-learning materials. Three of the participants indicated that they provide support involving classroom practice by monitoring content coverage and lesson planning, in addition to collaboratively brainstorming topics and providing resources. One was not very active in responding to questions. Resource-support was portrayed as one of the dominant themes emerging from the collected data as evidenced by some DHs who responded as follows:

DH- School B: I support them by acquiring the resources they need. I make sure that the teachers have the resources they are supposed to have.

DH- School D: I also support them through control of their preparation of lessons and learners' work, and by listening to their needs and taking them to the principal for assistance.

Four of the DHs' responses displayed their lack of understanding of what teaching and learning in the Reception year entailed. The information from the DHs about pedagogical support given to Reception year teachers was contradictory. Reception year teachers claimed that support concerning teaching practice was minimal or absent; this contradicted the DHs' claim that they were providing support to enhance teaching practice. It can be assumed that what the reception year teachers' articulation was more credible because the inaccuracies they were making during classroom practice indicated that supervision and support in classes were lacking. Sending Reception year teachers to training workshops alone is not the panacea to enhance teaching practice; a control mechanism was needed to monitor and ensure that they were also capable of executing practices that will provide pedagogical support to Reception year teachers.

The data revealed a range of perceptions among Reception year teachers regarding the quality of support received from DHs. While some acknowledged minimal support, others reported receiving no support at all. Although there was support which primarily revolved around resource-provision, some Reception year teachers perceived pedagogical guidance and collaboration among colleagues and DHs as more of a priority. These findings align with current literature which emphasises smart pedagogical leadership in providing quality support in teaching practice, in addition to the provision of teaching materials (Shirke, 2021; Penfold, 2019).

Vygotsky (1978) advised that support should be gradually tapered off as individuals develop independent skills. However, this study exposes challenges faced by Reception year teachers in skilfully utilising teaching-learning resources, which indicates the need for ongoing support and professional development which should be facilitated by DHs.

Theme 2: Effect of DHs' supervision regarding teachers' classroom practice

The intention was to evaluate the effect of DHs' supervision and support of Reception year teachers' classroom practices.

Findings elicited from DHs individual interviews on the effects of supervision and support.

Five DHs were interviewed to corroborate the Reception year teachers' information. Both individual interview responses involving DHs and the focus group discussion with Reception year teachers were analysed for authentication. Common responses to questions were classified under the same ATLAS Ti Software themes. It was commonly declared that DHs are part of the staff within an educational institution who play a fundamental role in overseeing, organising, and guiding the implementation of the curriculum (Ntuli & Mahlangu, 2023). Some examples of verbatim responses follow:

DH- School E: I do not have a clue about what is going on in the Reception Year. I need more information about their curriculum. I also need clarity on how they assess their learners' activities.

DH- School B: I do not have any measures. It is not practical because of time.

Based on what Reception year teachers indicated, it can be assumed that the pedagogical support for Reception year teachers were inadequate. It was apparent that the DHs are challenged in terms of their knowledge and skills in understanding the difficulties of teaching in Reception year classes. The implication is that it would be impossible for DHs to define what quality support are as they do not understand Reception year classroom practices.

Findings on DHs on the effects of supervising and supporting Reception Year teachers.

A question was asked to establish how DHs as supervisors resolved the challenges they experienced in Reception year classes. The DHs indicated that supervising and supporting Reception year teachers were challenging to them. It emerged that DHs were finding it virtually impossible to provide the expected support to the Reception year teachers because they were also full-time class teachers. Two of the DHs indicated that because of their burdensome workload, it was difficult to help the Reception year teachers when they (DHs) were approached for guidance. Some of the responses below bear testimony to this:

DH- School B: I do not have any measures of support; sometimes it is not practical because of time.

DH- School E: Reception Year has a lot of challenges; I sometimes do not know how to help the teacher when she approaches me.

DH- School A: Personally, I feel overloaded as I have a full-time class to manage and must manage more than six teachers of Reception Year classes and other grade teachers.

A positive that emerged from articulations of DHs was that Reception year teachers were very industrious. Some DHs felt that Reception year programmes should be run separately from the Foundation Phase, and that Reception year teachers should be excused from meetings when their issues were not on the agenda. It was noted through DHs' responses that the issues they mentioned at the interviews and discussions were contributory factors to the negative

experiences of Reception year teachers. It was apparent that the concerns raised by DHs confirm that they were facing challenges in supervising and supporting Reception year classes. This answered the research question:

What is the nature of supervision and support provided at school-based reception year classes?

Establishing the nature of support and supervision provided to Reception year teachers which was the aim of the study, had also been achieved. It can therefore be concluded that because of the challenges the DHs face concerning supervising Reception year teachers, they are not able to perform their mandate as expected, which leaves a huge gap in practice that needs to be filled.

Findings from Reception year teachers' Focus Group Discussions on the nature of support

This section presented the responses from focus group discussions on supervision and support in school-based Reception year classes. The purpose was to determine whether they would still be consistent with the same responses they articulated during the face-to-face interviews. Group members were asked about the type of support they received from the DHs. Five of the Reception year teachers out of seven alluded to the absence of pedagogical support, while the other two pointed out that they did receive support although it was only in the form of providing transport to attend the workshops and in-service training sessions. Their verbatim articulations follow:

Ryt 7 – School C: My DH helps me only when I ask for help; she would say she will call the District Office.

Ryt 3 – School A: I want to disagree; our DHs do not support us. They only come Once per term to check if we need help.

Ryt 2 – School E: I have a colleague who helps me together with the DH.

On the question of what they considered as being quality support, three Reception year teachers emphasised that their supervisors needed to first understand the Reception year curricula programme to be able to provide them with meaningful support. Another two Reception year teachers indicated that quality support is when their supervisors were able to help them with guidance in lesson planning. The remaining two defined quality support as conducting regular class visits which would afford them opportunities for individual support, creating time for Reception year meetings, and arranging internal workshops.

Ryt 1 - School C: She (DH) must first know the Grade R programme.

Ryt-3 - School E: Understanding the programme of Grade R, and how Grade R is running.

Ryt 6 - School D: Help with our lesson plans and set the class the way it is supposed to be.

From the above evidence, Ryts perceived that quality support involves receiving sound and relevant advice, assistance, cooperation, and knowledge to promote best practice. The DHs' responses and their unscheduled classroom visits demonstrated that they did not prepare to effectively interact and support Ryts in terms of lesson delivery, which resulted in insufficient

classroom support. They were therefore deemed to be inadequate and ineffective regarding pedagogical classroom support to meet ECCE's quality criteria in the Gauteng North District.

This theme explored the impact of DHs' supervision and support on Reception year teachers' classroom practices by reflecting on Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural perspective in terms of scaffolding within the ZPD. Additionally, the study highlighted challenges faced by DHs in balancing teaching responsibilities with supervisory duties, which led to insufficient support for Reception year teachers. This indicates the importance of time reduction, and the lightening of their classroom teaching loads so that DHs can enhance their knowledge and skills in understanding Reception year teaching practices to facilitate effective supervision and support (Mbise & Lekule, 2023).

DHs' responses revealed a lack of understanding and involvement in Reception year classroom practices, indicating the inability to provide meaningful support. This contradicts current literature which emphasises the pivotal role of DHs in successfully overseeing curriculum implementation (Anjum, Ahmed, & Rehman, 2024).

Theme 3: Nature of follow-up as support provided by DHs to Reception year teachers.

The intention was to determine the effectiveness of follow-up as a form of support provided by the DHs to Reception Year teachers.

Findings from DHs on follow-up measures

Inquiring about the measures instituted by the DHs to provide follow-up support revealed varying approaches. The verbatim responses from the DHs illustrate a lack of consistent follow-up practices. For instance, DH-School B expressed challenges with implementing measures due to time constraints. DH-School C cited the need for more information about the curriculum as a barrier to establishing specific measures, especially considering the range of classes they oversee. Similarly, DH-School D admitted uncertainty about the events in the Reception year, indicating a lack of awareness or involvement in follow-up activities for that stage. Example of some verbatim responses:

DH-School B: I do not have any measures, as sometimes it is not practical because of time.

DH-School C: Remember we also have Grade 1 to 3 classes. I do not have specific measures. I do not follow up. I need more information about their curriculum.

DH- School D: I am not very sure as I do not have any idea of what is happening in Reception Year.

Departmental Heads (DHs) are responsible for organising follow-up measures or feedback sessions involving Reception Year teachers, which includes creating instruments for best practice and ensuring resource availability. However, the monitoring system was lacking, as confirmed by DHs' comments on Reception Year classroom supervision procedures.

Findings from Departmental Heads on supervising and supporting Reception Year teachers.

A question was asked of the group of DHs about how they resolved the challenges they experienced in supervising Reception year teachers. Two of the DHs claimed to have noted great improvement in the performance of Grade 1 learners who had gone through the Reception year. However, one DH pointed out that some learners in Grade 1 had gaps in their Reception year work. Four of the seven DHs complained that whenever Reception year teachers went to meetings and workshops, they (DHs) did not accompany them, and this left them with little information regarding new developments in matters affecting Reception year teachers. Their verbatim responses follow:

DH - School B: In Grade 1 you still must start with aspects of Grade R work that they were supposed to have done.

DH - School E: Reception year has a lot of challenges; I sometimes do not know how to help the teacher when she approaches me

DH- School C: I do not attend their meetings and workshops called by the district.

DH- School A: Sometimes we have difficulty in resolving challenges as we are unable to attend their workshops with them, and we are not informed of new developments.

The DHs' responses to this question were mixed. The implication was that they were also to be blamed for failing to learn more about Reception year teaching practice. When employees are demoralised, the quality of work is negatively affected. The same applies to a school situation: if the morale of the Reception year teachers is very low, it will compromise the quality of teaching. It was clear that DHs did not professionally supervise Reception year teachers as they failed to play an active role in follow-up measures concerning supervision and support for teachers to implement quality teaching practices in ECCE. This theme delved into the effectiveness of follow-up measures undertaken by DHs to supplement the support provided to Reception year teachers, thus aligning to the principle of scaffolding as espoused by Vygotsky (1978).

The study exposed the irregularities in follow-up measures by DHs. There was the lack of formal instruments for monitoring and supporting Reception year teachers. This contradicts the principles of effective supervision and feedback emphasised in literature (Sengai, 2021). Limited involvement by DHs in Reception year meetings and workshops also hindered effective communication. This study emphasised the need for structured follow-up mechanisms for ongoing support and professional development. The study's findings align to existing literature and the theoretical framework, thus emphasising the importance of effective supervision, support, and professional development for Reception year teachers.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study revealed a disconnection between the support supposed to have been given by DHs and what Reception year teachers were expected to receive. The lack of skills and knowledge of DHs exacerbated this situation. Reception year teachers on the ground expressed the need to be supervised by knowledgeable and skilled personnel, an issue the DBE needs to explore further. This scenario revealed that pedagogical leadership is a challenging aspect of DHs' responsibility as leaders. As such, it calls for rigorous ongoing training in supervising Reception year classes so that teachers get all the support they need. The need for training to

upgrade DHs' supervisory skills will lead to acquiring modern strategies and knowledge to assist Reception year teachers. The findings of this study were crucial in uncovering DHs' challenges in providing quality pedagogical support to Reception year teachers such that learner-performance could be enhanced. The findings also revealed the application of the socio-cultural theory as being critical in managing and leading Reception year classes.

These difficulties regarding pedagogical leadership support were revealed through the responses of Departmental Heads (DHs) and Reception year teachers in the Gauteng North District, South Africa. The results indicated that Reception year teachers' impressions of the support they received from DHs varied; some placed more emphasis on material support, while others emphasised professional supervision. However, DHs lack the true meaning of support structures. These results are consistent with current research which advocates a strong relationship between instructors' effectiveness and the type of pedagogical leadership support (Groenewald, Kilag, Cabuenas, Camangyan, Abapo, & Abendan, 2023).

An ideal strategy to fill in the DHs' skills and knowledge gap is to inculcate a mindset in them to fulfil their obligations as leaders. Since pedagogical leaders' abilities and expertise were inconsistent, it confirmed that they needed specialised assistance and re-training. The Department of Basic Education (2016), policy stipulates that DHs are tasked with various responsibilities including supervising staff development, monitoring curriculum implementation, and providing support (Ntuli & Mahlangu, 2023). Despite this clear mandate outlined by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), there appears to be a persistent challenge among DHs regarding effectively supporting Reception year teachers in these areas. Hence, deputy principals (DPs) who are tasked to supervise and support Departmental Heads (DHs), should avail opportunities for continuous training to DHs to ensure effective pedagogical leadership. This notion aligns with the assertion made by Mahome and Mphahlele (2024) who advocate for the implementation of an induction programme for DHs to equip them adequately to execute their supervisory responsibilities.

When DHs find themselves unable to offer adequate support, the ZPD emerges as a pivotal concept of training. This collaborative learning strategy stresses the significance of social interaction and assistance, which aligns with the socio-cultural theory's emphasis on learning from individuals possessing greater expertise (MKOs). Similarly, Yang (2023) and Lambright (2023) point out collaboration as a catalyst for intellectual advancement and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills because it will provide opportunities for effective task accomplishment.

Accordingly, it is imperative to incorporate Sengai's (2021) insights to effect quality supervision and post-supervision measures. Sengai (2021) highlights the significance of structured follow-up sessions to engage subordinates in the planning phase, while maintaining consistent communication channels. These strategies resonate with Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory which emphasises the role of social interaction and collaborative learning for cognitive development. However, when Reception year teachers perceive their supervisors as being inadequately equipped or lacking in ECCE knowledge, it can lead to feelings of frustration and demotivation which may adversely impact their teaching methodologies and overall effectiveness. Other difficulties that DHs encounter include their overwhelming supervision schedules, lack of resources, and the absence of effective training. These difficulties exacerbate an already demoralising school climate. It is imperative that DHs receive extensive training and skills development to improve their administrative and pedagogical leadership abilities to overcome these difficulties. Deputy principals also need to be more

proactive in helping DHs to ensure that Reception year programmes are implemented successfully.

Further, the study highlights that policies should stipulate and entrench continuous support and training for DHs in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This implies mandatory ECCE leadership certification programmes, in addition to encouraging deputy principals to guide curriculum implementation. The study also calls for legislative changes to address structural issues, as well as the need for structured support mechanisms and proactive communication channels. By aligning the study's findings to relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, the insights and contributions that emanated added to existing knowledge which has practical implications for enhancing supervision and support practices (Dirks, 2021). The study also emphasises the need for Government organisations like the Department of Basic Education to prioritise DHs' in-service training to prepare them with knowledge and skills that will enhance the quality of their supervision.

Since this study was limited to Reception year teachers in the Gauteng North District schools, the situation regarding DHs' pedagogical support in the other eight South African provinces is unclear. Consequently, future studies must focus on these provinces to obtain a more national picture.

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CONCLUSION

The study explored the vital role that DHs play in supporting and supervising Reception year teachers in enhancing ECCE. Improving DHs' pedagogical leadership abilities and addressing their difficulties are critical to raising the quality of ECCE services. This study advances knowledge of educational leadership and support in ECCE contexts by relating the findings to pertinent literature and theoretical frameworks. In general, improving the quality of ECCE provision and learner outcomes in Reception year programmes requires addressing the knowledge and skill gaps regarding DHs which will encourage collaborative learning environments, while offering ongoing support and training. The results, discussions, and recommendations are integrated concisely in this article to contribute to the body of knowledge to benefit policymakers, best practice, and all other relevant role-players to enhance the quality of Reception year teaching and learning.

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