

## Foundation Phase Educators' Views on the Management of Professional Development in Historically Disadvantaged Schools

Bongi Mashiane-Nkabinde<sup>a</sup>, Bongani Innocent Nkambule<sup>\*b</sup>, & Sindile Amina Ngubane<sup>b</sup>

\* Corresponding author

E-mail: [nkambbi@unisa.ac.za](mailto:nkambbi@unisa.ac.za)

a. National Department of Basic Education, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa.


b. Institute for Open and Distance Learning, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

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### ABSTRACT

Foundation Phase (FP) educators are deemed productive when cohorts of learners who pass through their hands cope well with learning beyond the initial three grades of schooling. In South Africa, despite empirical evidence showing that FP educators in historically disadvantaged schools contend with overcrowded classes, low parental involvement and a shortage of teaching and learning resources, are still perceived as the primary source of poor learner achievement. The other point of view is that teacher underperformance and poor learner achievement are a legacy of the apartheid-engineered Bantu education policies that left the schooling system with poorly trained Black educators. To reverse these challenges, post-apartheid educational policies mandate that every school continuously conduct teacher professional development (TPD). Situated in the theory of change (ToC), this qualitative interpretivist study used interviews of a semi-structured nature to purposefully interact with a sample of six FP educators. They each characterised their HoDs' management of TPD in two primary schools in Emalahleni Circuit 2, Mpumalanga Province. The second method of data collection entailed the analysis of a range of documents, namely the educators' files, school performance improvement plans, and national education policy documents, to cross-check the findings of the thematic analysis. The findings revealed that HoDs were sufficiently collegial towards educators, showed commitment towards rendering professional support to educators, and adhered to a tight schedule of class visits to develop and appraise educators and monitor their implementation of inclusive education practices. Barriers stemmed from educators' apprehension towards HoDs' class visits, especially the randomly conducted ones. The second barrier was the school management teams' (SMTs') inefficiency of professionalism, support for HoDs and understanding of curriculum leadership policy. The study recommends that communication around HODs' scheduled and random class visits needs to take a more inclusive approach to scale down the panic caused by them, and SMTs must be equally prioritised for continuous professional development.

### KEYWORDS

Foundation phase educators; teacher professional development; heads of departments; school management teams; historically disadvantaged schools.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is the cornerstone of every nation's success. It is "exponentially indexed as an apex priority to liberate our mind; hence, it is affectionately defined as a critical phenomenon" (Mahaye, 2018:3). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2023) postulates that in any nation, educated citizens live longer, have self-determination and resilience to participate more actively in politics and advocate for change in their communities, and are less likely to resort to crime and rely on social assistance. However, the reality about education, especially in former colonies, leaves much to be desired. The remanence of the collateral damage caused by colonialism is demonstrable in how, in most of these countries, providing quality and equal education for all citizens is confronted by many challenges. While it is clear that these challenges are endemic to education systems across the Global South, evidence suggests that they are more pronounced in schooling systems across the length and breadth of Africa. For example in South Africa, it is well documented that during the forty-eight years of apartheid, educational policies legitimised a climate of racial privileging in terms of which a White minority race thoroughly enjoyed access to quality teaching and conducive learning environment. As Khumalo (2022) points out, promulgating the Bantu Education Act ensured that schools in White residential areas were light years ahead of those in townships, which were built exclusively to educate Black people. According to Khumalo (2022), the architecture of the apartheid education policies was such that "each of the four racial categories, namely Whites, Indians, Coloureds and Africans had their education systems" (p.261). These systems operated concurrently under the political leadership of Hendrick Verwood, initially as the Minister of Native Affairs (1950-1958) and later as the Prime Minister (1958-1966) (ibid). A differentiated approach was used to distribute resources, train educators, and provide subsidies for each education system. There is a consensus that of all the oppressed racial groups, Africans were the hardest hit by the wrath of apartheid education policies. "The [apartheid] government designed the [Bantu Education] Act to give Africans an education conforming to their needs and opportunities as a separate community" (McKay, 2007, n.a) whose inferior quality produced semi-skilled personnel, professionals, and practitioners to service their local populations on the mainland and Bantustans. By his admission, in the September 1953 parliamentary debate, Hendrick Verwood made it clear that,

"There is no place for him [Africans/natives] in the European [White] community above the level of certain form of labour...Until now he has been subject to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze" (quote drawn from Troup, 1976, p.22).

Much of what is covered in Verwood's statement reveals how the Bantu Education system was hellbent on ensuring that Africans did not enjoy some of the privileges that were enjoyed by other oppressed races. It also indicates that the dysfunctionality in historically disadvantaged schools today is a problem primarily attributed to the apartheid discriminatory policies (Khumalo & Mji, 2014; Singh & Manser, 2002). Sadly, despite the implementation of

radical policy reforms to redress past inequalities caused by the apartheid-engineered Bantu education policies, there is an indication that there is still a lot more that needs to be done by the post-apartheid government to transform the performance of historically disadvantaged schools. Given the continuance of poor learner achievement in early grade learning in impoverished primary schools (Petersen & Gravett, 2014) and limited district curriculum support given to educators of these grades in Mpumalanga Province (Mangena, 2008), the study limited its focus on drawing out educators' experiences of heads of departments' (HoDs') management of teacher professional development (TPD) in historically disadvantaged schooling contexts.

### **Problem Statement**

A problem statement is a concisely written demonstration of the phenomenon the researcher has identified as problematic and worth investigating. It encapsulates: the identified research problem, evidence that highlights the prevalence of the problem, documented factors that cause the research problem, and a clear description of the setting (Nova South Eastern University [NSEU], 2023). Bush and Glover (2014) established that classroom practice and leadership are primary factors determining the quality of education and school improvement. Meanwhile, Fleisch (2008) ascertained that effective learner performance is dependent on what occurs in classrooms between learners and educators. Although in a school setting, all members of the school management team (SMT) (i.e., HoDs, deputy principals and the principal) are liable for providing teacher leadership, it is apparent that the HoDs, who are line function managers of educators, are the primary custodians of the curriculum development and supervision of classroom-based teaching and learning practices (De Lima, 2007; Nkambule, 2018; Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2020; Personnel Administrative Measures [PAM], 2022; Tapala et al., 2021). The duality of their role, which cuts across classroom teaching and teacher curriculum leadership (PAM, 2022), puts them under the spotlight. The dilemma of crisscrossing between class teaching and TPD duties renders their fitness to transform educators' teaching skills questionable (Blandford, 1997). This is especially at the present moment when ineffectively trained educators besiege the schooling system (Mourshed & Barber, 2007), while poor early grade learning outcomes (Pretorius et al., 2020) and the neglect for early grade educators' capacity development (Mahlomaholo et al., 2023) are a cause for the dysfunctionality of FP education in historically disadvantaged schools (Petersen & Gravett, 2014). Moreover, in Mpumalanga Province where Grade 3 learners recoded 27% for literacy and 19% for numeracy in the Annual National Assessments [ANA] (Bipath & Nkabinde, 2018). Given these challenges, the researchers purposefully interviewed six FP educators who characterised their HoDs' management of TPD at two selected schools in the Emalahleni Circuit 2 under the Nkangala Education District in the Mpumalanga Province. The investigation was premised on the following research questions:

- Which factors do educators characterise as the positive impact of HoDs' management of TPD at selected schools?

- Which factors do educators consider to characterise barriers to HoDs' management of TPD at selected schools?

The [aforementioned] research questions were constructed to unearth the root causes of the perceived knowledge gap (Browner et al., 2022) around FP educators' experiences of HoDs' management of TPD at selected historically disadvantaged schools. They further served as the basis for the interview guide to situate the researchers' line of questioning within the boundaries of the objectives and the study's problem statement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The Post-apartheid Political Outlook of the South African Public Schooling System**

Shrestha et al. (2019) contend that education and politics are inseparable concepts. To clarify this point, they argue that decisions around the "scaling up" of teaching and learning operations in the schooling system and the application of measures that "shape education reforms" require political endorsement (Shrestha et al., 2019, p. 4). Hence, in South Africa, education is an essential public service and a hotly contested political portfolio. According to the country's Constitution, the politically appointed education minister is, among other things, responsible for the "planning, provisioning, financing, staffing, coordination, management, governance, programmes, monitoring, evaluation and the wellbeing of the education system" (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). Nevertheless, even under political oversight, some aspects of policy implementation are still not maximal. To provide context to this statement, reference is made to the prescripts of the South African Schools Act of 1996, that established a precedent for equal education among children of all races and genders. However, after 26 years of promulgation, some key aspects of these prescripts are yet to be fully realised. Manyooe (2017) underscores that the outlook of the South African public schools remains unequal and differentiated. A similar view is echoed by Amnesty International (AI, 2020, n.a) in their report, which dubbed the country's education system "broken and unequal." They levelled this accusation against the government for failing large proportions of children from lower socio-economic brackets. This they do by not combating the prevalence of the legacy of apartheid that continues to increase the likelihood of underperformance, poor quality of teaching and learning, staffing and resource provisioning in the country's historically disadvantaged schools (AI, 2020; Mudau et al., 2022).

On the one hand, learners in the formerly White schools, also known as the former Model C schools, continue to achieve resounding academic results, owing to being endowed with well-trained teaching staff, state-of-the-art infrastructure and resources (Nkambule, 2020; 2022). While on the other hand, learners in Black rural and township schools, also referred to as historically disadvantaged schools, continue to be confronted by poor learner achievement and under resourcefulness (ibid). Amidst this debacle, the South African minister of primary education admitted that close to 80 per cent of the schools in the country fall within the threshold of dysfunctionality (The Economist, 2012). Also De Lange (2008); Pretorius (2014); Taylor (2006) corroborate the 80 per cent estimate of dysfunctionality among historically

disadvantaged schools. Pretorius (2014, p. 351) defines dysfunctionality as the “abnormal or impaired functioning” of a school that results in it failing to foster a climate conducive to the accomplishment of quality teaching and learning.

School dysfunction is caused by “unstable management conditions, inappropriate or lack of leadership, lack of vision, an unhealthy school climate and culture, and low staff and learner morale” (Pretorius, 2014, p. 351). Sociology research shows that dysfunctionality in education is partly caused by increased social inequality (Dube et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) emanating from the education systems’ perpetuation of special entitlements and exclusionary undertakings to the detriment of others (Nickerson, 2023). Underfunding, overcrowding, crumbling or outdated infrastructure, and inadequacy of resources, including human and physical resources (i.e., teachers and physical equipment), can also contribute to the dysfunctionality of schools (Yadav, 2023). Evidence further points to the lack of clear professional development policies as one of the causes of the dysfunctionality of the schooling system (Mwila et al., 2022). Following an observation of the situation in both former Model C and historically disadvantaged schools, Chetty (2019) concludes that not only does the country’s schooling system perpetuate inequalities, but it also promotes the furtherance of double standards both in terms of quality and productivity of teaching, learning and the management of schools.

### **The State of Foundation Phase Teaching and Learning in Historically Disadvantaged Schools**

In the context of South Africa’s schooling system, FP starts from Grade R to Grade 3 and accommodates learners between the age brackets of five and nine (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014; Mtshatsha & Omodan, 2022). FP educators are trained to teach all learning areas in the syllabi that apply to their assigned grades (Morake, 2014). Despite FP educators having one of the critically important roles to play in shaping young minds for higher levels of learning, Petersen and Gravett (2014) argue that they are often not given the credit they deserve, particularly in historically disadvantaged schooling contexts. They are stereotyped as having the least demanding job in the entire spectrum of the teaching profession (ibidem). This is unfortunate especially when considering that FP educators work under severe pressure (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020) in “situations of acute disadvantage in education” (McKay, 2020, p. 70), where teaching and learning occur in poorly maintained schools and overcrowded classrooms (Mbambo & Agbola, 2020). This teaching and learning occurs to a majority of learners from dysfunctional and impoverished families (Nkambule, 2023a) whose parents are not actively involved in their education (Segalo & Rambuda, 2018).

The [former] Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, argues that it is a common cause that such contextual challenges largely contribute to literacy and numeracy “scores [that] are still unacceptably low” (Department of Education [DoE], 2008). Poor learner achievement is partly aggravated by the scarcity of the right calibre of educators in the schooling system (Mourshed & Barber, 2007) and a large concentration of ineffectively trained FP educators (Green et al., 2011). Even some of these educators gradually leave the system due to early retirement, death,

resignation, medical unfitness or having approached the pensionable age (Pitsoe, 2017). Given the misguidedly tainted image of FP educators among Black communities (Petersen & Gravett, 2014), teacher training institutions fail to attract academically capable young people to study FP teaching (Mourshed & Barber, 2007) who, upon completion, could be deployed to historically disadvantaged schools to scale up the efficiency of FP teaching and learning. According to Petersen and Gravett (2014), the urgency with which the challenges confront the local schooling systems warrants education planners and policymakers to turn to models used in Finland and Singapore to improve teaching and learning in historically disadvantaged schools. In so doing, South Africa could be seen as having an understanding that early-grade educators hold the key to children's early acquisition of skills for their educational future beyond the FP (Petersen & Gravett, 2014). Such a stance may present an opportunity to transform early-grade learning into a crucial avenue for capacitating a child with critical elementary academic skills, life skills and a positive self-concept that can enable them to cope with lifelong learning throughout their lives (Mahlo, 2017). The above-cited scholars relay that the transformation of FP rests upon the contextual relevance and effectiveness of the kinds of TPD initiatives put in place by schools, districts, and non-governmental education developers to improve FP teaching practices.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017, p.1) define "effective professional development as structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes." Postholm (2012, p. 405) considers TPD as educators learning to understand "how they learn to learn and how they apply their knowledge in practice to support pupils' learning". Meanwhile, Guskey (2002:381) ascribes professional development to "systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and the learning outcomes of students". These statements demonstrate that at the heart of TPD lies the goal of ensuring that educators are kept abreast of the amendments, new developments and teaching strategies constantly being introduced in the curriculum they are employed to implement (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020). TPD is propounded by the notion that to improve outcomes, educators' instructional practices must be developed continually (Mourshed & Barber 2007). Highlighting the significance of continuously fine-tuning in-service education practitioners' skills (Dilshad et al., 2019), Guskey (2002:381) asserts that "high-quality professional development is a central component in nearly every modern proposal for improving education". It provides a structured, active learning experience and ongoing support for educators to adopt new teaching practices or strategies that transform their classroom practices and improve learning outcomes at school (National Education Evaluation and Development Unit [NEEDU], 2018). Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) state that TPD has proven effective in improving educators' curriculum delivery efficacy and overall productivity when conducted continuously rather than occasionally. Mourshed and Barber (2007) add that conducting TPD continuously circumvents the re-occurrence of overlaps between the quality of the education system and that of its educators.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is one of the most essential steps in a research writing process. It acts as a lens that enables researchers to situate their investigation within the context of the research problem. The theoretical framework more generally links literature with the research rationale, describes the significance of the research, provides an understanding of the priority areas of the research problem, and helps researchers interpret the research findings (Hiebert et al., 2023). The study is nestled in the theory of change (ToC), which recognises that education only bears quality when it can bring about positive changes to the livelihoods of all learners across all educational contexts. It endorses the worldview that instead of haphazardly imposing change on actors, the socio-cultural and attitudinal dynamics of a particular professional context must be studied and used by the implementors of change as the basis for formulating goals and strategies that are equal to the task of heralding change in the culture of the organisation or people's ways of doing things.

It further postulates that by identifying the underbelly of the risk factors and attitudes of actors prior to implementing the change strategy and by continuously keeping tabs on the evolution of the project of change, the implementors of change (i.e., HoDs) (United Nations Development Group [UNDG], 2017) put themselves in a favourable position to cultivate actors' (i.e., educators) willingness to accept, commit, and to be enthused to implement the intended new practices or strategies (Guskey, 2002). Generally, "the cornerstone of the ToC is the application of the correctly calibrated combination of capacity building (support) with accountability (pressure)" (Fullan, 1999 cited in Fleisch, 2023, p. 1). In the parlance of school management, accountability and capacity building refer to the availability of a series of workshops, follow-ups and briefings, study, reflections, field observations (Morake, 2014), mentorship, peer coaching, coaching clinics, seminars, and conferences as well as informal short-term courses and in-service post-graduate training (Nkambule, 2020, 2023b). Meanwhile, his mentioning of "accountability (pressure)" Fullan (1999 cited in Fleisch, 2023, p. 1) serves to highlight the importance of having school leaders who can learn to adapt their leadership approaches to different situations and to use their personalities to influence the achievement of high performing, interdisciplinary teams that thrive in a culture of continuous learning focused on school improvement (New South Wales Government [NSW], 2023). The theory's propensity to highlight educational-related problems and possible interventions to solve them, particularly in the early grade levels of education (Fleisch, 2023), cemented its adoption as a theoretical lens for the study.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Worldview

This qualitative research study was situated within the confines of the interpretivist worldview. As evidenced in the above sentence, qualitative and interpretivism are used in one phrase because they are interrelated and inseparable components of a social inquiry. In the same

breath, Makombe (2017) affirms that “qualitative research is interpretivist and in interpretivist research, data collection and analysis can occur concurrently” (p.3370). The interpretivist worldview holds that qualitative researchers must gain familiarity with the social context of the research and must self-identify as collaborators in the investigation rather than becoming passive data collectors. Kgwete (2014, p.101) adds that any study conducted within the confines of the interpretivist worldview requires “actions and intentions as well as the personal involvement of both the participants and the researcher.” Therefore, the actions and intentions of the researchers put participants at ease to share their views on the HoDs’ management of TPD in their schools. It also ensured that they could respond to the interview questions freely as per their perception of the research problem.

### Sampling

A sample is a manageable chunk of objects or people selected to represent a broader population of objects or people in a specific context where researchers collect data to generate a body of findings to address the research problem. Berndt (2020) and Shukla (2020) assert that a carefully selected sample yields the gathering of enough data and reliable research results. As such, purposive sampling was used in this study to incorporate six FP educator participants of different years of experience who were purposefully selected because they were considered well-informed and open enough to share their lived experiences about the HoDs’ management of TPD in their respective schools. School A had nine, while School B had 13 FP educators under the supervision of two and three HoDs, respectively. Simply put, from a population of 22 FP educators from two public primary schools, three educators per school (altogether six) were sampled.

**Table 1.**

#### *The profile of the participants*

Participant	School	Coded Identity	Experience	Gender
Educator 1	A	E1A	29	Female
Educator 2	A	E2A	13	Female
Educator 3	A	E3A	07	Female
Educator 4	B	E4B	16	Female
Educator 5	B	E5B	27	Female
Educator 6	B	E6B	18	Female

The researchers had intended to interview four participants per school, which would have translated to a sample size of eight participants representing both schools. Because the study was conducted during the infant stages of the novel coronavirus, during which levels of panic were high, wherein a moratorium was passed on prolonged research fieldwork, researchers could only manage to interface with six participants as others expressed their discomfort with participating in the study. Fortunately, this “small number of cases and sample



size had no bearing” on the merits of the findings, but it instead “facilitated the researchers’ close association with the participants and enhanced the validity of fine-grained, in-depth inquiry in naturalistic settings” (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p.483).

### Research Context

Unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers consider the social dynamics in the context where research is conducted to acquire an in-depth understanding of the real-world problems experienced by individuals or groups in societal institutions (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 237). The schools sampled in the study are all based in the township, which Nkambule (2020) defines as settlements on the outskirts of towns and cities that were established during the apartheid era to house Black South African populations. The use of the purposive sampling technique implied that these schools were selected because of being reflective of a range of variations in quality and the general outlook of the challenges that occur in other schooling contexts of a similar nature (Wills & Hofmeyer, 2018). This includes the neglect for early grade learning interventions and capacity development of early grade educators (Mahlomaholo et al., 2023). Hereunder lies the profile of the sampled schools.

**Table 2.**

*The profile of the sampled schools*

Description:	School A	School B
Type:	Primary School	Primary School
Learners’ roll:	784	1138
Educators in the FP:	9	13
HoDs in the FP:	2	3
Staff complement:	21	31
Quantile of the school:	2	2
Founded:	1964	1990
Years of service:	59	33
Circuit:	Emalahleni 2	Emalahleni 2
Education District:	Nkangala District	Nkangala District
Provincial Education Department:	Mpumalanga	Mpumalanga
Republic:	South Africa	South Africa

Based on the outlook of the profile of the selected schools, it is evident that they are non-fee-paying schools (Wills & Hofmeyer, 2018). As pointed out by Wills and Hofmeyer (2018), “no-fee schools constitute the poorest 60% of schools in South Africa, based on income, unemployment, and illiteracy of the surrounding area (p.4).” These areas are typified by a large concentration of poverty-stricken Black people and an unemployment rate between 30% and 64% (Knutsson, 2020). By implication, each of the profiled schools is a custodian of a feeding scheme—a national government-funded initiative colloquially known as the School Nutrition

Programme (SNP) that guarantees learners at least one meal per day during lunch break (Nkambule, 2020; Romm & Nkambule, 2022). It is also worth mentioning that educators in such schools have to contend with large class sizes (Mamaile & Omodan, 2023).

### **Data Collection**

Data collection is collecting and evaluating information or data from multiple sources to find answers to research problems, answer research questions, analyse the research outcomes, and provide suggestions to improve practice (Hassan, 2023). Various data collection instruments were used to collate data for a specific research purpose, which in the context of this study pertained to investigating educators' views about HoDs' management of TPD at selected township schools. Semi-structured interviews, known for allowing participants to subjectively share their experiences and provide deeper insights into the research problem (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021), constituted one of the data collection instruments used in the study. Documents, which according to Bowen (2009) have for many years served as "a staple in qualitative research" (p. 27), were used as the second data collection instrument for the study. The documents used included educators' files, which entailed reports written by HoDs about their performance. School performance improvement plans (SIPs), made available to the researchers by the principals and their deputies, were also analysed alongside national education policies. Using a combination of semi-structured interviews and documents served to cross-check or triangulate the research data and landed weight on the credibility of the research findings (Bowen, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

After concluding data collection, researchers embarked on a data analysis mission. Qualitative data analyses give meaning to a disjointed body of data (Anfara et al., 2002, cited in Lester et al., 2020). The researchers initially dealt with the transcription of the interview data. Thereafter, content analysis was employed in which researchers went through the content of data to develop insights and a synthesis of the meaning of this data to the research objectives. That was followed by locating recurring patterns to formulate codes to generate provisional themes. Since the (provisional) themes were not cast in stone, researchers deliberated further on the alignment between the provisional themes and the research questions. The result of such deliberations was such that the content that researchers felt did not sharply respond to the research questions or address the research problem was eliminated. This culminated in the acceptance of the remaining data content as formal themes to be used to curate the study's findings.

### **Ethical Practices**

When conducting research on human subjects, researchers are bound to adhere to a set of ethical principles that ensure that their interface with participants is grounded on ethical undertakings (Pieper & Thomson, 2014). Prior to embarking on data collection, ethical clearance was sought. The schools where data were collected were also notified in advance about the intention of the researchers to interview participants. Letters explaining the protocols of the

research, specifically their right to report any offence directed at them during the research process and to withdraw from the process, were relayed to the participants. The letter also underlined researchers' commitment to keeping the identities of schools and participants confidential. The researchers repeated the same information discussed in the letter during a briefing prior to the commencement of data collection or fieldwork at selected schools. To adhere to the principle of anonymity, instead of using their names, the identities of participants and schools were coded.

Simply put, the alphabet E was taken from the participants' occupational title (i.e. educator). Since all the participants' coded identities began with the alphabet E, the researchers deemed it appropriate to place numbers (ranging from 1 to 6) and letters A and B to help identify their order of appearance and the schools they are attached to. For example, Educator 1 from School A was coded as E1A, whereas Educator 4 from School B was coded as E4B.

## RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Following a data analysis exercise, researchers collectively endorsed two themes and five sub-themes, which underline the following findings of the study.

### ***Positive Impact of HoDs' Management of Teacher Professional Development***

#### *a. Collegial relationships with educators*

In the context of this study, collegiality can be viewed as the quality of professionalism, trust, team orientation and co-dependency among staff members in a school. It is a precondition for achieving a thriving school culture and "the dominant paradigm for effective management" practices in education (Brundrett, 1998, p. 305). In their respective interviews, participants from both schools were thankful for their relationships with their HoDs. The crux of their comments, presented verbatim, was such that it was clear that they considered the relationships between themselves and the latter as collegial. Referring to her relationship with her HoD, E3A said,

It is very good, especially, I remember....I once thanked my HoD, that you were sent by God..... for me. She is much older than I am, but she treats us as equals on a professional level. To add to this, HoD, E5B stated,

Yes, number one, I can say she is good to us and supports us a lot. She never refuses when she is asked to help in some way concerning my challenges with the content.

A similar view was expressed by E2A, who briefly stated that,

You don't know how wonderful she is....I still have a lot to learn...what I like about her is she is very patient with me. She would tell me that mistakes are a part of learning.

Collegiality ensured that educators (participants) are not reluctant to approach their leaders at any given time when they have challenges, to ask for guidance on how to correctly interpret and implement curriculum policies and teaching strategies (Barth, 2006). This finding proves that in schools with a thriving culture of collegiality, educators tend to be cooperative and receptive to learning from others to hone their craft (Barth, 2006).

#### *b. Determination to provide ongoing teacher professional support*

Despite contextual challenges such as shortage of teaching and learning materials, decaying infrastructure, and inadequacy of financial resources (Pretorius, 2014), participants underscored that their HoDs do everything they can to sustain an effective teaching and learning environment. And by the standards of their schools, ensured that they performed within the minimum threshold that is needed to be declared productive. E6B stated,

When you are having a problem with some stuff in the classroom, curriculum-related issues, you can go to our HoD; she is very supportive in that area, and then she also issues whatever we need.

Similarly, E1A stated,

If somewhere, somehow, maybe you are delaying, or you are struggling to do something, our HoD will call all the staff members and guide us on how to do things; she always refers to policy documents. I even said to her I have learned a lot of things from her, especially those things.

The HoDs' way of treating TPD as a continuous process (David, 2016) ensures that their schools are professional spaces where learning is a collaborative, developmental and, most importantly, a continuous journey (Senge, 1990, p.3). Further to that, their commitment acted as a motivating factor for educators to adapt to contextual challenges (Bobek, 2002) and "situations of acute and disadvantage in education" (McKay, 2020, p.70) that are endemic to early grade or FP teaching and learning in South African schools (Mahlomaholo et al., 2023; Petersen & Gravett, 2014).

c. *Commitment to improving teaching practice through regular class visits*

According to the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM, 2022), in a school setting, class visits are part of a list of functions carried out by HoDs. When conducted earnestly, class visits can have a positive impact on the efficacy of educators and learners. For example, they can present an opportunity for educators to improve practice (Du Plessis & Eberlein, 2018; Smith et al., 2013; Tapala et al., 2020) while also ensuring that learners with learning barriers are accommodated by educators' teaching strategies so that they can also derive enriching learning experiences (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020). E6B indicated that,

[In conducting class visits] they [HoDs] will pick up your area where you are lacking, for example, diversity, discipline, class management, so they will use that area for IQMS to develop you as the teacher, so the class visits help them on what to do during IQMS.

In addition, E1A pointed out that,

HoDs during class visits guide us on how to teach those learners with different abilities and those with learning barriers. They facilitate differentiation.

From the above inferences, it is noticeable that HoDs in both schools were committed to honouring the prescripts of the PAM document by using class visits to assess educators' strengths and weaknesses. It also came to light that through class visits, HoDs can conduct the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) to appraise educators on a continuous basis

(Smith et al., 2013). Such professional conduct ensures that teaching practice becomes a continuous exercise instead of being limited to a once-off intervention (David, 2016).

### **Barriers to HoDs' Management of Teacher Professional Development**

#### *a. Educators' apprehension towards class visits*

Despite evidence showing that class visits are crucial in developing educators' teaching efficacy (Naicker et al., 2013), the study found that educators in the studied schools were generally not receptive to the presence of HoDs to observe their curriculum delivery rendition in their classrooms and the presence of learners. To characterise the impression she gets about class visits, E5B said,

I picked up [during class visits] that if they see you lacking in something, they will go and speak about you to someone else. I have a problem with them discussing things among themselves about how you teach when they observe you in the middle of the lesson.

E2B added,

Yoooooo!..... sometimes they come unannounced, and sometimes that makes me feel small. When I see them writing comments while I'm busy teaching I feel intimidated.....and I can't get used to her coming to my class as she pleases.

E4B concluded,

I noticed that when HoDs are in class, learners don't feel comfortable to answer questions and discuss things with me or their peers. But as soon as they leave learners start being active again.

Although some of the participants opted not to elaborate on this matter, they did, however, through their body language, give an impression that they were not in favour of hosting HoDs as observers in their classes. The researchers finally received a confirmation of their suspicion when they went through a body of documentary evidence, particularly the educator files and school improvement plans/reports. These contained reports written by HoDs to educators for lack of cooperation or performing way below average during observations/visits, more especially the randomly conducted ones. This finding is a replication of what had already emerged in studies by Mashiane-Nkabinde (2020) and Nkambule and Amsterdam (2018), which respectively indicated that most educators considered class visits as some way of trying to police them, find faults even when they are not warranted or make fun of their weaknesses. While not all the participants pointedly declared a dislike for class visits, there were, however, suggestions that communication around class visits needed to take a more inclusive approach to scale down the panic caused by them.

#### *b. School leadership's inadequate support for HoDs*

Komba and Nkumbi (2008) argue that for under-resourced schools to enhance their TPD efficacy, school leaders must render support to initiatives geared towards it, even if they are not their primary responsibility. Participants observed that HoDs were not adequately supported by staff belonging to the SMT, namely, the principals and their deputies. E5B point that,

SMT members they still need development in saying they are not professional like that....so they need to develop themselves. ....they don't know policies very well.

E1A said,

The way I see things is there is not much support given to them [i.e HODs]. We see their frustrations every day. They even do paperwork during break when they are supposed to be recuperating. Our deputy does not do much to support them.

This finding shows that collaborative undertakings among members of the SMT can go a long way towards improving school productivity (Mtimkulu & Kwatubana, 2023). As such, Ntuli and Mahlangu (2023) point out that all members of the SMTs are equally responsible for curriculum support and are dutybound to assist HODs in that pursuit. Documentary evidence suggests that TPD should be a collective responsibility of the SMT. According to the School Management Teams Guideline (DBE, 2020), members of SMTs ought to play a more active role in TPD processes by 1) creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning and ensuring that every period is taught every week – from January to December; 2) providing structures and resources that support teaching and learning; 3) building an organisational culture of collaborative professional relationships based on trust; 4) putting in place effective monitoring and support systems for teaching and learning; 5) advocating for functional teacher Professional Learning Communities (PLCs); 6) promoting daily tracking/ monitoring of teaching and reflection by teachers; and 7) holding frequent (weekly) SMT meetings focusing on teaching and learning. Furthermore, the Personnel Administrative Measures (2022) document stipulates that the curriculum aspect of TPD falls within the purview of all members of the SMT, namely HoDs, deputy principals and principals.

However, in this case, participants (educators) questioned their level of professionalism and understanding of curriculum leadership policy and practice—a concern that was also raised by Kruger (2003) twenty years prior. As such, SMTs' monitoring of curriculum processes, assessment of learner performance and supervision of HoDs (Bush & Glover, 2009) were reportedly often not done maximally. Furthermore, this finding aligns with those of Ntseto (2015), Ntuli and Mahlangu (2023), whose studies established that SMTs were not fully aware of the strategic importance of their role in enhancing the curriculum leadership component of TPD in their respective schools.

Based on years of assessing the conduct and role played by her SMT's curriculum leadership support, E1A identified the need for "school leadership to go for regular training". E2A, E3A, E4B and E6B also raised similar points, albeit subtly. Evidence suggests that based on their heavy administrative workload (Hoy & Hoy, 2009), most school leaders reject the claim that the curriculum leadership component of TPD constitutes one of their key functions (Mestry, 2017). They treat this function as the sole responsibility of the HoDs (Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020), who themselves are not adequately capacitated with the necessary skills to sustain effective TPD (Mthiyane et al., 2019).

### **CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS**

In view of the infrastructure, financial, human resource and governance-related challenges that confront most previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa (Al, 2020; Khumalo, 2022; Khumalo & Mji, 2014; Pretorius, 2014), which have a bearing on the delivery of education including early grade learning in most of these schools, the researchers interviewed six FP educators who were drawn across historically disadvantaged schools. Through these interviews, it was determined that educators were happy with the way in which HoDs relate to them at a collegial level. They mentioned that HoDs were easily accessible and were unrelenting in providing professional support and guidance to educators. Educators further applauded the HoDs' commitment to improving teaching practice and appraised them continuously by scheduling regular class visits and adhering to the scheduled class visit times. In summing up educators' lived experiences of FP teaching in the studied schools (Mtshatsha & Omodan, 2022), the study concludes that educators' enjoyment of collegiality between themselves and their leaders (HoDs) (Jarzambowski, 2012) heightened their "ability to adjust to varied situations and increase [their] competence in the face of adverse conditions" (Bobek, 2002, p.202). These conditions beset early grade or FP teaching and learning (Mahlomaholo et al., 2023; Petersen & Gravett, 2014) in a majority of South Africa's historically disadvantaged schools.

One of the notable barriers to HoDs' management of TPD in the studied schools was the educators' apprehension towards class visits conducted by HoDs for curriculum support (Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018) and performance appraisal purposes (Smith et al., 2013). This led them to believe that class visits were conducted as a fault-finding mission to ridicule their weaknesses rather than develop their teaching capabilities (Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). Meanwhile, the second and last barrier was revealed when participants were asked to give their impression based on their observation of internal support given to HoDs, in terms of which they unanimously admitted that they felt that HoDs were not adequately supported by the SMTs, especially the principal. Avoidance of responsibility, as stated by Pietersen et al. (2023) highlights principal's lack of understanding of the multidimensional nature of their role in post-apartheid schooling system. Factors participants highlighted as causing SMTs to shy away from exercising curriculum leadership with fervency were heavy workload, limited understanding of the far-reaching scope of their curriculum leadership role (Kruger, 2003) and the misconception that they have about the curriculum leadership aspect of TPD being a secondary function of theirs (Mestry, 2017).

To address such barriers, researchers recommend that there must be better communication between educators and HoDs around issues of class visits to allay the panic that educators have about class visits, more especially the randomly conducted ones, and to cast the negative mentality they have about them. Also, to help them better understand their importance in improving TPD (David, 2016), it is recommended that the principals and their deputies undergo regular in-service professional development to deepen their professional

efficacy and understanding of curriculum policy and practice (Du Plessis & Eberlein, 2018; Smith et al., 2013; Tapala et al., 2020).

### Limitations

As per the norm in social research, there were a few limitations to the study. Enslin (2014) defines limitations as factors that constrain certain actions, processes, or technicalities from the research going according to the desire of the researcher, and they are usually beyond the control of the researcher. The study recognises gender mix as one of the limitations, as it was apparent that in the study, only female participants were included. While there is an understanding that the country has a severe shortage of male educators committed to teaching in the FP (Mtshatsha & Omodan, 2022), it is equally important to express that not having male participants implies that the results cannot be transferable to other local schools within Emalahleni Circuit 2 that employ some male FP educators. Another limitation pertained to the sample size of educators and schools. Researchers had initially intended to interview four participants per school, which would have translated to a sample size of eight participants instead of six. However, because the study was conducted during the infant stages of the novel coronavirus at a time when levels of panic were high, a moratorium was passed on prolonged research fieldwork. At a macro level, in view of the more than 20,000 primary schools and 386 600 educators under the system (South African Comprehensive Schools Resource Directory [SACSRD], 2020), researchers concede that the sizes of the sampled schools and participants are way too little to depict the general picture of other schools in similar contexts across the province of Mpumalanga and the country at large.

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