Education District Office Coordination of Teaching and Learning Support Programmes in South Africa: Eastern Cape Perspective

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Abstract

This study analysed the coordination and collaboration of teaching and learning support programmes in the Department of Education District offices. Support for teaching and learning is a universal practise and education local (district) offices including in South Africa, are tasked to support schools with the view of enhancing learner outcomes. However, there is no significant improvement on the quality of learner educational outcomes in the Eastern Cape. Five district officials (office and school based) were purposively selected in two Education Districts. These were Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) Coordinators, Subject Advisors and Education Development Officers (EDOs) and School Management Team members and Principals. Qualitative research approach in which interviews and documentary analysis were used to collect data, served as a guide to this study. From the findings it emerged that district office based officials do not coordinate their teaching and learning support programmes. The data also revealed that EDOs' Subject Advisors' and IQMS Coordinators' teaching and learning support programmes do not inform each other and in some instances these district officials send different signals to schools. This meant that different district offices apply different approaches when it comes to supporting teaching and learning in schools. The researcher recommends therefore that a coherent framework be developed where district officials coordinate jointly and centrally teaching and learning support programmes at district office level so as to avoid mixed messages sent to schools.

Keywords: Coordination, support, Integrated Quality Management System Coordinator, Education Development Officers, Subject Advisors, District Office, complementarily, teaching and learning, principal, School management Teams

1. Introduction

The quality of teaching at classroom level is the most important variable affecting student teaching and the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (Chong & Ho, 2009). "It has become increasingly clear that the quality of teacher education is among the most important factors shaping the learning and growth of students" (Ibid,2009, p.2). It is for this reason that school and district leaders' most pivotal task is to support teachers in improving their instructional practice. This means that school and district leaders should be well equipped with necessary skills to deliver their mandate in the interest of teaching and learning process at classroom level. Though district offices are tasked to coordinate, support and monitor the implementation of policies including curriculum delivery in schools there seems to be a problem of education quality outcomes in schools (Chinsamy, 2002; Schoeman, 2004 & Narsee, 2006). Whether quality is measured in terms of inputs as measured by resources that go to schools; in terms of processes which focus on practices that relate to teaching and learning, or outcomes, in terms of average examination results and what skills, knowledge and values learners acquire (de Grauwe and Carron, 2007), the district office plays a critical role. Despite the expectation that district offices support teaching and learning in schools, there is a body of evidence to show that quality in the majority of schools, especially primary schools, remains poor (Chisholm, 2004 and Roberts, 2012). A number of districts seem to be struggling with their matric results (DoE, 2007a, DoE 2007b, DoE, 2009, DoE, 2010a and DoE,2010b). This study sought to investigate how coordination by IQMS Coordinators, Subject Advisors and Education Development Officers (EDO) play itself out when these officials support teaching and learning in schools.

District support for schools is a worldwide phenomenon. In countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Benin and Mali for instance district offices play the role of ensuring policy implementation. In these countries support to schools is done through inspection and mandatory advice to teachers. The officials also give pedagogical evaluation of the teachers' work as well as advice. In this way teachers are seen to be engaged in continuous learning that leads to quality teaching and learning (Lugaz and De Grauwe, 2010). However, there is little literature, according to authors' knowledge, that unpacks how district officials coordinate their activities in supporting teaching and learning in schools.

In Canada for instance education district offices serve as intermediaries in the relationship between the state and the schools (Mac Iver, 2003). Initially the education districts in Canada focused more on governance and leadership but as time went on, there was a paradigm shift as district offices began to concentrate on improving instruction and raising student achievement (Land, 2002 in Mac Iver, 2003). As district are in most cases expected to support curriculum implementation in schools this study therefore sought to investigate how the selected officials coordinate their work in supporting schools.

In the South African context a number of writers outline the role of education districts as resource centres for schools. (see, Chinsamy, 2002; Schoeman, 2004; Narsee, 2006; Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2006; Mphahlele, 1999 in Narsee, 2006; DoE, 2010; Mohlala, 2007). Schoeman (2004) argues that the role and functions of district offices were clarified as those of providing adequate resources and ensuring quality teaching and learning in schools. The rationale behind the establishment of district offices was to bring education authorities closer to schools and it was expected that their role would be to make schools effective and efficient by providing education resources and professional support (Narsee, 2006 and Diko et al, 2011). The District Development Programme was adopted by the National Department of Basic Education (DBE) and it was rolled out in such a way as to strengthen the capacity of each district in all the provinces. District offices were understood to play the important role of intermediaries between the central education office and the schools (Chinsamy, 2002). Roberts (2012) argued that the core purpose of educational districts in South Africa is to support the delivery of the curriculum and to ensure that all learners are afforded good quality learning opportunities which are evidenced by learner achievement. Though district offices are mandated to enhance the quality of education and thereby improving learner results research shows that there is no significant positive change on the quality of learner education outcomes especially in rural schools (Spaull, 2013). The Annual National Assessments (ANAs), which are annual, nationally-standardised tests of achievement for Grade one to six and nine, are one of the most important policy innovation seeking to improve the quality of education in South Africa. They provide some standardised indication of learning at the primary grades allowing for the early identification and remediation of learning deficits. The ANA results in the past three years have shown that the vast majority of pupils in South Africa are seriously underperforming relative to the curriculum (Ibid, 2013). This study therefore seeks to investigate how district offices coordinate their teaching and learning support programmes.

2. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to establish how district offices coordinate their programmes aiming to assist teachers' pedagogy.

3. Coordination Theory

Coordination is a concern of scholars in intra and interdisciplinary fields. Many different disciplines have dealt, in one way or another, with fundamental questions about coordination and several previous writers have suggested that theories about coordination are likely to be important for designing cooperative work tools (Malone, 1990). Following are some coordination definitions:

- The operation of complex systems made up of components.
- The emergent behaviour of collections of individuals whose actions are based on complex decision processes.
- The joint efforts of independent communicating actors towards mutually defined goals.
- Composing purposeful actions into larger purposeful wholes.
- Activities required to maintain consistency within a work product or to manage dependencies within the workflow.
- The additional information processing performed when multiple, connected actors pursue goals that a single actor pursuing the same goals would not perform. (Ibid, 1990)

It is evident from the above many different definitions of coordination that most of them recognise the need to work

together for a defined goal. Hoff (2001, p.156) when arguing for coordination noted that "an economy with all the preconditions for industrialization would fail to industrialize because of a failure to coordinate complementary investments". Malone (1988) further argued that Coordination theory can be defined as a body of principles about how activities can be coordinated, that is, about how actors in an organisation can work together harmoniously in achieving a specific goal of that particular organisation. Coordination therefore implies set of (two or more) actors who perform tasks in order to achieve goals. Coordination can be defined as a way by which those tasked to do the work or activity work together collaboratively to accomplish that particular task.

The obstacle to achieving the better state of affairs is not a matter of technological opportunities (or even knowledge of those opportunities), or of resources or preferences, but only of coordination (Malone (1988). This means that whatever skills and knowledge might district officials possess in their various corners if they fail to coordinate their activities aimed at supporting teaching and learning they may find difficulty in achieving their objectives.

Malone & Crowston (1990, p. 2-3) further argue that:

When we attend a well-run conference, when we watch a winning basketball team, or when we see a smoothly functioning assembly line we may notice how well coordinated the actions of a group of people seem to be. Often, however, good coordination is nearly invisible, and we sometimes notice coordination most clearly when it is lacking. When we spend hours waiting on an airport runway because the airline can't find a gate for our plane, when the hotel room we thought had been reserved for us is sold out, or when a company fails repeatedly to capitalize on innovative ideas its researchers develop we may become very aware of the effects of poor coordination.

From the above excerpt one can deduce the fact that coordination is in the eyes of the beholder. This means that, it is the person who observes the activities of an organisation who can see if there is proper coordination or not. This implies that those who might claim that their programmes are coordinated may be making a mistake if their programmes are not impressing eyes of those who receive the outcomes of their programmes. Proper coordination therefore should result to attainment of intended goals. If coordination at education district office level does not improve learner outcomes that would be an indication of lack of it.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study was based on a case study design. According to Anderson (1998) a case study emphasizes and focuses attention on what can be learned from a single case specifically. A case may be simple or complex, it may be about an individual, a group of individuals, a situation, condition or system (Punch, 2003, Punch, 2006; Leady and Ormrod, 2005 and Denzil and Lincoln, 2003). In this study a case study of two rural districts in the Eastern Cape was undertaken. These districts were selected because they have among the least performing district in the province in as far as matric pass rate is concerned.

4.2 Sample and sampling

The Education Development Officers, Subject Advisors and IQMS Coordinators were sampled from each district. All the participants were coded as for instance EDO1 and EDO2. One school from each district was selected and from each school a principal and one SMT member were interviewed. As suggested by May (2002) these district officials were selected as representative of other district officials tasked with supporting teaching and learning in schools.

4.3 Research methods

Data in this study was collected through interviews and documentary analysis. The type of interview that was used was face-to-face interviews and participants were interviewed during their spare times which sometimes fall late in the evenings. In this study unsolicited documents, that is, support and monitoring tools of district officials, principals and those of SMT members were used. The purpose of analysing these documents is discussed in the data analysis section below.

4.4 Ethical considerations

In this study ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality anonymity and informed consent were considered. Permission was sought from the Provincial Department of Education to conduct a study in the selected districts and this permission was granted. Requests for permission to conduct a study were also written to the District Directors of the selected districts. The researcher also outlined the interview procedure to the interviewees and sought consent to tape record the interview process.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 How coordination played itself out at district level

When asked about complementarity of support for teaching and learning among SMT members, Principals, IQMS coordinators, Subject Advisors and EDOs, both SMT members did not see any complementarity of the SMT's work by district officials. One SMT member reported that:

I don't see any complementarity since they do not support teaching and learning in schools.

This was an indication that this SMT member did not see any kind of assistance coming from the district officials. This means that, according to her district officials do not support educators in the manner she expects of them.

Another SMT member on the other hand reported that there is a high level of non-cooperation in his district and district officials work in separate pockets and sometimes send different signals to them. He commented that:

For example we have (Mobile Telephone Network) MTN who is supporting on a certain programme of teaching and learning. MTN says this and district officials say this. For instance on IQMS there is an official from national Department of Basic Education (DBE) on one hand who comes and says this and on the other hand an official from district office is says different thing.

It can be seen from this excerpt that this SMT members did not see any kind of coordinated support from the district office as programmes directed to educators sometimes send different messages. This means that district office sections that are tasked to support teaching and learning in schools do not plan their programmes together and this results in educators receiving mixed signals.

All participants viewed collaboration, coordination and complementarity between SMTs, Principals, IQMS Coordinators, Subject Advisors and EDOs as something that can be achieved through regular and constant meetings between these officials. One SMT member asserted that:

To me collaboration and complementarity could be done through meetings with district officials and through workshops to explain how best we can work in collaboration. In these workshops we should come with ideas that will improve collaboration. Our aim is to support teaching and learning and we should from time to time have workshops so that we share experiences and come up with ideas as to what programmes we can embark on to assist teaching and learning. We should in these meetings brainstorm and set our expectations. To me this will improve collaboration between SMTs and district officials. There is no problem between SMT and principal as we are all at school and we meet when there is a need.

He viewed collaboration, complementarity and coordination as something that can be achieved through regular meetings of people tasked to support teaching and learning. Participants viewed these sessions as a way of feeling the heartbeat of each one of them. It can be seen from this quotation that in these meetings the school based managers and district officials would be able to air their concerns on matters relating to support for teaching and learning in schools. It can also be noted in the above excerpt that this SMT member views regular meetings as a platform to chart a programme of action and come up with a clear and common or complementary approach as to how best to support teaching and learning in schools.

SMT1 indicated that the work of the SMTs can be improved through regular support from the district office. SMT 2 further noted that there should be induction workshops for the newly appointed SMT members so that they know and understand their role.

Principal 1 and Principal 2 indicated that the support they get from the district office is complementary to their work as it is assisting them. Principal 2 indicated that the support that they receive from district officials gives them confidence

as they become clear on what is expected of them. Both principals indicated that district officials complement their work by motivating and assisting them in areas where they need support.

Subject advisor 1 reported that in his district there is a certain level of coordination, collaboration and complementarity between SMT, principals and district officials and among district officials.

Subject Advisor 1 noted:

When we come back from school visits for example on a Friday we make the report on the curriculum platform and then fortnightly we meet with IDS and G because some of the findings are not necessarily in our domain. You might for example find that the reason why this particular educator is not doing well in his particular subject is that this educator is merely assisting in that subject. The educator allocated officially to that subject is not at school for some reasons such as health and so on. We need to inform IDS and G on that. In that platform where we meet as the multi-disciplinary structure including support service that we call ESSS we now discuss extensively.

This was an indication that, as Subject Advisor 1 noted, there are debriefing sessions with other sections in the district office aimed at taking each other on board on issues that relate to supporting teaching and learning.

As he was arguing for lack of coordination, collaboration and non-complementarity SMT2 noted that SMTs are the people at school level who should galvanise support for educators in their work by inviting relevant people from the district office. He noted that EDOs as well as curriculum managers should invoke the services of the relevant sections in the district office with the aim of enhancing teaching and learning in schools. Subject Advisor 2 also indicated that district officials should work hand in hand with the IQMS section as areas for development of educator are indicated in the IQMS policy.

IQMS1 in District A indicated that they normally have interdisciplinary meetings where each section reports on the findings of their respective schools on site support visits. He also mentioned that he coordinates district task team (DTT) meetings where they plan issues of teacher development at different sections of the district, together. However, IQMS2 in District B reported that this subsection in her district is neglected and that it is not part of the Institutional Development Support and Governance (IDS and G) section as it is supposed to be. She further commented that section meetings are EDO meetings and not every other subsection in IDS and G. She complained that:

This is part of the problem. If I could sit in these meetings I could tell them the schools that are not implementing and request their assistance because it is EDO who are in the DSGs of the principals.

It is clear from this excerpt that there are political issues at district office level where some officials are marginalised in section meetings. This was an indication that IQMS2 views support for teaching and learning in schools as an uncoordinated activity that is not jointly planned by educators in the district. IQMS2 blamed the manner in which the meetings are arranged where she is not included and where she feels she could make an impact in terms of coming up with support for teaching and learning strategies.

IQMS 2 further indicated that:

My role as IQMS Coordinator I think I tried to take it up a little bit further than what it is expected by tying up with EDOs in terms of governance and management and I wanted to tie up with curriculum people. First and foremost all the policies must be in place and all the teachers must have work schedules and lesson plans and these must be reviewed regularly. I also think that there must be a management plan of test and exams well in advance. I consider all exams and test to be set up to standard and moderated. I also see if the memorandums are compiled in time. Syllabus coverage is very important. As IQMS Coordinator you play a major role as performance standard one to four are about teaching and learning. I talk about issues of positive learning environment, if classroom is conducive for teaching. I talk about the things that should be hand on the wall. If the posters hanged against the wall are relevant. I talk about issues of spacing in the classroom. I do this my training I don't necessary go to somebody's classroom. I do this for them to raise a bar. I talk about issues of discipline. I explain performance standard one to four.

IQMS2 believes in a joint approach in support for teaching and learning. However, there is no centre where teaching and learning support activities are coordinated at the level of the district office. There is a lack of coordination of activities in District B, It can also be seen in this excerpt that IQMS1 plays a very important role in supporting teaching and learning as she deals with issues of how a positive learning environment should look. With regard to complementarity amongst people tasked to support quality teaching and learning, EDO1 indicated that for collaboration and complementarity to be improved SMTs and principals should be capacitated so that they understand their work. He indicated that this should not end up with induction workshops only. There should be a module that seeks to empower

school managers and district officials to carry out their work as managers of curriculum delivery. EDO 2 argued that district officials should understand principals and SMTs and the principals and SMTs should understand the district officials. He further argued that:

EDO2 proposed a developmental approach where school and district level officials learn from one another. Such an approach would encourage pro-activity on the part of school level educators instead of waiting for districts to support and develop them. EDO2 also noted that enabling SMTs and principals to solve problems that they encounter could enhance their performance. He indicated that SMTs should be involved and take an active role in solving the problems that they encounter. He noted that the EDO should enable them to solve their problems. EDO 2 further indicated that complementarity and collaboration between principals, SMTs and district officials could be enhanced by acknowledging the achievement of the SMTs and principals. District officials should be prepared to learn from school managers and acknowledge when a particular idea is from a particular school manager. He further argued that EDOs should not write off school managers who do not perform well, rather they should encourage them to do better by motivating them.

From the data it could be seen that the majority of participants do not see collaboration and complementarity between SMTs, Principals and district officials and among district officials. What emerged from the data was that there were no clear lines or patterns of coordination amongst district officials. The data also showed that some District A schools hold inter disciplinary meetings which were not reported in District B. This was an indication that different district offices have different approaches when it comes to supporting teaching and learning. It was also reported that district officials worked in silos and this resulted in clashes of programmes and sending of different signals to educators.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the major recommendations are:

In the light of the above discussion figure 1 below depicts how coordination of teaching and learning support programmes can be implemented at district office level by the three selected district officials.

Figure 1: Coordination Model Of Teaching And Learning Support Programmes

In figure 1 above it can be seen that district office based officials (EDOs, Subject Advisors and IQMS Coordinators) are supposed to throw their efforts in one basket and have one understanding of how teaching and learning could be best supported in schools. This means that they should coordinate their programmes together and inform each other on how teachers should be supported in their teaching process. The arrows denote that joint teaching and learning support centrally coordinated programmes should directly inform the actual teaching and learning process at classroom level and in turn teaching and learning process should inform centrally coordinated joint teaching and learning support programmes that are initiated at district office level. The work of EDOs includes management of approved curriculum. The work of

IQMS coordinators involves the monitoring the implementation of IQMS process in the district which includes development of educators teaching skills and measurement of their performance. The work of Subject Advisors involves supporting the implementation of approved curriculum. Whether the three officials' duties inform each other's is the subject of this paper. This study explored how the teaching and learning support programmes are coordinated at district office level.

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