

## Investigating Principal Capacity in Literacy Instructional Leadership at Selected Primary Schools

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the capacity of primary school principals with regard to literacy instructional leadership. I argue that specific capacities related to literacy instructional leadership include principals' knowledge of the literacy curriculum, supervision of the literacy instructional programme, empowerment of literacy teachers through professional development activities, the manner in which principals promote print-rich literacy classrooms, and the importance of principals having a vision and mission for literacy instruction. This qualitative study was conducted at six schools in the Motheo district, Mangaung Municipality, Free State, South Africa. Embracing a multiple case study research design, data were collected through individual interviews with each principal. This data were subject to thematic and content analysis. The findings revealed that principals have a poor understanding of the literacy CAPS curriculum. They also lack an understanding of data-driven decision-making. Professional development activities to enhance literacy instruction are neglected and teachers receive little guidance regarding strategies to construct print-rich literacy classrooms. However, principals demonstrated some commendable practices in the monitoring of literacy practices. Furthermore, the findings indicate that measures that address the impact of the social context on literacy instruction are insufficient.

**Key words:** Instructional leadership, literacy leadership, reading, writing, literacy curriculum

### Introduction

There are clear parallels between the importance and value of strong literacy skills (reading and writing) and progress in school and life. "The ability to read contributes to success in education, employment and citizenship, while the consequences of bad writing for businesses, professions, educators, consumers and citizens are disastrous" (Clark, 2006, p. 3-4). Without a doubt, mastery of literacy skills is crucially important for primary school learners, as a report of The Department of Education and Training (DET) (2018) states, "Students who developed strong literacy skills, are well placed to succeed in all areas of the curriculum" (p. 7).

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The underperformance of learners in literacy assessments (reading and writing), though, especially in high-poverty South African school contexts, is of great concern (Archer, 2010; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2013; Evans, 2011; Matomela, 2010; Potterton, 2008; Spaul, 2012). Few would therefore dispute that South African learners have serious literacy incompetencies, as confirmed by their performance, which is also “frequently far below international benchmark standards” (Mbhalati, 2017, p. 2). Consequently, education authorities in South Africa have made considerable efforts to address the challenge of poor literacy performance. However, it does not seem enough. Zimmerman (2017) points out that, “Despite significant literacy interventions in recent years, including the implementation of policy initiatives and major curriculum changes, the impact on the improvement in literacy still appears to be minimal” (p. 37).

### ***Statement of the problem***

The importance of leadership in boosting learner achievement is confirmed by a landmark examination on school leadership. Leithwood, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004, p. 5) declare that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among in-school influences that contribute to what students learn at school on student success”. Although the major focus of Instructional leadership, as stated by Jita and Mokhele (2014, p. 124), “is to attempt to influence each subject”, unfortunately very little is known about how principals should influence literacy instruction through this form of leadership. In general, research on instructional leadership in the South African context provides us with a generic instead of a subject-specific leadership approach. Houck and Novak’s research (2017, p. 30) has proven that “little has been done for instance to examine the specific knowledge that principals require in terms of literacy leadership”. I argue that any instructional improvement strategy in a specific subject will not only depend on the specific knowledge set of principals, but also on the appropriate capacities of the principal as instructional leader.

Given the scarcity and need of research on literacy leadership – especially within the South African context – educationists are hampered in addressing the literacy challenge. To date, the focus in literacy education studies have concentrated predominantly on instructional practices in the

classroom. The merits of this focus are understandable, given that educational research consistently points to insufficient literacy instruction. Providing the magnitude of the literacy challenge, though, plus a dire need for applicable leadership approaches, researchers emphasise the vital role of principals. Dowell, Bickmore and Hoewing (2012, p. 7), and Bean and Dagen (2012, p. xii), report in this regard, "... the need to achieve a successful turnaround in literacy performance, necessitates that the principal should be the chief mediator of improving student outcomes". Mbhalati (2017, p. v), referring more specifically to instructional literacy leadership, states, "guidance and support to literacy teachers by instructional leaders should be given high priority".

The influence of contextual challenges at some schools seems to be another enormous problem that complicates matters. Both Zimmerman (2011), and Spaul (2012) highlight the presence of formidable contextual barriers, ranging from extreme poverty levels, historic inequalities, low parental literacy levels and support, shortage of educational resources and infrastructure to insufficient pedagogical content knowledge of teachers. Within this counterproductive learning milieu, principals may face a mammoth task in leading the literacy instructional programme. Day and Sammons (2013, p. 16) agree,

"principals, whose schools draw their students from socio-economic vastly disadvantaged communities, face a larger range of challenges related to staff commitment and retention, student behaviours, motivation and achievement compared to more privileged groups".

This being said, it can be concluded that instructional leaders should be equipped with an in-depth understanding of diverse contexts and its influences on the teaching and learning process. Coleman and Goldenberg (in Lewis Spector, 2011, p. 16), recognising the need for intervention especially in high poverty areas, are adamant that "school leaders should effectively lead diverse groups who have physical, mental or psychological challenges in language instructional programs".

On the issue of how instructional literacy leadership is been exercised in schools, researchers point to several challenges relating to principals' sense of commitment and lack of expertise. To illustrate this point, Taylor, Van der Bergh and Mabogoane (2013) blame principals for not

prioritising literacy instruction as a key responsibility of their leadership duties. Plaatjies (2016, p. 257), on the other hand, claims that “examples of literacy leadership initiatives in some South African primary schools seem to be vague”. Routman (2014) contends that although many principals possess solid leadership and organisational abilities in general, they lack expertise in literacy leadership. In line with this argument, Dowell et al. (2012, p. 7) point out that “a major concern in providing consistent, high-quality literacy programmes is principals’ inability to understand the essential elements of effective literacy instruction. Many are considered generalists in curriculum areas and lack in-depth knowledge of instruction”. Plaatjies (2016, p. 257) concludes, “it is subsequently difficult for principals to perform their role as respected instructional leaders when their own literacy knowledge is defective”.

Thus, in order to keep focus with the research questions of the study, I aligned the theoretical framework and literature discussion with a conjunction of the required capacities of principals, key theories in instructional leadership and literacy leadership theories. Elaboration on the study’s theoretical framework and literature review follows.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

According to the PAM document (DBE, 2016, p. 33), instructional core duties of the principal include “to guide, supervise and offer professional advice and to be responsible for the development of staff training programmes, and to assist teachers in developing and achieving educational objectives in accordance with the needs of the school”. The Standard on Principalship (DBE, 2015, p. 9) requires that principals as instructional leaders “ensure that the school is a professional learning community, lead continuous improvement in curriculum implementation, lead the school into the future through the use of ICT, foster the success of all learners, promoting a culture of achievement for all learners by communicating and implementing a shared common vision and mission. Principals should develop and implement an instructional framework that is data-driven, research-based and aligned with the national curriculum, empower staff to become instructional leaders and recognise good instructional practices that motivate and increase learner achievement”.

Recent research on instructional leadership highlights the role of the principal as the instructional leader of the school, as well as dealing with approaches associated with this type of leadership. Van Deventer (2016, p. 342) conceptualises instructional leadership as

“a broad term used to describe the leadership and management of aspects of a school that directly influence learner achievement. It covers all the managerial and leadership tasks that are all involved in teaching and learning delivery every day”.

For Botha, (2016, p. 195) “instructional leadership focuses on the primary role of the principal in the quest for excellence in education”. Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom and Herrington (2015, p. 2) acknowledge that instructional leadership aims to “foster a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives and high teacher expectations for students”. Other important elements include principal leadership, a clear mission and opportunities to learn. Hallinger and Murphy (in Botha, 2016, p. 195) mention “three dimensions associated with instructional leadership: defining the school mission, managing the instructional programme and promoting the school climate”.

Leadership is defined by Spillane (2005, p. 11) as something that includes all

“activities tied to the core work of the organization designed by organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affects, and practices of other organizational members or that are understood by organizational members as intended to influence their motivations, knowledge, affects, and practices”.

Although a wealth of literature is available on instructional leadership and leadership as separate constructs, the concept of literacy instructional leadership appears to be a less studied phenomenon. Adapted from the definitions and theories as described in the previous paragraphs (instructional leadership and literacy leadership), and guided by the work of Bean and Dagen (2012), I opted in this study about literacy instructional leadership to focus on principals’ knowledge of the literacy curriculum; their knowledge of teaching and assessment methodologies and to assist teachers in the instruction process; the manner in which they promote the professional development of teachers to improve literacy instruction; how they provide direction towards promoting print-rich classroom environments; and adopting a vision and mission for literacy instruction that is cognisant of contextual challenges.

I was also guided by Lewis-Spector and Jay's research (2011), which focuses on addressing contextual challenges to meet the needs of all learners in literacy. Catering for all learners, according to Bomer and Maloch (2019, p. 261), "is especially important as teachers often encounter children who are racially, socioeconomically and culturally different from themselves. In these encounters, there may be confusion".

"Literacy leaders have to be well versed in literacy instructional practices that work for all students, including struggling as well as gifted readers. Teachers also need to know how to help language learners, and how literacy instruction should and can be differentiated to accommodate these diverse learning populations. Literacy leaders must be familiar with theory and research that explains such complexities of literacy development as connections between oral and written language and literacy achievement, options for literacy assessment and the contributions technology can make to developing student literacy" (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011, p. 5).

### ***Literature Review***

There is no clear description in the literature on what principal capacity in literacy instructional leadership entails. According to Hornby (2009, p. 209) the word *capacity* can refer to "the ability to understand or to do". This author also maintains that the term can refer to a "role; the official position or function". Following on this description and aligned with the related literature on principals' abilities and role as instructional and literacy leaders, the roles and abilities were grouped into six broad categories. These include principals' knowledge of the literacy curriculum, how they use this knowledge to assist teachers in literacy instruction, and their capacity to provide supervision in the literacy instructional programme. Moreover, I focused on principals' capacities to empower literacy teachers' instructional skills through professional development activities. Finally, I focused on the manner in which principals stimulate a positive, print-rich literacy environment, as well as their capacity to implement a vision and mission – cognisant of contextual challenges – for literacy instruction.

### *Principals' knowledge of the literacy-curriculum*

In order to lead continuous improvement in literacy instruction, principals should possess sufficient knowledge of the literacy curriculum, instructional methods and knowledge of assessment. Louis, Leithwood, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2010, p. 39) posit that “an understanding of the tenets of quality instruction and sufficient curriculum knowledge to ensure the appropriate delivery of content to all students, is vital”, because “without an understanding of the knowledge essential for teachers to teach well, school leaders will be unable to perform essential school improvement functions such as monitoring, instruction and supporting teacher development” (Day & Sammons, 2013, p. 12). This essential knowledge includes, according to Khosa (2013, p. 23), a focus on “improvement in subject specialist knowledge, subject-specific content, methodology, assessment methodology and common assessments”. Dole and Nelson (in Bean & Dagen, 2012, p. 149) similarly postulate that sufficient knowledge of the literacy curriculum is “what is important to teach in literacy”. The South African Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS) for languages (DBE, 2013) stipulates that the prescribed literature in reading genres include folklore, short stories, drama and poetry with a variety of reading strategies, including pre-reading and post-reading strategies. Learners should also be able to understand text, reading comprehension, text structures and text features. Writing areas include the writing of words, sentences and paragraphs, with a focus on genres associated with creative and transactional writing and skills. This includes process writing, pre-writing, planning, drafting revising, editing, proofreading and the presentation of the final piece. If principals are to fulfil their role as instructional leaders in literacy instruction in a thorough manner, it is vital that they have a strong knowledge basis of the reading and writing features, as outlined in the CAPS curriculum.

### *Assisting teachers in Literacy instruction*

Sufficient knowledge of the aforementioned content of the literacy curriculum will enable principals to assist teachers in the practical side of the process: literacy instruction. Dole and Nelson (in Bean & Dagen, 2012, p.152) assert that “literacy leaders know that the instructional delivery of the curriculum is one of the most critically important elements of teaching”, while the

DET (2018, p. 25) states that “leaders should work on explicit curriculum documentation and work with teachers to develop processes and protocols to better support targeted teaching”.

Creativity, frequent engagement and collaboration with teachers appear to be important to support them in their daily practice. Proponents of this approach such as Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011, p. 5) argue that “effective literacy leaders must be creative and successful in their approaches to engaging others in school or classroom literacy initiatives”. Referring to this engagement, Herrera (2010, p. 32) proposes that instructional leaders have “a relentless focus on learning through formal and informal meetings with teachers, classroom observations, mentoring and professional learning, to increase the professional dialogue between teachers”. As Dole and Nelson (in Bean & Dagen, 2012, p. 152) put it, this approach will enable principals to “know what is taking place in classrooms”, as “classroom instruction largely remains a black box until leaders make frequent visits to observe the daily instruction in literacy”. As a result of these interventions, principals can provide focused support related to lesson structures, content and lesson planning in the prescribed reading and writing content. This point is confirmed by the DET (2018, p. 25), that declare that “teachers and leaders should work collaboratively to ensure that individual lesson structures and unit planning support the development of greater consistency in the ways in which feedback and formative assessment is undertaken across the school”.

### *Supervision of Literacy Instruction*

Principals’ ability to perform rigorous supervision to ensure quality instruction probably forms one of the most important components of his/her instructional leadership responsibilities. As Parker and Day (in Botha, 2015, p. 200) explains, “Instructional leaders supervise teaching, that is, ensuring that teachers receive guidance and support to enable them to teach as effectively as possible.” “Supervision of instruction includes monitoring and feedback to teachers, the evaluating of instruction, the monitoring of progress and a vision of learning” (Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom & Herrington, 2015, p. 9).

Constant classroom visits are a logical approach to improve literacy teaching and learning. Dole and Nelson (in Bean & Dagen, 2012, p. 152) describe this form of supervision as “the most



effective way to know what is happening in classrooms. Through daily observations called ‘walkthroughs’ can principals spend brief, brisk amounts of time in each classroom”. Strong management skills of the process appears to be crucial. Herrera (2010, p. 30), therefore recommends that “instructional leaders should develop structures and routines to influence classrooms on a regular and timely basis”.

The evaluation of the teaching and learning should form part of classroom visits, as “teacher evaluation – focusing on instructional improvement and accountability – holds promise for engendering improvements in academic achievement” (Lear, 2017, p. 63). Teacher evaluation should form part of the principals’ management focus to improve classroom structures and routines. The issue at stake is, however, whether the content and skills as specified in the literacy CAPS programme are addressed. Hence, Dole and Nelson (in Bean & Dagen, p. 152) propose a strategy whereby principals evaluate teaching and learning in classrooms by asking the following questions, “Are teachers teaching what they are supposed to be teaching? Are they spending their time wisely? Are objectives and goals clearly laid out, and do these match important standards at specific levels?” An observation checklist can be used to observe certain aspects. Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011, p. 5) describe this approach as follows, “An observation guide can indicate to both teachers and principals which areas are taught, how they are taught and how students are encouraged to respond to and apply literacy skills.”

Comprehensive supervision practices should also embrace data-driven, instructional decision-making, resulting from assessments and the monitoring of the instruction programme. Massey (2017, p. 52; DET, 2018, p. 9) highlights the value of “data-driven assessment and instructional decision-making as at the forefront of literacy learning and growth, and that it can provide a more comprehensive view of the status of teaching and learning and creates a shared focus”. Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011, p. 16), as well as Massey (2017, p. 53) therefore recommend that “leaders – as active participants in data review meetings – can use the results of formal assessments to note patterns of students’ successes and weaknesses for the purpose of improving or customising instruction”.

*Empowering of Staff through Continuous Professional Development Activities*

Effective literacy instructional leadership should also entail a focus on high-quality continuous professional development (CPD) activities for literacy teachers. For Van Deventer (2015, p. 259), CPD activities should “improve subject and pedagogical knowledge and skills”. Principals should promote CPD-activities “for professional growth”, as an instructional management-leadership strategy. This can be in the form of “emphasising the study of teaching and learning, collaboration among educators, the developing of coaching relationships, encouragement and support” (Blasé & Blasé, in Van Deventer, 2016, p. 344). Other forms of CPD-activities

“should include professional learning communities and goals for school practices, workshops, communities of practice and principal forums. In this process principals drive system improvement through a collaborative approach, pursuing a focus on literacy” (Espania, 2012, p. 34; DET, 2018, p. 9).

The National Centre for Literacy Education (NCLE) (2015, p. 7) describes CPD activities as “capacity-building leadership” that “finds and protects time for teacher collaboration and provide models and professional learning around how that time can be used most effectively”. In fact, through this close involvement in CPD activities, leaders work together with teachers “maximising the effect of teaching on all students in their care” (Hattie, in DET, 2018, p. 25).

Another aspect that requires close scrutiny in CPD programmes is providing leadership in ICT activities. In South Africa, policy (DBE, 2015, p. 9) requires of principals “to lead schools into the future through the use of ICT. Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011, p. 15) state that

“principals must lead their schools using a 21<sup>st</sup>-century mentality about the information age because familiarity with technology is essential to the literacy future of students. Effective principals who act as literacy leaders will ensure that their teachers are trained adequately to use technology appropriately in facilitating instruction”.

#### *Establishing well resourced, print-rich literacy classrooms*

Compelling evidence exists in the literature on the influence of a well-resourced, print-rich literacy environment. Sailors and Hoffman (in Bean & Dagen, 2012, p. 186) postulate that “learning to

read occurs best in classrooms within print-rich environments, and lead to improved achievement”. According to Dole and Nelson (in Bean & Dagen, p. 2012, 158), “literacy leaders must understand that learners need additional and many different books at their appropriate level-both traditional and electronic digital materials”. Ensuring a print-rich classroom environment is undoubtedly the responsibility of the teacher, but as the International Literacy Association (ILA) (2019, p.4) states, “... teachers must be supported to provide strong learning environments for every student”. Research demonstrates the role of the principal in this facet as well. “Principals should provide literacy leadership in the arrangement and monitoring of classroom resources and the physical organisation of the literacy environment to promote student learning and the use of print and/or technology.” (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011, p. 15) Dole and Nelson (in Bean & Dagen, 2012, p. 156) further explain that, “to be effective instructional literacy leaders need to have expertise in assisting teachers in selecting and implementing high quality and a variety of literacy materials”.

#### *A clear vision and mission for effective literacy instruction*

Another element of principals’ repertoire as instructional leaders is to have a clear vision and mission about literacy instruction. This should include clear learning and teaching goals. Principals are responsible for implementing teaching and learning goals and developing strategies for evaluating their progress (Houck & Novak, 2017). Osborne-Lampkin et al. (2015, p. 2) note that “the enhancement of teaching and learning, and thus establishing a system of clear teaching objectives, should be a priority”.

Regarding a clear vision and mission for literacy learning, scholars stress various sub-aspects of a vision. Day and Sammons (2013), as well as Francois (2014), for instance, feel that leaders should provide, understand, monitor and communicate a clear instructional vision and a sense of direction for the school. In support of this point, Nelson and Dunsmore (2018, p. 5) emphasise that “this clear vision of effective literacy instruction should be clearly connected to the classroom”. Day and Sammons (2013, p. 7) recognise this advantage of principals’ involvement and claim that “principals’ clarity of thought, sense of purpose and knowledge of what is going on means that they can get the best out of their staff, which is key to influencing the work in the classroom and to raising the standards achieved by the learners”.

## Research Questions

The central question framing this paper was, “What are the capacities of principals in literacy instructional leadership in selected primary schools?”. The following secondary questions framed the study:

- *How do principals understand their roles as literacy instructional leaders?*
- *What are principals’ capacities to utilise data to improve literacy instruction?*
- *What are principals’ capacities to empower staff through professional development activities?*
- *What are principals’ capacities to transfer their literacy vision and mission into action to respond to contextual challenges?*
- *What are principals’ understanding of the features of literacy instruction?*

## Method

Using a qualitative research approach, I investigated the capacities of six principals in literacy instructional leadership at selected schools in the Motheo District of the Mangaung area, which falls under the Free State Education Department (FSDoE). For both Gast (2010) and Kumar (2011, p. 103-104), the primary purpose of qualitative research is “to describe a phenomenon, problem or issue in detail”.

## Research Design

This article employs data from a multiple case-study design involving six primary schools. Rule and Vaughn (2011, p. 4) perceive case studies as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and focused setting”, and afford the opportunity to elaborate on an entire situation or process holistically, allowing for the incorporation of multiple perspectives and viewpoints” (Lawrence, 2014, p. 42). I opted for both

exploratory and descriptive case study designs (Yin, 2011), to provide specifics as to “how” and “why” principals demonstrate their capacities in literacy instructional leadership.

### **Population and Study Group**

The population of the study was schools located in high-poverty areas and my sample consisted of six principals. The participants were selected purposefully, as they were “those best suited to address the research problem” Creswell (2009, p. 178). The study met the standards of trustworthiness, which encompass notions of validity, reliability, anonymity and conformability. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of the Free State (ethics approval number **UFS-HSD2018/1055**), while permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Free State Department of Education. Informed consent was obtained from all the principals prior to the commencement of the investigation. To ensure anonymity, abbreviations were used to identify the participants (P for principal and the numbers 1-6, which indicate schools one to six).

### **Data Collection Tools**

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. This method enabled me to “deal with flexibility with unstructured questions and to probe for more information if answers are too brief or there is no initial response” (Dakwa, in Okeke & Van Wyk 2015, p. 301). To mitigate validity and bias threats, I sent the findings to the participants for review to validate the analysis. Reliability was ensured through rigorous documentation of the entire data collection process.

### **Data Collection**

Due to the small sample size, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews of approximately 45 minutes with each principal. The questions related to their role as instructional leaders in literacy instruction.

### **Data Analysis**

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data analysis process was performed during, continuously and immediately after the data collection process, ensuring a good grip on the

process. By adopting this approach, irrelevant data could be discounted, which enabled me to target exact themes related to the research purpose. Both content analysis, as explained by Leedy and Omrod (2001) and thematic analysis, as suggested by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) were employed. The data were coded, themes identified and organised, and followed by interpretations linked to the research questions. They were answered providing in-depth descriptions of principals' capacities in literacy instructional leadership.

## **Findings**

### ***Research Question 1: How Do Principals Understand Their Roles As Literacy Instructional Leaders?***

The data displayed that principals have a narrow understanding of their roles as instructional leaders. They only regard some aspects like guidance and support to teachers, a "few" class visits, conversations and meetings with educators as part of this role. Significantly enough, the participants could not elaborate on how the aforementioned strategies contribute to support in literacy instruction. The findings revealed that principals lack a solid understanding of supervision, and view it mainly as an internal moderation function. Moreover, the data affirmed that principals lack a classroom observation programme, nor do they understand other processes related to the observation of literacy instruction. This includes evaluation, the use of observation checklists and feedback on instruction. A pleasing finding, however, is that principals conduct regular, rigorous internal moderation and monitoring. Participants (P1, P3 and P5), for instance, alluded to the system of weekly or biweekly internal moderation of workbooks, planning files and programmes of assessment.

Participants expressed concerns relating to a challenging workload, including time constraints that hamper monitoring. SMT members do not have specific roles allocated to them in internal moderation procedures, and do not operating as a united, collective team:

“They [SMTs] are actually trendsetters ... if only all SMT members can talk the same language to say ultimately we have a common purpose. The SMT members are actually

the trendsetters and if only they could have seen what I try to do with them and not all of them are buying into what I'm trying to do ...” (P 3)

***Research Question 2: What Are Principals' Capacities To Utilize Data To Improve Literacy Instruction?***

On the subject of the usage of data to strengthen instructional skills in literacy, the findings showed that all schools are obliged to use a compulsory data analysis programme from the FSDoE. Apart from this, principals are not leading in-depth data analysis strategies in literacy instruction. Some shallow data analysis practices confirms this impression:

“We take educators' work, look at the results and compare and discuss these with the rest of the SMT”. (P 6)

“We do things like bar graphs whereby we check how many learners for instance passed mathematics and how many failed. We take statistics of the current year and the previous year and evaluate where we did wrong and how we can improve. In English and mathematics, I sat down with the educators and came up with a plan that they must conduct extra classes for those two subjects.” (P 2)

***Research Question 3: What Are Principals' Capacities To Empower Staff Through Professional Development Activities?***

From the replies assembled, it can be deduced that the participants do not really empower professional development activities amongst staff members in literacy instruction:

“We have not started with literacy at the other schools. They name it professional learning communities (PLC), we currently have it only for maths, not for literacy. (P2)

In addition,

“We intend to start with PLC groups for literacy as well.” (P3)

The responses further indicate that principals do not provide direction to teachers in CPD activities like the development of exemplars, demonstration lessons, communities of practice, development of coaching and collaboration on instructional practices in literacy.

***Research Question 4: What Are Principals' Capacities To Transfer Their Literacy-Vision Into Action To Respond To Contextual Challenges?***

Responding to the question of what their vision for literacy instruction demands, principals could not share with confidence what their vision entails. Additional support to learners that compensate for contextual challenges are present at most of the schools. P 1, 3, 4 and 6 indicated afternoon classes in languages in smaller groups, intervention from a school-based support team, as well as using old papers and homework classes. I could not trace any evidence, however, of a structured, pre-planned intervention literacy programme at any of the participating schools.

In addition, the participants do not provide direction to promote a sense of collective efficacy that promotes literacy instruction as a key priority. Although some of the participants referred in their responses to strategies such as meetings, videos on motivation and punctuality, it was unclear how these strategies promoted literacy instruction. Moreover, the data showed that the shortage of support from education authorities like subject advisors poses a significant threat to improving literacy instruction.

***Research Question 5: What Are Principals' Understanding Of The Features Of Literacy Instruction?***

In order to answer this question, I looked at principals' knowledge of the CAPS literacy curriculum. Principals have a poor understanding of the skills, subject content (reading and writing genres) and strategies of this curriculum, nor do they understand assessment processes. Interestingly, the data demonstrated that none of the principals were exposed to literacy instruction themselves as teachers. Principals' understanding on what learning materials and posters are needed in literacy classrooms was lacking as well. They have no understanding of the link between the content and the learning materials required in the classroom. Principals are lacking leadership



skills to improve the print-richness and resources in literacy classrooms. On a constructive note, though, some remarks were indicative of a minimal understanding of a conducive literacy classroom. The principals of schools 2 and 3, for instance, mentioned strategies such as essays that could be placed on the classroom walls, teachers who make their own posters and develop their own learning materials. Other strategies relevant to promote a conducive literacy environment include a moveable library, reading clubs and a computerised reading programme.

### **Discussion, Conclusion and Implications**

The point of departure in this paper was to investigate the capacity of principals in literacy instructional leadership. This study revealed that some South African principals have a poor understanding of instructional leadership. This observation supports a finding by Kgatla (2013, p. 54), who claims that “principals have little understanding of instructional leadership”. Given the nature of South African primary schools that do not really achieve the mandate of strong subject-specific instructional leadership knowledge, expertise appears to be even non-existent in literacy instructional leadership.

Due to this lack of expertise, principals seem to have a tendency to neglect targeted support to teachers in all aspects of supervising literacy instruction. Classroom observation, for instance, suggested by Francois (2014, p. 591) as “an opportunity to provide targeted support to teachers, and for the principal to assert himself/herself as an instructional leader”, is completely wanting. The study discovered that there is a clear intention from most of the principals to conduct rigorous internal moderation and monitoring of learners’ workbooks and portfolios of evidence. This finding is in line with research conducted by Botha (2013, p. 195) and Osborne-Lampkin et al. (2015, p. 9), who “regard monitoring and feedback as a crucial duty of instructional leaders”.

Participants expressed concerns relating to a challenging workload and time constraints that may hamper the monitoring of teachers’ work. Plaatjies (2016, p. 256) affirms this challenge, adding that “literacy initiatives are difficult to implement due to large numbers of learners with learning impairments”. This finding on the time constraints in principals’ daily conduct is also consistent with research conducted by Austin et al. (2018, p. 41) who claim, “principals spend only 10 per

cent of their day in instruction-related tasks”. If one takes into consideration that the primary school curriculum consists of much more than the literacy component, it justifies the reasons why principals struggle to devote enough attention to literacy supervision. On the issue of SMTs that do not operate as a united collective unit, it may be ascribed to the fact that the principals do not adopt a distributed/shared leadership approach in literacy leadership. Hence, this should be seen as a point of critique concerning the policy documents, as they lack specific roles allocated to SMTs operating as a collective unit.

Furthermore, the findings showed that principals display a shallow understanding of what data-driven analysis and decision-making involve. For example, I could not pick up clear indications of how principals provide leadership in data usage relating to the analysis of instruction, assessment, observation and supervision of reading and writing instruction. This finding is in line with Naidoo and Petersen’s (2015, p. 7) research in which they also found that “principals ignore or underestimate learner assessment data, and that they may not be able to identify where instructional strategies are failing”. For this reason also, principals may struggle to provide teachers with informed support in literacy instruction.

My study further revealed that principals do not empower staff through professional development activities. The same sentiments were reflected by Mbhalati (2017, p. 58), who confirmed that “professional learning activities in the form of capacity-building strategies for literacy teachers are lacking”. The nature of staff development strategies involves activities such as professional learning communities, further studies and workshop training. This trend is confirmed by Kgatla’s study (2013, p. 59) in which “school-based staff participate in development programmes and teachers are encouraged to embark on further studies”. Moreover, the findings indicate that it is difficult to for principals to implement formal professional development programmes. Bomer and Maloch (2019, p. 261) support this challenge by claiming that “getting everyone involved in professional development may be a tricky exercise, as it is difficult to get everyone pulling in one direction”. The shortage of professional development activities are further evident by the fact that principals do not offer leadership in the development of exemplars, demonstration lessons and the sharing of ideas on instructional practices in literacy are absent. This finding is contrary to what Francois (2014, p. 583; 591) recommends, namely “that principals should encourage teachers to

share reflections and ideas about class and school-level instructional practices, as their involvement will provide them with experience and reinforce their role as instructional leaders”.

The finding that principals do not pursue a sound vision for literacy instruction calls into question what Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011), Day and Sammons (2013), Osborne-Lampkin et al. (2015) and Houck and Novak (2017) regard as crucial functions of a principal’s instructional leadership responsibilities. Interestingly enough, literature displays contradicting opinions by researchers on the idea of the development of a vision and mission statement. In his study, Kgatla (2013, p. 55) shows that “principals understand the process of developing a mission statement”, while Mbhalati (2017, p. 57), rejects the notion that principals’ possess sufficient capacities to adopt a vision for literacy learning, “School Management Teams, (including the principal) at some South African schools are not doing enough to support teachers in literacy instruction; a clear indication of the lack of vision and mission.”

Regarding contextual challenges, the data also affirmed that principals do not operate as a collective to address contextual challenges and their influence on literacy instruction. Francois’ (2014, p. 590-591) research demonstrates that “a learning community where learning happened collectively, validated the monitoring of reading instruction”.

This research has demonstrated that principals have a clear lack of understanding of the features and content of the CAPS literacy curriculum. This factor hampers their ability to provide sound support to literacy teachers. This finding is supported by Routman (2014, p. 11), who declare “that principals often do not recognise key aspects of literacy in classrooms and struggle to assess the quality of teachers’ work”. Plaatjies (2016, p. 256) agrees “that principals’ deficient instructional and assessment knowledge of the literacy curriculum hampers support to teachers, and even leads to feelings of powerlessness”. Kgatla (2013, p. 65) ascribes this deficiency to a lack of leadership training regarding the CAPS curriculum. The fact that most of them were not literacy teachers themselves appears to have a negative impact on their subject knowledge. Dowell et al. (2012, p. 8) also discovered that “the prevailing perspective of many administrators is that they do not understand literacy, nor do they know how to lead literacy”. Principals’ lack of understanding of the curriculum is also evident in their knowledge on what a print-rich, well-resourced literacy

classroom constitutes. The findings clearly demonstrate that they have a limited understanding of what a print-rich literacy environment is.

It can be concluded that the overall finding in this study is that principals experience immense challenges in leading literacy instructional practices. Five major findings arose from the data. Firstly, principals have a poor understanding of the CAPS literacy curriculum. The implication of this finding for practice is that it may currently be an unrealistic expectation for South African school principals to lead the literacy instructional programme effectively. This has a simple implication; principals need training as instructional leaders. Secondly, the data demonstrate that work overload prevents principals from gaining a better understanding of literacy instruction. Work overload also hampers effective supervision. Providing work relief and promoting collective leadership imply that principals should receive training in implementing shared leadership approaches. Implications for theory are that studies should be conducted that focus on enhancing leadership in literacy instruction. The FSDoE should take the lead in these training programmes. The third finding from the data suggests that there is an inadequate understanding of data-driven decision-making. Consequently, principals struggle to identify and address difficult areas in literacy learning and instruction. Training in this aspect appears to be vital. The fourth finding specifies that subject-specific professional development for principals should be promoted. The last finding relates to a lack of collective efficacy amongst SMT members and the absence of a vision to address contextual challenges. Together with a distributed leadership approach, continuous, intensive training on the influence of the social context is of paramount importance. Although the Department should be at the forefront of confronting this challenge through postmodern training, principals should develop specific initiatives and greater accountability through professional development of the SMT in these areas.

As with any study, this study also has its limitations. Instructional leadership as well as literacy leadership are very extensive concepts, each in their own right. It was not possible to address all the dimensions of these concepts, given the limited scope of this article. While this paper can contribute to unresolved issues in the field of literacy instructional leadership, these topics are open to further scrutiny. Conducting interviews with principals only is definitely not the only way to deal with the challenges in literacy instructional leadership. It would have been interesting to have

heard the views of the entire SMT and other staff. Such a study should be conducted to provide even more valuable data on the topic.

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