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Instructional leadership experiences of departmental heads in five public primary schools in Gauteng province, South Africa

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Abstract: Departmental heads are increasingly recognised as pivotal instructional leaders within schools, serving as a bridge between senior management and classroom practice. Despite this recognition, the existing literature predominantly focuses on principals, often neglecting the leadership roles of departmental heads, particularly in South African public primary schools. This under-representation creates a gap in understanding how these middle leaders interpret and enact instructional leadership within complex and under-resourced educational environments. This study aimed to explore the instructional leadership experiences of departmental heads in five public primary schools in Gauteng Province, South Africa. A qualitative research approach, underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, was adopted, employing a generic qualitative design. Ten departmental heads were purposively selected, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the findings. Results revealed varied understandings of instructional leadership, shaped by personal orientations, school culture, and leadership structures. Departmental heads actively engaged in curriculum planning, classroom monitoring, and mentoring but faced challenges due to curriculum changes, limited autonomy, administrative overload, and a lack of formal leadership training. These challenges created a disparity between policy expectations and practical realities. Participants highlighted the necessity for structured leadership capacity development, peer support, and access to digital tools. The study concludes that departmental heads are crucial to instructional improvement, yet they remain under-supported and overburdened.

Keywords: Curriculum implementation, departmental head, instructional leadership, professional development, public primary schools, school management team.

1. Introduction

Globally, departmental heads are recognised as middle leaders who serve as a critical bridge between the strategic vision of senior leadership teams and the day-to-day instructional practices of teachers (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Sengai, 2021). However, much of the existing research on school leadership focuses predominantly on principals, often overlooking the instructional leadership responsibilities of departmental heads (Chitamba & Jita, 2023; Nkosi, 2025). This under-representation has created a significant gap in understanding how departmental heads enact instructional leadership, particularly in contexts where they are essential to enhancing teaching and learning outcomes. In South Africa, the post-1994 democratic reforms decentralised power in the education system and introduced school-based management, significantly expanding the responsibilities of school leadership teams (Bush, 2016; Kameshwara et al., 2024). Departmental heads, as members of school management teams, now face dual roles as both teachers and instructional leaders, a dual responsibility that has intensified their workload and expectations.

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Despite their pivotal position, departmental heads often encounter challenges that hinder their effectiveness. These include role ambiguity, insufficient leadership training, limited authority, and overwhelming workloads (Kalane & Rambuda, 2022; Nkosi, 2025). Many are appointed based on teaching experience rather than leadership competence, leaving them inadequately prepared to support curriculum implementation, monitor teaching quality, and lead instructional improvements (Kalane & Rambuda, 2022). The lack of clear role definitions contributes to professional stress and uncertainty, weakening their potential impact on teaching and learning. The scope of instructional duties expected of departmental heads is extensive. They are tasked with leading curriculum planning, mentoring novice teachers, conducting classroom observations, analysing learner performance data, and maintaining their teaching load (Mbhele, 2024). These multifaceted demands often result in burnout and reduced instructional oversight, which can undermine curriculum consistency and learner achievement (Creagh et al., 2025; Dlamini & Zulu, 2024).

Although policy frameworks such as the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM, 2016) and the Education Labour Relations Council (2003) outline the responsibilities of departmental heads, there is often a disconnect between policy prescriptions and school-level realities. Departmental heads are frequently left to navigate complex leadership roles with minimal support, limited recognition, and inadequate preparation. Literature often generalises school leadership experiences without sufficiently exploring the distinct roles of middle leaders, especially in the South African primary school context. This study addresses this gap by exploring the instructional leadership experiences of departmental heads in five public primary schools in Gauteng province. It investigates how they perceive, enact, and manage their leadership roles amid systemic constraints. Departmental heads are responsible for leading specific educational phases—such as the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3) or the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6)—and supervising Post Level 1 (PL1) teachers who play a foundational role in curriculum delivery. Their duties, as outlined in PAM (2016), include teaching, managing subject policies, assessing learner achievement, and coordinating teaching and assessment practices. By examining the lived experiences of departmental heads, this study aims to deepen the understanding of their instructional leadership practices, identify the challenges they face, and uncover the coping strategies they employ.

1.1 Objectives

The following objectives guided the study:

- To explore how departmental heads understand instructional leadership within their school contexts.
- To examine the instructional leadership roles of departmental heads in public primary schools.
- To explore the challenges that departmental heads experience in enacting their instructional leadership roles in public primary schools.
- To analyse the influence of leadership capacity development for departmental heads on effective and efficient classroom instruction in public primary schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The roles and responsibilities of departmental heads in public primary schools

The role of departmental heads in public primary schools has gained increasing attention in educational leadership research. Despite the significant contributions of departmental heads to instruction and curriculum delivery, empirical studies specifically focusing on them remain limited. Existing literature primarily explores school leaders in general, with little distinction between principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads (Chitamba & Jita, 2023; Jansen & du Plessis, 2023). However, as outlined in the PAM document (2016) in the South African context, departmental heads spend up to 90% of their professional time on teaching, planning, assessing, supervision, and administration, in addition to providing professional development for teachers and pastoral care.

This multifaceted role places them in a mediating position between senior management and level one (PL1) teachers, making their role both demanding and indispensable (Tapala et al., 2022).

Departmental heads navigate a complex role that integrates managerial, instructional, and pastoral responsibilities, balancing formal institutional mandates with the dynamic needs of teachers and learners. Tapala et al. (2022) emphasise that the functions of departmental heads are shaped by hierarchical structures, staff expectations, and their individual leadership styles. As instructional leaders, they oversee curriculum implementation, assess teaching quality, and support educators in refining their pedagogical practices (Hallinger, 2011; Munna, 2023). Additionally, their administrative duties encompass coordinating teaching resources, ensuring policy compliance, and fostering interdepartmental collaboration to enhance school efficiency (Kalane & Rambuda, 2022).

Beyond administrative and instructional roles, departmental heads play a pivotal part in professional development, particularly in mentoring novice teachers and promoting continuous learning among staff (Dyosini, 2024). Their liaison role strengthens communication between school leadership and teaching staff, ensuring that policy directives are clearly conveyed and effectively implemented (Urick, 2016). Furthermore, their pastoral responsibilities extend to offering emotional and professional support to both teachers and learners, fostering a conducive school climate that enhances overall well-being and performance (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021). By balancing these diverse roles, departmental heads contribute significantly to the stability, growth, and efficiency of the educational environment.

Research consistently underscores the critical role of instructional leadership in driving student achievement. Studies by Kilag and Sasan (2023) confirm that effective instructional leaders, such as departmental heads, significantly influence student outcomes by fostering high-quality teaching practices. Departmental heads shape pedagogical approaches through mentoring, professional development, and performance monitoring, ensuring that teaching aligns with curriculum standards and fosters continuous improvement. Their leadership extends beyond administrative duties to encompass active engagement in curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation (Hallinger et al., 2017). By facilitating a culture of reflective practice and supporting teachers in refining their skills, departmental heads help bridge the gap between educational policy and classroom instruction, ultimately enhancing student learning (Suphasri & Chinokul, 2021).

Departmental heads play a central role in managing and supervising teachers within their departments, ensuring the effective implementation of teaching strategies and fostering a collaborative environment. Research by Tapala et al. (2022) highlights the departmental head's responsibility for providing oversight, promoting professional development, and ensuring accountability. They facilitate peer collaboration, encourage reflective discourse, and help teachers address instructional challenges, such as adapting to diverse student needs. In addition to their role in performance appraisals, departmental heads actively support teachers in overcoming barriers to teaching effectiveness, contributing to a supportive and growth-oriented departmental culture (Noor & Nawab, 2022).

Positioned between school leadership and classroom practice, departmental heads serve as a vital bridge in translating policy mandates into actionable strategies that meet both educational and teachers' needs. Tapala et al. (2022) emphasise the departmental heads' role in interpreting government policies and ensuring their implementation within the classroom. Balancing regulatory compliance with the support of teachers, departmental heads advocate for their colleagues' needs while maintaining alignment with broader school objectives. This intermediary function demands a nuanced understanding of both policy requirements and classroom dynamics, positioning departmental heads as key figures in creating an environment where teachers feel both supported and accountable (Ateş et al., 2020).

Despite growing recognition of the pivotal role departmental heads play in instructional leadership, existing literature remains disproportionately focused on principals and general school leadership, offering limited empirical insight into the unique experiences of departmental heads, particularly within the South African primary school context. While studies acknowledge their multifaceted responsibilities, few delve into the practical challenges they face in fulfilling these roles or how leadership capacity development influences their instructional effectiveness. This study addresses this critical gap by exploring the lived instructional leadership experiences of departmental heads in Gauteng public primary schools, thereby providing context-specific insights into their roles, challenges, and developmental needs.

3. Methodology

The study was underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, which emphasises understanding the subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals within their specific social contexts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is co-created between the researcher and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Given that the study aimed to explore how departmental heads perceived and enacted their instructional leadership roles, the interpretive paradigm was appropriate. It enabled access to rich, contextually grounded insights into participants' beliefs, practices, and leadership experiences. Qualitative research approach was adopted to investigate the complex, context-dependent experiences of departmental heads. This approach prioritised rich, descriptive data over quantification and sought to interpret participants' perspectives in their natural settings (Creswell, 2012). Since the study aimed to understand instructional leadership in practice rather than measure it statistically, the qualitative approach was ideal for generating in-depth, nuanced understandings of leadership roles, challenges, and developmental influences.

The study followed a generic qualitative design, which draws broadly on interpretive methodologies without adhering strictly to any single qualitative tradition such as phenomenology or grounded theory (Percy et al., 2015). This design was suitable because the study's aim was not to generate theory or describe lived phenomena in a phenomenological sense, but rather to explore, describe, and interpret departmental heads' experiences related to instructional leadership. The design allowed for flexibility in data collection and analysis, enabling the researcher to comprehensively address the study's exploratory objectives.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who possessed specific, relevant characteristics—in this case, their roles as departmental heads with a minimum of three years' experience in public primary schools (Campbell et al., 2020). Ten departmental heads from five schools in Gauteng Province were selected based on their expertise and capacity to provide rich, relevant insights. This non-random, criterion-based sampling ensured that data were gathered from knowledgeable individuals whose experiences were aligned with the research focus on instructional leadership. The study utilised triangulated data collection methods comprising semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a flexible, guided format that allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe for clarification and deeper understanding (Morse, 2015). This method facilitated the exploration of nuanced, context-rich narratives that captured the lived experiences of departmental heads.

In addition, non-participant observations were carried out over two consecutive days (from 08:00 to 13:00) in each participant's natural work setting. These observations enabled the researcher to witness firsthand the leadership practices, interpersonal interactions, and departmental routines of the participants, thereby providing contextual insight into how instructional leadership was enacted. The researchers began by observing the departmental heads engaged in their daily roles and responsibilities as outlined in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document (2016). Key

areas of focus included administrative tasks, interactions with parents, participation in meetings, classroom visits, handling learner discipline issues, and the support provided to teachers. These observational insights were instrumental in shaping the interview questions.

For clarity and ease of reference in reporting, the ten departmental heads were labelled DH1 and DH2 within each of the five schools, which were designated S1 through S5. This labelling system facilitated a structured and coherent presentation of participants' narratives. Furthermore, document analysis was conducted by reviewing relevant artefacts such as departmental planning documents, lesson plans, meeting minutes, and monitoring tools (Merriam, 2002). These documents provided tangible evidence of formal leadership practices and helped corroborate and contextualise data obtained through interviews and observations. The integration of these three methods ensured methodological triangulation, allowing for cross-verification of findings and offering a comprehensive understanding of the instructional leadership experiences of departmental heads.

The study employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim, and data from observations and documents were carefully reviewed. A systematic coding process was followed to categorise the data into themes, which involved identifying recurring ideas, concepts, and phrases (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). These codes were grouped into overarching themes that reflected the shared experiences, challenges, and influences among the participants. The iterative process of coding and theme development ensured that the findings were valid, trustworthy, and grounded in the data. Thematic analysis was particularly appropriate as it enabled the researcher to explore the meanings that departmental heads assigned to their roles and challenges, as well as how leadership capacity development shaped their instructional practices across diverse school contexts.

3.2 Ethical consideration

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Johannesburg's Education Faculty Ethics Committee (Ethical Clearance No. Sem 1-2020-005) and by the Gauteng Department of Education. Prior to data collection, all participants provided written informed consent, acknowledging their participation and agreeing to the recording of the interviews. To ensure the validity of the data, the transcriptions were shared with the participants for verification (Flynn & Goldsmith, 2013). Throughout the study, we took extensive precautions to minimise any potential harm to the participants, both physiological and psychological. We ensured that participants were fully informed about their rights, including the option to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences (Creswell, 2012). Confidentiality was maintained at all stages, and no personal or workplace information was disclosed.

4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

3.1 Departmental heads' understanding of instructional leadership within their schools

The departmental heads shared their understanding of instructional leadership in the following responses. DH2, S3's response was that:

> *Instructional leadership is generally defined as the management of curriculum and instructions by the principal. This term, instructional leadership, the principal is deeply involved with setting the school's direction based on the school mission and vision.*

DH1, S3 defines instructional leadership as:

> *We receive instructions from our principal or the district and carry them out accordingly.*

This statement aligns with the documents reviewed by the researcher, as the participants maintained records of all the instructions they received in a file, which included evidence of when the instructions were communicated to team members. DH2, S4 described instructional leadership as:

> *A type of leadership where the SMT works together to provide guidance and support to teachers in order to achieve the best practices in delivering curriculum.*

DH2, S3 added:

> *The most significant role of middle managers is to support teachers. Find the gaps that they may be [experiencing] and monitor as well as moderate the work that they perform*

The responses from departmental heads indicate varying perspectives on instructional leadership, reflecting both traditional and collaborative approaches. DH2 from S3 perceives instructional leadership as primarily the principal's responsibility in managing curriculum and instruction, aligning with Hallinger's (2005) seminal framework, which defines instructional leadership as a process where school leaders set the school's mission, manage instructional programmes, and promote a positive learning climate. This perspective suggests a top-down approach in which the principal plays a dominant role in shaping instructional practices. Similarly, DH1 from S3 views instructional leadership as the execution of directives from principals or district officials. This perception resonates with Bush (2013), who argues that in hierarchical educational settings, middle leaders often function as implementers of top-level decisions rather than initiators of instructional strategies. The documentation of received instructions further supports this bureaucratic model of instructional leadership, emphasising compliance and record-keeping rather than proactive pedagogical engagement.

Nonetheless, a more collaborative perspective emerges in DH2 from S4's description, where instructional leadership is seen as a shared function within the SMT. This view aligns with Nadeem's (2024) distributed leadership model, which suggests that leadership should be enacted through collective efforts rather than being confined to a single leader. The emphasis on guidance and support for teachers underscores a more facilitative role for instructional leadership, consistent with research by Leithwood et al. (2020), who argue that instructional leadership is most effective when it fosters teacher capacity and collaboration. Furthermore, DH2 from S3 highlights the role of middle managers in identifying instructional gaps and providing support, which aligns with Sharif (2020), who found that instructional leadership significantly impacts student outcomes when it involves direct engagement with teaching and learning processes. Monitoring and moderating teachers' work also reflects the accountability aspect of instructional leadership, ensuring that teaching practices align with curriculum expectations and standards.

3.2 Instructional leadership roles of departmental heads

This theme captures the participants' perspectives and experiences in fulfilling their roles as instructional leaders. Departmental heads across all five schools acknowledged that ensuring effective teaching and learning was a core responsibility. Their roles encompassed curriculum planning, monitoring, communication, and collaborative leadership. The data from interviews, observations, and document analysis revealed a strong alignment between what participants shared and what was evident in practice.

3.2.1 Curriculum planning and implementation

Participants highlighted that a significant part of their responsibility involved planning curriculum-related activities and ensuring that teaching and learning processes were well coordinated. At School 1, DH1 emphasised the planning aspect of instructional leadership, stating that curriculum operations, timetabling, and monitoring were central to the role:

> *The planning that we do is around the running of curriculum, planning timetables, and monitoring if teachers are doing their work. We provide support where needed and moderate assessments.*

Similarly, DH2 from School 1 spoke about the proactive nature of planning to ensure curriculum delivery within set timeframes:

> *My work requires a lot of planning. I must plan to make sure that teachers are teaching. I plan times and dates for specific activities even though I do not get to do all of them, but I still plan. This helps in making sure that we deliver all that is due on time.*

From School 2, DH1 discussed how she interpreted and relayed instructions from district authorities to ensure that curriculum expectations were met:

> *When I receive instructions, I need to plan accordingly to make sure that we deliver. I normally do not give direct instructions but send across messages or instructions that I receive and make sure that they are carried out.*

3.2.2 Monitoring and supporting curriculum delivery

Participants also described how they monitored curriculum implementation and supported teachers where challenges arose. At School 3, DH1 clarified that her role did not involve making curriculum decisions but rather ensuring that existing directives were implemented effectively:

> *My role in giving instruction does not involve deciding what to teach but rather making sure that instructions received are carried out and executed by teachers.*

DH2 from the same school acknowledged the limitations in decision-making but affirmed her role in facilitating implementation:

> *This is a difficult one; we do not make curriculum-related decisions; these come from the district. We get plans and make sure that the plans are executed. I believe that is my role in instructional leadership.*

At School 4, DH1 reinforced the importance of planning in managing instructional tasks and ensuring that feedback processes were adhered to:

> *At any given time, as a manager, I must make sure that things run according to plan. This requires planning from my side; when I get an instruction, I ensure that I plan as to when I should send feedback. I believe this is my role in instructional leadership.*

Observations revealed that most departmental heads maintained detailed assessment moderation records, including assessment tasks, question papers, and memos. Additionally, each teacher's file contained timetables, phase plans, and year plans, which were also displayed on classroom walls.

3.2.3 Communication and execution of district instructions

The importance of facilitating communication and executing district-level instructions emerged as another key responsibility. DH2 from School 5 stressed that middle managers play a pivotal role in policy implementation and curriculum support:

> *Providing the teachers with the support for the curriculum, policy implementation, and monitoring of their work is the foremost function of the middle manager.*

Similarly, DH2 from School 4 shared how exemplary leadership contributed to effective implementation:

> *As a leader, I need to be exemplary to my subordinates … thus my role is to lead by example. This helps me in ensuring that set targets are met on time and instructions are carried out.*

Document analysis confirmed that departmental heads maintained well-organised files containing emails and circulars from district offices, along with signed records from teachers acknowledging these communications.

3.2.4 Collaborative planning and vision alignment

Many participants viewed instructional leadership as a collective effort that aligned with the school's broader vision and mission. In School 5, DH1 explained that instructional leadership necessitated strategic collaboration among SMT members to ensure the achievement of school objectives:

> *Instructional leadership is very important in making sure that we achieve our vision and mission as the school. As the SMT, we need to have proper plans in place. We all meet from time to time and plan the activities in the school. So that is our role in instructional leadership.*

DH2 from the same school acknowledged the broader role of management in supporting the principal through the execution of plans:

> *My understanding of the concept is what we do as management to make sure that the school runs perfectly. This is more of the principal's duty, but it also requires us to help the principal as management. We do this by making sure that all the plans we have succeed.*

The data highlights the key instructional leadership roles of departmental heads in public primary schools. A recurring theme is their responsibility for ensuring effective teaching and learning, aligning with Hallinger's (2005) assertion that instructional leadership involves defining the school's mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and fostering a positive learning climate. The findings indicate that departmental heads play a critical role in curriculum planning, timetabling, and monitoring instruction. They ensure that teachers adhere to policy guidelines and instructional schedules, as seen in statements such as DH1, S1. This aligns with Bush (2016), who emphasises that instructional leaders must establish and communicate instructional goals, ensuring curriculum implementation aligns with national and institutional objectives. Furthermore, departmental heads facilitate curriculum execution rather than making decisions on curriculum content, as evidenced in DH2, S3's statement. This highlights their intermediary role between policy directives and classroom execution, as also noted by Williams (2022), who underscores the hierarchical nature of curriculum decision-making in public schools. The departmental heads also oversee assessment moderation, ensuring the quality and standardisation of assessments. The observation that most participants kept files with formative and summative assessment moderation records supports this claim. This function aligns with Van der Merwe (2021), who argues that assessment moderation is a crucial instructional leadership function that maintains educational standards and improves student learning outcomes. The practice of keeping organised records, as noted in document analysis, reflects the structured approach recommended by Tintswalo et al. (2022) in promoting accountability and instructional coherence.

A strong theme in the data is the importance of leading by example. DH2, S4's statement reflects transformational leadership qualities. Leithwood et al. (2020) emphasise that effective instructional leaders inspire and influence teachers through role modelling, motivation, and professional development support. Moreover, departmental heads provide support where curriculum breaches occur, as DH1, S1 mentioned. This aligns with Bellibaş et al. (2022), who state that instructional leadership extends beyond monitoring to actively supporting and developing teachers' instructional practices. The data also indicate that departmental heads engage in strategic planning and collaboration within the SMT. DH1, S5's comment underscores the collective leadership approach. This supports findings by Nadeem (2024), who argues that instructional leadership is most effective when it is distributed across multiple stakeholders in the school system. Additionally, the involvement of departmental heads in planning school activities aligns with Hallinger's (2005) distributed leadership theory, which suggests that leadership practices are not confined to a single individual but are shared among various leaders within the institution.

3.3 Challenges faced by departmental heads in executing instructional leadership roles

The participants across the five schools identified a range of challenges that hinder their ability to effectively carry out instructional leadership duties. These challenges stemmed from systemic issues, such as frequent curriculum changes, top-down policy implementation, inadequate workshops, and administrative overload. Below is a breakdown of the key sub-themes, along with supporting quotes from the participants.

3.3.1 Frequent curriculum changes and time constraints

Participants expressed concern over constantly changing curricula and learning materials that are delivered late, which disrupts curriculum coverage and planning. DH2 from School 3 explained that delayed learning materials and curriculum changes interfere with termly coverage:

> *One of the biggest challenges was the changing curricula – the learning material is always delivered out of the stipulated normal time frames, affecting termly curriculum coverage. Most of the key performance areas per grade are decided at the district circuit level, and middle managers are expected to conform to policy.*

DH2 from School 3 also noted that rigid curriculum coverage requirements lead to poor teaching quality:

> *Curriculum coverage does not allow us to do that. We receive instruction from the district on what to cover by when, and every month we must report if that was covered. This disadvantages the learners as we're now chasing quantity instead of quality.*

3.3.2 Top-down instruction and lack of autonomy

Participants highlighted a lack of voice and participation in decision-making processes, particularly during curriculum workshops, which limits their ability to lead effectively. DH1 from School 2 raised concerns about the lack of consultation in workshops:

> *Curriculum challenges are also based on the quality of workshops the middle managers receive. In the workshops, we do not have a say as people in the classroom. We merely get instruction, and we are not heard, nor do they accept any suggestions that we may have.*

DH2 from School 2 shared a similar sentiment, noting the workshops' one-way structure:

> *The workshops they attended only concentrated on the policy, not on teaching the curricula. Such workshops are intended to capacitate teachers to perform their duties effectively.*

DH2 from School 5 commented on the brevity and superficial nature of workshops:

> *The duration of the workshop is too short and is not done in detail [but is merely a] session where we receive instructions.*

3.3.3 Administrative overload and policy-driven pressure

Participants described how excessive administrative duties and pressure to comply with policies reduce their focus on teaching and learning. DH2 from School 5 explained how adapting to new teaching styles for compliance affects the balance between quality and quantity:

> *We adapt teaching styles to meet the demands of producing quantity vs. quality work.*

DH1 from School 4 lamented that curriculum delivery has been replaced by bureaucratic priorities:

> *We no longer concentrate on making sure that our learners understand the content delivered in class.*

DH2 from School 2 reinforced this concern, stating:

> *Lately we only concentrated on the policy, not on teaching the curricula. Policy determines what should be done by staff and how it should be done.*

3.3.4 Difficulty in problem-solving and leading under pressure

Departmental heads expressed frustration at being unable to effectively problem-solve or lead due to the top-down nature of decision-making and unrealistic expectations. DH1 from School 1 criticised the narrow focus of workshops and their lack of practical value:

> *The workshops only concentrate on the policy, not on teaching the curricula. Such workshops should be intended to capacitate teachers to perform their duties effectively.*

The site visits reinforced these challenges, revealing that departmental heads often face resistance from teachers and are burdened by the responsibility of cascading district information to an already demotivated staff. They operate within a system where their leadership is constrained by policy deadlines and quantity-focused reporting, which hampers meaningful instructional support.

The findings highlight several challenges that departmental heads experience in enacting their instructional leadership roles in public primary schools. These challenges align with the literature on educational leadership, which underscores the difficulties that middle managers face in balancing administrative demands, curriculum implementation, and teacher development (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Kariyana, 2024). One of the dominant themes emerging from the data is the challenge of frequent curriculum changes and the pressure to cover prescribed content within rigid timelines. Participants reported that learning materials are often delivered outside the stipulated timeframes, making it difficult to complete termly curriculum coverage. Research by Fullan (2021) supports this, arguing that continuous curriculum shifts, without adequate preparation and resources, undermine effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, departmental heads feel that curriculum decisions are dictated at the district level, limiting their autonomy to tailor instruction based on the needs of their learners. This aligns with findings by Wong et al. (2020), which assert that centralised decision-making in education can disempower school-based leaders, reducing their ability to enact meaningful instructional leadership.

Another major challenge is the administrative burden associated with instructional leadership. Participants mentioned that constant adjustments to teaching methodologies, dictated by the circuit, result in excessive administrative work, leaving them with little time to focus on improving teaching and learning. Literature corroborates this concern, with Cansoy et al. (2024) emphasising that instructional leaders are often overwhelmed by managerial duties, which reduces their direct engagement with classroom instruction. Additionally, accountability pressures force departmental heads to prioritise policy compliance over deep pedagogical engagement. Hallinger et al. (2020) argue that when instructional leaders are preoccupied with administrative tasks, their ability to support teachers and enhance learner outcomes is compromised. The participants also expressed dissatisfaction with curriculum workshops, stating that they focus too much on policy rather than practical instructional strategies. Research suggests that effective professional development should be contextually relevant and address the specific challenges educators face (Muammar & Alkathiri, 2022). However, the top-down approach described by the participants—where workshops are brief, directive, and exclude participant input—mirrors findings by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who argue that professional development is most effective when it is collaborative, reflective, and sustained over time. The lack of meaningful engagement in these workshops contributes to the sense of frustration among departmental heads, as they feel unheard and unsupported in their instructional leadership roles.

A recurring concern is the emphasis on curriculum coverage and reporting over meaningful teaching and learning. Participants described how they are required to report on curriculum coverage monthly, which shifts the focus from instructional depth to mere content completion. This aligns with the concerns raised by Spillane et al. (2015), who note that excessive bureaucratic oversight can lead to a compliance-driven approach rather than a pedagogical focus. The notion of chasing quantity instead of quality also resonates with research by Sliwka et al. (2024), who argue that effective instructional leadership should prioritise deep learning rather than superficial content delivery.

Another issue highlighted is the resistance of teachers to the leadership of departmental heads, as they, too, feel overwhelmed by unrealistic deadlines and expectations. Literature suggests that effective instructional leadership requires collaboration and shared decision-making (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, the findings indicate a lack of participatory leadership, with departmental heads and teachers feeling disconnected from curriculum decisions made at the district level. This challenge

is further compounded by the limited authority that departmental heads have to influence policy implementation at the school level, reinforcing the argument by Kariyana (2024) that middle managers often struggle to balance top-down mandates with bottom-up needs.

3.4 Continuous professional and personal capacity development for departmental heads

The data revealed that departmental heads in public primary schools strongly believe in the need for ongoing professional and personal capacity development (PPCD) to fulfil their roles effectively. Several sub-themes emerged from the data, supported by participants' narratives, observations, and document analyses.

3.4.1 Learning from peers and professional networks

Participants emphasised the importance of collaborating with other departmental heads for mutual learning and support. DH2, S2 reflected: *It's crucial to pick the brains of experts ... nothing is more reliable than institutional knowledge and the experiences of those who have faced a similar scenario in the past.*

DH2, S3 described regular peer collaboration:

> *We met once every two weeks as middle managers in our circuit, and then we would summarise the week's activities and lay out plans for the coming weeks. And that was the best preparation, or rather training, we got.*

DH1, S5 emphasised the informal support gained through experience-sharing:

> *Sharing our encounters in daily things that we come across is another way of helping each other.*

3.4.2 Use of digital platforms for communication and support

Participants highlighted the use of WhatsApp and virtual platforms to facilitate rapid communication and development. DH2, S3 mentioned the effectiveness of digital tools: *We have WhatsApp groups as middle managers in our district, where we communicate with each other daily. This has proven to be a very useful tool as […] we are able to help each other immediately. I would think this is also part of development.*

DH1, S1 confirmed the benefit of social media in problem-solving:

> *It has become very easy for us to seek help from each other … when we do not understand something, we get to discuss it in our groups and get solutions faster [sic].*

DH2, S4 appreciated time-saving virtual training:

> *We now hold most of our training sessions via Teams or Zoom. We no longer must travel to the district office for workshops. That is really time-saving, and training is done easily.*

3.4.3 Formal study and departmental support

While some opportunities for formal study exist, participants noted time constraints and competing responsibilities as barriers. DH2, S5 acknowledged departmental support for further study:

> *We are afforded bursaries by the department where we can register with different universities and get development.*

DH1, S5 highlighted the challenge of balancing duties and study:

> *Managers have an option for studying with other institutions, but the challenge is time. Where do I fit studying into my daily life? Remember, I struggle to perform all my duties in a day so where would I get time for studying … I have a family too.*

3.4.4 Need for induction, mentoring and coaching

Participants underscored the importance of structured induction and mentoring programmes for newly appointed departmental heads and teachers. DH1, S2 explained their current induction

approach: *The new PL1 needs to understand how we as a school function. In this school, we have sessions where various committees will explain this to new educators, and the SMT will concentrate on things like attendance registers and other things done through a well-informed induction programme.*

DH1, S3 pointed out resource limitations in inducting new teachers:

> *Even though we try our best to induct new teachers, we do not have all the material that is needed to make induction easier [sic].*

DH2, S5 suggested improving induction tools:

> *Induction would be easier if we had files that were filed with all the documents an educator will need in [their] working environment.*

DH2, S3 recommended the development of a practical resource:

> *There should be a manual developed for new teachers. This manual should entail all the things they will need in their class, forms, and copies of registers and all administration paper.*

The data highlights that departmental heads in public primary schools often assume leadership roles without formal managerial training, learning on the job through peer collaboration, mentoring, and informal networking. The lack of structured leadership development programmes underscores a critical gap in professional capacity building, which directly impacts effective classroom instruction. This finding aligns with Bush (2016), who emphasises that leadership preparation is essential for school effectiveness, particularly in disadvantaged contexts where instructional leadership plays a crucial role in supporting teachers and improving student learning outcomes. The evidence suggests that departmental heads rely significantly on peer learning through structured networking within districts, WhatsApp groups, and virtual platforms like Teams and Zoom. DH2, S3's account of biweekly meetings where middle managers share experiences mirrors the concept of professional learning communities, which have been found to be effective in building leadership capacity (Feldman, 2020). Studies indicate that collaboration among educational leaders fosters a shared vision and improves instructional practices (De Jong et al., 2022; Toikka & Tarnanen, 2024). However, while these platforms provide an alternative form of professional development, they do not replace the need for structured and evidence-based leadership training programmes.

The increasing reliance on WhatsApp groups and online training highlights the digital transformation in leadership development. Digital tools facilitate real-time problem-solving and collective decision-making, making leadership development more accessible and immediate. This aligns with the findings of McCarthy et al. (2023), who argue that digital networking enhances school leadership effectiveness, particularly in resource-constrained environments. However, while virtual engagement is valuable, its efficacy depends on the quality of the content shared and the level of engagement from participants. The data reveal that many departmental heads assume their roles based solely on teaching experience, with no formal managerial training. This correlates with previous research indicating that experience alone is insufficient for effective school leadership (Lipscombe et al., 2025). Effective instructional leadership requires targeted training in curriculum management, teacher support, and assessment practices (Leithwood et al., 2020). The lack of formal training limits departmental heads' ability to provide structured guidance to teachers, potentially affecting the quality of classroom instruction.

The participants' discussion on induction programmes and mentoring for newly appointed departmental heads aligns with the broader literature on leadership succession planning. Effective induction programmes help new leaders navigate their roles, understand school functions, and integrate into the school culture (Rajoo, 2012). However, the data suggest that current induction efforts are inconsistent and lack essential resources, such as structured manuals and standardised materials. This is consistent with research by Ndabankulu (2023), which highlights the importance of structured leadership induction programmes in enhancing school management effectiveness.

Although participants acknowledge that bursaries are available for further studies, time constraints pose a significant barrier to participation. As DH1, S5 notes, juggling managerial duties, teaching responsibilities, and family life makes it difficult to pursue additional qualifications. This finding echoes Lafferty et al. (2024), who found that time constraints often limit school leaders' engagement in continuous professional development, thereby affecting their ability to implement leadership best practices in schools.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to explore the instructional leadership experiences of departmental heads in five public primary schools in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Guided by four key objectives, the study sought to understand departmental heads' conceptualisations of instructional leadership, identify their instructional roles, examine the challenges they face, and analyse the impact of leadership capacity development on classroom instruction. Findings revealed varied understandings of instructional leadership among departmental heads. While some viewed it through a hierarchical, principal-led lens, others embraced collaborative and shared leadership models, shaped by individual orientations, school cultures, and structural dynamics. This diversity confirmed the first objective and emphasised the context-dependent nature of instructional leadership.

Findings also indicated that departmental heads played central roles in curriculum planning, lesson observation, learner performance monitoring, and mentoring novice teachers. These practices aligned with their legislated roles in the PAM document and underscored their contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning. However, the study exposed significant challenges that constrained their leadership practice. These included frequent curriculum changes, lack of autonomy, administrative overload, and time constraints that diluted their instructional focus. These findings suggest a persistent gap between policy expectations and the operational realities of middle leadership in public primary schools. The study highlighted that many departmental heads lacked formal preparation for their roles. Participants stressed the need for contextually relevant leadership development programmes, peer support structures, and digital platforms for professional growth. While the Department of Education provides limited training focused on curriculum, leadership, and management capacity development remains neglected.

In conclusion, the study affirms that departmental heads are critical to driving instructional improvement, yet they are overburdened, under-supported, and insufficiently prepared for the complexity of their roles. Strengthening leadership capacity through structured induction, mentoring, coaching, and well-being support is essential to enable departmental heads to lead effectively and sustainably. For instructional leadership to thrive at the middle leadership level, systemic reforms and targeted professional development must be prioritised.

4.1 Limitations of the study

The study was limited to five public primary schools within a single province, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings to other provinces or school phases. Although the sample size is appropriate for qualitative inquiry, it also limits broader representational insights.

4.2 The study presents the following recommendations

The Department of Basic Education, in collaboration with School Management Teams (SMTs), should provide structured support to departmental heads to strengthen their instructional leadership roles. This could be achieved by clearly defining their responsibilities in curriculum planning, timetabling, instructional monitoring, and assessment moderation. Schools should implement a system whereby departmental heads receive ongoing training on policy updates, curriculum implementation, and leadership skills through workshops and professional learning communities. Additionally, departmental heads should be equipped with digital tools and resources to streamline record-

keeping and data-driven decision-making. By strengthening the instructional leadership roles of departmental heads, schools can enhance curriculum implementation, improve teacher support, and ultimately contribute to better learning outcomes for students.

To mitigate the challenges faced by departmental heads in executing their instructional leadership roles, the Department of Basic Education and district officials should establish more flexible curriculum implementation timelines that account for delays in the delivery of learning materials and teacher workload. District officials should also decentralise some curriculum decisions, granting departmental heads the required autonomy to tailor instructional strategies to their schools' specific needs. Furthermore, professional development workshops should be redesigned to be more interactive and practical, ensuring that departmental heads gain hands-on experience in problem-solving rather than merely complying with top-down directives. Reducing the administrative burden on departmental heads by delegating non-instructional tasks to administrative staff will allow them to focus more on supporting teachers and improving teaching quality. Addressing these challenges will create a more conducive environment for instructional leadership, reducing stress and enhancing the overall efficiency of teaching and learning in public primary schools.

It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education, in partnership with higher education institutions, establish structured leadership development programmes specifically tailored for departmental heads. These programmes should include formal training in instructional leadership, curriculum management, and teacher mentoring, ensuring that departmental heads are well prepared for their roles. Schools should also institutionalise mentorship and induction programmes for newly appointed departmental heads, where experienced leaders provide guidance and support during the transition process. Digital platforms, such as virtual training sessions and professional learning communities via WhatsApp or Teams, should be further developed to facilitate ongoing knowledge-sharing and collaboration. Furthermore, departmental heads should be supported in pursuing higher qualifications by providing time allowances and incentives such as study leave. Strengthening professional development opportunities will ensure that departmental heads are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to lead effectively, thereby improving teacher performance and student learning outcomes.

5. Declarations

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (P.N.K. & P.N.); Literature review (P.N.K., P.N. & P.B.O.); methodology (P.N.K. & P.N.); software (N/A.); validation (P.N.); formal analysis (P.N.K., P.N. & P.B.O.); investigation (P.N.K.); data curation (P.N.K. & P.N.) drafting and preparation (P.N.K. & P.N.); review and editing (P.B.O.); supervision (P.N.); project administration (P.N.K. & P.N.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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