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# The experiences of mathematics subject advisors when conducting school support visits

## Abstract

*Given the importance of mathematics performance of learners and the challenges in South Africa, it is important that the expertise of all role-players, including the subject advisors who visit the teachers to guide and support them, is used to its full potential. While some studies have explored the experiences of teachers in this regard, literature on the experiences of mathematics subject advisors is scant. Furthermore, little has been published on the experiences of subject advisors within the context of rural areas with a low population, such as the Northern Cape Province. This article addresses the gap by exploring the deeper understanding of mathematics subject advisors' experiences when conducting school support visits. Taking a qualitative research approach, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six mathematics subject advisors from the four phases (foundation, intermediate, senior, and further education and training) in all five of the education districts of the Northern Cape Department of Education (Frances Baard; Z.F. Mgcwawu; Pixley Ka Seme; Namakwa; and J.T. Gaetsewe). Through Husserl's phenomenological theoretical framework, complemented with Gibbs' reflective cycle and Colaizzi's seven steps of data analysis, participants were found to have had both good and bad experiences when conducting school support visits. Experiences included positive attitudes from educators and schools in general, and good curriculum implementation and teaching and learning practices. However, participants were sometimes received with hostility, and observed poor curriculum implementation and teaching and learning practices. Noteworthy is some negative union influence, lack of specialisation in mathematics by foundation phase departmental heads, lack of coherence in communication, and lack of cooperation and collaboration amongst district officials. If the concerns raised by mathematics subject advisors in this paper are not addressed, these may have a negative impact on the experiences of subject advisors and, by implication, on learner performance as well as education in general.*

**Keywords:** class visits, curriculum support, Northern Cape education, rural education, teacher unions



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## 1. Introduction and background

South Africa is currently experiencing low learner outcomes (Taylor, 2021), which may be manifested *inter alia* in learners' inability to read with meaning (Spaull & Hoadley, 2017), and low learner performance in mathematics (NCDoE,

2020; Govender, 2018). The foregoing may be ascribed to, amongst others, poor curriculum implementation (Jansen & Christie, 2000, in De Clerq, 2020) and unsatisfactory teaching and learning practices. One way to address the aforementioned challenges in schools is through school support visits (Deliwe & Seabe, 2022; DBE, 2018), within the context of supporting curriculum implementation, and teaching and learning practices. Deliwe and Seabe (2022: 17) assert that “[d]istrict (school) visits are an important aspect of support and oversight in the schooling system in many countries, including South Africa”. Amongst the district officials entrusted with the responsibility to conduct school support visits are subject advisors (Deliwe & Seabe, 2022; DBE, 2018). Subject advisors’ core role is to support curriculum implementation and ensure that quality teaching and learning takes place in schools (DBE, 2020: 24), and this role can be realised through school support visits.

Whilst noting the importance of school support visits by subject advisors, Deliwe and Seabe (2022: 17) found that

principals in primary schools are less likely to be satisfied if the purpose of a district official’s visit is to conduct an EMIS validation, perhaps because validation discussions involve robust conversations about adherence to the information processing and records management standards.

The authors also noted that

[t]he probability of secondary schools being satisfied is high when they receive teaching, principal and school assessment support, but less so if the purpose of the visit by district officials provides some insight into the dynamics of dual accountability at the boundary between the school and district.

From the foregoing, a number of implications arise. The support for curriculum implementation and learning and teaching practices, the effectiveness of school support visits by subject advisors, as well as the experiences of subject advisors may be impacted upon, depending on what the focus will be during the school support visit. Noting that the perspectives and experiences of schools and principals regarding school support visits by district officials (subject advisors) were highlighted, a need to explore the experiences of subject advisors also became necessary.

Whilst a few good experiences were reported (Sithole, 2020; Stephen, 2018; De Grauwe & Lugaz, 2011), the literature also highlights some negative experiences by subject advisors. These experiences include having been received by school officials who were demotivated and demoralised (Sithole, 2020; Shoji, 2014), who displayed unwillingness and non-commitment, and negative attitudes and behaviours (Tjonzongoro, 2019; Stephen, 2018; Tatana, 2014). Subject advisors were also faced with negative attitudes from the more experienced educators, who believed that support from subject advisors was not necessary (Shoji, 2014). In some cases, subject advisors purported to have felt undermined by some principals (Tjonzongoro, 2019; Shoji, 2014). At times, they alleged even to have been refused permission to do classroom observations or provide academic or curriculum support (DBE, 2019). In most cases where educators and schools refused subject advisors access to their classrooms, union influence was suggested as the reason (Sithole, 2020; Stephen, 2018). Subject advisors noted that this phenomenon seemed to be more prevalent at township schools than at former model-C schools<sup>1</sup> (Stephen, 2018).

1 The township schools are predominantly for Black learners and are less resourced, compared to the comparatively well-resourced schools that were predominantly for White learners before democracy (Sayed *et al.*, 2020: 5).

Furthermore, some subject advisors claimed that they had observed educator absenteeism (Sithole, 2020), bunking of classes by educators, educators not teaching learners all sections of the curriculum (Stephen, 2018), not marking or signing learners' books (Sithole, 2020), not preparing lessons (Tjonzongoro, 2019; Stephen, 2018), or not being able to control and foster class discipline (Sithole, 2020). Subject advisors observed that some educators did not seem to be comfortable with pedagogical and content knowledge (Sithole, 2020), and lacked accountability and responsibility (Stephen, 2018). They found that some "educators and learners were not committed to their duties" (Tatana, 2014: 67). Sometimes some subject advisors observed that the wrong corrections were done (Stephen, 2018) and that proper continuous assessment processes were not followed (Tjonzongoro, 2019). Similarly, some subject advisors indicated that lesson preparations were only done when educators were aware that subject advisors were scheduling school visits (Tjonzongoro, 2019).

In addition, most subject advisors complained of work overload (Stephen, 2018; Tatana, 2014; De Grauwe & Lugaz, 2011) and that they were expected to fulfil more of an administrative role (Sithole, 2020; Stephen, 2018; De Grauwe & Lugaz, 2011). Subject advisors claimed that the lack of effective communication amongst the Department of Education, educator unions and subject advisors (Tatana, 2014), lack of vehicles to travel to the schools (Malumbete, 2021; Sithole, 2020; Tjonzongoro, 2019; Shoji, 2014; Tatana, 2014), and shortages of computers and related resources (Malumbete, 2021; Sithole, 2020; Tjonzongoro, 2019; Shoji, 2014) to support educators and curriculum implementation limited their effectiveness of school support visits. Several subject advisors alleged that they did not receive support from their school management team (SMT) members in monitoring educators' work (Shoji, 2014); neither did some principals provide curriculum support (Stephen, 2018). At some schools, principals seemed "not to be really aware what is [was] happening in the classroom", and "teachers do [did] as they please[d]" (Stephen, 2018: 176). There were complaints about the presence and impact of unqualified educators, and some subject advisors were frustrated by the policy regarding progressed learners, which they claimed took much of their time, to the detriment of the rest of the other learners (Stephen, 2018). Stephen (2018) also notes that subject advisors sometimes found that notional time was affected as learners were busy with extramural activities or attended sporting activities during school hours.

In a few instances, a number of subject advisors alluded to the lack of cooperation amongst district officials regarding plans to visit and support schools (Stephen, 2018). Tjonzongoro (2019) found that some educators in Namibia and Kenya did not implement the findings and recommendations offered by subject advisors. De Grauwe (2011: 61-62) notes that in Kenya, Lesotho and Uganda, subject advisors (supervisors) alleged that "they did not receive any comments from their" seniors, and this had an impact on their follow-up visits.

From the description above, the factors that can promote and "the factors that hinder their [subject advisors'] capacity to provide effective support to schools and teachers" (Bantwini & Diko 2011: 228) are noted. However, the aforementioned authors argue that there is still a need for further reflection regarding the experiences of subject advisors when providing school support. Nkambule and Amsterdam (2018: 8), for instance, recommend that "[g]reater insight into this topic can be achieved through the solicitation of views of ... subject advisors", while Deliwe and Seabe (2022) assert that a reflection on the visits by subject advisors could *inter alia* improve learner outcomes which, in essence, is the objective of school support visits. Besides the foregoing, I noted that the experiences from the subject advisors discussed in literature were derived from studies focusing on other themes and did not specifically focus on

the experiences when conducting school support visits *per se*. These experiences were more general, and not all necessarily focused on mathematics. In addition, studies from the Northern Cape Province or similar vast rural areas could not be found in the literature consulted.

Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Northern Cape (NC) Province mathematics subject advisors when conducting school support visits (Bevan, 2014) within the context of supporting curriculum implementation and teaching and learning practices. In order to provide a fair sense of the experiences of mathematics subject advisors in the NC Province in all five districts (Frances Baard, Z.F. Mgcwawu, Pixley Ka Seme, Namakwa, and J.T. Gaetsewe), all four phases (foundation, intermediate, senior, and further education and training) were included in the study. The focus on mathematics subject advisors was because mathematics is regarded as one of the priority subjects in South Africa (Spaull & Hoadley, 2017), with many challenges noted.

In light of the above, the broad research question that this study pursued was, "What are the experiences of mathematics subject advisors when conducting school support visits?"

## 2. Theoretical framework

I adopted Husserl's (1983, in Giorgi, 2007) method of providing an understanding of the experiences of mathematics subject advisors when conducting school support visits as a guide to my theoretical framework (Qutoshi, 2018). Husserl (1983, in Giorgi, 2007) asserts that in order to understand the essence of how participants experience school support visits, it is imperative that one assumes the phenomenological attitude, which is applying the *epoché*. In this regard, I applied the *epoché* by bracketing out or suspending my prior knowledge, suppositions, or theories related to school support visits (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019; Bliss, 2016; Giorgi, 2007). Also drawing from Husserl's phenomenological framework, I applied imaginative variation, which I did by sifting through the generated data, only considering those aspects that were relevant to the experiences of school support visits (Giorgi, 2007). As Gibbs' (2013) reflective cycle also deals with the experiences of phenomena, I complemented Husserl's (1983) theory with Gibbs' reflective cycle (2013). Gibbs (2013: 49-50) posits that in order to reflect or describe effectively how phenomena (school support visits) have been experienced, five principles may be employed. These principles include a description of what happened, descriptions of the reactions and feelings elicited, an evaluation of whether the experience was good or bad, an analysis of "what sense you can make of the situation", and a general sense of what can be concluded. Due to the role and focus on essence, as advocated by both frameworks, I provided the essence of school support visits by mathematics subject advisors.

The process outlined above was consistently done in both the data generation and analysis stages of the study.

## 3. Research methodology

Following a qualitative research approach, I purposively selected and invited six mathematics subject advisors (four females; two males) from all four phases (cf. 1) to participate in this study. As mathematics subject advisors, they engage with similar duties, responsibilities and activities, which amongst others include curriculum support to educators, observing educators engaged in teaching and learning practices, checking lesson preparation and assessments,

and providing overall support towards learner outcomes (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, I deemed them to be best suited and relevant to be participants in this study, as they are involved in and have experience in the phenomenon under study.

The study was conducted in all five education districts of the Northern Cape Province (cf. 1). Since each district has only one mathematics subject advisor per phase, identifying them by a specific district, gender, or age could compromise confidentiality, thus I removed references to their names and gender, as well as any association with a specific district or phase to protect their identities. Instead of using the full pseudonyms chosen by the participants (P), the first letters of their pseudonyms were used: PL, PJ, PA, PT, PM, and PP.

Other ethical considerations included ethical clearance from the University of the Free State, permission from the Northern Cape Department of Education (NCDoE), permission and informed consent from the participants, as well as the permission and assistance regarding their contact details from the various education district offices.

At the time of data collection, South Africa was at Alert Level 1 with regard to the COVID-19 protocols; hence, in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes each were held virtually, using the Google Meet platform. I used an approach of questioning that is consistent with Gibbs' (2013) reflective cycle and Husserl's (1983) framework, which demands the consistent assumption of a phenomenological attitude (cf. 2). Therefore, questions that could provide information to such questions were posed. Depending on the need, responses were further probed for more clarity. The interviews were video recorded, and are accessible on a Google Drive virtual storage platform for ease of access for the participants for member checking (Bliss, 2016). I shared the transcriptions/findings relevant to the article with each participant concerned for member checking. None provided any further inputs or made changes.

I adopted Colaizzi's (1978, in Abalos *et al.*, 2016) seven-step process of data analysis which, according to Abalos *et al.* (2016: 21), "is consistent with descriptive phenomenology". Colaizzi (1978, in Abalos *et al.*, 2016: 20-21) asserts that to provide a description that is close to what participants have experienced, a phenomenological data analysis method is proposed. Since this is a phenomenological study, I have used Colaizzi's seven-step process, which are evident through its application herein. I read through each transcript several times to ensure that I understood what was shared with me, and identified and delineated the significant statements, phrases or sentences that I regarded as significant and related directly to school support visits. I noted the meaning of each significant statement (e.g. formulated meanings) and then organised these into a cluster of themes. The cluster of themes were such that they responded to the overarching research question. These clusters were referred back to the original individual transcriptions to be validated. I checked for discrepancies among or between the various clusters and ensured that I did not leave out any relevant data. Thereafter, I checked for commonalities and/or differences amongst the cluster of themes, and grouped them into general themes. The results were integrated to provide a thick, clear and detailed description of school support visits as conducted by mathematics subject advisors.

Lastly, the findings were validated with the participants, and none of them registered any objections.

## 4. Findings

Five general themes emerged: *attitudes and human relations; curriculum implementation and teaching and learning practices; perceived educator union influence; leadership, management and support; and the impact of external factors on school support visits.*

### 4.1 Attitudes and human relations

Most participants in the study indicated that they were happy and felt good with regard to having been warmly received by educators at the schools where and when they conducted school support visits. Some participants claimed that some educators could communicate with them freely. PA, for instance, shared that *“when teachers are aware that you are coming”, it is a good experience in general.* Some educators had their educator files and learner books ready for the participants to check their work.

Participants noted their satisfaction when they found that some educators displayed good attitudes when executing their duties. PJ appreciated that *“there are some teachers out there with nice visions of what they want to achieve with learners”.* PP indicated that it felt good *“when a teacher does his work and try [tries] his best to do the best for the kids that makes me feel good”.* According to PP, PJ and PM, some educators seemed to cooperate well with other educators, especially through orientation, induction and collaboration. PJ also indicated that *“you get some educators who go above and beyond what is expected, midday classes, classes in the afternoon, Saturdays, and Sundays, without any remuneration from the department. That to me is very positive”.*

Participants appreciated it when they observed that some educators implemented the ideas and recommendations provided during their previous school support visits. Some educators were appreciative of their contributions. Hence, PP commented that *“it’s nice for me to work with the people than sit in my office. I rather go to a school where I can see, ok, I help and I support”.* He further indicated that he enjoyed supporting schools, because he felt he made a difference.

Despite the good experiences, a few participants were not satisfied with some of the negative attitudes and practices displayed by a number of the educators and schools. Both PL and PT shared their frustration when they had to wait to be attended to. PT indicated that *“[y]ou can wait for more than 3-4 hours for them to bring their things”* and purported that *“some of the teachers are coming with this negative thing (attitude)”*, and she felt *“very frustrated”.* PM indicated that some *“teachers are under tremendous stress, personal issues, that impact on their work”.* PA and PT noted that several educators were uncooperative and refused to submit documents. PP and PJ observed that educators allegedly showed no commitment, and some educators were defiant towards the departmental heads. Whilst PM noted that various educators did not feel free to share their challenges with subject advisors, other participants experienced a few educators to be simply lazy, and blame the learners for their underperformance. PP commented that some educators were just not doing the work. He mentioned that *“I didn’t feel good, it [makes me] feel sad, maybe angry, maybe disappointed”.* PM claimed that several educators were not prepared to learn new ways of doing things, like planning.

## 4.2 Curriculum implementation and teaching and learning practices

Participants welcomed the opportunity for having been given access to educators' classrooms to either observe what educators were doing or to present demonstration lessons. PA felt *"very good to observe teachers in the classroom"* and PP shared that *"sometimes I sit in a class and observe teachers, especially my novice teachers. It's good to see what they did and then I can give them some support in where they can do better"*. PA remarked, *"I really feel like I serve my purpose if a teacher can said [say] to me come to my class and look at this and look at that"*, and sometimes she used that opportunity in the class *"to share good practices and do a demonstration lesson"*.

Furthermore, PJ observed that educator files were indeed moderated. Some participants stated that some educators taught the learners mathematics topics on a daily basis. PT indicated that some educators tried to implement the School Based Assessment (SBA) guidelines when setting tests and tasks. PT also mentioned that some departmental heads moderated the tests and memoranda, and that educators followed the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) when teaching mathematics in schools. Both PT and PJ noted that some educators developed monthly and annual lesson plans.

Apart from the good experiences, participants also had bad experiences. PM complained that some educators refused to submit departmental and school policy documents to be checked, while other educators who wanted to submit their documents were intimidated by union members because they were perceived to be 'selling out'. PL remarked, *"[w]hat I'm not happy about is the teacher file is there, but not all that documents will be in the file"*. Participants explained that some educators either did not plan their lessons well or at all. PM, for instance, expressed her frustration:

*I've trained them in our empowerment professional development, we have provided professional development sessions every day. I've trained them about it. If I visit a school ... I don't see a well-structured planning, like that is now the main concern in most of our schools.*

Both PL and PM indicated that some educators neither taught all required cognitive levels, nor followed school-based assessment (SBA) guidelines. They also mentioned that some educators did not follow the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP). While PM observed that some *"teachers are not using manipulatives"* that they were apparently provided with, PL claimed that some educators just used *"textbook and chalk"*. Participants alleged that several educators did not implement the recommendations that emanated from their previous reports, and PP added that it *"frustrates the hell out of me"*. PJ complained that *"[t]hey make you feel as a subject advisor, whatever you have done, it doesn't really impact [the] school"*.

PA and PJ mentioned that some educators were absent from school whenever they conducted school support visits. PA remarked that *"there is a certain school that forever when you get to that school, that teachers are absent"*. PJ commented: *"I don't even know how [the mathematics teacher] looks. I have been to that school four times, but I have never met him."* PT stated that her *"only worry is that they sometimes teach [only] what they are comfortable with"*, for example, *"[i]n mathematics it's one of the challenges where problem-solving is not done as expected"*.

PT and PM indicated that some educators did not mark learners' books; hence, PT lamented:

*It breaks my heart to see a learner who has put so much effort in whatever that they doing and nothing is done to the learner's work, so it simply means that the teacher does not care, I can say it you don't care about the learners that are in your class.*

Whilst PA claimed that novice educators lacked "that specific subject knowledge" in mathematics, PM reported that even some experienced teachers at face value lack mathematics "subject content knowledge". As a result, PT purported that:

*in foundation phase, truly speaking, most of the teachers are challenged; they don't like mathematics. So, that's why at Grade 12 we have fewer learners because the foundation was not laid.*

Both PA and PM noted that some educators used inappropriate teaching strategies, and PJ observed that some educators lacked skills to instil discipline in the classroom. PJ indicated that some educators "don't teach the processes of mathematics", and despite that "learners have 40 sums in his books but he cannot do any one of them because he don't [does not] know how to do the sums". Whilst there were those educators who underperformed while being at school and in class, PJ indicated that his worst experience is to "go to a school but you don't see any evidence of teaching happening", or "teachers being in class but not teaching". PA alleged that learners "in the foundation phase are still struggling a lot with maths", and PL noted that some learners at some schools could not read or count. PJ argued that schools should "stop passing learners on who is [are] not ready for the next grade. That to me is also a systemic problem, and it's very huge and has a large impact on the mathematics". The advice was with regard to the South African policy on progression, where learners may be promoted to the next grade if they have already failed once in that phase.

#### 4.3 Perceived educator union influence

At times, participants were not allowed into classes for observation or to provide support. For example, PJ noted that some educators would be adamant and state, "No, don't come to my class". PL complained that "it is not good, because for me it's like we are not supporting them thoroughly". Participants claimed that educators used the name of unions as the reason for refusing subject advisors entry into their classes. PM was of the view that "individuals use the union to hide their laziness and they will tell you it's a union rule that you must give notice one week in advance".

With regard to the submission of documents, PM noted that educators would say: "[M]am, we want to submit but we are afraid of A, B, C, D, [and] E." The foregoing suggests intimidation from union shop stewards or representatives indicating to the educators not to submit documents, or not to cooperate with subject advisors. PM and PJ indicated that despite the name of the union being used, no written proof was ever provided.

Another hurdle subject advisors experienced was a lack of effective and clear channels of communication between them and union representatives. PJ mentioned that "usually they don't engage with me, they engage with my bosses". Hence, PM stated that:

*on the day of my visit ... the shop steward came to me and said I'm the shop steward ... teachers were not notified; they are not prepared to submit [their] books.*



#### 4.4 Leadership, management and support

Though not prominent, lack of leadership, management and support from some SMT members in schools were raised. PM shared that infights amongst educators were prevalent and indicated that these *"infights are usually about positions"*. PM also observed conflict amongst educators and SMT members, which impacts negatively on learner performance. Furthermore, PM indicated that some educators claimed that departmental heads did not inform them about impending school visits and they were therefore not ready to receive the subject advisers. PA observed that at some schools, some principals and SMT members did not seem to support school support visits. PA also noted that at one school which she visited later in the year, a principal had by then not procured learner support material (LTSM), despite her request for the school to do so earlier in the year.

#### 4.5 The impact of external factors on school support visits

From the participants' responses, it emerged that some of their experiences were also affected by external factors, such as educator subject specialisation knowledge, heavy workload, after-school training sessions, lack of adequate transport for both subject advisors and learners at schools, perceived lack of cooperation between subject advisors and circuit managers, and issues of communication.

PP and PT hinted that the lack of specialisation knowledge in mathematics by educators was perceived to be a challenge with regard to learner performance, as well as made educators uncomfortable when teaching mathematics in schools. In addition, PT suggested that, *"in [the] foundation phase most of our teachers did not do mathematics"*; hence, PT thought that *"our department can now start thinking of really making teachers to become subject specialists especially even though in foundation phase"*. It seems it is for this reason that PT observed that subject advisors who were stronger in Home Language, for example, would *"definitely support the Home Language and neglect the mathematics"*.

In addition, PT also claimed that *"we have many schools, we cannot only focus on one school forever"*. PA concurred with PT regarding the workload of most of the subject advisors. She stated: *"I'm stressed, I had a very few white hair, I have 64 primary schools with roughly I don't know roughly how many teachers."* PT also noted that having after-school cluster sessions for educators were not helpful, as *"the teachers are already tired"*.

PA claimed that after having prepared to go and support schools, *"when you get to the office and then you will hear that there is no transport"*, which impacts on their ability to conduct school support visits at all or most of the schools in their district. Hence, PJ alleged that he found that some faraway schools seemed not be supported regularly. He referred to a school that is *"about 438 km from where I am from the district office"*. Regarding scholar transport, PJ alleged that learners *"are two hours late every morning"*, and then the buses *"are in a hurry in the afternoon when learners should leave"*. As a result, learners miss teaching and learning time and this caused some conflict between educators and those learners.

PA indicated that sometimes disagreements also seemed to exist between some circuit managers and district managers who were accused of not intervening timeously in addressing educators' challenges. Some circuit managers cautioned that participants *"mustn't come and put their schools in a bad light"* (PA). Furthermore, according to PJ, *"circuit managers and the two units (other managers) does [do] not work together"*.

Despite PJ's observation that there "is a challenge with the 'older people' because they are not good with the technology" (ICT), the support from the department regarding training on the use of social media platforms was appreciated. Participants shared that they developed WhatsApp groups, or used Google Meet, or developed mathematics websites, which also became handy during the COVID-19 period. PJ indicated:

*I'm grateful when I get to a school and see ... more experienced teacher[s] also uses [using] the website, and to me, it's very positive, it makes me feel as if what I'm doing is essential at schools.*

Whilst cognisant of the foregoing, participants stated that, due to miscommunication between the district office and the school, schools were unaware of district visits. Both PT and PP noted how this impacts on the effectiveness of school support visits, and by implication, on the experiences of participants.

## 5. Discussion

This study sought to explore the experiences of Northern Cape Province Mathematics subject advisors when conducting school support visits in the context of supporting curriculum implementation and teaching and learning practices. Five main themes emerged, i.e. attitudes and human relations, curriculum implementation and teaching and learning practices, perceived educator union influence, leadership, management and support, and the impact of external factors on school support visits.

Whilst some participants experienced good attitudes and human relations when they visited schools (Sithole, 2020; Stephen, 2018; De Grauwe & Lugaz, 2011), others encountered a hostile reception. These negative attitudes and human relations from educators and schools are consistent with other studies (Sithole, 2020; Tjozongoro, 2019; Stephen, 2018). Negative attitudes and human relations may impact on the motivation of subject advisors as well as a conducive environment; hence, impact negatively on envisaged support.

Weak curriculum implementation and inadequate teaching and learning practices that were observed resonate with reports by Sithole (2020), Tjozongoro (2019), and Stephen, (2018). The foregoing may divert focus and attention from what subject advisors initially prepared to support the educators with.

In cases where subject advisors were granted the opportunity to visit schools, to do classroom observations, and provide curriculum support (DBE, 2019; Stephen, 2018; Shozi, 2014), it seems this was ascribed to minimal union influence (Sithole, 2020). In this study, a common perception of union influence on school support visits was observed. Perceived union influence has the potential to limit subject advisors' access to schools or classrooms to provide the necessary support. This phenomenon is consistent with previous studies (Sithole, 2020; Stephen, 2018).

Consistent with previous studies (Sithole, 2020; DBE, 2019; Stephen, 2018; Tatana, 2014; De Grauwe & Lugaz, 2011), cases of weak or lack of satisfactory leadership, management and support from some SMT members and districts were noted. For example, in cases where the management of the schools were unable to solve challenges, or when educators were not fulfilling their duties, the subject advisors would be asked to intervene. Not only would this be in conflict with subject advisors' roles (DBE, 2020:24), but it would also be perceived to be interfering with issues that do not affect them.

School support visits were also impacted upon by external factors. In this study, these external factors included the lack of specialisation knowledge of foundation phase educators in mathematics, apparent lack of cooperation or collaboration between mathematics subject advisors and circuit managers, as well as human and physical resources. The foregoing challenges were also reported in previous studies (Malumbete, 2021; Sithole, 2020; Tjozongoro, 2019; Shoji, 2014; Tatana, 2014; De Grauwe & Lugaz, 2011). These external factors either make it difficult for subject advisors to conduct school support visits or frustrate them when foundation phase departmental heads were not knowledgeable in mathematics. These negative experiences of subject advisors mentioned in the study, affect the quality and effectiveness of school support visits negatively.

Though this study focused on the experiences of mathematics subject advisors, I believe that this study has the potential to contribute towards highlighting the experiences of other subject advisors, give them a voice, and consider the concerns of both the educators and those of the subject advisors. In addition, it may implore policy makers and those in authority to consider working on both the identified challenges as experienced by educators, as well as subject advisors so that the quality of education and learner competencies may be improved.

The study elicited a few areas of concern that seemed to impact profoundly on both the experiences of participants and the effectiveness of school support visits. These include the alleged resolution by educator union(s) of not allowing subject advisors to conduct classroom visits, the extent to which communication amongst education stakeholders impacts on school support visits, as well as the extent to which cooperation or collaboration between circuit managers and subject advisors impact on school support visits. In this regard, it is recommended that the mentioned areas be investigated further.

## 6. Conclusion

This article provides an opportunity for reflection. This article found that the lack of foundation phase mathematics educators' specialisation knowledge was a constraint, the minimal collaboration between circuit managers and mathematics subject advisors was not helpful, and that learner scholar transport failures were to the detriment of learners' contact time. Despite these negative experiences, the mathematics subject advisors still felt that school support visits had value and were enjoyable. Areas of contention and non-compliance that crystallised in this study should be noted and addressed. It should contribute towards informing policy and practice regarding school support visits by mathematics subject advisors in particular and beyond.

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