



**Departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support in teaching and learning: A
case of selected Ugu primary schools**

Submitted by

Charity Thandeka Mbelu

Student number: 224140446

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Supervised by: Dr LL Mbatha

DECLARATION

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved children, Zewande and Zukhanye. I thank the Almighty for trusting me with you. You've been my inspiration and motivation throughout this journey. I thank God for your unwavering faith, enduring love, and constant encouragement that have driven my determination to succeed.

I will forever be grateful to God for the opportunity to fulfil my dream as a mother and scholar. His unconditional love has always reminded me that with Him anything is possible. This accomplishment is a testament to His faithfulness, determination, and love.

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of instructional leadership in South African primary schools is paramount for successful curriculum delivery. Instructional leadership is vital because it guides teaching practices, fosters professional growth, and ensures student learning remains the central focus. Strong leaders create supportive environments, set clear expectations, and use data to drive improvement. This leadership empowers educators, enhances collaboration, and ultimately raises academic achievement across schools. Subject advisors are mandated to provide pedagogical support and oversight to departmental heads, yet the efficacy of this crucial relationship is frequently compromised. This qualitative study investigated the lived experiences of six departmental heads concerning district-level support, triangulating their interviews and collage data with questionnaire responses from five subject advisors within a resource-constrained district. The study employed Bandura's social learning theory to interpret the findings, focusing on how the constructs of observational learning and social persuasion are either supported or undermined by the district environment. The findings reveal a critical systemic failure in the support structure. Data collected from departmental heads consistently reported the total absence of modelling on subject advisors, stifling observational learning and severely eroding professional self-efficacy, which manifested as professional risk aversion. This isolation compels departmental heads to rely on unvetted, informal peer-to-peer modelling (e.g., WhatsApp groups), a resilient but precarious coping mechanism that threatens curriculum integrity. Crucially, the subject advisor data substantiates this operational failure, revealing that subject advisors are themselves burdened by systemic constraints, including excessive administrative duties and insufficient travel budgets, which structurally prohibit them from fulfilling their instructional mandate. The study concludes that the challenges faced by departmental heads are not a result of individual negligence but a direct consequence of a policy–practice misalignment. The district environment actively obstructs the conditions necessary for social learning, creating a negative feedback loop of low self-efficacy and professional stagnation. Recommendations are presented to address these systemic resource barriers to restore the relational, cognitive, and environmental structures required for sustainable instructional leadership. Instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the overall quality of teaching and learning within schools. Strong leaders in this area provide clarity of vision, practical guidance, and effective modelling that enable educators to develop professionally, deliver curriculum with greater precision, and uphold high standards of learner

achievement. In the absence of such leadership, teachers and departmental heads often lack direction, which leads to inconsistency, diminished accountability, and weakened educational outcomes. When districts prioritise instructional leadership, they foster collaborative learning cultures, build teacher confidence, and ensure that organizational structures actively support rather than obstruct the pursuit of educational excellence.

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Subject Advisor, Departmental Head, Social Learning Theory, Self-Efficacy, Systemic Failure, Curriculum Coherence.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CPD	- Continuous Professional Development
DBE	- Department of Basic Education
ELMP	- Education Leadership Management and Policy
ICT	- Information and Communication Technology
PLC	- Professional Learning Community
SBA	- School-Based Assessments
SIP	- School Improvement Plan

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The quality of teaching and learning in primary education depends significantly on the professional support provided to educators. In South Africa's education system, this support structure includes departmental heads, subject advisors, and district officials, forming a multi-layered approach to educational leadership and development. Within KwaZulu-Natal, subject advisors have emerged as crucial facilitators of instructional improvement, particularly in primary schools (Shozi, 2014). Teaching and learning outcomes and the role of subject advisors in enhancing teacher capacity and instructional quality (Abdulah, 2023). Subject advisors are crucial in primary schools because they guide teachers in building strong foundations for literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. They provide expertise, ensure curriculum alignment, and support effective teaching strategies. Their mentorship enhances teacher confidence, improves classroom practice, and directly strengthens learners' early academic development and long-term success (Buzică, 2024). It has been noted that adequate professional support can lead to improved student achievement and reduced teacher turnover. Given the critical role of subject advisors in supporting educators and improving instructional quality, an exploration of their effectiveness and the challenges they face in KwaZulu-Natal primary schools is warranted.

This chapter provides a comprehensive introduction to the study. It begins by establishing the background and context of the research problem, highlighting the importance of subject advisor support in primary schools. Following this, the problem statement, purpose, and significance of the study are clearly defined. The chapter then outlines the research objectives and questions that will guide the investigation. Furthermore, it provides a rationale for the study and articulates the researcher's positionality. To conclude, the chapter presents an overview of the methodology employed and the theoretical framework underpinning the research, setting the stage for the subsequent chapters.

1.2 Background to the Problem

The success of curriculum implementation and instructional improvement in South Africa hinges on effective leadership within schools (Fleisch & Christie, 2004). The departmental head's role is central to this effort, serving as the crucial link between national policy and classroom practice. Similarly, the subject advisor is mandated by policy to act as a supportive

instructional leader, providing developmental guidance, resources, and professional support to departmental heads and educators (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2020). This relationship is intended to foster a culture of reflective practice and continuous improvement (Joyce, 1990). Departmental heads play a key role in schools by overseeing teaching and learning in their subject areas. On a daily basis, they monitor classroom teaching, support and guide teachers, check lesson planning, and ensure curriculum standards are met. They also encourage collaboration and help improve overall learner performance.

However, research across South African contexts consistently highlights systemic pressures that undermine this ideal. Subject advisors frequently face overwhelming caseloads, often supervising hundreds of schools across vast geographical areas with limited logistical and financial resources (Villegas, 2022). This structural environment means the support provided is often reduced to sporadic, compliance-driven visits rather than the sustained, developmental coaching departmental heads require. Furthermore, many departmental heads take on their leadership roles without adequate formal training in instructional coaching or change management, leaving them highly dependent on the very support structures that are failing.

Consequently, while the literature confirms that the departmental head–subject advisor support system is under strain, it also establishes that adequate support is non-negotiable for academic success. It is against this backdrop of mandated support that the current study is situated, within a system facing significant, documented systemic pressure.

1.3 Problem Statement

The established background demonstrates that the departmental head–subject advisor support system, while vital, is constrained by significant systemic challenges. Despite this widespread structural issue, there is a distinct lacuna in empirical knowledge regarding the actual lived experiences and professional coping mechanisms of departmental heads when this formal support is absent or intermittent.

Specifically, in the Ugu District, preliminary observations and anecdotal evidence suggest a stark reality: departmental heads are often operating in profound professional isolation, substituting mandated subject advisor support with informal peer networks and communication channels (such as WhatsApp groups). This reliance on non-mandated support is a clear symptom of a systemic breakdown. Furthermore, the existing literature primarily focuses on policy failures or subject advisor workload, neglecting the consequences of this failure on the

departmental head. A departmental head may struggle to moderate assessments without support, as ensuring fairness and consistency across multiple classes requires collaboration, shared expertise, and additional time. Without assistance from colleagues or subject advisors, maintaining standardized marking and balancing workload becomes difficult, potentially affecting the quality and reliability of learner outcomes. This gap is critical because, through the lens of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, a sustained lack of supportive interaction risks eroding departmental heads' self-efficacy, leading to decreased motivation and stagnation in instructional leadership. While we know the system is broken, we do not know how departmental heads experience it, how they cope with it, or the emotional and professional cost it exacts. This study addresses this critical empirical void by exploring the departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support in teaching and learning within selected Ugu primary schools.

The need for this study is not simply to reiterate the failure of the system but to understand its immediate human impact. Understanding the human impact is important because it shifts the focus from abstract systemic shortcomings to the lived realities of those directly affected. By examining the emotional, professional, and personal consequences for departmental heads, we gain empathy and awareness, uncover practical insights into coping strategies, and hold policymakers accountable for the consequences of dysfunction. Most importantly, it ensures that any proposed solutions are grounded in human needs, making reforms more ethical, sustainable, and impactful.

1.4 Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study explores the experiences of departmental heads in selected Ugu primary schools concerning subject advisor support in teaching and learning. It aims to investigate the nature of support, the challenges encountered, and the impact of this support on teaching and learning outcomes, ultimately seeking a deeper understanding of the role of subject advisors.

The study is significant because it addresses a critical aspect of educational support systems. Adequate subject advisor support can enhance teacher confidence, competence, and overall teaching quality, ultimately leading to improved learner outcomes. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge on educational support systems, specifically in the context of primary schools. The research provides insights into the challenges and

opportunities associated with subject advisor support, informing policy and practice initiatives aimed at enhancing teaching and learning.

For instance, research has emphasised the role of subject advisors in promoting teacher confidence and competence. A study by Tjozongoro (2019) highlighted the importance of subject advisor support in enhancing teaching and learning. Other studies, such as studies by Ngole & Mkulu (2021) have stressed the need for effective collaboration between subject advisors and departmental heads to enhance teaching and learning. Additionally, studies by Kotirde & Yunos (2014) states that collaboration between subject advisors and departmental heads is aimed at strengthening teaching practices, solving school related challenges, fostering teamwork between leadership and staff, and promoting both professionalism and staff autonomy while encouraging intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, inspection is specifically intended to ensure that minimum standards are consistently upheld in teaching and learning. This includes monitoring curriculum coverage, resource availability, discipline, and accurate record keeping. It also serves as a way to identify the challenges schools face and to assess how effectively they are achieving their educational goals. Identified challenges faced by subject advisors in providing support to teachers, underscoring the need for targeted interventions.

This study provides a nuanced understanding of departmental heads' experiences with subject advisor support, informing improvements in education policy and practice, professional development, and support systems to enhance teaching and learning outcomes in primary schools. The study's significance is further underscored by its focus on Ugu primary schools, providing contextual relevance and addressing the specific needs and challenges of these schools. The research provides valuable insights into the experiences of departmental heads, subject advisors, and teachers, informing initiatives aimed at enhancing teaching and learning in primary schools.

1.5 Research Objectives and Research Questions

The objectives of this study are:

- 1 To explore the experiences of departmental heads regarding support provided by subject advisors in teaching and learning.
- 2 To examine how departmental heads perceive the effectiveness of subject advisors in enhancing teaching and learning practices.

- 3 To identify the challenges departmental heads face in accessing and utilising subject advisor support.

The main research question is: How do departmental heads in Ugu District primary schools experience the support provided by subject advisors in teaching and learning, including their perceptions of its effectiveness and the challenges they face in accessing and utilising it? The sub-questions for the study are:

- 1 What are the experiences of departmental heads regarding support provided by subject advisors in teaching and learning?
- 2 How do departmental heads perceive the effectiveness of subject advisors in enhancing teaching and learning practices?
- 3 What challenges do departmental heads face in accessing and utilising subject advisors' support?

1.6 Rationale for the Study

While existing literature has extensively documented the role of subject advisors in curriculum implementation and teacher support (Mahupela, 1996), there remains limited research on how departmental heads experience and perceive this support, particularly in rural and semi-rural contexts like the Ugu District. Previous studies have focused primarily on urban schools (Diko & Bantwini, 2013) or subject advisors' perspectives (Shozi, 2014), creating a significant knowledge gap regarding the experiences of departmental heads who serve as the crucial link between subject advisors and classroom teachers.

This study is particularly timely given the recent curriculum changes in South African primary schools and the increasing emphasis on quality assurance in education. While policy documents clearly outline the expected role of subject advisors in supporting teaching and learning (Husén 1988), there is insufficient empirical evidence about how this support manifests in practice, especially from the perspective of departmental heads who are direct recipients of this support (Hart-Baldrige, 2020). Departmental heads must adapt to policy changes, such as updates in assessment policy, which affect how teachers plan lessons, evaluate learners, and report progress

My personal experience as a primary school teacher and departmental head in Ugu District has provided first hand insight into the challenges of implementing curriculum changes without

adequate support. During a recent mathematics curriculum rollout, the disconnect between policy expectations and actual support received became particularly evident. This experience, while valuable for contextualising the research, points to a broader systemic issue that requires systematic investigation.

Hence, this study seeks to examine these experiences through rigorous research, and it aims to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks of educational support and the practical realities faced by departmental heads. The insights gained could inform policy refinements and practical interventions to enhance the effectiveness of subject advisory support in similar contexts. This study can help improve the support departmental heads receive by highlighting their experiences with subject advisors in primary schools. It explores how advisors guide teaching practices, assist with curriculum implementation, and provide professional development. By examining challenges such as moderating assessments and adapting to policy changes, the study reveals areas where departmental heads need stronger collaboration and resources. Insights gained can inform strategies to enhance instructional leadership, strengthen teacher support, and improve learner outcomes. Ultimately, the findings aim to ensure subject advisors play a more effective role in advancing teaching and learning at the foundational level.

1.7 Research Positionality

As a departmental head in a primary school, I have always been fascinated by the role of subject advisors in supporting teaching and learning. However, my interest in this topic is not only professional but also deeply personal. Throughout my career as a departmental head, I have never received subject advisor support, and this lack of support has significantly impacted my experiences and perspectives on teaching and learning.

Growing up in a disadvantaged community, I attended a primary school that lacked resources and support. As a result, I had to rely heavily on my initiative and creativity to develop skills that would later inform my teaching practice. When I became a departmental head, I expected to receive guidance and support from subject advisors, but unfortunately, this was not the case. The absence of subject advisor support forced me to navigate the complexities of teaching and learning on my own, often relying on trial and error.

This experience has shaped my research positionality, as I am deeply invested in advisor support. I am curious to know how subject advisors support departmental heads in teaching and learning, what challenges they face, and how they overcome these challenges. My own

experiences have created a sense of empathy and understanding for departmental heads who may be struggling to access support, and I am committed to amplifying their voices through this research.

As a researcher, I am aware of my own biases and assumptions, which may influence my interpretation of the data. However, I believe that my experiences as a departmental head without subject advisor support provide a unique perspective that can enrich this research. My positionality allows me to approach this study with a sense of curiosity, empathy, and understanding, which will enable me to gather rich and nuanced data. I will manage bias by openly acknowledging my prior experience with the same challenge and implementing structured safeguards such as reflexivity, peer review, and transparent methodology to ensure balanced and credible findings. My experiences guide this study, but I will remain open to all perspectives.”

1.8 Overview of the Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study research design because it allowed for an in-depth examination of the experiences of departmental heads with subject advisor support, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2017). A qualitative case study approach was used to obtain a contextualised understanding of the experiences of departmental heads, considering the unique socio-economic and cultural context of the two primary schools. The study was conducted in semi-rural and rural primary schools to explore how contextual differences influence departmental heads’ experiences of subject advisor support in teaching and learning, ensuring diverse perspectives and richer comparative insights. This is further expanded in Chapter Four.

1.9 Overview of Theoretical Framework

Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory is used as a framework for this study. Given that the study focuses on the interaction between departmental heads and subject advisors, social learning theory is particularly relevant, as it emphasises the reciprocal influence of social interactions on learning outcomes. This theory aligns with the study's objective of examining how subject advisors, through their guidance and mentorship, influence the teaching practices of departmental heads, who, in turn, affect their teaching staff. This is further explained in Chapter Three.

1.10 Structure of the Dissertation

This study is divided into five chapters, each with a distinct focus.

Chapter One introduces the study, outlining its background, purpose, research objectives, questions, and rationale.

Chapter Two presents a discussion of related literature, focusing on the role of subject advisors in improving learner outcomes. The chapter draws on both international and local empirical studies.

Chapter Three establishes social learning theory as the theoretical framework for the study, describing its key components, explaining its relevance and application in the study, and providing a critique of the theory.

Chapter Four describes the research methodology employed in the study, including methods, data generation tools, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Chapter Five presents the data generated during the field study, reflecting on the research journey and summarising the study's key findings

Chapter Six delivers a thorough interpretation and critique of the findings from Chapter Five, focusing on how departmental heads in primary schools experience support from subject advisors. It explores the quality, consistency, and relevance of this support, identifying key trends and contextual factors. Using theoretical perspectives and comparative analysis, the chapter assesses how well current support structures meet departmental heads' professional demands, offering insights for policy reform and future educational research.

Chapter Seven is a concluding chapter that wraps up the investigation into departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support in Ugu District primary schools. It synthesises findings by directly addressing the research questions and reinforcing the relevance of Bandura's social learning theory. The chapter also outlines the study's limitations, clarifying its scope and applicability. Ultimately, it offers actionable, research-informed recommendations to enhance policy and practice to strengthen leadership effectiveness in school settings.

1.11 Chapter Summary

The chapter introduces the study and provides the background to the problem, followed by the purpose and significance of the study. The research objectives and research questions are presented, followed by the rationale and the researcher's positionality. An indication of the methodology used in the research and the theoretical framework underpinning the study is also provided, together with an overview of the thesis outline. The next chapter will engage in an in-depth review of related literature.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on introducing the study, outlining its background, purpose, research objectives, questions, and rationale, while establishing context for subsequent analysis. The study objectives are threefold: firstly, to explore the experiences of departmental heads regarding the support provided by subject advisors in teaching and learning; secondly, to examine how departmental heads perceive the effectiveness of subject advisors in enhancing teaching and learning practices and thirdly, to identify the challenges departmental heads encounter in accessing and utilising subject advisor support. These objectives collectively guide the research in understanding both the value and limitations of subject advisor interventions within primary schools.

The role of subject advisors in supporting teaching and learning in primary schools is crucial yet remains underexplored, especially in rural South African contexts. This literature review aims to explore the existing scholarship through three thematic lenses that correspond to prevailing research gaps: the nature of subject advisor support, departmental heads lived experiences with this support and the challenges within the support system. Subject advisor support is vital because it directly influences teaching quality and learner outcomes by strengthening instructional practices and providing professional guidance. The nature of support shapes departmental heads' experiences, which in turn highlight both positive impacts and persistent challenges in accessing and utilising such assistance. These challenges inform the development of effective models that can enhance teaching and learning in diverse contexts. By linking the themes of support, experiences, challenges, and models, the study builds a comprehensive understanding of subject advisor effectiveness. This review draws on local and international scholarship to critically examine these themes and identify gaps that this study addresses.

2.2 Nature and Forms of Subject Advisor Support

Subject advisors serve as crucial intermediaries in the educational system, facilitating curricular knowledge and supporting the implementation of educational policies (Denzin et al., 2017). This means that subject advisors play a vital role that extends beyond administrative responsibilities to include pedagogical guidance and curriculum implementation strategies. Tallerico (2005) emphasises subject advisors' roles in teachers' professional development,

particularly in curriculum delivery guidance, explaining that adequate support relies on conducting sessions at school to develop heads of department and teachers through school visits, workshops and mentoring sessions.

In addition, research by Martin & Mulvihill (2023) emphasises the necessity for subject advisors to engage in continuous professional learning to retain their effectiveness and credibility in supporting educators. Providing support by subject advisors fosters growth, strengthens teaching skills, encourages collaboration, and enhances professional development for improved learner outcomes (Makhanya, 2020). The engagement of departmental heads with subject advisors on professional development has not only focused on the provision of up-to-date knowledge but has also supported subject advisors with practical strategies to assist teachers. This raises an emergent question about which specific forms of support departmental heads value most. Currently, there is a lack of studies that examine these preferences, particularly in rural contexts where support frameworks may differ significantly from urban environments.

2.3 The Challenges of Support and Mentorship for Departmental Heads

Subject advisors play a vital role in supporting teachers in their professional development. However, they encounter numerous challenges that hinder their ability to provide adequate support. According to subject advisors, South Africa is facing increasing difficulties in supporting teachers due to inadequate resources. Funding shortages have delayed the Department of Basic Education's provision of resources to advisors, further exacerbating the issue. Diko & Bantwini (2013) claim that district assistance for schools in South Africa is mainly absent, leaving subject advisors without the necessary support to perform their duties effectively. In contrast, Evert & Stein (2022) emphasise that subject advisors, despite systemic constraints, have increasingly become central to fostering communities of practice among teachers, thereby compensating for the lack of district-level support. More recently, Dlamini et al., (2024) underscores that subject advisors act as mediators between policy and classroom practice, highlighting their evolving role in shaping pedagogical approaches and bridging gaps in curriculum implementation. Thus, while Diko & Bantwini (2013) stress the absence of structural support, later scholars such as Evert & Stein (2022) illustrate how subject advisors are adapting and expanding their influence to sustain teacher development in resource constrained environments.

An expanding body of research highlights the critical role that departmental heads play as mediators between subject advisors and teachers. Tapala et al. (2021) reveal that many departmental heads report feeling inadequately supported, yet do not explore the nuances of their experiences or define what constitutes meaningful support for them. This means that, in most institutions, departmental heads experience inadequate support and mentorship from subject advisors, which falls short of their expectations. Consequently, some departmental heads resort to seeking support from external resource personnel, often incurring personal financial costs for transport and incentives. They feel that subject advisors need to develop a way to provide support and mentorship to departmental heads and teachers. More focused studies are needed that investigate how departmental heads perceive the support received from subject advisors and how they translate these interactions into actionable strategies for their teachers.

The quality of the relationship between subject advisors and departmental heads can have a profound impact on instructional practices and student learning outcomes (Day et al., 2016). An interactive relationship between subject advisors and departmental heads is crucial, as its absence can compromise the effectiveness of subject advisor presence in schools. Departmental heads do not operate in limbo, and subject advisors need to have a better understanding of the perceptions of departmental heads in these interactions since they are essential for optimising support strategies. One of the aims of this research is to identify the forms of support that departmental heads consider most beneficial and to explore how these preferences may vary across different geographical contexts, particularly in rural areas where resource constraints often limit access to adequate support.

2.4 The Influence of Subject Advisor Support in Teaching and Learning

The influence of subject advisor support on teaching quality and student outcomes is an area ripe for further exploration. (Salma, 2020) Salma articulates that a disconnect between educational policies and actual classroom conditions hinders effective teaching practices. This implies that a disconnect in supporting teaching quality is likely to result in poor learner outcomes, as subject advisors may be present but fail to offer the expected quality of mentorship, hindering productive teaching and learning. Weak support leads to weak learner outcomes because learners lack guidance, feedback, and encouragement needed to build confidence and skills. Without strong support, motivation declines, misunderstandings persist, and progress slows. This results in poor knowledge retention, limited skill development, and

reduced ability to apply learning effectively. Inadequate professional development opportunities for subject advisors lead to diminished quality in the support provided by subject advisors (Niska, 2014). These studies highlight the need for systematic frameworks that align subject advisor support with the distinct contexts of the classrooms they aim to assist.

2.5 Effective Model of Subject Advisor Support

Research must address how practical subject advisor support can be mobilised to improve not only teaching practices but also student achievements. (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). These scholars advocate the establishment of collaborative learning communities to foster more meaningful dialogue among stakeholders involved in educational improvement. More surveys are required to substantiate these claims, particularly considering recent studies that provide fresh insights into successful intervention strategies and models of effective subject advisor support.

A notable gap regarding benchmarks for effective subject advisor support models has been noted, particularly in similar contexts. Studies from regions such as Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate the efficacy of localised support systems that recognise the specific needs of educators working in rural primary school environments, promoting peer collaboration and on-the-ground mentorship (Naoko & Yumi, 2023). Such models stress the need for subject advisors to engage in culturally relevant training that underscores their role within the community while also ensuring that they can effectively support teachers in implementing a curriculum that resonates with local realities.

While the literature outlines the framework through which subject advisors operate, there exists a profound under-representation of research focused on departmental heads' perceptions and experiences with subject advisor support. The clarity of effective support models, the impact of these supports on teaching quality and outcomes, and insights from successful intervention strategies in similar contexts represent critical avenues for research. Valuable insights into effective practices and challenges can also be gleaned from the experiences of subject advisors in different countries, as noted in the recent studies in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa mentioned above.

Subject advisors play an essential role in improving the quality of education by bridging the gap between educational policy and classroom implementation (Mbanjwa, 2014). The effectiveness of this role, however, hinges on the presence of structured, contextually relevant

models of support that not only empower teachers and departmental heads but also promote sustained improvement in teaching and learning outcomes. Studies by Parker et al. (2024) emphasise the need for innovative, collaborative, and context-sensitive models that go beyond administrative oversight and focus on developmental, instructional, and relational dimensions of support.

One of the most widely endorsed models for adequate subject advisor support is the professional learning community (PLC) model. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) argue that PLCs create a culture of continuous learning, where subject advisors, departmental heads, and teachers collaboratively engage in problem-solving and reflective practice. In this model, subject advisors are not seen as external evaluators but as co-learners and facilitators who foster dialogue around best practices, curriculum challenges, and innovative pedagogy. PLCs enable schools to move away from isolated professional development events towards ongoing, embedded learning experiences that are directly linked to teachers' daily instructional realities (Owen, 2014).

This collaborative approach has been shown to improve both teacher confidence and learner outcomes, especially when subject advisors adopt a coaching stance rather than a directive one (Hall & Simeral, 2008). In rural areas of South Africa, where isolation and limited access to professional development are prevalent, PLCs offer an opportunity to decentralise expertise and enable peer-to-peer knowledge sharing (Tournier et al., 2023).

2.6 Subject Advisors' Perceptions of Resource-related Difficulties

The effectiveness of teaching and learning in primary schools is heavily reliant on the support structures in place, with subject advisors playing a pivotal role in enhancing educational outcomes. (Hightower et al., 2011). However, the success of these advisors is often contingent upon the resources available to them in their work environment (Ntlhare & Veliswa, 2024). Numerous studies have highlighted the challenges faced by subject advisors in accessing adequate resources, which can impede their ability to provide meaningful support to departmental heads, teachers, and students. (Rammbuda, 2023).

The shortage of resources has severe consequences for the effectiveness of subject advisors. Curriculum advisors struggle to lead workshops in situations with inadequate or non-existent infrastructure (Diko & Bantwini, 2013). Moreover, the lack of government-funded transportation forces curriculum advisors to use their vehicles, which can be costly and

inefficient (Mandukwini, 2016). The compensation for using personal vehicles is often insufficient to cover maintenance costs. This underfunding ultimately affects learners and teachers, with wider implications for the economy.

Insufficient funding also directly exacerbates the difficulties faced by subject advisors, profoundly impacting academic achievement (National Research Council et al., 2007). These financial constraints often prevent districts from acquiring the necessary instructional materials. In addition, curriculum advisors are limited in their school visits, sometimes only managing a visit once a year due to resource scarcity and inadequate provisions for lodging and travel costs (Rambuda, 2023).

Addressing these resource and funding limitations requires intervention strategies supported by adequate operational capacity and sustained funding. Studies consistently show that schools in underfunded districts face significant hurdles in accessing high-quality teaching and learning materials. While the DBE has proposed increased investment in curriculum support services, scholars such as (Smith & O'Day, 1990) argue that such financial interventions may have a limited impact without systematic structural reforms. Educational experts advocate a holistic approach to curriculum support, encompassing continuous professional development (CPD) for curriculum advisors, improved workload distribution, and enhanced district-level authority to implement curriculum strategies effectively (Petar, 2024). These comprehensive measures are crucial for fostering improved school performance and ensuring greater accessibility to resources that promote high-quality education for all stakeholders.

2.7 Resources for Professional Development: Benefits and Effective Utilisation

Access to appropriate resources, particularly digital resources, significantly enhances teaching and learning, supporting CPD among educators. The DBE emphasises the need for subject advisors to actively guide teachers in leveraging tools in the classroom (Thomas, 2016). Indeed, the advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) has profoundly transformed educational landscapes, offering new avenues for effective teaching and learning (Rambuda, 2023). The application of modern methods and skills in online resource use can boost facilitator motivation and optimise the learning process (Obizoba, 2016). Furthermore, subject advisors can broaden their professional experience, acquire new skills, and remain current on industry best practices by effectively using these resources (Folsom et al., 2015).

To successfully fulfil their responsibilities in the digital age, subject advisors must possess strong proficiency in the use of digital resources and a firm grasp of technology (Collins & Halverson, 2018). The integration of contemporary instructional technology demonstrably increases the effectiveness of teacher education (O'Brien et al., 2011). For instance, online professional development programmes facilitate interactive discussions between teachers and subject advisors, enabling real-time feedback and support (Yang & Liu, 2004). Common digital resources that enhance teaching and learning include computers, interactive whiteboards, computer laboratories, and the internet.

2.8 Instructional Supervision in Schools

Research into subject advisors' roles and responsibilities suggests that subject advisors play a crucial role in supporting teaching and learning (Tjozongoro, 2019). However, their roles and responsibilities are often unclear, leading to confusion and uncertainty (Shozi, 2014). Some studies emphasise the importance of instructional leadership (Tjozongoro, 2019), while others highlight the need for support and guidance. Subject advisors face various challenges, including limited resources, inadequate training, and conflicting expectations. The lack of clear job descriptions and operational manuals can also hinder their effectiveness (Ndeipanda, 2018). In addition, the dual role of support and evaluation can create tension and conflict.

Instructional support research emphasises the importance of subject advisors providing instructional support to teachers, including guidance on curriculum implementation, teaching strategies, and assessment practices (Nandjembo, 1999). Adequate instructional support can lead to improved teacher practice and student learning outcomes (Sachs, 2012). Studies from other countries highlight the need for context-specific approaches to instructional support and the importance of ongoing professional development for subject advisers. Recent literature indicates that there is limited research on the specific roles and responsibilities of subject advisors in supporting teaching and learning, particularly in the South African context. Further research is needed to explore the practical aspects of instructional support and the challenges faced by these subject advisors.

2.9 Challenges in Curriculum Support in South African Schools

Existing literature highlights several challenges encountered by curriculum advisors when offering support to schools. Research by Hunter and Nguyen (2024) suggests that curriculum advisors often suffer from understaffing, leading to an overwhelming workload that affects

their efficiency and the quality of support they can provide. Additionally, studies emphasise that advisors frequently lack the necessary pedagogical training to handle curriculum complexities (Rambuda, 2023).

Furthermore, time constraints significantly impact the ability of curriculum advisors to respond to school needs effectively (Daniel, 2017). The heavy demands placed on advisors often result in inadequate engagement with teachers, limiting the potential for meaningful curriculum guidance (Phillippo, 2010). These issues exacerbate the already strained education system, creating dissatisfaction among teachers and principals who view the existing support structures as unsustainable.

Beyond these universal challenges, curriculum support in South African education has been a contentious issue, raising concerns about its implementation and sustainability. The effectiveness of this support is intricately tied to various structural and administrative factors, including the authority of districts, resource availability, and the competency of curriculum advisors (Mncube et al., 2023). Although South African education districts play a significant role in curriculum support, their authority often remains mainly administrative, focused on planning and setting objectives rather than direct intervention. This limited power can hinder their ability to provide adequate curriculum support, despite their responsibilities in financial allocation, resource management, and curriculum implementation.

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2.9.1 Contextual and Localised Support Models

Adequate support must also account for the contextual realities of the schools in which subject advisors operate (Phillippo, 2010). In the South African context, localised models of subject advisor support have emerged as particularly effective. These models are grounded in the recognition that rural and under-resourced schools have unique challenges that standardised support strategies may not address (McEvoy, 2024).

In rural districts, tailored support interventions have included the formation of school clusters, small groups of schools supported by a common advisory team, where advisors provide targeted, rotational mentorship on curriculum implementation and assessment strategies (Kirmayer et al., 2009). Research indicates that when subject advisors are embedded within communities and understand the local context, they are more effective in building trust and facilitating meaningful professional growth (Thiry & Laursen, 2011).

2.9.2 Instructional Coaching Models

Instructional coaching has gained traction globally as an effective strategy for improving teaching practices through one-on-one, sustained engagement (Hickey, 2024). In this model, subject advisors act as instructional coaches who observe classroom practice, provide targeted feedback, and help educators set goals for improvement (Devine et al., 2013). Unlike traditional supervision, instructional coaching is non-evaluative, interactive, and focused on continuous professional learning.

Mashiane-Nkabinde (2020) highlights the effectiveness of this model in schools across Mpumalanga and Limpopo, where subject advisors who received training in coaching skills

were able to build stronger professional relationships with departmental heads and teachers. These advisors reported increased confidence in facilitating data-driven instruction and curriculum alignment. Instructional coaching not only enhances teachers' pedagogical skills but also helps departmental heads build their instructional leadership capacity, a factor often overlooked in generic development programmes.

2.9.3 Use of Digital and Blended Support Models

The integration of digital platforms into subject advisor support models has proven especially useful in expanding the reach and frequency of support in geographically dispersed areas. Mpungose (2020) reports that WhatsApp groups, Google Meet sessions and learning management systems like Moodle are being increasingly used in South African districts to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous interactions between subject advisors and school staff.

This blended support model, combining face-to-face engagements with digital communication, enables advisors to provide timely feedback, share resources, and conduct virtual workshops, even when transportation and logistics pose barriers. Moreover, digital tools allow for differentiated support: for instance, novice departmental heads may receive more frequent check-ins, while experienced ones may engage in leadership forums and discussion boards. However, it is crucial to note that technological disparities still exist in rural areas, where internet access and digital literacy can be limiting factors. (Neumeyer et al., 2020).

An increasingly popular and practical model is the peer mentorship approach, where experienced departmental heads or lead teachers are paired with newer counterparts under the guidance of a subject advisor (Antoniadis, 2024). This approach not only distributes leadership but also reduces the strain on individual subject advisors, who are often overwhelmed by large caseloads.

The co-facilitation model, wherein subject advisors lead joint workshops or school development sessions alongside departmental heads, has also been shown to foster greater professional respect and empowerment (Watson & Gatti, 2012). Such models enhance sustainability because they create in-school leadership capacity, allowing ongoing support to continue even in the absence of the advisor. Moreover, co-facilitation encourages joint ownership of the school's development trajectory, leading to better alignment between departmental goals and classroom practices.

2.9.4 Evidence-Based Support Models

Effective support models are increasingly grounded in data-informed decision-making. Subject advisors who use school-level data, such as learner performance trends, assessment results, and classroom observation notes, to guide their interventions are better able to tailor their support (Hamilton et al., 2009). This approach, when embedded within the coaching or PLC framework, ensures that support is responsive to actual needs rather than assumed deficiencies.

Recent efforts by the DBE to roll out school improvement plans (SIPs) across South African provinces have also emphasised the importance of integrating subject advisor support within data-driven planning cycles (Botha, 2015). However, implementation success varies widely depending on training, advisor workload, and school leadership capacity.

Despite the promising nature of these models, implementation challenges remain. These include a lack of standardised training for subject advisors on coaching and mentoring, an overemphasis on administrative accountability at the expense of developmental support, and persistent under-resourcing (Zide, 2013). Time constraints, high staff turnover, and the dual role of advisors as both supporters and evaluators can also diminish the efficacy of support models (Tjozongoro, 2019).

To overcome these challenges, scholars advocate for structured induction programmes for subject advisors, more explicit role definitions, and adequate operational support from districts. Furthermore, strong institutional support from provincial education departments is essential for sustaining effective models and scaling them across diverse school contexts (Glazer & Peurach, 2013).

2.10 Instructional Support Through Subject Advisors

The role of subject advisors in enhancing teaching and learning has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly in the South African educational context (Tjozongoro, 2019). Subject advisors are pivotal in providing instructional support, resources, and expertise to teachers, thereby facilitating improved teaching practices and student learning outcomes. However, the effectiveness of this support is often influenced by various factors, including role clarity, resource availability, and systemic challenges (Kennedy, 2016).

Subject advisors are expected to possess in-depth knowledge of subject matter, curriculum, and instructional strategies to support teachers effectively. However, studies indicate that the roles

and responsibilities of subject advisors are often unclear, leading to confusion and impacting efficacy. A study by Shoji (2014) emphasises the importance of instructional leadership, while others highlight the need for support and guidance. This ambiguity can lead to conflicting expectations and role confusion, ultimately affecting the effectiveness of subject advisors.

2.11 Challenges in Providing Instructional Support

Subject advisors face various challenges in delivering adequate instructional support (Rammbuda, 2023). Limited resources, inadequate training, and conflicting expectations are among the primary obstacles. The lack of clear job descriptions and operational manuals also hinders their effectiveness. Additionally, as mentioned, the dual role of support and evaluation can create tension and conflict, as subject advisors may struggle to balance their supportive role with the need to evaluate teacher performance.

Research emphasises the importance of subject advisors providing instructional support to teachers, including guidance on curriculum implementation, teaching strategies, and assessment practices (Shoji, 2014). Adequate instructional support can lead to improved teacher practice and student learning outcomes (Shoji, 2014). Subject advisors can provide coaching, mentoring, and professional development opportunities to teachers, enabling them to improve their teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

To enhance the effectiveness of subject advisors in supporting teaching and learning, several recommendations have been proposed. These include clarifying the roles and responsibilities of subject advisors, providing adequate training and resources, and fostering collaboration between subject advisors and teachers (Kennedy, 2016). In addition, addressing systemic challenges such as limited resources and conflicting expectations can further improve the support provided by subject advisors.

2.12 Roles of Subject Advisors in Promoting Professional Learning Communities

Subject advisors play a vital role in promoting PLCs in schools. A PLC is a collaborative approach to professional development where teachers work together to improve student learning outcomes (Graham, 2007). Subject advisors, as experts in specific subjects, can facilitate the development of PLCs by providing guidance, support, and resources to teachers. According to DuFour and DuFour (2013), PLCs are essential for improving student learning

outcomes, as they provide a platform for teachers to share best practices, discuss challenges, and develop strategies for improvement.

One of the primary roles of subject advisors in promoting PLCs is to guide curriculum implementation (Song, 2012) and assist teachers in understanding the curriculum requirements. According to Borko and Putnam (1996), subject advisors can play a critical role in supporting teacher learning and development by guiding curriculum implementation and instructional strategies. In so doing, subject advisors can help teachers develop a shared understanding of the curriculum and work collaboratively to improve student learning outcomes. Furthermore, subject advisors can provide support to teachers in developing their pedagogical content knowledge, which is critical for effective teaching and learning (Chan & Yung, 2018).

Another role of subject advisors in promoting PLCs is to facilitate collaboration among teachers. Subject advisors can facilitate regular meetings and workshops where teachers can share best practices, discuss challenges, and develop strategies for improvement. According to Hudson (2024), PLCs require a culture of collaboration and trust among teachers, and subject advisors can play a critical role in facilitating this culture (Smith, 2014). By facilitating collaboration among teachers, subject advisors can help teachers develop a sense of community and shared responsibility for student learning outcomes. This can lead to improved teacher morale, reduced teacher isolation, and increased student achievement.

Subject advisors also play a critical role in providing resources and support to teachers. According to Hammerness et al. (2005), teachers need ongoing support and resources to develop their practice and improve student learning outcomes. Subject advisors can provide teachers with access to relevant resources, such as curriculum guides, instructional materials, and technology. They can also provide coaching and mentoring support to help teachers develop their practice. By providing resources and support to teachers, subject advisors can help teachers develop the skills and confidence they need to improve student learning outcomes.

In addition to providing guidance, facilitating collaboration, and providing resources and support, subject advisors also play a critical role in promoting a culture of inquiry and reflection among teachers. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2025), teachers need to be reflective practitioners who continually examine and improve their practice. Subject advisors can facilitate this process by guiding action research and reflective practices and encouraging

teachers to share their experiences and insights. By promoting a culture of inquiry and reflection, subject advisors can help teachers develop a growth mindset and a commitment to ongoing learning and improvement (Zhang, 2023).

Subject advisors play a vital role in promoting professional learning communities in schools (Roberts & Pruitt, 2008). By providing guidance on curriculum implementation, facilitating collaboration among teachers, providing resources and support, and promoting a culture of inquiry and reflection, subject advisors can help teachers develop the skills and confidence they need to improve student learning outcomes. According to Dilotsothle et al. (2001), the role of subject advisors in promoting PLCs is critical, as they provide the necessary support and guidance to teachers to improve student learning outcomes. By investing in the development of subject advisors and providing them with the necessary resources and support, schools can promote a culture of collaboration and improvement that benefits both teachers and students.

2.13 Impact of Subject Advisor Support on Teaching Quality and Student Outcomes

Support from subject advisors is likely to result in improved educational practices, student performance, and enhanced professional development opportunities for teachers. (Shozi, 2014). The impact of subject advisor support on teaching quality and student outcomes is a critical area of research. Subject advisors play a vital role in enhancing teacher quality and student outcomes. (Makubung, 2017). By providing guidance, support, and resources to departmental heads, subject advisors enable them to improve their teaching practices, which ultimately leads to improved student performance. Research has also highlighted the importance of subject advisor support in promoting teacher professional development (Hartnett, 2011). Subject advisors provide feedback and coaching, which helps departmental heads to reflect on their practice and make data-driven decisions. This, in turn, leads to improved teaching quality and student outcomes.

The role that subject advisors play is vital in enhancing and promoting teacher collaboration and peer support (Phillippo, 2010). Subject advisors facilitate PLCs, which enable departmental heads to share best practices, discuss challenges, and develop solutions. This collaborative approach to teaching and learning enhances teacher quality and student outcomes. The impact of subject advisor support on student outcomes is also significant. Studies have shown that students who receive instruction from teachers supported by subject advisors tend to perform better academically (Shozi, 2014). This is because subject advisors provide

resources and guidance on differentiated instruction, which enables departmental heads to cater to the diverse needs of their students.

Subject advisor support is essential for promoting teacher retention and reducing teacher turnover (Shuls & Flores, 2020). When departmental heads feel supported and empowered, they are more likely to remain in their positions and continue to grow and develop as educators. This, in turn, leads to improved student outcomes and a more stable educational environment.

Subject advisors provide guidance and support to departmental heads, enabling them to develop and implement effective school improvement plans. This, in turn, leads to improved teaching quality and student outcomes. The role of subject advisors in promoting teacher leadership is of utmost importance (Busher & Harris, 2000). Subject advisors provide opportunities for departmental heads to take on leadership roles, which enables them to develop their leadership skills and confidence. This, in turn, leads to improved teaching quality and student outcomes.

Subject advisor support is essential for promoting teacher reflection and self-improvement. Subject advisors provide feedback and coaching, which enables departmental heads to reflect on their practice and identify areas for improvement (Vrazhnova et al., 2021). The impact of subject advisor support on teaching quality and student outcomes is also influenced by the quality of the support provided (Ntlhare & Veliswa, 2024). Subject advisors who are well-trained and experienced are more effective in providing support to departmental heads, which leads to improved teaching quality and student outcomes.

The impact of subject advisor support on teaching quality and student outcomes is significant. Subject advisors play a critical role in enhancing teacher quality, promoting teacher professional development, and improving student outcomes. Both supportive and critical perspectives on the role of subject advisors in enhancing teaching and learning in primary schools are crucial. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) profiling study (2020) positions subject advisory services as the bedrock of curriculum and teacher development, particularly in Mathematics and English First Additional Language. This view emphasises that advisors are indispensable for strengthening teacher capacity and ensuring academic excellence.

In contrast, Mdabe (2019), though still cited in recent debates, offers a more critical perspective. He argues that subject advisors' support is often inconsistent and does not always

translate into improved learner performance. This highlights a gap between policy expectations and classroom realities, suggesting that while advisors are tasked with professional development, their interventions are not always effective.

Adding to a debate that presents evidence by the Research Triangle Institute that instructional coaching, when integrated with subject advisor roles, can significantly improve early grade reading outcomes. Their findings show that external coaches sometimes outperform subject advisors in delivering effective support, particularly in literacy development. This challenges the assumption that advisors alone are sufficient and instead points to the effectiveness of blended support models.

The points of agreement among DBE (2020) and RTI International (2023) lie in their recognition that subject advisors are central to teacher development and curriculum delivery. However, contradictions emerge when comparing these views with Mdabe's critique. While DBE argues that subject advisors are the foundation of curriculum support, Mdabe disagrees by stating that their interventions are inconsistent and fail to guarantee academic excellence. Similarly, while DBE emphasises advisors as indispensable, RTI International shows that external instructional coaches may outperform advisors in improving learner outcomes.

This scholarly debate underscores two major tensions: the optimistic view that subject advisors are indispensable for professional development and academic excellence, and the critical view that advisor support is inconsistent and sometimes less effective than alternative models. The contrast highlights the need for integrated support systems where subject advisors collaborate with external coaches and school leadership to ensure sustainable professional development and improved learner outcomes.

2.14 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an in-depth review of literature on the role of subject advisors in teaching and learning. It examined how their support influences classroom practices, the difficulties departmental heads face in mentoring teachers, and the contribution of advisors in building professional learning communities. Both global and South African studies were analysed to offer a balanced perspective. Particular attention was given to curriculum support challenges in South African schools, emphasising the instructional guidance offered by advisors alongside the barriers they encounter. The discussion also addressed the impact of limited funding on these initiatives. Scholars such as Boumpouri and Galanakis (2022), Kubheka et al. (2025), Nkosi and Moyo (2025), Chitamba and Jita (2023), and Bantwini (2020) collectively highlight the importance of collaborative leadership and adaptive strategies in strengthening school leadership and learner outcomes.

The next chapter will outline the theoretical framework that underpins this study, providing a deeper understanding of the conceptual theories that guide the research.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, a significant gap exists in research into the support provided to departmental heads by subject advisors. This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for examining the experiences of departmental heads regarding subject advisor support in primary schools. While much attention has been given to teacher development, there is limited research focusing on the lived experiences of school-based leaders in accessing and using such support to promote effective teaching and learning. The chapter introduces social learning theory, which underscores the importance of learning through observation, interaction, and collaboration. This theory is particularly relevant to understanding how departmental heads internalise, model, and influence instructional practices. The chapter also elaborates on the core principles of social learning theory and justifies its applicability in analysing the dynamics of support in educational contexts.

3.2 Social Learning Theory as a Framework

To anchor the study in a theoretical framework, social learning theory, initially developed by Albert Bandura (1977), is applied, which provides an insightful lens for understanding the dynamics of learning and interaction among educators, departmental heads, and subject advisors.

3.3 Rationale for Selecting the Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and behaviours in a social context (Bandura 1977). The theory suggests that learning occurs in a social environment where individuals observe, model, and imitate the behaviours of others, particularly those they perceive as role models or experts (McLeod, 2011). Given that the study focuses on the interaction between departmental heads and subject advisors, social learning theory is particularly relevant, as it emphasises the reciprocal influence of social interactions on learning outcomes. This theory aligns with the study's objective of examining how subject advisors, through their guidance and mentorship, influence the teaching practices of departmental heads, who, in turn, influence their teaching staff.

The selection of this framework is motivated by the nature of the interaction between departmental heads and subject advisors, where learning is shaped through observation, feedback, and the modelling of effective teaching strategies. In the context of Ugu primary schools, where resource limitations may affect direct access to professional development programmes, the role of subject advisors as models of best practices becomes even more critical. Social learning theory provides a relevant perspective to analyse how subject advisors' actions and guidance impact the professional growth of departmental heads and ultimately enhance teaching and learning at the primary school level (Bandura, 1977).

Social Learning Theory is commonly used in leadership studies because it explains how leaders influence followers by modeling behaviors that others observe and imitate. It highlights the importance of reinforcement, showing that people adopt behaviors that are rewarded or socially approved. The theory emphasises that leadership is learned in social contexts, making mentorship, coaching, and role modeling effective tools for leadership development. It also helps explain how leaders transmit values, ethics, and organisational culture through their actions and interactions (Boumpouri & Galanakis, 2022).

3.4 Key Constructs of Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory comprises four key constructs, which are essential for understanding the dynamics of learning in social contexts. These constructs include observational learning, imitation and modelling, reinforcement, and reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1977). Each of these concepts will be used in this study to analyse how departmental heads experience and benefit from subject advisor support. Learners today are understood as active participants who seek out and process information rather than simply absorbing it from their surroundings. Their thoughts, beliefs, and choices shape the direction, purpose, timing, and methods of their learning. Social cognitive theory highlights this self-directed aspect, stressing that much of human learning takes place within social contexts. Through interaction with others, individuals acquire knowledge, skills, strategies, values, rules, and attitudes. Observation and engagement also teach them which behaviors are appropriate, effective, and what consequences they may bring. Ultimately, people act based on their perceptions of their own abilities and the outcomes they anticipate (Schunk, 2012).

3.4.1 Observational learning

Observational learning refers to the process by which individuals acquire new behaviours or knowledge by observing others. Bandura (1977) argued that people can learn both through direct experience and by observing the actions of others and the outcomes of those actions. In the context of this study, departmental heads in Ugu primary schools may observe subject advisors' teaching methods, classroom management strategies, and curriculum implementation practices. By watching subject advisors model these behaviours, departmental heads can learn new techniques, which they can then adapt and implement in their departments. If a subject advisor demonstrates effective lesson planning or innovative teaching strategies, departmental heads are likely to observe and learn from these practices.

This observation may lead to a change in how they guide their teaching staff. Observational learning, therefore, provides a foundation for the professional development of departmental heads and contributes to the broader improvement of teaching practices in the school. Bandura (1985) found that humans, who are social animals, naturally gravitate toward observational learning. He further states that children may watch their family members and mimic their behaviors. In observational learning, people learn by watching others and then imitating or modelling what they do or say. Thus, the individuals or objects performing the imitated behavior are called models (Bandura, 1985). Even infants may start imitating the mouth movements and facial expressions of the adults around them. There are four processes that Bandura's research identified as influencing observational learning which are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Kang et al., 2021).

3.4.2 Imitation and modelling

Imitation refers to the act of copying or replicating behaviours observed in others, particularly those individuals who are considered role models (Bandura, 1977). Modelling, on the other hand, is the process through which an individual displays certain behaviours or skills for others to observe and imitate. In this study, subject advisors serve as role models for departmental heads. When subject advisors exhibit high standards of teaching practice, departmental heads may feel motivated to imitate these practices in their leadership roles (Smith & Berge, 2009).

Subject advisors might model specific strategies for teaching a particular subject or address a curriculum-related issue in a manner that departmental heads find effective. These departmental heads, in turn, are likely to adopt those methods and replicate them in their

interactions with teachers. Through imitation and modelling, departmental heads can build their capacity to support and guide their teaching staff more effectively, ultimately improving the teaching and learning process.

3.4.3 Reinforcement

Reinforcement refers to the process by which behaviours are either encouraged or discouraged through rewards or consequences (Jones et al., 2011). Positive reinforcement involves providing rewards or recognition for desired behaviours. In the study's context, subject advisors may reinforce the practices of departmental heads by acknowledging their efforts to improve teaching practices or offering praise for the implementation of new strategies. Such reinforcement can motivate departmental heads to continue refining their approaches and supporting their teachers.

Similarly, negative reinforcement may occur when subject advisors identify areas of improvement for departmental heads and offer constructive feedback. This process can prompt departmental heads to modify their behaviours and strategies to align with best practices, thus enhancing the overall quality of teaching and learning in their schools.

3.4.4 Reciprocal determinism

Reciprocal determinism is the concept that behaviour, environment, and personal factors all influence one another in a continuous loop. According to Bandura (1977), individuals are not merely passive recipients of external influences, but they actively shape their environments through their actions. In the context of this study, reciprocal determinism suggests that the interactions between subject advisors, departmental heads, and teaching staff are dynamic and mutually influential. Subject advisors impact departmental heads' professional development, while departmental heads influence the teaching practices of their staff, creating a cycle of continuous improvement.

In this way, the support provided by subject advisors can positively influence departmental heads, who, in turn, can impact the teaching and learning environment in their schools. The reciprocal nature of this process is crucial, as it highlights the bidirectional flow of influence between departmental heads, subject advisors, and teachers, leading to a holistic improvement in educational practices.

3.5 Relevance of Social Learning Theory for the Study

According to social learning theory, people learn from observing others, particularly role models, through processes such as imitation, modelling, and reinforcement (Maisto et al., 1999). In the context of this study, social learning theory can help explain how departmental heads learn from and are influenced by subject advisors' behaviours and actions. When subject advisors demonstrate effective teaching practices, departmental heads may imitate these practices or adapt them in their leadership roles. The theory provides a lens through which I will examine how departmental heads internalise and act upon the support provided by subject advisors.

Social learning theory is highly relevant to this study, as it helps explain how departmental heads in Ugu primary schools learn and grow professionally through their interactions with subject advisors. By applying the key constructs of observational learning, imitation, modelling, reinforcement, and reciprocal determinism, this theoretical framework enables a deeper understanding of the ways in which departmental heads acquire new teaching strategies and leadership practices.

Furthermore, social learning theory emphasises the importance of social interactions and collaborative learning, which is particularly pertinent in the context of educational support in resource-constrained environments like those in the Ugu District. Subject advisors, by modelling effective teaching practices and providing consistent feedback, can help departmental heads overcome the challenges they face in improving teaching and learning in their schools. This framework provides valuable insights into how professional development, facilitated by subject advisors, can enhance the leadership capacity of departmental heads and improve educational outcomes in their schools.

The study explores how departmental heads' experiences of support from subject advisors influence teaching and learning outcomes in Ugu primary schools. By applying the social learning theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how these interactions facilitate professional growth and enhance the effectiveness of educational practices. The key constructs of observational learning, imitation, modelling, reinforcement, and reciprocal determinism offer a valuable lens for analysing the dynamics between departmental heads and subject advisors, shedding light on the mechanisms through which support leads to improved educational outcomes.

3.6 Application of Social Learning Theory in Educational Leadership and Practice

The social learning theory has been widely applied in various studies to understand how individuals learn and adopt new behaviours. In the context of education, the theory has been used to study how teachers develop and adopt new teaching practices (Bandura, 1977). For instance, Bandura (1969) used the social learning theory to examine how teachers learn and adopt new teaching practices through observing and imitating their colleagues. The study found that teachers who observed and imitated their colleagues' teaching practices were more likely to adopt those practices in their teaching.

Similarly, the theory has been used to study how departmental heads learn and adopt new leadership practices (Latham & Saari, 1979). A study by Bandura (1977) found that departmental heads who observed and imitated their colleagues' leadership practices were more likely to adopt those practices in their leadership. These studies demonstrate the applicability of the social learning theory in understanding how individuals learn and adopt new behaviours in educational settings.

In the context of teaching and learning, the social learning theory suggests that departmental heads learn and adopt new teaching and learning practices by observing and imitating their subject advisors (Latham & Saari, 1979). Subject advisors play a crucial role in supporting departmental heads in their teaching and learning practices. They provide guidance, feedback, and reinforcement that help departmental heads to develop their teaching and learning skills. By observing and imitating their subject advisors, departmental heads can learn new teaching and learning practices that can improve their teaching effectiveness.

In this study, the social learning theory underpinned the exploration of how departmental heads' interactions with their subject advisors shape their professional development and teaching practices. The theory was used to examine how departmental heads perceive their subject advisors as role models and how they learn and adopt new teaching and learning practices through observation, imitation, and receiving reinforcement and feedback from them. SLT remains appropriate despite its constraints, since the relationship between subject advisors and departmental heads is grounded in observation and interaction. Its value lies in sustaining dialogue, reflection, and mutual understanding rather than directive control. This relational foundation ensures the method continues to fulfil its intended purpose effectively.

3.7 Theoretical Framework and Research Design

Social learning theory guided research design by providing a comprehensive framework for understanding how departmental heads learn and interact with subject advisors in their professional context. The methodology was strategically structured to capture the nuanced learning experiences through carefully designed data collection methods.

The data collection process primarily used semi-structured interviews specifically crafted to explore the key components of social learning theory. These interviews were designed to elicit rich, detailed narratives about how departmental heads observe, learn from, and interact with subject advisors. The questions probed specific instances of professional modelling, challenges in learning new practices, and the ways in which departmental heads develop professional confidence through these interactions.

The sampling strategy was purposive, aiming to capture a diverse range of learning environments and contexts for professional interaction. By selecting participants from schools with varying socio-economic backgrounds, the study ensured a comprehensive understanding of how learning occurs across different educational settings. This approach allowed for a more nuanced exploration of how contextual factors influence professional learning and support.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis, which aligned closely with social learning theory's core components. The coding process focused on identifying patterns of observational learning, instances of professional modelling, narratives of self-efficacy, and the reciprocal interactions between individuals and their professional environments. This analytical approach ensured that the theoretical framework was not just a backdrop but an active lens through which the data was interpreted.

To enhance the rigour of the research, theoretical triangulation was employed. This involved cross-referencing interview data with questionnaires, collages and the theoretical framework's constructs. By doing this, the study provided a multi-dimensional understanding of how departmental heads learn and develop professionally through their interactions with subject advisors.

This approach ensured that social learning theory was not merely a theoretical decoration but a fundamental driver of the research design, guiding every aspect from conceptualisation to data interpretation. The methodology allowed for a deep, nuanced exploration of professional

learning in the educational context, providing insights that go beyond surface-level descriptions.

3.8 Critique of Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, developed by Bandura (1977), has been widely applied in educational contexts to explain how individuals learn new behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. In educational leadership, the theory has informed how teachers and departmental heads acquire new practices by observing and modelling the behaviours of their colleagues or superiors. For instance, Bandura (1969) demonstrated that teachers who observe and imitate their colleagues' instructional strategies are more likely to adopt similar practices. Similarly, Latham and Saari (1979) and (Bandura & Hall, 2018) showed that departmental heads are inclined to emulate the leadership styles of their peers or subject advisors, particularly when those behaviours are reinforced by positive feedback and institutional support. These findings underscore the theory's applicability in understanding behaviour acquisition within social and professional settings in education. Intrinsic motivations driving departmental heads include professional pride, desire for recognition, commitment to growth, alignment with values, and pursuit of meaningful impact. They may also be influenced by curiosity, autonomy, responsibility, ethical convictions, and the aspiration to model effective leadership, shaping their choice to adopt or resist behaviors.

Despite its usefulness, social learning theory presents several limitations when applied to educational leadership and practice. A primary critique is that the theory tends to reduce learning to a process of observation and imitation, potentially underestimating the complex cognitive and reflective processes involved in professional learning and leadership (Prestine & LeGrand, 1991). In practice, departmental heads do not passively absorb observed behaviours; they actively evaluate, adapt, and contextualise these behaviours based on their unique institutional environments and leadership philosophies. Combining Social Learning Theory with adult or transformative learning theory enriches interpretation by highlighting both relational observation and deeper meaning-making. It situates departmental heads' experiences within collaborative dialogue, critical reflection, and personal growth, revealing how professional interactions foster not only shared practice but also transformative leadership development. A departmental head may observe a subject advisor's teaching technique but choose not to adopt it due to differences in student needs, school culture, or available resources. Thus, social learning theory's assumption of straightforward behavioural adoption may

oversimplify the nuanced and critical decision-making required in educational leadership (Arthur & McGregor, 2024).

Furthermore, while social learning theory emphasises external reinforcement, it often overlooks the role of intrinsic motivation, which is particularly relevant for adult learners such as departmental heads. These individuals may be driven by internal goals such as professional growth, ethical values, or a commitment to student achievement factors not adequately captured by the theory's traditional framework. Social learning theory also focuses on dyadic learning relationships but under-represents the influence of broader organisational structures, such as professional development systems, school leadership policies, and institutional support networks (Boylan, 2018). In contexts where subject advisors serve as key mentors, social learning theory does not fully explain how systemic constraints or collaborative structures mediate the learning process.

Moreover, social learning theory assumes that appropriate role models are available and accessible for observation, which may not be the case in under-resourced or marginalised educational environments (McEvoy, 2024). If departmental heads lack consistent access to subject advisors due to staffing limitations, scheduling issues, or geographical barriers, the opportunity for observational learning diminishes, limiting the practical applicability of the theory in such settings. In these cases, other mechanisms such as formal training, peer collaboration, or self-directed learning may play a more central role than social learning theory accounts for.

Nonetheless, social learning theory remains a valuable theoretical framework for examining how departmental heads may learn new teaching and leadership practices through social interaction (Jago & Radford, 2017). The theory provides a foundational lens through which to explore how subject advisors serve as role models and how feedback, reinforcement, and observational learning shape professional behaviours. For this reason, it was a useful starting point for the present study, which investigated how departmental heads adopt new practices through observing and imitating their subject advisors. However, it is crucial to apply social learning theory with an awareness of its limitations and to consider integrating it with other learning theories that better address context, cognition, and reflective practice.

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter established social learning theory as the central theoretical framework guiding the study. Originally conceptualised by Albert Bandura, this theory emphasises the importance of learning through observation, imitation, and modelling, asserting that much of human behaviour is acquired in social contexts rather than through direct experience alone. By situating learning as a socially mediated process, social learning theory offers a lens through which the study interprets how individuals particularly those in educational leadership roles internalise, replicate, and modify behaviours based on their interactions with others. The chapter began by outlining the key constructs of social learning theory, including observational learning, modelling, reinforcement (both direct and vicarious), and reciprocal determinism. These constructs provide a nuanced understanding of how behaviours are adopted and maintained, particularly within professional environments where leadership and collaborative practices are often shaped by example rather than explicit instruction.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHOD

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology employed to explore the experiences of departmental heads regarding the support provided by subject advisors in the context of teaching and learning within primary schools in the Ugu District. Qualitative inquiry was deemed appropriate because it enables rich, contextualised insights into lived experiences, capturing the complexity of interpersonal dynamics and institutional realities that quantitative approaches might overlook. It outlines the chosen research paradigm, qualitative design, sampling strategies, data collection methods, analytical procedures, and ethical considerations. The selected approach aimed to capture a nuanced and in-depth understanding of departmental heads' lived experiences, with a particular focus on the primary school setting. Importantly, the methodology was deliberately aligned with the research questions, ensuring coherence between the theoretical framework, the inquiry focus, and the methods used to generate meaningful insights. This chapter begins with the paradigm, followed by research approach, design, sampling, data generation, analysis, and ethical considerations.

4.2 Research Method

A research method refers to the systematic and scientific approach used to collect, analyse, and interpret data to answer research questions or test hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It involves a range of activities, including formulating research questions, selecting research design, collecting and analysing data, and interpreting and reporting the findings (Kumar, 2019). The choice of research method depends on the research questions, the nature of the study, and the researcher's philosophical orientation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, the method guides how I explore lived experiences, ensuring that the research design, data collection, and analysis remain consistent with the research questions and theoretical framework. This alignment strengthens coherence and allows the methodology to illuminate the nuanced realities of departmental heads' professional contexts.

A research paradigm refers to the underlying framework or worldview that guides the research process, including the research question, methodology, and interpretation of results (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It encompasses the researcher's ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, which shape the research design and the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Husén, 1988). The research paradigm served as a lens through which I

viewed the research problem, and it influenced the research questions, the selection of participants, and the data generation methods.

There are several research paradigms, including positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and constructivism (Davies & Fisher, 2018). Each paradigm has its own set of assumptions, principles, and methods that guide the research process. For example, positivist researchers assume that reality is objective and can be measured through quantitative methods (Su, 2018). In contrast, interpretivist researchers assume that reality is subjective and can be understood through qualitative methods. Thus, understanding the research paradigm is essential in research, as it influences the research design, methodology, and interpretation of results.

The research paradigm that guided this study was interpretivism. As indicated above, interpretivism emphasises the understanding of social phenomena from the perspectives of those directly involved. It assumes that reality is subjective and socially constructed (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This approach was well-suited for exploring the complex, nuanced experiences of departmental heads regarding subject advisor support in teaching and learning, as it allowed for a deep understanding of how these individuals perceived and made sense of their interactions with subject advisors. Positivism or critical theory was not appropriate for this study because positivism reduces complex lived experiences to measurable variables, while critical theory prioritises structural critique, neither adequately captures the relational, context-specific, and meaning centered dimensions central to departmental heads' professional learning.

4.2.1 Research approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. This approach allowed for a deep, nuanced exploration of participants' experiences, providing rich, descriptive data that quantitative methods might not capture (Tisdell et al., 2025). Qualitative design was particularly suited for this research that aimed to understand the meaning people attach to their experiences and how these experiences shape their behaviours and attitudes (Seamon & Gill, 2016). A qualitative approach allowed me to generate rich, detailed data through various techniques and was essential for understanding the personal experiences of departmental heads in their interactions with subject advisors.

In this case, a qualitative design enabled me to gain a deep understanding of the support process from the perspectives of the departmental heads and subject advisors involved. Through qualitative data generation, I was able to capture the complexities of the support process, including perceptions of support, leadership influence and associated challenges. The study focused on how subject advisors' roles are perceived and how they influence departmental heads' leadership practices.

The qualitative approach also facilitated flexibility and responsiveness during data collection. It enabled me to probe deeper into specific responses, clarify ambiguous points, and explore unexpected themes that emerged (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Moreover, the qualitative design allowed me to focus on contextual understanding, which is essential when exploring experiences within a specific educational setting, such as primary schools in Ugu District. I was also able to examine the influence of various contextual factors on the departmental heads' experiences, such as the socio-economic environment, the level of subject advisor support, and other institutional dynamics. However, the qualitative nature of the study limited its ability to generalise findings to a larger population. Therefore, the study's findings will be specific to the departmental heads in the selected schools in Ugu District and may not apply to departmental heads in different districts or schools with other contexts. Qualitative data helped me examine leadership practices by providing rich, descriptive accounts of departmental heads' lived experiences, revealing how they interpret, negotiate, and enact their roles in context. Through interviews and collages, I was able to capture subtle relational dynamics, mentorship patterns, and decision-making processes that quantitative measures could not adequately reflect. This approach illuminated the complexity of leadership as socially embedded practice, allowing for deeper insight into how departmental heads learn, adapt, and influence teaching and learning within their schools.

Qualitative inquiry drew on two complementary data sources: collages and interviews. The collages allowed departmental heads to visually represent their perceptions, emotions, and experiences, offering symbolic insights into leadership practices that might remain unspoken in conventional dialogue. Interviews, on the other hand, provided detailed narratives and reflective accounts, enabling participants to articulate the reasoning, challenges, and relational dynamics underpinning their leadership roles. Together, these methods enriched the study by capturing both expressive and discursive dimensions of practice, ensuring a holistic understanding of leadership as lived experience.

4.2.2 Research Methodology for the study

This study adopted a case study research design. A case study is a research design that involves an in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon or case, often in its natural setting (Yin, 2017). It aims to provide a detailed and contextualised understanding of the case, often using data generation methods such as interviews, observations and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Case studies can be used to explore, describe or explain a phenomenon, and they can be either single-case or multiple-case studies (Greene & David, 1984).

This study adopted a multiple case study design because it would allow for an in-depth examination of the experiences of departmental heads regarding subject advisor support, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2017). Through adopting a qualitative case study, I aimed to obtain a contextualised understanding of these experiences in the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts of two schools. A case study approach is particularly well-suited for exploratory research (Creswell & Poth, 2016) and allowed for flexibility in data generation and analysis, enabling me to adapt to the unique needs and circumstances of subject advisors and departmental heads.

The study comprised of six departmental heads and five subject advisors as participants, it took place within two primary schools in the Ugu District, one located in a low-income community and the other in a medium-income community, and the phenomenon of the study is the support process provided by subject advisors to departmental heads. The choice of two cases was sufficient because it allowed for literal replication testing whether similar findings emerge across comparable contexts and theoretical replication highlighting differences that deepen interpretation, consistent with Yin's logic of case study design. This study is an instrumental case study, as the cases are used to illuminate broader questions about leadership learning and advisor support rather than being examined for their intrinsic uniqueness.

The Department of Education as well as the principals of the participating schools were formally approached and granted permission for their departmental heads to take part in the study. Approval letters were obtained from both the Department of Education and the individual schools. Subject advisors and departmental heads were also contacted in advance to request their participation.

4.2.3 Location of research site

Location refers to the geographical or physical setting where the study takes place. It can significantly influence the context, findings, and interpretation of a study (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). This study focused on two primary schools – referred to in this study as Bobby and Tamara primary schools in Ugu District in KwaZulu-Natal. Bobby Primary School is situated in a low-income context, while Tamara Primary School is located in a mid-income context. The reason for choosing schools in different contexts is to understand how the socio-economic context in which the schools operate might influence the nature of support provided by subject advisors; affect the expectations and needs of departmental heads; and, potentially, create varying challenges in the implementation of teaching and learning practices.

The low-income school (Bobby Primary) was selected to provide insight into the challenges faced by departmental heads in resource-constrained environments. Schools in low-income communities often struggle with limited resources, inadequate infrastructure and high teacher turnover rates (Singh, 2024). By examining the experiences of departmental heads in such a setting, I could identify the unique challenges they face in accessing subject advisor support and the strategies they can employ to overcome these challenges.

The mid-income school (Tamara Primary) was selected to provide a contrasting perspective on the experiences of departmental heads. Schools in mid-income communities often have more resources available, which can impact the nature and quality of subject advisor support (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By comparing the experiences of departmental heads in low-income and mid-income schools, I could identify the differences in the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to access subject advisor support.

4.2.4 Target population and Sampling

The target population, according to Willie (2024), refers to the specific group of individuals or organisations that a research study aims to investigate or describe. The target population is often defined by its characteristics, such as age, occupation or location (Willie, 2024). For this study, the target population was characterised by location and occupation because the study sought to explore the experiences of departmental heads and subject advisors (occupation) from two primary schools in Ugu District (location).

There are 218 primary schools in Ugu District, with 931 departmental heads and 17 subject advisors. The study focused on a sample of departmental heads from this population who had sufficient time to develop their leadership skills and understand the complexities of subject advisor support. In addition, a sample of subject advisors from the same population were included as participants to gain a deeper understanding of their roles, responsibilities and challenges in supporting departmental heads in teaching and learning.

4.2.4.1 Sampling procedure and sample size

The sampling procedure refers to the process of selecting a subset of participants from the target population to participate in a research study (Alvi, 2016). The optimal goal of sampling is to obtain a representative sample that accurately reflects the characteristics of the target population (Grafström & Schelin, 2014). Careful sampling enhances the validity and reliability of the research findings (Andersson et al., 2024).

I used purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants and sites based on their contexts, expertise and experiences, as the sampling technique in this study (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling was used to choose six departmental heads and five subject advisors from different educational phases (foundation, intermediate and senior phase). One subject advisor was selected for the foundation phase, as only a single advisor serves that phase within the Ugu District. For the intermediate and senior phases, one subject advisor was likewise chosen to represent each subject area, ensuring balanced representation across phases. This strategy allowed for the selection of participants who could provide profound, detailed insights into their experiences of the support process, which was critical in understanding how to improve teaching and learning.

The two schools were also purposively selected to ensure that they were from different socio-economic contexts, as explained in section 4.2.5 above. This provided a nuanced understanding of the experiences of departmental heads regarding subject advisor support. The comparison and contrast of the findings from the two schools enabled the identification of patterns and relationships that might not have been apparent through a single-case study (Stake, 1995).

4.2.4.2 Sample Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A total of eleven participants were purposively selected for this study: three departmental heads per school, each representing one of the educational phases (foundation, intermediate and

senior), and five subject advisers. This ensured a representative sample and enhanced the reliability and the validity of the data generated.

The following criteria (inclusion criteria) were used to select participants who were:

- 1 Departmental heads or subject advisers in the Ugu District, KwaZulu-Natal
- 2 Department heads or subject advisers in primary schools
- 3 Departmental heads or subject advisers with a minimum of two years of experience in their current role
- 4 Department heads or subject advisers with experience of the subject advisor support process

The exclusion criteria were:

- 1 Departmental heads and subject advisers with less than two years of experience in their current role
- 2 Departmental heads and subject advisers who were not in Ugu District
- 3 Departmental heads and subject advisers in high schools

4.2.4.3 Recruitment of participants

The participants for this study were recruited through email because of its convenience and efficiency. This strategy enabled me to send multiple invitations simultaneously, saving time and reducing costs, as there were no expenses related to postage, printing, or face-to-face interactions. It also increased response rates, as invitations were tailored to include personalised messages, increasing the likelihood of responses (Dillman Taylor & Belser., 2024).

In my email to participants, I explained the aims of the study and described how the participants would contribute to it should they agree to participate. I also addressed the fact that they would remain anonymous and could withdraw from the study at any time without penalties. I attached the ethical clearance certificate I had obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal for their reference and the informed consent document for them to read and sign. After receiving the signed consent forms, I contacted departmental heads to schedule face-to-face sessions to explain the data collection process (collage and interviews) and sent questionnaires to the subject advisers.

4.2.5 Data generation methods

Data generation methods refer to the procedures used to collect and produce data in a research study (Weyant, 2022). These methods can be broadly categorised into quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data generation methods involve collecting numerical data for example, through surveys, questionnaires, and experiments that can be analysed statistically (Ahmad et al., 2019). Qualitative data generation methods, on the other hand, focus on non-numerical data gathered through instruments such as interviews, focus groups, and observations and are analysed thematically or narratively (Oranga & Matere, 2023).

The choice of data generation method depends on the research questions, the nature of the study, and the researcher's philosophical orientation (Jackson, 2013). A study examining the relationship between two variables may use quantitative data generation methods, such as surveys or experiments (Kent, 2015). In contrast, a study exploring the experiences and perspectives of participants may use qualitative data generation methods, such as interviews or focus groups (Gill & Baillie, 2018). Regardless of the method chosen, it is essential to ensure that the data generation method is rigorous, reliable, and valid to produce high-quality data.

This study used three types of data generation methods, namely, interviews, questionnaires, and collages. Interviews and collage creation were conducted with departmental heads, while questionnaires were administered to subject advisors. In terms of sequence, the collage creation activity was carried out first, followed by the interviews. The rationale for selecting these instruments is expanded on in the sections below.

Questionnaires were selected as the primary data collection tool for subject advisors because they are easier for this group to complete and can be distributed digitally a practical advantage given how scarce advisors time is and how difficult it is to liaise with them in person amid their heavy workloads. Sending an online questionnaire removed the need for synchronous meetings, letting advisors respond when their schedules allowed, while still ensuring that every participant received the same set of focused prompts. This standardization made responses easier to compare and analyse across sites, and it accommodated a geographically dispersed group within a tight fieldwork window.

In contrast, semi-structured interviews were used with departmental heads, reflecting a different epistemological stance toward their role. Departmental heads are embedded in the

daily life of a single school and hold a situated, practice-based understanding of policy enactment one that is constructed through interaction, context, and reflection. An interpretivist approach guided this choice. Interviews create a dialogical space where meaning can be explored, probed, and co-constructed, capturing the nuance and contradictions that questionnaires would flatten. For subject advisors, a more pragmatic, post positivist logic applied seeking comparable, time bound data across contexts whereas for departmental heads, the philosophical commitment was to depth, context, and voice.

Concerns about validity, reliability, and fairness arising from the mixed methods were addressed through several design moves. To strengthen validity, the questionnaire items were mapped directly to the interview guide so both instruments targeted the same core constructs, allowing triangulation of responses across groups. Reliability for the questionnaires was supported by piloting the questionnaire, refining ambiguous wording, and using closed and Likert-type items that yielded consistent categories, for interviews, reliability was pursued through a shared protocol, audio recording, and systematic coding checks to keep interpretation disciplined. Fairness was built in by aligning the purpose of each method to participants roles rather than treating certain individuals as “less heard”. Subject advisors were also allowed to respond anonymously and without time pressure, while Subject heads were offered the respect of extended dialogue appropriate to their school level expertise.

Collage

According to Gerstenblatt (2013), a collage is a qualitative research method used to explore participants' perspectives, emotions, and experiences. Collages help researchers gain a deeper understanding of participants' thoughts, feelings and experiences. The rationale for choosing a collage method was that it would provide a unique opportunity for departmental heads to visually represent their experiences, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their perspectives. This also reduced issues of power dynamics between the participants and me, as they retained control over the creation and interpretation of the collage.

The following steps were followed to guide the participants and ensure successful completion and reliable data.

Step 1: Introduction and Context Setting (10 Minutes)

I started by introducing the research and its objectives to my participants. Then I explained the purpose of the collage activity and how it would be used in this study. While doing this, I ensured that participants understood that their contributions were confidential and anonymous.

Step 2: Collage Creation (30 Minutes)

I provided my participants with a variety of materials, including:

- Magazines (related to education, teaching, and learning)
- Scissors
- Glue
- Markers or coloured pencils
- Large sheet of paper or cardboard (as the base for the collage)

I then asked the participants (departmental heads) to create a collage that represented their experiences with subject advisor support in teaching and learning. I encouraged them to think about the following aspects:

- Types of support received (e.g., mentoring, resources, workshops)
- Quality and effectiveness of the support
- Challenges or barriers faced
- Desired support or resources

Step 3: Collage Presentation and Discussion (30 Minutes)

After participants completed their collages, I asked them to present their work to me individually so that I could understand their experiences. I encouraged them to explain the symbols, images and colours they had used in their collages and describe how these represent their experiences. While they provided this explanation, I took notes and audio-recorded the discussion (with their consent).

Step 4: Data Analysis

After the collages were completed and discussed, I then analysed the collages and discussion notes to identify themes and patterns related to departmental heads' experiences with subject advisor support.

Step 5: Follow-up and Member Checking

After analysing the data, I went back to each departmental head to check for accuracy and validate the findings.

During the design of the collage, I was available to provide guidance and answer questions should my participants require any assistance. I also encouraged them to take their time and think deeply about their experiences, ensuring that all participants had an opportunity to share their thoughts and insights.

4.2.5.1 Interviews

After the completion of the collages, I conducted interviews with the same participants (departmental heads). Interviews are a qualitative data generation method that involves a conversation between a researcher and a participant with the aim of gathering in-depth, detailed, and contextualised information about the participant's experiences, perspectives, and opinions (Gill & Baillie, 2018). Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, depending on the research question and objectives (Low et al., 2019). Structured interviews involve asking predetermined questions, while semi-structured interviews include asking open-ended questions to gather more in-depth information. Unstructured interviews involve a more conversational approach with no predetermined questions (Qamar, 2023).

Interviews are a popular data generation method in qualitative research because they allow researchers to gather rich, nuanced, and contextualised data that help answer the study's research questions (Schultze & Avital, 2011). Interviews also enable researchers to build rapport with participants, which can increase the validity and reliability of the data (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In this study, semi-structured interviews and collages were chosen as the primary data collection methods for departmental heads, as together they allowed for an in-depth understanding of their personal experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding subject advisor support (Alamri, 2019).

I was also able to build rapport with departmental heads, which encouraged openness and more authentic responses (Creswell & Creswell (2017)). Thus, interviews gave me the opportunity to collect rich, detailed data on departmental heads' perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about subject advisor support. I asked open-ended questions that allowed me to gain insights into their experiences with subject advisors and to probe deeper into the departmental heads' responses. Probing was particularly useful when participants provided incomplete or ambiguous answers (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I ensured that each departmental head was asked the same questions in the same way, which helped maintain consistency across participants and reduce interviewer bias. This ensured that the data collected was comparable,

making it easier to identify patterns or trends in their experiences. Each interview was an hour long.

4.2.5.2 Questionnaires

The study used questionnaires to gather data from the subject advisors. A questionnaire is a data generation method that uses a set of standardised questions to collect information from a large participant base (Baker, 2003). Questionnaires can be administered online, by mail, or in person and can be used to collect data on a wide range of topics, including attitudes, behaviours, and demographic characteristics (Remillard et al., 2014). Questionnaires are often used in survey research, where the goal is to collect data from a large, representative sample of participants.

The use of questionnaires as a data generation method offers several advantages, including efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and the ability to collect data from many participants (Zelege et al., 2021). However, questionnaires also have limitations, such as the potential for respondent bias and the need for careful questionnaire design to ensure validity and reliability. A study by Zhang et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of piloting questionnaires to ensure that they are effective and reliable data generation tools.

Questionnaires were used to gather data on subject advisors' perspectives and experiences of supporting departmental heads in teaching and learning. They offered a level of anonymity that encouraged subject advisors to provide honest and candid responses, particularly where topics involved sensitive issues such as perceived challenges in providing support to departmental heads (Roberts & Allen, 2015). Since subject advisors were spread across different schools, questionnaires allowed for the collection of data from a broader sample in a cost-effective and time-efficient manner. Questionnaires also included some open-ended questions, providing a balanced approach, where I explored more profound insights into subject advisors' experiences (Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019).

4.2.6 Data analysis

The data in this study was analysed using thematic analysis guided by the core components of social learning theory and following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis – a widely recognised qualitative analysis method that involves identifying and interpreting themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This analytical approach ensured that the theoretical framework was an active lens through which the data was interpreted.

Thematic analysis is viewed as a good data analysis technique in qualitative research because it clearly detects and interprets themes that form qualitative data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I familiarised myself with the data through reading the interview transcripts and explanations from the collage discussions and examining the answers to the questionnaires so that I got the gist of the data. The second step involved the systematic coding of data segments to identify patterns and categories that came from participants' responses. This process was conducted manually to ensure thorough engagement with the text (Neale, 2016). Themes were then refined through iterative reviews to ensure they adequately captured the data's richness and complexity. During this process, a central theme emerged, and several codes were developed to represent participants' key ideas and concerns regarding the role of subject advisors.

Social learning theory guided the coding process by providing a conceptual lens through which both deductive and inductive strategies were applied. Deductively, codes were developed from key constructs of the theory such as modelling, observation, imitation, and reinforcement ensuring that the analysis remained anchored in the theoretical framework. Inductively, additional codes emerged directly from participants' narratives and collage representations, capturing unexpected themes and context-specific nuances of leadership practice. This dual approach allowed the coding to remain theoretically informed while still responsive to the lived experiences of departmental heads and subject advisors, thereby strengthening the coherence between theory and data.

Collages were analysed as visual-textual artifacts, since they contained both pictures and words. The analysis focused on how participants combined imagery and language to convey symbolic meanings, metaphors, and emotional undertones related to leadership practices and advisor support. Visual elements such as color, spatial arrangement, and recurring motifs were examined alongside textual captions or keywords, allowing patterns to emerge across cases. This dual-layered analysis highlighted how departmental heads and subject advisors expressed complex experiences through both symbolic representation and written articulation, enriching the interpretation of leadership practices within the social learning framework.

4.2.7 Data management for the study

To ensure data security, I implemented the following security measures:

- All data was stored on the hard drive of a password-protected personal computer and on the supervisor's password-protected laptop. I ensured that regular data backup was

done to secure external locations using an encrypted cloud storage service and made use of secure data transfer to ensure secure methods for transferring data and encrypted emails.

- I ensured that my supervisor had access to the stored data. I provided my supervisor with designated access to the data storage location using a unique login credential, provided the supervisor with regular updates on data collection, storage and analyses, and lastly, collaborated with the supervisor on data analyses and interpretation using secure, shared workspaces. All digital audio files and other electronic data were stored on the hard drive of my supervisor's password-protected personal computer and the hard drive of my supervisor's password-protected laptop. All data from computers and any other device will be deleted after five years.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

When carrying out research involving human participants, especially in an educational context, it is essential to address various ethical considerations to ensure the wellbeing, dignity, and rights of participants are protected (Fisher, 2012). This research involved subject advisors and departmental heads in the Ugu District of KwaZulu-Natal. Therefore, several measures were implemented to safeguard participant autonomy, confidentiality, and overall integrity throughout the research process.

Participants were given an informed consent form (see Appendix E) that included clear, comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were also advised that they were not being forced to participate and could withdraw from the study at any time should they feel they no longer wish to participate. Participants signed this informed consent form before participating.

Confidentiality and anonymity are critical components of ethical research practices. During the research, several strategies were employed to guarantee that participants' identities and personal information remain protected. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, I assigned pseudonyms and removed any identifying information – such as names, addresses and phone numbers – from the data and reports to protect their identities (Allen & Wiles, 2016).

4.4 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a key concept in qualitative research and refers to the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In a pragmatic framework, trustworthiness is enhanced by combining multiple data sources and methods (triangulation) and ensuring that the findings are credible and grounded in real-world contexts (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). In the context of this study, I used multiple data sources, such as interviews, questionnaires, and collages, to help verify the data and provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

4.4.1 Credibility

Credibility ensures that the research truly reflects the experiences of the departmental heads and that the findings are well-supported by the data (Domingo & Masabpi, 2024). To enhance credibility, I employed strategies such as prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources and methods, peer debriefing, and member checking, where participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of research findings. The goal was to establish confidence in the truth of my research findings by ensuring that the research was conducted in a way that accurately captured and interpreted participants' experiences. This involved creating a detailed, nuanced representation of participants' perspectives that rings true to those who have experienced the phenomenon being studied while also providing sufficient evidence and detailed descriptions to convince other researchers of the findings' authenticity and validity.

4.4.2 Dependability

Qualitative research is a critical criterion of study. It refers to the extent to which the research findings are consistent and reliable over time and can be repeated by other researchers (Creswell & Poth 2017). Dependability is essential to establishing the validity of the research findings, as it ensures that the research methods and procedures are reliable and consistent (Kumar, 2019). A dependable study uses rigorous and systematic methods and provides clear and transparent documentation of the research process (Patton, 1987). Therefore, it is essential to ensure that the research findings are dependable and consistent.

To ensure dependability, I created a comprehensive and transparent audit trail that includes detailed documentation of research processes, decision-making rationales, methodological shifts, and analytical approaches. This involved maintaining meticulous records of data

collection methods, interview transcripts, coding processes, and interpretative strategies while also embracing a reflexive approach that acknowledges potential variations and explains any changes in research design or methodology. The goal was to provide a clear, traceable account of the research journey that showed the study's findings are consistent, coherent, and grounded in systematic inquiry rather than arbitrary or random processes.

4.4.3 Conformability

Conformability is defined as the extent to which the research findings can be verified and confirmed by others and are free from researcher bias and influence (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Confirmability is essential in establishing the validity of the research findings, as it ensures that the research methods and procedures are transparent, systematic, and free from bias (Haq et al., 2023). Confirmable research provides clear and detailed documentation of the research process and allows others to verify and confirm the research findings (Patton, 1987).

To ensure conformability in this research study, I systematically documented the research process, maintained transparency, and minimised personal bias. This involved creating a comprehensive audit trail that includes raw data, research notes, and analytical documentation; practising reflexivity by critically examining personal assumption; using triangulation to cross-verify findings through multiple data sources and methods; engaging in peer debriefing to gain external perspectives; and conducting member checking by allowing participants to validate the research interpretation.

4.4.4 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the research findings can be applied or generalised to other contexts, settings, or populations (Burchett et al., 2013). Transferability is essential in establishing the validity of the research findings, as it ensures that the research findings are relevant and applicable to other contexts (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). A transferable study provides thick and detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and methods, allowing others to determine the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts (Drisko, 2025).

To ensure transferability in this study, I provided thick, comprehensive descriptions of the research context, participants, methodology, and findings, including detailed demographic information and specific environmental conditions. This may empower readers to make

informed judgements about the potential transferability of the study's insights, methods, and conclusions.

4.5 Limitations of the Study

Several conceptual and contextual elements could compromise the research design. Identifying and addressing these limitations is crucial for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study's findings. Some of the key limitations and ways to address them are discussed below.

Departmental heads may have different experiences based on their school contexts, such as rural vs. urban settings or variations in school resources. These contextual differences could affect the generalisability of the findings. To mitigate this limitation, I included a diverse sample of departmental heads from two different types of schools, ensuring that context is considered when analysing the data. Furthermore, the study explored how these types of contextual factors influence the types of support received and the effectiveness of that support. This information was incorporated into the analysis to contextualise the findings.

Another contextual limitation is that the study relied on the self-reported experiences of departmental heads, which may be influenced by personal biases, perceptions, or recall issues. This subjectivity could introduce a potential limitation in capturing the true extent of subject advisor support. To address this limitation, the study employed multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, questionnaires and collages) to help verify the accuracy of self-reported experiences and reduce bias.

Another limitation is the conceptual limitation. This relates to the relationship between subject advisors and departmental heads, which may be multifaceted, with varying degrees of influence, authority, and collaboration. This complex dynamic might be challenging to capture fully in a study. To mitigate this limitation, I incorporated multiple perspectives to understand the nature of this relationship better. This involved interviewing departmental heads and using triangulation to compare their views. In addition, I used detailed case studies of two specific schools to explore how the subject advisor–departmental head relationship manifests in different contexts.

Recognising and addressing these conceptual and contextual limitations, the study provides a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of departmental heads' experiences with subject advisor support in teaching and learning. Employing strategies such as diverse sampling

and triangulation helped to ensure that the research findings are credible, valid, and reflective of real-world complexities.

4.6 Delimitations of the Study

One of the primary delimitations of the research is its geographical scope, which focused exclusively on primary schools in Ugu District in KwaZulu-Natal. The decision to limit the study to this area ensured a localised, contextualised understanding of departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support. By concentrating on one district, the research could provide in-depth insights that are specific to the local educational context, including regional policies, resources, and challenges faced by schools in Ugu District (Smit, 2005). However, this limits the generalisability of the findings to other regions or districts. In addition, the study only captured departmental heads' experiences at a specific point in time, which may not reflect changes over time, such as shifts in the role of subject advisors or departmental heads' evolving needs. In addressing these recommendations, a longitudinal approach could be considered in future studies, tracking the experiences of departmental heads over a more extended period to better understand how subject advisor support evolves and impacts teaching and learning. This would allow for more comprehensive insights into the long-term effects of support. Future studies could also expand the geographical scope to include multiple districts or provinces, allowing for comparative analysis and broader generalisability of findings.

Another delimitation concerns the selection of participants. The study focused on department heads who had at least two years of experience in their roles. This criterion was set to ensure that participants had a sound understanding of their responsibilities and had likely encountered subject advisor support over an extended period. The exclusion of less experienced departmental heads ensured that the data collected reflected informed and experienced perspectives on the support provided by subject advisors (Tjozongoro, 2019). This selection criterion, however, means that the experiences of newer departmental heads were not captured in the study.

The research design also included all phases of primary education, from the foundation phase through to the senior phase. This broad inclusion ensured that the study considered the experiences of departmental heads across different levels of primary schooling, each of which faces distinct challenges and different forms of support. For example, departmental heads in

the foundation phase may encounter limited or inconsistent support from subject advisors compared to their counterparts in the senior phase.

Recent findings highlight that both foundation and intermediate phase educators often receive minimal guidance and engagement from subject advisors, which significantly affects teaching and learning outcomes. This lack of support is especially concerning given the distinct pedagogical needs and developmental stages of learners in these phases. Without regular feedback, professional development, and curriculum-specific assistance, educators may struggle to implement effective teaching strategies and meet curriculum standards, ultimately impacting the quality of education provided to learners in these crucial early years (Mitchell et al., 2018). The inclusion of all phases in this study provided a comprehensive view of subject advisor support across the entire primary school spectrum; however, it may also have introduced complexities in data interpretation.

The exclusion of other stakeholders is another delimitation. The research focused solely on the experiences of departmental heads and subject advisors, excluding other stakeholders such as educators and school principals. While different perspectives could have enriched the study by providing a more holistic view of subject advisor support, focusing exclusively on departmental heads allowed for a deep exploration of their unique experiences and challenges. Including other stakeholders would introduce additional complexity and may distract from the study's core aim of understanding the departmental heads' perspective (Finnegan & Currie, 2010). Future research could consider incorporating the perspectives of other educators and school leaders to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the support system.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research methodology used to investigate departmental heads' experiences of the support provided by subject advisors in primary school teaching and learning within Ugu District. The study operated within an interpretivist paradigm, recognising multiple, socially constructed realities and emphasising the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences. This philosophical approach is well-suited to the study's goal of exploring how departmental heads perceive and engage with subject advisors as key curriculum facilitators in the primary school environment.

The study employed a qualitative case-study design to deeply explore the lived experiences of participants across two schools. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews

and collage-elicited creation sessions with departmental heads, complemented by a questionnaire administered to subject advisors. This approach enabled methodological triangulation, drawing on diverse data sources and methods to cross-validate findings and enrich the study's credibility and depth.

This chapter also addressed the study's trustworthiness by systematically considering its four pillars: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and detailing how each was ensured throughout the research.

The chapter has laid a solid foundation for the next phase of the research, which presents and interprets the findings. Drawing on the thematic analysis discussed above and the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Three, the following chapter will tie findings back to the research questions and explore the implications of social learning theory in this study's context.

CHAPTER FIVE: DATA PRESENTATION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and examines the data collected through the research design and methodology detailed in the preceding chapter. The primary sources of data included semi-structured interviews conducted with six departmental heads across two primary schools, collages created by the six departmental heads to represent their experiences of the support provided by subject advisors for teaching and learning, and questionnaires completed by five subject advisors in the Ugu District. The chapter is structured into three sections, each focusing on data from one of the sources: interviews, questionnaires and surveys.

5.2 Section 1: Data from Departmental Heads - Interview Participants

5.2.1 Presentation of participant demographics

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six departmental heads from two primary schools in the Ugu District. The participants were evenly distributed across the three educational phases: two from the foundation phase, two from the intermediate phase, and two from the senior phase. Their professional experience in education ranged from ten to thirty-four years, and their tenure as departmental heads from three to 18 years. In terms of subject specialisation, one participant taught English, two focused on natural science and technology, two handled social sciences, and one taught mathematics. These demographics are presented in Table 1 below. The schools and participants were assigned pseudonyms to safeguard their identities, maintain privacy, and protect them from harm.

Table 5.1: Background of departmental head participants

Participants (pseudonym)	School (pseudonym)	Phase	Subject Specialisation	Years in Education	Years as Dept. Head	Age Range
Miss Nenesh	Bobby	Foundation Phase	English	11	4	30–40
Miss Charlotte	Tamara	Foundation Phase	Natural science & technology	10	3	40–50
Miss Jay	Bobby	Intermediate Phase	Natural science & technology	34	18	40–50
Miss Zoe	Tamara	Intermediate Phase	Social sciences	18	6	30–40
Miss Cleo	Bobby	Senior Phase	Social sciences	15	5	30–40
Miss Lucy	Tamara	Senior Phase	Mathematics	19	8	40–50

5.2.2 Key Themes from Semi-Structured Interviews

This study used a qualitative approach, analysing data from semi-structured interviews to identify key themes that emerged from the experiences of departmental heads. A total of seven dominant themes were identified, providing insight into the complexities of educational leadership. These themes include:

1. Inadequate subject advisor support: Impact on curriculum coherence and instructional leadership
2. Emotional impact of perceived isolation and lack of support
3. Reliance on peer support and PLCs
4. Perceptions of professional development
5. Impact of external factors
6. Impact on teaching and learning outcomes
7. Desire for effective leadership and support.

The themes highlight the challenges faced by departmental heads, from inadequate support to the emotional toll of isolation, and the importance of peer support and effective leadership in enhancing teaching and learning outcomes. By exploring these themes, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the needs and experiences of educational leaders.

Theme 1: Inadequate subject advisor support: Impact on curriculum coherence and instructional leadership

All six participants expressed concerns about inconsistent curriculum monitoring and significant communication gaps between themselves and subject advisors, which led to uncertainty in curriculum implementation. Participants cited that subject advisors rarely conducted school visits to offer support or guidance. This lack of visible presence and engagement had left departmental heads unsure whether their teaching teams (the educators within their respective departments or phases) were aligned with district expectations.

A common sentiment was the absence of updated annual teaching plans (ATPs), exacerbating confusion. Miss Nenesh and Miss Charlotte, among others, highlighted that without up-to-date ATPs, departmental heads had to rely on outdated materials or peer-derived content, potentially compromising curriculum fidelity (the accurate and consistent implementation of the curriculum as intended). Furthermore, participants shared that there was no formal monitoring system in place to ensure curriculum coverage and quality assurance across schools. The lack of regular consultation and feedback from subject advisors undermined departmental heads' confidence in executing their instructional leadership roles. Miss Nenesh and Miss Zoe specifically noted that, while workshops were conducted mostly in the foundation phase, these were not sufficient substitutes for consistent, school-based curriculum monitoring.

Miss Nenesh noted,

In my experience as a departmental head, I have only had one visit, and since then I have not received any other visitation, which has negatively impacted how I do my work... There needs to be consistent support from our subject advisors, where we meet either one-on-one or as departmental heads.

She also added, Due to no visits and no regular support, it becomes very hard to initiate some of the activities that are required in terms of curriculum management.

Charlotte stated:

I have never received any curriculum guidance from my subject advisor. I feel completely disconnected from the kind of support I expected in this role. There's virtually no communication beyond WhatsApp groups... I've never been visited by a subject advisor at my school, not once.

Miss Nenesh also noted the lack of ATPs:

We have not been able to receive documents such as annual teaching plans for the last two years... Even if we go online, there is nothing under our province, so that then possess a challenge in terms of mitigating any challenges that we come across within the school or developing educators according to the current policy.

Miss Charlotte also mentioned,

I don't even have access to updated annual teaching plans for my phase. I've had to rely on the Gauteng province version, which doesn't align perfectly with our local curriculum needs.

Miss Jay echoed the sentiments of others regarding a breakdown in communication and the absence of consistent curriculum monitoring, especially post-COVID-19, however she also noted positive support from one specific subject advisor who consistently offered valuable assistance.

She stated,

Before the pandemic, I used to receive regular assistance and feedback that helped me improve not only my teaching but also how I managed the department... But after COVID, everything shifted. I felt abandoned and lost, with no monitoring or follow-up on the curriculum.

However, she also noted positive support from one specific subject advisor who consistently offered valuable assistance. She stated,

One of my subject advisors has always stood out as proactive and hands-on. She used to continuously support me, and thanks to her, I genuinely enjoy teaching the subject she monitors.

Miss Zoe shared similar challenges regarding a lack of consistent support and communication, emphasising the vital role of WhatsApp groups for sharing resources and addressing challenges:

As a departmental head, I have found the experience increasingly frustrating due to the persistent lack of communication and support from subject advisors. The oversight and guidance we were promised just aren't happening.

She further added, Truthfully, if it weren't for the WhatsApp groups we have created among ourselves, I don't know how I would cope. Those groups have become our lifeline.

Miss Cleo highlighted the challenges of significant gaps in communication and no school visits from subject advisors, stating:

One of the biggest issues I face is that I've never actually met a subject advisor in person... I've only heard about them through discussions and circulars, but I've never received a school visit or had the opportunity for face-to-face engagement.

Miss Lucy described operating in isolation with no meaningful support. "There hasn't been a single visit from a subject advisor, nor any form of monitoring to reassure me that I'm on the right path." This participant also noted that "The communication gaps are enormous. There's little to no direct engagement with subject advisors."

All six participants expressed concerns over inconsistent curriculum monitoring and significant communication gaps between departmental heads and subject advisors. They highlighted that subject advisors rarely conduct school visits, leading to uncertainty in curriculum implementation.

Theme 2: Emotional impact of perceived isolation and lack of support

Four of the six participants expressed the emotional toll of feeling unsupported and isolated due to the lack of consistent engagement from subject advisors. This feeling of isolation increased when those involved in crafting teaching and learning strategies were not visible to guide implementers.

Miss Cleo noted,

The persistent lack of support and absence of visible curriculum leadership have left me feeling not just professionally isolated but personally disconnected from the system... There's no guidance, no reassurance, just uncertainty.

Miss Lucy echoed a similar concern, stating,

I often feel unsupported, unseen and undervalued... It's demoralising. Leadership becomes a lonely space when support systems fail.

Miss Zoe noted,

I feel unhappy and deeply lost as a departmental head, having never received sufficient support from subject advisors, which ultimately led me toward emotional breakdown.

Miss Charlotte echoed,

I often feel drained and ineffective in performing my duties because the lack of support from subject advisors leaves me uncertain, emotionally burdened, and unable to lead confidently.

Theme 3: Reliance on peer support and professional learning communities

All participants highlighted the crucial role of peer support networks, such as WhatsApp groups and PLCs, in bridging the gaps left by formal support structures. Miss Zoe mentioned that “If it weren’t for the WhatsApp groups we’ve created among ourselves, I don’t know how I would cope.” Similarly, Miss Cleo stated, “We share challenges, offer strategies, and support each other.”

These informal networks have become integral for departmental heads, enabling them to share resources and address challenges collectively. Miss Charlotte highlighted that the WhatsApp groups facilitated communication among her peers, stating they have become a lifeline despite the lack of formal channels.

Miss Cleo and Miss Lucy similarly remarked that successful collaboration within these informal networks provided a semblance of structure amid overwhelming uncertainty. Miss Jay and Miss Lucy raised concerns about the effectiveness of WhatsApp groups, especially without subject advisor involvement. Miss Lucy asserted that:

WhatsApp groups were introduced as a way to bridge the gap, but they’re not nearly as effective as one-on-one engagement.

Miss Charlotte concurred, stating:

There are no functioning WhatsApp groups that include subject advisors, no structured PLCs in my context just occasional conversations with other departmental heads who are equally overwhelmed.

Theme 4: Perceptions of professional development

The participants articulated varying experiences regarding professional development workshops facilitated by subject advisors, with many dissatisfied with their implementation. Miss Cleo noted that workshops often catered to a limited sample of departmental heads of sampled schools, with little follow-through in ensuring that the knowledge reached departmental heads of other schools in the district. This sentiment was echoed by Miss Nenesh and Miss Zoe, who described experiences where workshops occurred without sufficient follow-up or monitoring, and questioned their effectiveness. Miss Zoe highlighted:

One of the most frustrating aspects of the current system is the way workshops are handled. Often, only a small sample of schools is invited to attend, with the expectation that those few will share the information with the rest of us in the circuit departmental heads.

All participants expressed a desire for professional development that was not only informative but also sustained through ongoing mentorship and guidance.

Theme 5: Impact of external factors

A common thread in the discussion was the influence of external factors on the effectiveness of curriculum delivery and the support they received. Miss Jay and Miss Cloe pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic had particularly exacerbated the challenges of communication and oversight. In this regard, Miss Jay articulated how the pandemic led to increased isolation because of diminished communication channels. In addition, departmental heads felt a heightened sense of uncertainty regarding curricular expectations, which further complicated their instructional roles.

Some participants indicated that subject advisors cited COVID-19 rules as reasons for not visiting schools for monitoring and guidance, and minimal visits continued even after the state of disaster declaration had been lifted. Other factors cited included global warming issues, such as floods in KwaZulu-Natal that destroyed roads, blocking subject advisors from travelling to institutions.

Theme 6: Impact on Teaching and Learning Outcomes

The findings revealed that the departmental heads were not being monitored sufficiently on curriculum implementation, as illustrated by the lack of appropriate teaching strategies by

educators, which had resulted in poor outcomes for learners in schools. All six participants felt that they lacked support for teaching and learning outcomes.

Miss Nenesh, Miss Charlotte, Miss Zoe and Miss Lucy highlighted the potential impact of inadequate support on teaching and learning outcomes, with Miss Lucy saying, "Without curriculum monitoring, we as departmental heads are left guessing, and it's the learners who suffer the consequences."

Miss Jay also shared this concern about the impact of poor support on learning outcomes, pointing out,

The inconsistency in oversight doesn't just affect us, it filters down to the learners. When we lack clear communication and assistance, it disrupts our planning, assessment, and overall teaching practice. More importantly, it affects learner outcomes.

Theme 7: Desire for effective leadership and support

The outcry from the departmental heads was that leaders in education should not be leaders in their offices only, but they must take steps to move into the workplace physically and see what their subordinates are doing before they start charging them for insubordination.

All participants expressed a desire for effective leadership and support from subject advisors. Miss Cleo stated, "I want someone to check in, not to police, but to guide." This sentiment was echoed by Miss Lucy, who emphasised the need for meaningful oversight and communication structures to enable departmental heads to lead effectively.

Miss Nenesh shared this concern about the need for visible, effective leadership and support in schools, commenting that "I've never been visited by a subject advisor at my school, not once, and as a result, I'm left questioning whether I'm steering my team in the right direction."

However, Miss Jay had a different experience since she received support from a subject advisor who regularly visited her and offered support, even to the extent of seeing the learners doing some activities during lessons. Miss Jay noted that her experience was not entirely negative because one specific subject advisor had consistently offered her valuable support and made herself available whenever assistance was needed.

One of my subject advisors has always stood out as proactive and hands on. She used to continuously support me, and thanks to her, I genuinely enjoy teaching the subject she monitors.

5.3 Section 2: Data from the Collage

Six departmental heads were invited to produce a collage that encapsulated their personal experiences and perceptions of subject advisor support within their respective departmental contexts. The collage creation process allowed participants to reflect on their experiences. The collages created by the department heads are reproduced here as Figures 5.1 to 5.6.

5.3.1 Collage by participant 1 (Miss Nenesh)



Figure 5.1 Collage made by participant 1, Miss Nenesh

During the collage discussion, Miss Nenesh shared her experience with subject advisor support, revealing a sense of frustration and isolation. She noted that she had only received one visit from her subject advisor, with no follow-up support, negatively impacting her work as a departmental head. The lack of consistent engagement made it challenging to initiate curriculum management activities. Miss Nenesh also emphasised the need for regular support,

suggesting one-on-one or departmental head meetings with subject advisors. She expressed the emotional toll of feeling unsupported, highlighting the importance of networking to survive. In addition to attending minimal workshops, she noted that ATPs were not updated regularly, causing further frustration.

5.3.2 Collage by participant 2 (Miss Charlotte)



Figure 5.2 Collage made by participant 2, Miss Charlotte

During the collage discussion, Miss Charlotte shared her experience with subject advisor support, revealing feelings of frustration and disconnection. She stated that she had never received curriculum guidance from her subject advisor, contradicting her expectations as a departmental head. She mentioned that she felt isolated, with communication limited to WhatsApp groups and no visits from subject advisors to her school. She described herself as exhausted and frustrated, relying on networking and peer assistance to navigate her role. The

lack of support and training left her struggling with curriculum monitoring, a task made more challenging by the absence of induction or guidance.

5.3.3 Collage by participant 3 (Miss Jay)



Figure 5.3 Collage made by participant 3, Miss Jay

During the discussion, Miss Jay shared her experience with subject advisor support, highlighting the challenges she faces as a departmental head. She reported receiving minimal support and curriculum guidance from her subject advisor, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, as things were better before COVID-19 when she had more contact with subject advisors. Although she felt fortunate to have a team of educators with a strong sense of team spirit, the lack of workshops and guidance from subject advisors eroded her confidence. Miss Jay felt abandoned, struggling to determine whether she was on the right track without regular support. She emphasised the difficulties of leading by example as a leader while facing challenges due to subject advisors' inactivity.

5.3.4 Collage by participant 4 (Miss Zoe)



Figure 5.4 Collage made by participant 4, Miss Zoe

During the discussion, Miss Zoe shared his experience with subject advisor support, emphasising the crucial role of peer support in his success. He credited his peers with helping him navigate challenges, stating that without their assistance, he would not have made it this far. Miss Zoe expressed feelings of isolation, highlighting the lack of proper curriculum guidance from subject advisors. Despite this, he found solace in the PLC groups formed with his cluster, which enabled him to mitigate challenges. He added that these informal networks had become essential in filling the support gap left by subject advisors. Miss Zoe's experience

stresses the importance of peer support and collaboration in overcoming the challenges of being a departmental head.

5.3.5 Collage by participant 5 (Miss Cleo)



Figure 5.5 Collage made by participant 5, Miss Cleo

Miss Cleo highlighted a lack of meaningful support from subject advisors since her appointment. She expressed frustration over the absence of proper curriculum guidance, induction, and ongoing monitoring, which has left her uncertain about her professional responsibilities. Without formal support structures, she relies heavily on her peers to navigate her duties, often questioning whether she is executing them correctly. This lack of feedback and direction has significantly impacted her confidence in her effectiveness in her role. Despite these challenges, Miss Cleo acknowledged a positive aspect: the school she serves under is proactive and places strong emphasis on networking, which provides her with occasional access to new insights and resources.

5.3.6 Collage by participant 6 (Miss Lucy)

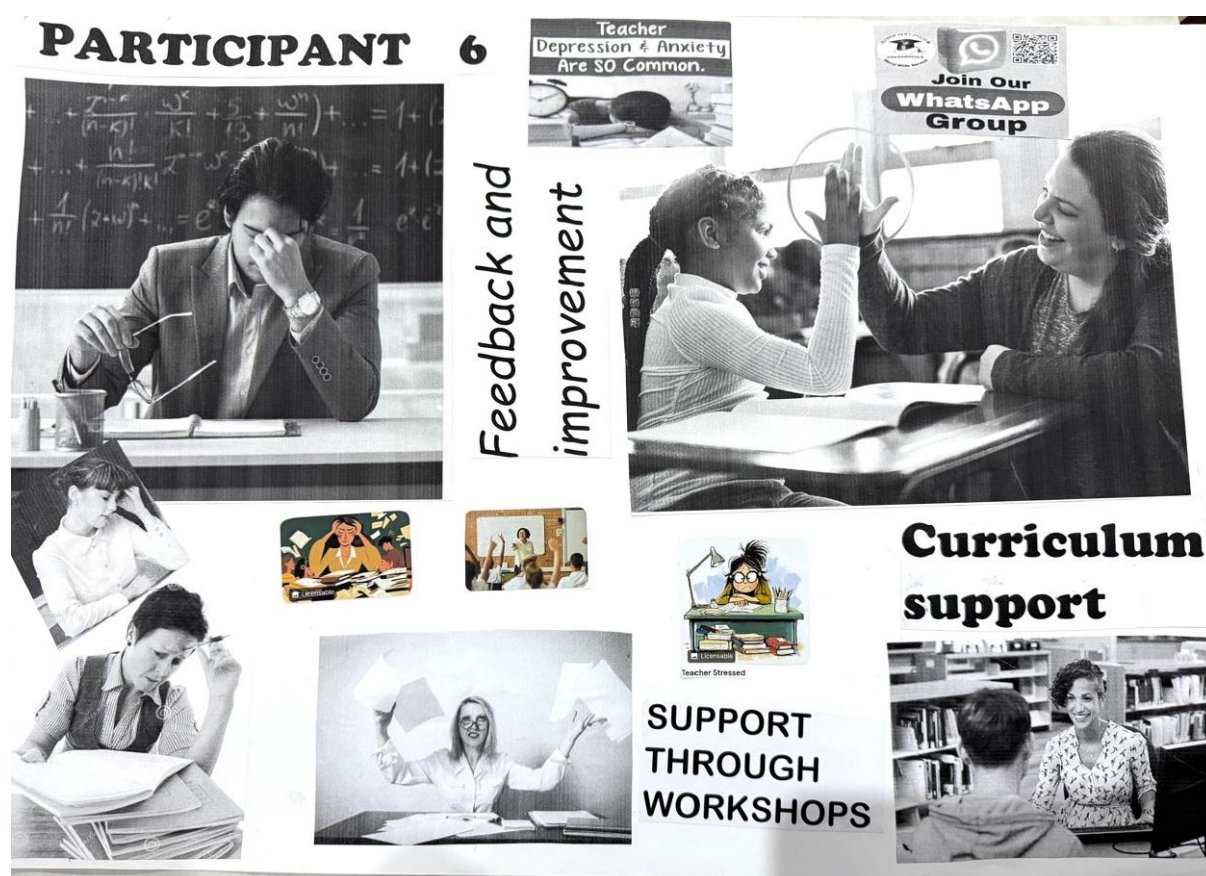


Figure 5.6 Collage made by participant 6, Miss Lucy

Miss Lucy conveyed her deep sense of frustration stemming from limited support by subject advisors. She openly shared how this lack of guidance leaves her feeling lost and uncertain, often leading her department without confidence. With the KwaZulu-Natal ATPs outdated, she resorts to using those from Gauteng province, which are more current and relevant. However, navigating curriculum demands with external resources and no clear direction has become a challenging and isolating experience.

5.4 Data from the Questionnaire: Subject Advisors

This section provides a summary of the data from the questionnaires completed by the five subject advisors, offering a blended perspective on their insights into the support offered to departmental heads in Ugu District.

A questionnaire was designed for the five subject advisors. It had four sections that were structured to explore various dimensions of advisor–departmental head interactions. The first section sought information on the support provided to departmental heads, the second dealt

with teaching and learning support, the third gathered information on challenges and recommendations, and the fourth and last section was the conclusion (see Appendix E). At the start of the questionnaire, subject advisors provided details on the schools they supported, their subject specialisation and other demographic information (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2: Background of subject advisor participants

Participants (pseudonyms)	School (pseudonyms)	Phase	Subject Specialisation	Years as Subject Advisor	Age range
Mandy	Bobby	Senior Phase	EMS	16	50–60
Thandy	Tamara	Intermediate Phase	Natural science & technology	16	40–50
Snowy	Bobby	Intermediate Phase	Mathematics	17	50–60
Snerish	Tamara and Bobby	Foundation Phase	All foundation phase subjects	17	50–60
Bheki	Bobby	Senior Phase	Languages	5	40–50

To enhance clarity and visual impact, the responses are displayed using pie charts. The results are systematically organised based on questionnaire sections, allowing for targeted analysis and interpretation. This approach highlights recurring methods and forms of support provided by the subject advisors to the departmental heads, identifies areas of strength, and reveals potential gaps in support, offering a comprehensive overview of the advisory landscape within the district.

5.4.1 Section 1: Support provided to departmental heads

All five subject advisors noted that they provide support related to curriculum management, professional development, and assessment practices. Common types of support included:

- Providing guidance on curriculum implementation and instructional strategies.
- Facilitating PLCs and workshops.
- Monitoring and evaluating to ensure compliance with curriculum standards.
- Providing resources and tools for tracking curriculum coverage and learner performance.

However, variations were noted in the specific areas of focus and types of resources provided. For example, Mandy and Snowy emphasised support for curriculum management and the compilation of resource files, while others, such as Thandy, focused more on assessment moderation and tracking learner performance.

In terms of subject advisors meeting with departmental heads, the responses indicated the frequency of meetings were as follows:

- Two subject advisors stated that they met with their departmental heads weekly
- Two said they met monthly
- One scheduled meetings on a quarterly basis (see Figure 5.1).

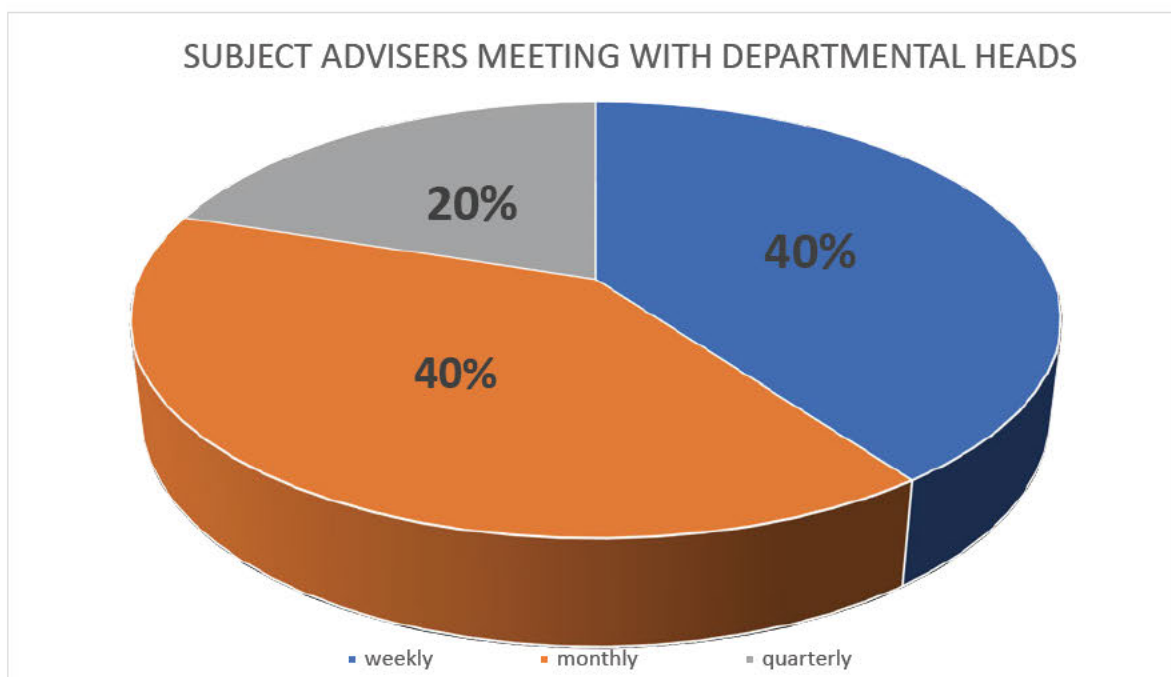


Figure 5.7 Subject advisers meeting with departmental heads

All five subject advisors indicated using a diverse range of communication methods to engage with departmental heads. These included face-to-face meetings during school visits, WhatsApp groups for instant updates and informal exchanges, and circulars and telephone calls for more formal interactions. Despite this commonality, individual preferences varied; while some advisors favoured the flexibility and immediacy of WhatsApp, others leaned towards structured meetings for deeper, focused dialogue.

Five subject advisors confirmed that they provide training on professional development for the departmental heads. Two subject advisors noted that they also conducted various training sessions ranging from content knowledge to instructional strategies and facilitation skills. They also mentioned that they provided ongoing support to ensure the objectives of the training were fully realised.

5.4.2 Section 2: Teaching and learning support

In terms of supporting departmental heads in ensuring effective curriculum implementation, all five subject advisors indicated that they assisted in curriculum implementation through conducting workshops and school visits, providing support documents (e.g., ATPs, lesson plans) and offering feedback on lesson delivery and classroom practices. They also suggested strategies to departmental heads to improve learner outcomes. Some of the common strategies suggested included establishing and maintaining PLCs, setting up structured departmental plans prior to the academic year, and frequent monitoring of curriculum coverage and learner performance.

Furthermore, the five subject advisors emphasised assisting in the analysis of learner performance data, supporting the development of subject improvement plans, and providing guidance on the use of assessment tools to track progress. In addition, four of the subject advisors explained that they provided departmental heads with curriculum tracking tools and assessment templates, monitoring tools for lessons and written work, and moderation tools for school-based assessments (SBAs). one subject advisor focused more on specific subject areas than others, based on their expertise.

5.4.3 Section 3: Challenges and recommendations

The five subject advisors reported a set of common challenges that they faced, including:

- high workloads, leading to insufficient time for follow-ups,
- limited human resources, which affected their capacity to support multiple schools effectively, and
- resistance from some departmental heads to adopting new strategies.

However, the challenges also varied slightly. Some subject advisors cited issues related to the number of schools they support (for example, Snerish monitoring 218 schools and Snowy

supervising 487 schools), while other participants focused on the lack of engagement from departmental heads.

Four of the five subject advisors suggested that departmental heads could be better supported by increasing the frequency of professional development workshops. They also emphasised the need for more targeted support based on specific departmental needs. In addition, one participant noted that enhancing collaboration and communication between subject advisors and departmental heads would significantly improve support.

All five subject advisors emphasised the need for additional human resources and tools to better manage the large number of schools they were assigned, and two participants also indicated specific needs, such as ICT training and resources for effective curriculum delivery.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the data on the experiences of six departmental heads in relation to subject advisor support within primary school teaching and learning. Their perspectives reveal a nuanced blend of frustration, resilience, and unwavering commitment to improving educational outcomes. The themes that emerged from the study include inconsistent curriculum oversight, communication gaps, emotional isolation, and dependence on peer collaboration and PLCs. These factors underscore a fragmented support structure that often hinders effective teaching practices.

Professional development initiatives were viewed with mixed sentiment: valued when relevant but criticised for a lack of consistency and strategic focus. External challenges, such as policy mandates and resource constraints, further complicate their leadership roles, with a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Importantly, the departmental heads advocate for stronger leadership and enhanced subject advisor involvement, presenting constructive recommendations for a more responsive and collaborative support system.

Their collective voices signal a pressing need for educational reform that centres on authentic engagement, continuous capacity building, and meaningful communication. Elevating these insights can pave the way for more cohesive instructional leadership and improved student outcomes.

The next chapter will analyse and discuss these findings by presenting a comprehensive conclusion and practical recommendations aimed at redefining the role of subject advisors and strengthening support for teaching and learning.

CHAPTER SIX: INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

The primary purpose of this chapter is to offer a rigorous interpretation and critical analysis of the findings presented in Chapter Five regarding the support experiences of departmental heads in primary schools, drawing upon the perspectives of both departmental heads and subject advisors. This discussion deliberately moves beyond a mere descriptive summary by critically engaging with the empirical data, explicitly connecting the emergent themes to the literature review (Chapter Two) and the theoretical framework of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (Chapter Three).

A systematic analysis is conducted to determine how the current support system, or the lack thereof, impacts the departmental heads' professional development and instructional leadership efficacy in the South African context. The core argument here is that the systemic failures in support directly undermine the conditions necessary for effective social learning and the cultivation of self-efficacy, thereby forcing departmental heads to adopt precarious, informal coping mechanisms that compromise curriculum quality. This chapter's final section will synthesise these findings to set the stage for the formal conclusions and recommendations presented in Chapter Seven.

6.2 Interpretation Through the Lens of Bandura's Social Learning Theory

The experiences detailed by the departmental heads are fundamentally understood as a crisis in the professional social learning environment, as conceptualised by Bandura (1977). This theory offers a potent lens through which to analyse the failures in the support system by examining four key conceptual areas – observational learning, imitation and modelling, reinforcement, and reciprocal determinism – substantiated by participant voices.

6.2.1 Observational learning and modelling

Observational learning asserts that individuals acquire new behaviours and knowledge by watching others (models). In this context, subject advisors are intended to serve as highly competent models demonstrating effective curriculum implementation and instructional leadership. The data, however, reveals a critical failure of this mechanism, as the key models are largely absent, thus preventing the necessary process of modelling. Miss Charlotte's experience, detailed in both interview and collage data, exemplifies this void:

I have never received any curriculum guidance from my subject advisor. I feel completely disconnected from the kind of support I expected in this role. There's virtually no communication beyond WhatsApp groups... I've never been visited by a subject advisor at my school, not once.

This absence of observed competency directly frustrates the departmental head's ability to assimilate and replicate best practices, leaving them uncertain about their instructional roles. According to Bandura's (1977) concept, the absence of mastery experiences creates a stagnant environment where the departmental head is forced into inefficient, self-devised curriculum solutions, a stark contrast to the expected instructional leadership roles outlined in the literature. Tapala et al. (2021), aligning with Bandura's perspective, highlight that numerous departmental heads express a sense of insufficient support, though they often refrain from exploring the complexities of their experiences or clarifying what effective support would entail.

While social learning theory offers valuable insights into how individuals acquire behaviours through observation and imitation, it has been critiqued most notably by Prestine and LeGrand (1991) for oversimplifying the learning process. Their critique confirms that the theory often reduces learning to mere mimicry, overlooking the nuanced cognitive and reflective mechanisms that underpin authentic development. In real-world settings, departmental heads do not simply replicate observed behaviours; rather, they engage in active evaluation, adaptation, and contextualisation of these behaviours to suit their unique environments. This underscores the notion that leadership development extends beyond modelling; it requires critical engagement, personal interpretation, and situational awareness. Therefore, while observational learning plays a foundational role, I argue that it must be complemented by deeper cognitive strategies to cultivate effective and genuine leadership.

6.2.2 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a specific situation (Bandura, 1977), is profoundly eroded by the support deficit. The pervasive feelings of isolation and neglect that were reported by the participants directly translate into a severe erosion of their professional confidence. When formal institutional support is absent, the necessary sources of mastery experience and performance feedback are undermined, leading to diminished professional identity (Bandura, 1977). The emotional toll of this experience was captured by Miss Lucy:

I often feel unsupported, unseen and undervalued. It is demoralising. Leadership becomes a lonely space when support systems fail.

This severe erosion of confidence has a clear theoretical consequence: professional risk aversion. When departmental heads lack the conviction in their ability to lead (internal cognition), they are less likely to initiate complex, but necessary, behavioural changes in their departments. This translates into a reluctance to challenge poor teaching practices, introduce pedagogical innovations, or demand accountability from staff. Instead of leading instruction, the departmental head role often defaults to administrative compliance, which is less risky but fails to drive school improvement.

When the District ignores my urgent queries for weeks, I inevitably start doubting my own abilities to lead my teachers. It makes me feel utterly redundant, and sometimes I just want to give up on trying to innovate. (Miss Nenesh).

This statement clearly demonstrates the cognitive effect of the unsupportive environment on the individual's self-assessment and motivational state. Furthermore, the collage reflection from Miss Jay revealed that the lack of workshops and guidance from subject advisors eroded her confidence and left her struggling to determine whether she was on the right track.

Bandura's social learning theory highlights self-efficacy as a key driver of behaviour, shaped through observing others' successes and failures. Vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional states influence belief in one's capabilities. However, critics argue the theory overemphasises environmental factors, neglecting innate traits and unconscious processes. It may also limit autonomy by relying heavily on external models, suggesting a need for more integrative approaches to understanding self-efficacy development.

6.2.3 Reciprocal determinism

Reciprocal determinism describes the continuous, mutual interaction among the individual's cognition (beliefs, self-efficacy), behaviour (leadership actions), and environment (support system, resources). The study's findings illustrate a negative feedback loop: the environmental constraint of absent subject advisors limits the departmental head's behaviour (e.g., reluctance to implement new curriculum changes), which then negatively impacts their cognition (reduced confidence and morale), thereby reinforcing the dysfunctional environment. A study by Naoko and Yumi (2023) also confirms that environmental factors may cause subject advisors to be reluctant to perform their duties effectively because of the challenges they experience.

I want to implement the new Annual Teaching Plan with confidence, but the subject advisor hasn't been here to train us properly or even check on the resources. I am forced to rely on old, inefficient ways, and then the District Office still wonders why our results are poor. (Miss Charlotte).

This uncertainty about performing the job correctly was clearly captured in the collage reflection of Miss Cleo:

Without formal support structures, I rely heavily on my peers to navigate my duties and often question whether I am executing my duties correctly (Miss Cleo).

This demonstrates the constraining power of a deficient environment on both leadership behaviour and subsequent performance outcomes.

6.2.4 Social persuasion and reinforcement

The social learning theory construct of social persuasion highlights the importance of verbal encouragement and credible feedback from others. The data suggests that for many participants, the system provides negative or sporadic reinforcement, failing to recognise effort or success. This failure to offer timely, positive social persuasion severely hampers motivation and professional standing.

The weight of responsibility grows heavier when there's no one to lean on, no encouragement, and no recognition. It's exhausting to keep pushing forward in isolation, trying to lead effectively while feeling disconnected from those (subject advisors) who should be offering guidance and solidarity. (Miss Charlotte)

This disconnect weakens the reinforcing power of the relationship, further eroding the departmental heads' professional self-efficacy.

The only time I ever hear from the district subject advisor is when something is wrong or they need a report submitted immediately. There is no positive reinforcement, only criticism or bureaucratic demands. It feels like they are disconnected from our daily realities, never acknowledging our hard work, only appearing when pressure mounts. This lack of encouragement drains morale and makes genuine collaboration feel impossible. (Miss Lucy)

This critical perspective confirms that the lack of encouraging or constructive feedback from official structures contributes directly to the reported feelings of being ‘unsupported, unseen, and undervalued’ among departmental heads.

Social learning theory posits that behaviour is shaped through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Social persuasion and verbal encouragement can enhance self-efficacy, while reinforcement solidifies learnt actions. However, critics argue that this concept of the social learning theory underestimates internal cognition and overemphasises environmental influence. It may neglect individual agency and cultural variability, limiting its explanatory power in complex social contexts where persuasion and reinforcement interact unpredictably.

6.3 Discussion of Key Findings and Links to Literature

6.3.1 Inadequate subject advisor support: A failure of modelling and curriculum coherence

The empirical evidence from this study indicates a significant, sustained gap in the support and oversight provided by subject advisors, a finding that is consistent with existing South African literature on the efficacy of district assistance. Across the board, participants’ reports of inconsistent curriculum monitoring and significant communication gaps affirm that departmental heads are not being supported in their mandated functions. This critical issue confirms that subject advisors are failing in their foundational role as ‘crucial intermediaries’ who facilitate curricular knowledge and policy implementation, as defined in the literature by Denzin and Lincoln (2017).

The current deficiency, therefore, constitutes a failure of this intermediation function, directly compromising curriculum fidelity at the school level. Miss Nenesh, for example, detailed the consequences of this neglect.

In my experience as a departmental head, I have only had one visit, and since then, I have not received any other visitation, which has negatively impacted how I do my work... There needs to be consistent support from our subject advisors, where we meet either one-on-one or as departmental heads.

As a departmental head, I feel unsupported by my subject advisors, which negatively impacts student outcomes due to lack of guidance and collaboration. This ongoing

neglect undermines teacher confidence, disrupts curriculum delivery, leaving our learners at a disadvantage academically. (Miss Nenesh)

This operational failure is structurally predetermined: the subject advisor questionnaire data confirmed that this lack of presence is not due to a dereliction of duty but is often a result of overwhelming workload and logistical challenges. Therefore, this shared experience illustrates that the support failure is structurally predetermined. The lack of regular consultation and feedback directly undermines departmental heads' confidence in executing their instructional leadership roles. This operational inconsistency, driven by apparent resource constraints or administrative overload on the part of the subject advisor, transforms the departmental head's mandated instructional role into an unsupported, high-stakes bureaucratic task.

6.3.2 The emotional impact of perceived isolation: The occupational strain of leadership

The study's findings reveal that the inadequate support generates a considerable emotional toll on departmental heads (Theme 2), which represents a significant and often unacknowledged occupational hazard. Participant accounts expressing feelings of being 'unsupported, unseen and undervalued' are not merely personal grievances but evidence of an occupational hazard resulting from systemic neglect. This perceived isolation represents the cognitive result of a thwarted learning process, as explained by social learning theory, and it directly impacts departmental heads' professional confidence.

Miss Cleo connected this professional isolation to a personal disconnection from the system:

The persistent lack of support and absence of visible curriculum leadership have left me feeling not just professionally isolated but personally disconnected from the system.

This critical strain highlights the necessity for a functioning environment to prevent the collapse of individual morale. This shared emotional context reinforces the argument: the failure of the environment to provide necessary resources and manageable workloads impacts the cognition (morale and self-efficacy) of both the learner, departmental head and the intended model (subject advisor). When the subject advisor, as the intended model, feels ineffective, it confirms that the environment is hostile to the professional success of both parties, weakening the foundational assumption of a competent support structure.

The workload of being a departmental head is overwhelming, and when you truly realise that you are completely on your own to figure out complex curriculum issues,

the job becomes deeply demoralising. Sometimes I feel like crying at my desk because of the stress (Miss Charlotte).

This critical finding aligns with the broader literature suggesting that lower morale among educational leaders is directly connected to compromised school performance and instructional efficacy. When the necessary social persuasion (Bandura, 1977) from the district is absent, the resultant emotional strain severely inhibits the leader's ability to maintain the high levels of self-efficacy required for demanding instructional leadership roles.

6.3.3 Reliance on peer support and professional learning communities: Reactive social modelling

Faced with a debilitating deficit in formal support, departmental heads have proactively sought refuge in peer support networks, frequently leveraging informal channels such as WhatsApp groups and self-initiated PLCs (Theme 3). This behaviour serves as a demonstration of the inherent human drive for social learning, where peers become the primary models and sources of encouragement, thereby acting as a “crucial lifeline”. This aligns with the argument by Tinto (2003), who advocates for the value of collaborative learning communities. Miss Zoe confirmed the necessity of these informal structures, saying,

“Truthfully, if it were not for the WhatsApp groups we have created among ourselves, I do not know how I would cope. Those groups have become our lifeline”(Miss Zoe).

This reliance on peer support is a symptom of systemic failure and is further substantiated by the subject advisor questionnaire data. The subject advisor data revealed that all subject advisors reported knowing that departmental heads rely heavily on WhatsApp groups to share resources, and several admitted to using these WhatsApp groups to disseminate urgent information. This highlights a systemic paradox in that the intended models (subject advisors) are not only failing to perform the modelling and social persuasion roles but are implicitly endorsing and participating in the creation of an unofficial, potentially unverified, alternate social learning structure. This reliance on a reactive, informal channel accepted and used by both parties (subject advisor and departmental head) further undermines the formal, policy-driven hierarchy and risks the propagation of inaccurate, peer-derived information, which is a significant threat to curriculum integrity.

The departmental heads' reliance on peer networks confirms existing literature on the necessity of PLCs for professional growth (Tinto, 2003), but this study critically extends that literature

by highlighting the inherent risks in unvetted peer-to-peer modelling. Miss Lucy underscored the precarious nature of this reliance:

There are no functioning WhatsApp groups that include subject advisors, no structured PLCs in my context, just occasional conversations with other departmental heads who are equally overwhelmed (Miss Lucy)

Therefore, these peer lifelines, though resilient, cannot guarantee curriculum integrity, underscoring the indispensable and formal need for authoritative, structured support to maintain genuine curriculum integrity and high professional standards (Hammerness et al., 2005).

6.4 Policy and Systemic Misalignment: The Impact of External Constraints

A critical analysis necessitates looking beyond the interpersonal failures (Sections 6.2 and 6.3) and addressing the broader systemic and policy constraints (Theme 5). The findings suggest that the failure of subject advisors to provide consistent guidance is often a symptom of structural issues such as high advisor-to-school ratios and logistical limitations rather than professional negligence. This creates a critical gap between the policy expectation of support and the operational reality of resource constraints, which directly undermines the environmental factor in Bandura's (1977) reciprocal determinism. The system itself is actively constraining the leader's behaviour.

The primary issue is a systemic contradiction between the DBE mandate for instructional leadership (Chapter 2) and the available resources. The subject advisor questionnaire data confirmed that subject advisors are effectively trapped in a purely bureaucratic role, highlighting that the system structurally prohibits the subject advisor from performing the crucial modelling role. In addition, the administrative overload is coupled with severe resource limitations. This dual constraint ensures an environmental failure that limits the departmental head's professional growth.

Departmental heads are acutely aware of these logistical hurdles, reinforcing the systemic nature of the problem:

As a subject advisor, I take my responsibilities seriously. Despite challenges like limited resources, I execute my duties correctly and timeously. I ensure departmental heads receive the necessary support and materials to carry out their roles effectively. I

remain committed to maintaining high standards, even when the system presents obstacles. My dedication to education drives me to do my part with integrity and consistency, no matter the circumstances. (Snerish)

This perspective shifts the argument from individual failure to a systemic misalignment where the ideals of the curriculum and the practical means of its implementation are fundamentally disconnected. The departmental heads are left to absorb the administrative and educational failures of a resource-constrained district, transforming their professional frustration into an issue of educational policy efficacy. External factors, such as the floods in KwaZulu-Natal that destroyed roads and the COVID-19 pandemic regulations, further compound this operational inconsistency. The resulting impact on school-based leaders was profound, as articulated by Miss Jay and Miss Charlotte:

After COVID, everything shifted. I felt abandoned, lost, and completely unsupported. There was no monitoring, no follow-up, and no guidance on the curriculum. It was as if my education had been tossed aside. I kept waiting for someone to step in, to help, to care, but no one did. The silence was deafening, and the confusion overwhelming. (Miss Jay)

During COVID, I felt completely forgotten. There was no support, no guidance, no one checking in. I was left to figure everything out on my own, drowning in confusion and stress. The isolation wasn't just physical; it was academic too. I kept hoping someone would reach out, offer help, anything. But the silence just kept growing louder. (Miss Charlotte)

Furthermore, the inconsistent nature of the subject advisor support raises significant equity concerns. The findings suggest that the lack of a consistent support baseline may disproportionately disadvantage smaller, rural, or less-resourced schools that lack the internal capacity and strong peer networks of larger institutions. Where formal support is absent, the departmental heads in these vulnerable schools are left without alternative avenues for professional guidance, which intensifies feelings of isolation and negatively impacts learner outcomes. The system's failure to maintain a consistent support baseline ensures that existing inequalities are not mitigated but instead are amplified by the support deficit. The system's inability to support the subject advisor's modelling role effectively places the burden of curriculum cohesion squarely, and unfairly, on the school-based leader, a challenge that Tinto (2003) acknowledges requires a whole-system response.

6.5 Synthesis: The Systemic Erosion of Leadership Efficacy

This discussion concludes by synthesising the interpretations across the empirical data, the theoretical framework, and the existing literature to establish the study's central argument. The dominant narrative is one of systemic erosion, where the intended support mechanisms have fundamentally failed to create an environment conducive to effective instructional leadership development. The findings demonstrate a critical discrepancy between the official policy expectations for departmental heads to be curriculum drivers and instructional leaders and the operational reality of pervasive district negligence. This absence directly contravenes the conditions necessary for effective social learning as envisioned by Bandura (1977).

Departmental heads are observed to be trapped in a debilitating cycle of low self-efficacy, where professional growth through observational learning is stifled by the absence of credible subject advisor models, thereby eroding the necessary social persuasion. This compels them to rely on unverified, yet resilient, peer-to-peer modelling. While this reliance demonstrates remarkable professional tenacity, it is ultimately a reactive strategy and a symptom of a systemic breakdown (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The core argument thus stands: the reported challenges are a direct consequence of a misaligned policy practice continuum where the district's resource constraints place an unsupportable and professionally damaging burden on school level leaders. In an ideal teaching and learning environment, subject advisors should provide consistent, targeted, and collaborative support to departmental heads, ensuring that curriculum delivery is aligned with policy expectations and classroom realities.

This should involve regular engagement, constructive feedback, and capacity building initiatives that empower heads of department to guide their teams effectively. However, the findings of this study reveal systematic challenges that hinder such support, including fragmented communication channels, limited availability of advisors, and a lack of contextualised guidance tailored to specific departmental needs. Instead of rigid, top down approaches, what could work better is a more flexible, participatory model of support where departmental heads and subject advisors co-design strategies, share best practices, and engage in ongoing professional dialogue. This collaborative framework would foster ownership, responsiveness, and adaptability in addressing teaching and learning challenges. The implications of these findings for redesigning support systems are significant: institutions must move beyond compliance-driven structures toward dynamic, needs-based support mechanisms. By rethinking the role of subject advisors as facilitators of professional growth rather than

monitors, educational systems can create sustainable pathways for improving teaching quality and learner outcomes, while simultaneously addressing the systemic barriers that currently undermine effective support. This study, therefore, strongly advocates that any meaningful improvements must first address the systemic failures that obstruct the necessary relational, cognitive, and environmental structures required for quality educational leadership in South African primary schools.

6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a rigorous critical discussion and interpretation of the study's findings, grounded firmly in the literature review and the theoretical framework of Albert Bandura's social learning theory. The interpretation of the findings confirms that the departmental heads in this study navigate a challenging professional landscape characterised by severe support deficits.

The study has critically demonstrated that the lack of subject advisor engagement constitutes a fundamental failure of the intended social learning environment (Bandura, 1977), leading to a measurable decline in departmental heads' self-efficacy and a consequential reliance on informal social modelling. While this peer-driven resilience is evident, it is insufficiently robust to guarantee sustainable curriculum coherence and quality instructional leadership (Tinto, 2003). The challenges faced are thus critically understood not as merely administrative inconveniences, but as profound systemic failures in providing the necessary relational, cognitive, and environmental structures required for effective instructional leadership within the South African primary school system.

In essence, the study has established that departmental heads operate in an environment of high expectation and low support. This comprehensive discussion sets the stage for the final chapter, which presents the study's formal conclusions and evidence-based recommendations. These recommendations are directly informed by the systemic failures and cognitive deficits outlined here and aim to offer practical strategies for improving subject advisor engagement, strengthening formal leadership support structures, and fostering a more viable professional culture within schools.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter brings closure to the study, which investigated departmental heads' experiences of the support provided by subject advisors in primary schools in Ugu District. The preceding chapters established the background to the study (Chapter One), reviewed the existing literature (Chapter Two), outlined Bandura's social learning theory as the study's theoretical foundation (Chapter Three), detailed the methodological journey (Chapter Four), presented the empirical data (Chapter Five), and culminated in a rigorous and critical discussion of the findings (Chapter Six). The current chapter fulfils the study's terminal objectives. Firstly, it presents the conclusion by definitively answering the research questions and summarising how the findings affirmed the study's theoretical framework. Secondly, it acknowledges the limitations of the research, ensuring that the scope and generalisability of the findings are appropriately contextualised. Finally, it offers evidence-based recommendations for both policy and practice, aimed at addressing the systemic failures identified and enhancing the professional efficacy of school-based leaders in the future.

7.2 Review of the Focus of the Study

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of departmental heads regarding the support they receive from subject advisors in the context of teaching and learning within primary schools. The focus was anchored in understanding how such support influences curriculum implementation, instructional leadership, and learner performance. By examining the nature, consistency, and impact of subject advisor engagement, the study aimed to uncover both the strengths and gaps in current support structures. It also sought to highlight the role of collaborative practices and systemic challenges that shape the effectiveness of subject advisor interventions. Ultimately, the study provided a nuanced view of how departmental heads navigate their responsibilities with or without adequate professional support, offering insights into areas for strategic improvement.

7.3 Summary of Key Findings

The study highlights that effective support from subject advisors plays a pivotal role in strengthening departmental heads' ability to effectively implement the curriculum, monitor student progress, and drive improved learner outcomes. It underscores that when subject

advisors provide consistent, targeted guidance, departmental heads are better equipped to navigate instructional demands and foster academic growth. In addition, the findings emphasise the importance of collaborative structures such as PLCs, which serve as vital platforms for addressing systemic challenges, promoting shared expertise, and enhancing collective problem-solving within educational settings.

7.4 Answering the Research Questions

The findings presented in Chapter Five and critically discussed in Chapter Six unequivocally addressed the study's sub-research questions, providing empirical evidence for the conclusions drawn.

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of departmental heads regarding support provided by subject advisors in teaching and learning?

The experiences were predominantly characterised by inconsistent, infrequent, or non-existent support. Participants reported a profound lack of instructional modelling and curriculum guidance from subject advisors, confirming a failure in the observational learning aspect of Bandura's social learning theory. This was evidenced by accounts of zero school visits or support being reduced to sporadic bureaucratic communication, leaving leaders feeling professionally isolated.

Research Question 2: How do departmental heads perceive the effectiveness of subject advisors in enhancing teaching and learning practices?

Departmental heads perceive the current effectiveness of subject advisors as low and insufficient. They feel that the pervasive lack of guidance and constructive feedback has severely eroded their self-efficacy, as the formal structure fails to provide the necessary social persuasion and positive reinforcement – key constructs of social learning theory. Consequently, their ability to confidently lead their teachers and initiate new practices is diminished, directly compromising curriculum coherence.

Research Question 3: What challenges do departmental heads face in accessing and utilising subject advisors' support?

The primary challenges are systemic and structural. These include:

1. Systemic misalignment (e.g., subject advisor overload and resource constraints, such as inadequate travel budgets, which hinder consistent contact),
2. Communication gaps (inconsistent feedback and varying interpretations of policy), and
3. Emotional isolation, which is the psychological manifestation of the support failure.

This crisis in access forces a desperate reliance on informal peer support networks as a substitute for official guidance.

7.5 Affirming the Theoretical Framework

The data critically affirmed the use of Bandura's social learning theory (1977) by demonstrating a direct causal link between the dysfunctional support environment and the negative professional cognition and behaviour of departmental heads. The study's conclusion is that the challenges are not rooted in a failure to learn but in the system's failure to provide a functional social learning environment. The pervasive erosion of self-efficacy is the clearest evidence that the absence of modelling and social persuasion, the core tenets of social learning theory, is actively inhibiting instructional leadership effectiveness.

7.6 Limitations of the Study

This study, while providing rich, in-depth insights, is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. Firstly, the study employed a qualitative research design with a small, purposive sample of six departmental heads and five subject advisors. This approach was intentional to explore the lived experiences in detail, but it limits the generalisability of the findings. The insights gained are specific to the experiences of the participants in Ugu District and may not be representative of departmental heads and subject advisors in other districts or provinces across South Africa.

Secondly, the study's focus on the experiences of departmental heads did not include a direct, in-depth exploration of the subject advisors' perspectives and operational challenges. While the questionnaires provided some insight, a more extensive data set from subject advisors could offer a more holistic understanding of the systemic constraints and resource limitations they face.

Lastly, the study's reliance on self-reported data from interviews, collages and questionnaire, while rich, presents the possibility of recall bias or emotional exaggeration. However, this was mitigated by the use of multiple data collection methods.

7.7 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the systemic failures in the support system for departmental heads. The DBE and the District Office must move beyond mere policy rhetoric to implement tangible, well-resourced support systems, as suggested below.

7.7.1 Formalise structured support and use technology

The District Office should implement a clear schedule of mandatory, in-person visits to schools by subject advisors. These visits should be frequent and consistent at least once on a monthly basis, providing opportunities for observational learning and direct modelling of best practices, rather than being reactive responses to problems. Furthermore, considering the adaptations made during the COVID-19 pandemic, where technology played a crucial role in maintaining educational support, subject advisors are encouraged to continue leveraging digital tools to communicate with and support departmental heads. This blended approach can enhance accessibility and ensure sustained guidance, even when physical visits are not feasible.

7.7.2 Invest in continuous professional development for subject advisors

To enhance their credibility as professional models, subject advisors must receive regular and up-to-date CPD, particularly on the new curriculum and pedagogical strategies. This will equip them with the necessary knowledge and social persuasion skills to effectively guide and reinforce the efforts of departmental heads.

7.7.3 Formalise and resource professional learning communities

The District Office should formally recognise, resource, and facilitate the peer-to-peer networks that departmental heads have created. By providing these PLCs with official platforms, access to resources, and structured agendas, the district can ensure that valuable peer support is also authoritative and aligns with national curriculum standards.

7.7.4 Re-evaluate the subject advisor-to-school ratio

The District Office should conduct a thorough review of the workloads and resource allocation for subject advisors to ensure they are equipped to meet their mandate. This may require an increase in the number of subject advisors or the provision of better logistical support, such as travel stipends, to facilitate frequent school visits.

7.8 Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations of this study provide a strong foundation for future research that can expand on these findings. Future research should employ a quantitative approach using surveys to investigate the experiences of a larger, more representative sample of departmental heads across different districts or provinces. This would help to determine the generalisability of this study's findings and identify broader trends.

A longitudinal study could be conducted to track a specific group of departmental heads over an extended period. Such research would explore how the reliance on informal peer networks evolves and its long-term impact on professional growth and curriculum implementation in the absence of formal support.

A separate qualitative study focusing exclusively on the lived experiences and professional challenges of subject advisors would provide invaluable context to the findings of this study. This research could help uncover the root causes of the systemic failures identified and inform a more comprehensive approach to educational reform.

The existing support system negatively affects instructional leadership by restricting departmental heads to administrative compliance rather than enabling them to lead meaningful improvements in teaching and learning. Instead of being positioned as mentors and visionaries, they are often burdened with bureaucratic tasks and rigid oversight from subject advisors, which diminishes their ability to inspire teachers and cultivate innovative practices. This lack of autonomy weakens their role as instructional leaders, leaving them unable to provide coherent guidance or foster collaborative professional growth among staff. As a result, teachers receive inconsistent support, and classrooms lack the structured leadership necessary to ensure effective curriculum delivery. The direct consequence of this weakened leadership is seen in learner performance: when departmental heads cannot drive instructional quality, learners experience fragmented teaching, gaps in curriculum coverage, and reduced opportunities to

build cumulative knowledge and skills. Systemic issues such as poor communication, limited advisor availability, and generic feedback further exacerbate these challenges, creating a cycle where departmental heads are reactive rather than proactive. Ultimately, the erosion of instructional leadership translates into diminished learner achievement, highlighting the urgent need to redesign support systems to prioritize leadership development, contextualised guidance, and learner-centred outcomes.

Departmental heads are central to effective curriculum delivery, serving as instructional leaders who guide teachers, monitor practices, and align departmental goals with broader educational priorities. Their leadership ensures consistency, collaboration, and innovation in teaching. Strengthening their support is essential because without adequate resources and meaningful guidance, they cannot fully mentor teachers or address challenges in curriculum implementation. When empowered with context-specific support, departmental heads enhance instructional quality, which directly improves learner performance and achievement, making them vital to sustainable educational success.

7.9 Conclusion

This study has concluded that the support structure for departmental heads in Ugu District is not merely inadequate but is demonstrably detrimental to instructional leadership efficacy. The study successfully answered all research questions, confirming that departmental heads experience a profound lack of modelling and inconsistent communication from subject advisors, which has severely eroded their self-efficacy. This crisis is not a result of individual failure but is a function of systemic misalignment, where resource-constrained district policies fail to provide a conducive social learning environment. The theoretical lens of social learning theory was critically affirmed, demonstrating that the collapse of the formal support environment directly obstructs the processes of observational learning and social persuasion, forcing leaders to rely on informal, and potentially vulnerable, peer-to-peer networks. In essence, the high expectations placed upon these curriculum drivers are undermined by the low-support reality of their operational context. The findings provide a clear mandate for urgent policy intervention, making the implementation of the suggested recommendations essential for rebuilding the professional support structures critical to quality teaching and learning outcomes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical clearance certificate



03 April 2025

Charity Thandeka Mbelu (224140446)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear CT Mbelu,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008356/2025

Project title: Departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support in teaching and learning: A case of selected Ugu primary schools

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 11 March 2025 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 03 April 2026.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix B: Letter of permission, KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200

Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201

Enquiries : Ms Phindile Duma

Email : phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Ref: 24/8/443

Tel : 033 392 1051

Ms Charity Thandeka Mtelu

Dear Ms Mbawu

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DOE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"DEPARTMENTAL HEADS' EXPERIENCES OF SUBJECT ADVISOR SUPPORT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING: A CASE OF SELECTED UGU PRIMARY SCHOOLS"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 03 March 2025 to 31 October 2027.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

UGU DISTRICT

Mr. GN Ngcobo

Head of Department: Education

Date: 04 March 2025

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix C: Permission letters from schools



KZN EDUCATION
UMNYANGOWEZEMFUNDO ISIFUNDAZWE
SAKWAZULU

Permission Letter

25/02/2025

Charity Thandeka Mbelu

Dear Charity Thandeka Mbelu

Re: Gatekeeper 's Permission for Research Study: "Departmental Heads Experiences of Subject Adviser Support in Teaching and Learning"

We the administration of Amandawe primary School, hereby grant you permission to conduct research at our school for your study titled "Departmental Heads 'Experiences of Subject Advisor Support in Teaching and Learning" as part of your academic requirements at the university of KwaZulu -Natal.

You are permitted to collect data from our departmental heads. Kindly confirm on availability a week prior. Please ensure that you obtain informed consent from all participants and *maintain confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.*

We appreciate your interest in conducting research at our school and believe that your study will contribute valuable insight to the field of education. Please feel free to contact us if you require any assistance or support during your research Thank you for choosing [redacted] Primary School as a research site.

Yours sincerely

[Principal]

PROVINCE OF KWAZULU NATAL
UMNYANGO WEZEMFUNDO
DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION



Dear Charity Thandeka Mbelu,

We, the administration of [redacted] hereby grant you permission to conduct research at our school for your study titled "Departmental Heads' Experiences of Subject Advisor Support in Teaching and Learning" as part of your academic requirements at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. You are permitted to collect data from our departmental heads.

Please note that you must obtain informed consent from all participants, maintain confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process, comply with the school's rules and regulations, and respect the privacy and confidentiality of our students and staff. We appreciate your interest in conducting research at our school and believe that your study will contribute valuable insights to the field of education.

If you require any assistance or support during your research, please do not hesitate to contact us. We acknowledge that your research is for academic purposes only and will not be used for any other purpose without our prior consent. Thank you for choosing [redacted] School as a research site.

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

[redacted] School Principal)

Appendix D: Interview guide

Interview Schedule

(Departmental Heads - 3 from each school)

Section 1: Background Information (10 minutes)

Name:

School:

Phase:

Qualification:

No of years as a Departmental Head:

Section 2: Experiences of subject advisor support (30 minutes)

1. Can you briefly tell me a little bit about your experience as a departmental head?
2. What are your major challenges and successes in this role so far?
3. How do you perceive the role of subject advisors in supporting teaching and learning?
4. What kind of support have you received from subject advisors, and how have you found it beneficial or not beneficial?
5. Can you describe your experiences of working with subject advisors in your department?
6. Are there any challenges or barriers you have experienced in accessing or utilising subject advisor support?
7. How do you think subject advisor support could be improved or enhanced?

Section 3: Impact on Teaching and learning (10 minutes)

1. How do you think subject advisor support has impacted your teaching practices and student learning outcomes?
2. Can you provide specific examples of an instance where subject advisor support made a positive impact on teaching and learning?
3. Are there any areas where you think subject advisor support could have a greater impact on teaching and learning?

Conclusion and final thoughts (5 minutes)

1. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences of subject advisor support?

Thank you for your time and participation in this study

Appendix E: Subject advisor questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

(Subject advisor)

Background information Name: [REDACTED] Qualification: BED Honours

Number of years as a subject advisor: 17 years

Phase speciality: IP and SP

Section 1: Support provided to departmental heads.

1. What types of support do you provide to departmental heads?

I provide specialised, strategic, and operational support to departmental heads so that they can fulfil their role to improve teaching, learning outcomes, school management and policy implementation. I focus in the following areas:

Curriculum and Instructional Support

- Interpret curriculum policies (CAPS, SBA, etc.) and guide implementation at school level.
- Support departmental heads with lesson planning, content delivery, and assessment.
- Monitor classroom practices and provide feedback to improve teaching quality.
- Identify learning gaps and help design intervention strategies for underperforming schools.

Performance Monitoring and Data Use

- Analyse learner achievement data to spot trends and inform planning.
- Help set performance targets for each subject.
- Track progress toward goals and suggest mid-course corrections.
- Support Subject Improvement Plans (SIPs) and departmental strategies.

Policy Implementation

- Advise on the rollout of DBE policies, including inclusive education, E-learning, ICT integration, progression and promotion, etc.
- Ensure compliance with national and provincial education laws, norms, and standards.
- Support departmental heads in adapting policies to local contexts.

School Leadership and Governance

- Support them in instructional leadership and accountability.
- Guide them in providing professional leadership within the school.

Resource Management Support

- Advise on allocation and utilisation of teaching and learning materials (LTSM).
- Support infrastructure development planning, especially in rural or under-resourced schools.
- Help manage human resources e.g., teacher placements and workloads.

Innovation and Change Management

- Introduce new methodologies such as ICT integration, multi-grade teaching strategies, or learner support programmes.
- Support pilot programmes and special initiatives (e.g., Maths/Science campaigns, learner camps).

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication

- Advise on effective communication strategies with the public.
 - Support departmental heads in building trust and collaboration.
2. How often do you meet with departmental heads to discuss teaching and learning?

(Circle the most appropriate answer to you).

- a) Daily
- b) Weekly
- c) Monthly
- d) Quarterly

e) Rarely

3. What methods do you use to communicate with departmental heads?

I have created a WhatsApp chat group for them. Sometimes we communicate through telephone calls and circulars. It depends on the urgency and what is being communicated. I also communicate with them one on one during school visits.

4. Do you provide any training or professional development for departmental heads? If yes, please describe.

Yes, at the beginning of the year, we have a session with them to set the tone. Also, during school visits.

Section 2: Teaching and learning support

1. How do you support departmental heads in ensuring effective curriculum implementation?

I guide and support them to:

Interpret curriculum policies (CAPS, SBA, etc.) and guide implementation at school level.

Develop and monitor lesson planning, content delivery, and assessment. Monitor classroom practices and provide feedback to improve teaching quality.

Identify learning gaps and help design intervention strategies for underperforming learners.

2. What strategies do you suggest to departmental heads to improve learner outcomes?

Monitor classroom practices and provide feedback to improve teaching quality. Identify learning gaps and help design intervention strategies for underperforming learners.

Analyse learner achievement data to spot trends and inform planning. Set performance targets for each subject.

Track progress toward goals and suggest mid-course corrections.

Monitor and support the implementation School Improvement Plans (SIPs)

3. How do you assist departmental heads in assessing learner progress and identifying areas for improvement?

Guide them on:

Setting performance targets for each subject.

Analysing learner achievement data to spot trends and inform planning. Tracking progress toward goals and suggest mid-course corrections.

Supporting and monitoring Subject Improvement Plans (SIPs).

4. What resources do you provide to departmental heads to support teaching and learning?

ATPs; POAs; Monitoring tools; Moderation tools; Test frameworks; Guidelines for written work

Section 3: Challenges and recommendations

1. What challenges do you face in providing support to departmental heads?

Human resource – The number of schools is way above what I could handle in a year. Time – There are too many activities. There is no time to make follow up visits.

2. How do you think departmental heads can be better supported in their roles?

Departmental heads' role is crucial for ensuring curriculum delivery and supporting teachers. The best way to support them is to strengthen their instructional leadership thereby guiding effective teaching and assessment practices. I need to build trust, provide practical support, and empower them to lead their departments confidently. Their role is not just compliance, but coaching, mentoring, and enabling quality education in every classroom.

3. Are there any additional resources or training that you need to effectively support departmental heads?

Yes, human resources. I am supporting 478 schools. It is not possible to cover all of them. I then plan my support visits based on the need as informed by data analysis. Even then there is

a challenge since there are many other activities, including workshops and meetings that I have to attend to.

Section 4: Conclusion

1. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions about the support you provide to departmental heads? If yes please provide with a suggestion.

NO

Yes

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your input is valuable in understanding the support provided to departmental heads in teaching and learning.

Appendix F: Informed consent

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: xx 2025

Valued Participant,

My name is **Charity Thandeka Mbelu** from the University of KwaZulu Natal in the School of Education under the College of Humanities. I am currently pursuing my master's degree in the discipline of Education Leadership Management and Policy (ELMP). I will be conducting a research study as part of my degree fulfillment. The title of my study is Departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support in teaching and learning: A case of selected Ugu primary schools. My research study will be conducted under the supervision of Dr L.L Mbatha. She is a lecturer in the School of Education, College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal. [REDACTED]

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support in teaching and learning. The aim and purpose of this research is to explore the nature and quality of care and support provided by subject advisors to departmental heads, to explore strategies used by subject advisors to enhance teaching practices amongst departmental heads and to identify challenges faced by departmental heads in accessing support from subject advisors. The study is expected to enroll 6 departmental heads and subject advisors from 2 selected primary schools under Ugu district. 3 departmental heads and subject advisors will be selected in each school representing the foundation phase, intermediate phase and senior phase. The study will involve collage, audio-recorded interviews and questionnaires. If you are a departmental head, you will also be required to create a collage that justifies your experiences on subject advisor support and then a one-on-one interview. If you are a subject advisor, you will be expected to complete a questionnaire. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be approximately 1 to 3 hours (depending on your position) 1 hour for face-to-face interview and 1 hour for questionnaire and 2 hours for collage). The aim of including subject advisors and departmental heads is to triangulate data from both participants and data generating tools, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the support systems in place for departmental heads.

The study will not involve any risks and/or discomforts to you. The study will provide no direct benefits to you as a participant. However, I hope that the study will provide insights into the challenges and successes of departmental heads in utilising subject advisor support, enabling them to refine their strategies and improve teaching and learning outcomes. This will also inform policy decisions related to teacher support and professional development to create more effective policies and programmes that support teaching and learning.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number_00030043____). In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary, and you may withdraw participation at any point. If you refuse/withdraw your participation, you will not incur a penalty. You may also stop participating without stating any reasons, and your withdrawal can be done verbally or in writing. I may terminate you from the study if you are no longer employed at the two primary schools or the district chosen for the study.

You will incur no costs due to your participation in the study. There will also be no incentives or reimbursements for participation in the study.

Your responses will be strictly confidential and used only for academic purposes. You will be anonymous throughout the study and given a pseudonym. The names and any information that could identify you as a participant will not be used in the final thesis or any publication deriving from this study. Printed copies of raw data/transcripts of interviews will be securely locked away in my supervisor's office. All digital audio files and other electronic data will be stored on the hard drive of the password-protected personal computer and the hard drive of the password-protected laptop of my supervisor. All data from computers and any other device will be deleted after five years.

CONSENT

I ... [REDACTED] have been informed about the study entitled Departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support in teaching and learning: A case of selected Ugu primary schools provide by Charity Thandeka Mbelu.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no compensation and there are no risks associated as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact Charity Thandeka Mbelu [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness

Date

(Where applicable)

Signature of Translator

Date

(Where applicable)

Appendix G: Language editing certificate

KD Editing Services

Kate Davies
[REDACTED]
Boknesstrand 6189
Eastern Cape South Africa

5 November 2025

To whom it may concern

Declaration of language editing

I, Kate Davies, ID number [REDACTED] an accredited text editor (English) and member of the Professional Editors' Guild (number DAV013) with copy-editing certification from the University of Cape Town, confirm that I have conducted an English proofreading and copy edit on the master's dissertation by

Charity Thandeka Mbelu
titled

**Departmental heads' experiences of subject advisor support in teaching and learning:
A case of selected Ugu primary schools**

Yours faithfully

[REDACTED]

Kate Davies



Kate Davies
Accredited Text Editor (English)
Membership number: DAV013
Membership year: March 2025 to February 2026
[REDACTED]
www.editors.org.za

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Kate Davies

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