



School Management Teams' Challenges and Professional Development Requirements in Implementing the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in Gauteng Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The successful implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in South African secondary schools requires varying degrees of leadership capability from School Management Teams (SMTs). This article was rooted in frameworks on distributed leadership and instructional leadership and used a qualitative methodology to investigate the professional needs of SMTs in four Gauteng secondary schools. The study found that SMTs in the sampled schools face five major challenges related to professional development needs: a lack of curriculum and assessment capacity, heavy administrative loads that are incompatible with high-quality instructional leadership, generic professional development that is not aligned with professional needs, resource inequalities, and unpredictable district collaboration. These are perceived as impeding SMTs' capacity to provide high-quality leadership in teaching, learning, and assessment. It is therefore contended in the present article that professional development programs for SMTs must move towards job-embedded, context-specific professional programs rather than being compliant professional development programs based on routine workshop sessions designed to promote compliance rather than better performance in the curriculum assessment area, based on the experiences in the research study on SMTs in the sampled schools.

Keywords: School Management Teams; CAPS; Instructional Leadership; Distributed Leadership; Curriculum Implementation; Professional Development; Gauteng Secondary Schools.

Introduction

Since the inception of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in South Africa in 2012, a debate has emerged over the ability of the schooling system, and particularly the School Management Team (SMT) to successfully implement the curriculum. CAPS is notably prescriptive about content and imposes heavy demands not only on the teacher but also on the management structure tasked with monitoring the curriculum, teaching, and assessment, as well as teacher development. Secondary schooling utilises the SMT, which consists of the principal, the deputy principal and the Heads of the various departments, as the major vehicle in the effort of curating the curriculum into learning experiences (Letshwene & du Plessis, 2021; Mabunda, 2023). In Gauteng, which is considered the most diverse economy and densely populated province in South Africa, worries continue to be raised about SMT's abilities to head the implementation process of the curriculum, owing to administrative pressures, accountability and performance. It was found that the implementation process of CAPS was

being affected by the abilities of school leadership, limitations and professional development opportunities afforded to SMTs (Mabunda, 2023). This paper explores the challenges SMTs face in Gauteng's secondary schools during CAPS implementation, with the aim of establishing their professional development needs.

Curriculum change in the South African context has also witnessed a number of transformations since the year 1994, as the country has committed itself to equity, quality and national learning outcomes. The movement away from Curriculum 2005 to the Curriculum Statement, as well as finally to CAPS, can be seen as efforts to find a balance between the learner-centred approach and prescriptive guidance. CAPS came as a refined curriculum structure that defines the content to be covered in each subject and level (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Though teachers remain responsible for delivering curriculum content daily, SMTs are equally important in establishing conditions that ensure its successful implementation. The main functions of SMTs include tracking instructional practices, ensuring curriculum coverage, supporting assessment plans and providing professional direction and feedback, managing teachers' development programs, supporting resource allocation and leading various development efforts at the institutional level. To ensure that CAPS works, there is a need to ensure that SMTs perform leadership functions in the curriculum effectively and competently. These include explaining policy documents, providing professional guidance to teachers, explaining assessment outcomes and promoting an effective learning context (Mabunda, 2023). However, despite such demands, evidence from recent research has pointed out that there are often issues on the SMTs' side in embracing such duties.

The Gauteng Province is represented by a wide spectrum of schools, from resource-rich to very resource-poor schools. The context is marked by high learner numbers, an amended or reduced number of teachers in critical areas, high levels of infrastructural disparities, a broad spread of socio-economic backgrounds among learners and accountability imperatives tied to provincial performance indicators. Such are the contextual realities that SMTs must grapple with, together with their imperatives in playing a critical role in school curricula, thus often stretching their loads in attending to their responsibility in teaching, learning, and instruction, alongside their official obligation duties in overall school management, such as doing WSE, SSE, and SIPs. Although CAPS is intended to improve curriculum clarity and standardisation, the success of CAPS requires capable and adequately supported SMTs with strong leadership in instruction capabilities. Evidence, however, suggests that SMTs are struggling in terms of readiness and support. Currently, studies reveal that SMTs are not adequately trained in CAPS leadership and are burdened with unending administrative tasks, especially in resource-poor schools (Mofoka & Mokhampanyane, 2024; Maifala, 2024). Further studies reveal that SMTs are hampered by resource constraints in supporting and directing the development of other teachers in resource-poor schools (Madonsela, Jita & Badmus, 2025). Further still, SMTs' professional development remains generic, ad hoc and not suited to the reality of school leadership (Arendse, Phillips & Waghid, 2024). Presently, although SMTs play a pivotal role in the implementation of policy, unfortunately, little attention has been devoted to researching SMT experiences and struggles in Gauteng secondary schools. This issue is addressed in this paper as it highlights the reality of SMTs that exists in regard to CAPS implementation and identifies types of professional development that will help improve SMT leadership in teaching and learning.

The study aims to determine SMTs' professional development needs and to identify how curriculum leadership implementation can be improved. The study has examined the SMT members' experience in handling the complexities of curriculum and assessment leadership. Issues such as lack of resources, time constraints and proper teacher collaboration are seen as key issues that SMTs face. Professional development opportunities that are offered to SMTs are also examined. Based on the study's objectives and the literature review on the problem and related studies, the study concludes that SMTs should be equipped and empowered through professional development opportunities to handle curriculum reforms and improve teaching and learning outcomes in Gauteng's secondary schools. This is an important piece of research for the following reasons. It is expected that this research study will enable policymakers, as well as the Gauteng Department of Education, to identify areas for improving the professional development of SMTs and, hopefully, inform changes within provincial frameworks for school-level management of the school curriculum. It is obvious that this piece of research specifically aims for the needs of SMTs, that is, to improve instructional leadership, an important factor

that determines school performance and ultimately learner success, which is vital for the quality of mentoring, monitoring, or professional support provided by school authorities to educators. It is evident that although numerous research studies have focused on CAPS implementation, little research has specifically examined the dynamics of SMTs within Gauteng, providing the necessary context for this piece of research.

This research report is based on public secondary schools in the Gauteng province. The study deals with the experiences of SMT members, including principals, deputy principals and HODs. This research report excludes primary schools, independent schools and teachers outside the SMT structure. The geographical consideration enables the investigation of the selected province with varied circumstances of schooling. The crucial concepts that underpin this paper are explained in detail to ensure a clear and consistent conceptual basis is established. The School Management Team (SMT) is regarded as the school principal, deputy principal, or deputy principals and Heads of Department in charge of managing the school curriculum, assessments and overall school administration. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is regarded as a national, prescriptive, or specific outcomes-based school curriculum that determines what is to be covered in assessment, from Grade R to Grade 12. Professional Development (PD) is a form of organised, continuous and structured learning that targets enhancing SMT members' competencies in school curriculum and instruction. Curriculum Implementation is regarded as a set of implementations, approaches, or methodologies that entail schools turning school policies, in this case CAPS, into realities through teaching, assessment, monitoring and managing school resources. Instructional Leadership is regarded as teaching and learning through leadership practices in managing school curricula, classroom support, school supervision and school instruction or teaching practices that aim at improving learner outcomes in their learning endeavours at schools through instruction or teaching practices, directions and support that shape instruction and teaching practices in schools.

Literature Review

This literature review distils existing knowledge about the implementation of CAPS in South Africa and those that specifically concentrate on matters of curriculum change, involvement of SMTs, instructional leadership, issues pertinent to management of curriculum and professional development, will be incorporated in this review. One way or another, because CAPS represents an educational change that must be led by superior facilitation within the educational institution, the role of SMTs as leaders between the national and educational levels has received growing attention in academic circles. Among the efforts made by the South African government, since 1994, the country has experienced varied curriculum reforms with the ultimate goal of reshaping an education system that was previously marred by inequalities, fragmentation and exclusion. For instance, the Curriculum 2005, also referred to as the 'Curriculum of Outcomes-Based Education' and abbreviated as C2005, was introduced in 1998 and promoted learner autonomy but was widely criticised for being unclear and for being ambiguously implemented across the country (Ngobeni & Chibambo, 2023).

It was followed by the National Curriculum Statement, also known as the revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS), but it remained marred by complex ideas and concepts. However, due to persistent concerns about the quality of learning and assessments, the "Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, or CAPS, was introduced by the Department of Basic Education in 2011 and 2012," catering to the teachers by providing them with 'clearer guidelines regarding what and when to teach and assessment guidelines' (National Department of Basic Education, 2024; Mabunda, 2023). This was to ensure less ambiguity, better standardisation and to address the legacies of inequalities left behind by the previous reforms in the education system of the country.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is distinguished by highly prescriptive teaching week plans, the assessment requirements and the accompanying evidence moderation, the ongoing monitoring of coverage of the curriculum, the Programme of Assessment (PoA) template per subject and the enhanced documentation requirements. Despite

these dimensions improving clarity and consistency in the implementation of the curriculum, they also present highly intricate organisational and management requirements to SMTs. Teachers rely on the SMTs for the interpretation of policies, the distribution of resources, the pacing of the curriculum and the coordination of assessment tasks. Therefore, the SMTs have the role of intermediaries in the curriculum, requiring a blend of administrative and instructional leadership skills.

In the South African education sector, School Management Teams (SMTs) consist of the School Principal, Deputy Principal(s), or both, in addition to the School Head of Department (HOD), with primary tasks such as developing the learning curriculum, teacher support, curriculum supervision, assessment administration and the planning of a better learning outcome within schools (Bush & Glover, 2016; OER Africa, 2024). SMTs in schools sit at the focal point at which schools meet both management and leadership. There have been various assertions in the literature indicating that instructional rather than managerial leadership in SMTs would be more appropriate in schools (Hallinger, 2011). Instructional or classroom leadership includes setting a vision in the classroom, observing, classroom observations, thorough completion of the learning curriculum, constructive critique and teacher development.

It has been found in empirical studies in South Africa that most SMTs find it challenging to effectively play these types of instructional leadership roles. According to Maifala (2024), SMT members in a rural high school have a very limited understanding of their role in instructional leadership, as well as resource shortages and being in a rural area, which limit their ability to provide effective leadership. Mofoka and Mokhampanyane (2024) also investigate that in the case of the Township Secondary schools in Western Cape Province, SMT members are faced with severe hindrances to their practices in the form of role ambiguity and lack of proper communication. The challenge of SMT members in schools performing poorly, being faced with the difficulty of administrative overload, has also been highlighted by Subramoney (2022) in their study on how SMTs in poorly performing schools understand the value of Shared Leadership, yet are limited by the role definitions in policies not aligned to Distributed Instructional Leading.

From a theoretical point of view, the Distributed Leadership Theory argues that leadership should not be concentrated in the hands of an individual but should be shared across teams and structures (Spillane, 2006). Among SMTs, delegation of curriculum duties, empowering HODs to lead in the context of a subject group, developing teacher leadership and encouraging shared decision-making are some measures. Nonetheless, recent studies have found the potential of distributed leadership to be inadequately tapped in a large number of South African education institutions. For instance, Manzini (2023) found that although distributed leadership practices are perceptible in some secondary institutions in Limpopo Province, its application is not balanced; that is, SMTs share management duties but not teaching duties. De Klerk (2024) noted that underperforming institutions within the Johannesburg Central District have an ill-defined view of distributed instructional leadership. Therefore, despite the structural potential for distributed leadership evident in SMTs, the challenges of training, resource and role definition have consistently militated against its attainment. These challenges must be addressed for the purpose of strengthening the capabilities of SMTs, as well as the quality of implementation, curriculum and instruction leadership, evident within South African schools.

Achieving competence in the new curriculum knowledge and assessment formats takes a great deal of training. Nevertheless, there is fresh scholarship that points to inadequacies in professional development (PD) work for SMTs on issues pertaining to CAPS. Training workshops remain short, generic rather than discipline-specific, conducted in massed rather

than in-school formats and lacking in their practical application focus on matters such as assessment moderation or curriculum development work. For instance, Mabunda (2023) observed that there was a dearth in school managers' capacity on matters concerning CAPS, especially in assessment development and leadership. Arendse, Phillips and Waghid (2024) continue to underscore that SMTs would need to foreground professional teacher development, but in their experience, there is a lack of capacity and time for doing so.

Equally important is that the introduction of CAPS puts much pressure on SMTs in terms of increased administrative tasks. This is because the planning documents of districts make it clear that the Department of Basic Education's 2023/24 Annual Report emphasises that the district's officials are monitoring struggling schools not only in terms of learner achievements but also in terms of their level of compliance in terms of school improvement plans, managing the curriculum and evidence portfolios. Inequality in resource availability still poses a problem. In resource-poor schools, factors such as large class sizes, unavailability of textbooks, unreliable technology and lack of access to specialised classrooms still exist. Inequality in school resources, including learning materials, has also been evident, hampering the implementation of the curriculum, according to an article by Mabunda in 2023 on School Management Teams.

Furthermore, support structures like mentoring and coaching are often underdeveloped. District leadership training and consulting are expected but lack consistency, as demonstrated in empirical studies. According to Mofoka and Mokhampanyane (2024), important factors militating against the use of instructional leadership in Western Cape Township secondary schools include role ambiguity among SMTs, as well as a lack of effective communication. Also supported by current debates in a publication in *Frontiers in Education*, district leadership approaches in South Africa are characterised by a focus on compliance rather than development. In light of such challenges, what SMTs need to develop their capabilities in implementing CAPS is not only additional training opportunities but also ongoing, context-responsive development. There is also a need to realign district support along with developments at the school level. Strategic approaches are further required to address administrative burdens.

For SMT to take effect, there must be relevant and effective professional development. Nonetheless, recent research indicates that current provisions regarding this are generally very narrow. Training tends to be workshop-based and short-term. It tends to be more compliance-oriented than transformation-oriented. It tends to be generic and not role specific. It tends to be dependent on the district schedule. It tends not to be context-specific to the particular school's challenges. For example, Adams, Sayed, Esau and Arendse (2025) point to the importance of the instructional role played by principals in the continuous professional teacher development. Principals' role aspirations and capacity may be limiting in this area. Arendse, Phillips and Waghid (2024) note that SMTs perceive their role in the context of professional development as a managerial one. Further, township schools within the Western Cape experience their own set of challenges. For instance, according to Mofoka and Mokhampanyane (2024), ineffective communication, lack of goals and role conflicts all impede instructional leadership within the SMT. Further, the outcomes within district leadership patterns stand to perpetuate compliance. For example, recent reading within the article involving two South African districts brings leadership strategies into isolated pockets, hence showing that support for schools overlooks relevant contextualisation for improved performance.

On theoretical grounds, it is easy to see how instructional leadership continues to play an important role in addressing these concerns. Current scholarship on this topic sees it as crucial in leading the instructional program, in creating a collaborative school culture and in connecting leadership to teaching and learning (Hallinger et al., 2024). Moreover, professional

development models, in line with OER Africa, continue to urge for “modules on enhancing SMTs' capacity for leading in teaching and learning, not just for leading in administrative and organizational functions.” Lastly, discipline-based leadership must not be overlooked, as it has been clearly shown through their “Case in Life Sciences” that improving instruction-related leadership in specialised content improves learning outcomes by leading teachers (Madonsela, Jita, & Badmus, 2025).

Even though the above discussion concentrated on the South African context, research on Singapore, Finland, and Canada has contributed toward gaining knowledge on the best practices for developing SMTs. Evidence from the mentioned countries indicates that effective curriculum change depends entirely on capable school leaders. The mentioned school leaders are provided with in-depth training on leaders' roles regarding learning and teaching, as well as the planning of the curriculum, enhancing their capacity to support teachers when the school undergoes the teaching of the curriculum (Day et al., 2023; Leithwood & Sun, 2024). Research also puts emphasis on PLCs, as it helps in supporting the professional growth of teachers and leaders based on cooperative planning, observation, joint problem-solving and mutual reflection (Vangrieken et al., 2023). In South Africa, PLCs are tested in subject clusters; however, the mentioned PLCs are not effective (Mabunda, 2023). Research also emphasises the efficacy of coaching and peer dyadic professional development in building on leaders' proficiency when carried out daily, rather than the traditional workshop approach (Timperley et al., 2024).

Although this literature review report will concentrate on South Africa, much experience has been covered in the literature elsewhere, especially in Singapore, Finland and Canada, which informs SMT development. There exists significant experience in these foreign nations, which indicates that for any curriculum overhaul to succeed, the schools must have highly qualified administrators who themselves get rigorous education on instructional leadership, planning, assessment and teacher coaching activities (Irby et al., 2023; Vangrieken, Dochy & Raes, 2024). Furthermore, literature also shows that PLC activities within teacher development activities play even more significant parts in developing both the teacher and administrative cadres, using activities such as using data in PLC, where formal or informal leadership plays a significant role in ensuring that the data usage remains important. In South Africa, the effort to integrate PLCs is seen in the subject clusters; however, the efficacy of PLCs is quite varied. In a contemporary article concerning newly qualified teachers in South African schools, it was found that PLCs assisted newly qualified teachers in their school integration as they promoted collective efficacy, mutual support and thoughtful problem resolution. In addition, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has again pledged its commitment to integrating PLCs; for example, in 2024, a consultative workshop on PLC guidelines was held.

Furthermore, international research has clearly demonstrated that job-embedded approaches to professional development and learning, such as school-based coaching and peer association activities, are more successful at developing leadership and bringing about curriculum change than traditional models of professional development that are carried out through workshops (Irby et al., 2023; Talafian & Lundsgaard, 2023). The lesson from the above global developments and trends is the need to reinterpret how SMT development models are constructed within the SMTEC in South Africa.

Theoretical And Conceptual Framework

A theoretical framework serves as the lens through which SMTs' experiences in implementing the CAPS program can be viewed and understood. This article integrates two related theories. Distributed Leadership Theory and the Instructional Leadership Framework. This enables the incorporation of both the theoretical aspect of leadership distribution among school principals, deputy school principals and

Heads of Department (HODs) and the leadership development related to the Instructional Leadership Framework. This article will investigate both the leadership distribution and the leadership development.

Distributed leadership theory

Distributed Leadership Theory removes the emphasis on traditional, principal-focused leadership, emphasising group practices among individuals, structure and interactions within a specific setting (Spillane, 2006). In South African schools, SMTs consisting of principals, deputy principals and Heads of Department structure a framework of distributed leadership that takes up group duties such as curriculum development, assessment and moderation, support and resource allocation. However, evidence has recently emerged that such an ideal still falls short. This, for instance, has been investigated by Manzini (2023) in regard to the practices of distributed leadership among Limpopo secondary schools, demonstrating that while collective understanding existed, little effectiveness and further integration occurred either. This lack of effective integration has been recently brought to light by De Klerk (2024) in Johannesburg Central District, indicating that while very little understanding of distributed educational leadership occurred, little evidence of collaboration as a required cohesive unit of effective, operational leaders existed either.

Deepened exploratory study, particularly within the management and effective use of environmental education curricula, further brought to the forefront systemically inflicted limitations within SMTs as to effective use and engagement, specifically that hierarchical inhibiting tension, administration and lack of teacher readiness play substantially as crucial, exercising impediments toward effective distributed leadership within South African secondary institutions, discovered by Shabalala (2025). All works related to this topic emphasise that to effectively distribute leadership in SMTs, professional capacity, role and structure have to be in place, aspects that are not effectively developed in most circumstances. Focusing on this specific study, Distributed Leadership Theory provides an insight into how the leadership role concerning CAPS is distributed in relation to the role confusion that exists in SMTs, how schools affect this leadership, as well as the effects of collaboration for curriculum implementation in schools

Instructional leadership framework

Instructional leadership focuses on the doing of enhancing learning outcomes in schools. Hallinger's (1987) theory, which focuses on school mission, instruction programme management and creating a desirable learning climate, still encapsulates how SMTs affect learning outcomes in schools. Recently, in a Limpopo secondary school, it was found in an academic article in a rural area that some members in the SMT were not fully grasping or executing their responsibilities in instructional leadership, where rurality, among other factors, has significantly impacted their effectiveness in any instructional leadership in schools. Members in SMTs in Western Cape township schools equally contend with similar issues in communication, goals and systemic barriers, hindering their effectiveness in leading learning in schools. Moreover, Adams, Sayed, Esau and Arendse (2025) illustrated in their academic publication that teacher continuous development, through instructional leadership, is absolutely fundamental in an institution, where continuous engagement with instructional leadership has been required for effectiveness in school learning outcomes in South African township schools in the Western Cape. Recently, theoretical discussions on Hallinger's theory for South African schools contend that under-resourced or indigent schools must, in instruction, develop instruction models reflecting their nature. With regards to the article in mind, the framework of instructional leadership can be used to analyse the extent to which SMTs manage curriculum delivery, class observation, analysis of performance data, teacher mentoring and

assessment management. By using the framework in tandem with the concept of Distributed Leadership Theory, the weaknesses and challenges that SMT leaders face with regard to their own leadership role and influence within teaching and learning can be analysed.

Conceptual framework for the article

The following conceptual pillars are critical in exploring the role of SMTs in implementing CAPS. The concept of 'Curriculum knowledge and competence' entails familiarity with content, planning, assessment techniques and progression needs required in CAPS. 'Leadership capacity' involves skills and competencies required in teaching, learning and managing in a teaching and learning process. 'Professional development' is relevant in that it involves proper learning and enhancement of skills through training and development, while 'Workload and administrative pressures' entail aspects of compliance, reporting and managing in exercising teaching leadership. 'Resource availability' involves availability of proper infrastructure, staffing, Learning and Teaching Support Materials and technology, while 'Support systems' entail aspects of structure and support at the district levels in areas like professional training, communities and internal school structures. These concepts will, thus, form a coherent framework in managing both data collection and analysis in this article, in that they will aid in a critical exploration of the various considerations in SMTs' performance and implementation of CAPS.

Methodology

This article subscribes to the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that the world is a social construction and can be interpreted through individuals' experiences. The study adopts the method of qualitative research because of the complexities inherent in the process of implementing the curriculum in schools, as the main perspectives of SMT are considered and the study aims to make meaning and not measure variables. In this paradigm, the role of the researchers is considered the co-construction of meaning, as they also engage in the process of making meaning through the interpretation of narratives. The qualitative phenomenological approach was chosen in this article to investigate SMT experiences in-depth. Phenomenology aims to identify just how a person understands a particular phenomenon; within this text, the process of CAPS implementation. This type of approach is well-suited because SMT issues are very subjective and/or context-driven, there are differences in experiences of curriculum leadership in different settings, and a phenomenology approach allows a very in-depth description of participants' perspectives.

The population for the article consists of all SMTs found in public secondary schools in Gauteng. These include the principals, deputy principals and HODs. These participants are pivotal in understanding curriculum leadership, the CAPS implementation challenge and professional development needs within the province. For this reason, the study adopted a purposive sampling strategy to select schools and participants who could meaningfully assist the study in answering the research questions. A total of four secondary schools were targeted that captured variation in school quintiles (1-5), location (township, suburban, inner-city), resources and academic performance profile. This was to ensure that the sample is representative of a wide range of contexts and experiences that this article intended to explore about SMT challenges and professional development needs with regard to CAPS implementation. Twelve SMT members in total formed the sample of the study. These comprised four principals, four deputy principals and four HODs. This sample size was thus adequate for a phenomenological inquiry into participants' lived experiences, enabling data saturation.

Data collection methods

The dominant method of data generation was semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes. These were organised around guides that focused on involvement in CAPS implementation, training, leadership and management difficulties, instructional leadership practices, professional development needs, support systems within the district and shortcomings in resources. The rationales for adopting semi-structured interviews were that they promoted probing, clarification and detailed

responses that suited the chosen paradigm and approach. Document analysis was undertaken for purposes of data triangulation, where School Improvement Plans (SIPs), minutes from departmental meetings, curriculum trackers, internal moderation results, Whole School Evaluation (WSE) results, feedback results from the district and staff development plans were analysed. This showed evidence about the accuracy of claims made about practices and discrepancies between policy and practice. Field notes were also used to generate data. These were used for purposes of noting observations beyond the verbal responses about the school environment, the researcher's own observations and preliminary analytic interpretations following each interview. These supplemented data from interviews and documents.

A thematic analysis paradigm was used, based on a six-step process as described in Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, familiarisation with the data was achieved through multiple readings of interview transcriptions, documents and fieldwork. Secondly, initial coding was done line-by-line using NVivo software. Thirdly, coding was used to identify potential themes fitting the research queries. Fourthly, themes were assessed for their fitting description of data, including the removal of overlaps. Fifthly, themes were explained in terms of their definition and granted names fitting their description. Lastly, reporting on the research was done through incorporating themes into quotations from research participants. Coding in both inductive and deductive fashions took place. Coding inducted themes directly from the research and coded using the Distributed and Instructional Leadership paradigms.

Findings

In the four schools, the School Management Teams were perceived to face several challenges in implementing the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). The key challenge was a lack of capacity and confidence in critical areas of the curriculum, such as School-Based Assessment moderation, understanding the depth of learning in content, developing subject-specific interventions and studying learner performance data analysis. According to one deputy principal, "The problem is that the CAPS documents contain considerable information, yet the learner assumes some background understanding to start with. The presentation was general, one-off, giving members of our SMT little more than an overview and most often a dim one and then expecting them to find their way on their own in this part." More broadly in this area, according to one Head of Department, "The problem is that teachers will produce tasks that might not specifically relate to the CAPS." Document analysis has confirmed this finding, where some departmental moderation reports are irregular.

The following insights into SMTs' understanding of curriculum capability were obtained. Administrative overload was also found to be a major constraint. Participants suggested that the excessive administrative work in terms of document completion for compliance, Plan of Action and report submission, handling staffing, planning for Whole School-Evaluation, responding to district inquiries, planning assessment and developing portfolios, restricts a substantial amount of time dedicated to instructional leadership. A principal expressed, "Administrative work has no end. I also would like to be in the classrooms, but most of my work revolves around report submissions," while an HOD said, "We always have meetings to attend to our paperwork rather than assisting our teachers in improving their lessons." These results signify the reduction in instructional leadership as a result of administrative work, which forms an essential aspect of CAPS implementation.

The participants also emphasised the inadequacies of the existing professional development (PD) programs. The existing PD was seen as generic, short, non-subject-specific, irrelevant to the professional roles of SMT members, dependent on the district's availability and more compliance-driven than development-oriented. A member of the HOD thus added, "We attend workshops, but they are often the same things repeatedly. What we really need is subject-based support and mentoring," and the deputy principal added, "Most of the training is on paperwork. We need training on how to lead the delivery of teaching and learning." These

point out the inadequacies of the district's PD offerings and the lack of sustained and context-informed support for developing instructional leadership.

Resource inequalities in schools also contribute to the difficulties in implementation. Large discrepancies in the number of textbooks, class size, use of technology, specialist classrooms such as laboratories and ICT facilities were observed, especially in quintile one schools, where resources are least. One HOD in a township school stated, "Our classes are populated with nearly 50 learners. Even when we are up-to-date with the CAPS curriculum, it becomes impossible to provide effective feedback in assessment." One SMT member added, "Technology-enriched teaching is encouraged, but we can only use one computer lab and this lab does not always work." Reviews of documents, such as School Improvement Plans, supported these resource discrepancies in schools. Finally, support from the districts, although overall regarded as well-intentioned, was inconsistent.

The schools experienced irregular support visits from the curriculum advisors, minimal feedback about moderation, delayed responses to inquiries, saturated workshop classes and, on occasion, a lack of subject knowledge in the support staff. As one teacher said, "We have to wait a long time for feedback from the district. Sometimes when assistance finally reaches us, the problem would have escalated," while a second teacher stated, "The workshop is a large class. You can't ask specific questions." This lack of support not only frustrates SMT members but it is also a hindrance in their efforts to apply CAPS in class.

Taken collectively, these results indicate that a complex combination of issues, including training needs, administrative burden, lack of professional development, resource inequities and variability in district support, impacts SMT ability and, in turn, the ability to implement CAPS in schools in the same way. To mitigate such challenges, there is a need for systematic support, training and changes in the structure in terms of both curriculum management and instruction.

Discussion of Findings.

This discussion shall interpret the results within the theoretical frame and the modern literature, focusing on pertinent challenges with implications for SMTs in Gauteng secondary schools. Firstly, the study revealed that SMTs must possess better curriculum knowledge expertise for effective instructional leadership. A lack of understanding with regard to assessment, moderation and CAPS knowledge corresponds with more contemporary works. For example, Zuzidlenhle and Mtshali (2025) indicate that well-designed lesson articles improve teacher content knowledge for Life Sciences teachers.

This reflects the subject knowledge deficit. Further, Mofoka and Mokhampanyane (2024) argue that within Western Cape Township schools, SMTs perceive that they do not have sufficient leadership competency within content areas as being inhibitive for significant instructional support. This supports the premise that serious curriculum and assessment understanding is necessary for instructional leadership; failing that, SMTs cannot deliver meaningful pedagogical support. This was expressed by Hallinger (1987 & 2011).

Secondly, administrative overload limits distributed leadership. Even though the Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2006) supports shared duties, the current article's evidence shows that business compliance activities consume SMT time and limit shared leadership. The evidence supports district-level research and suggests that district offices in South Africa function in silos and are more concerned with administrative accountability and less concerned with providing structured instructional support to schools (Mthembu & Bhengu, 2025). Third, PD of SMTs has to be job-embedded and role-specific. Indeed, the finding about the current state of PD being generic and of a shorter format echoes the concerns expressed in current scholarship. Arendse, Phillips and Waghid (2024) strongly argue the importance of SMTs' ongoing and context-specific leadership in shaping teacher development

efforts leading to capacity enhancement and enhanced learning outcomes. Also, the work of Adams, Sayed, Esau and Arendse (2025) illustrates the significant role of principals' participation in the ongoing process of professional teacher development in bridging the gap in teachers' pedagogical content knowledge.

Fourth, resource issues inversely affect equity and the curriculum offering. The inequities in infrastructure, personnel, learning resources and technology resources identified in the paper are reflected in national and district-level studies. For example, Zuzidlelenhle and Mtshali (2025) explain how a lack of pedagogical content knowledge and resources affects SMTs in their role in facilitating and directing classroom learning for teachers. Klinck, Thutulwa and Pelsner (2023) are also worth citing, since they describe, in their discussion on factors for creating a high-performing SMT, their emphasis on demographics, talent and resource allocation. Finally, this article emphasises the importance of enhanced ongoing district support. The observation that district support can be inconsistent or unspecialised in most schools bears out an analysis presented by Mthembu and Bhengu in 2025, stressing the need to move towards a more holistic concept of accountability from a compliance-focused one to better address the pivotal role of SMTs in facilitating the implementation of CAPS, in their view by ensuring their major task, a focus on the developmental aspects within the classroom as part of their role in providing teaching leadership is accomplished effectively.

Conclusion

This article highlights the challenges and professional development demands faced by SMTs in the implementation of CAPS in Gauteng secondary schools. The main findings of the matter are that SMTs in Gauteng province lack the required expertise to effectively monitor the implementation of CAPS and administrative workload significantly hinders the instructional leadership of SMTs. The professional development opportunities are inadequate and in dire need of restructuring, and resource inequalities persist in curriculum implementation. The support structures of the districts are not consistent and not sufficiently focused. This article recommends that, for SMTs to play their required roles in the instructional leadership of learners, they should have continuous, context-specific professional development opportunities to build SMT capacity, as this would be crucial for enhancing the implementation of the curriculum in South Africa's secondary school system.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on the article above cater to different levels. For the Department of Basic Education, there are recommendations to develop targeted training programs for SMTs on leadership in education, assessment and decision-making. There should be a reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy and administrative tasks related to SMTs. For the district offices, there should be regular school-based SMT coaching and mentoring. Subject specialists should be used to help with the above.

There should be the formation of effective Professional Learning Communities. There should be a system in place related to classroom observation and feedback. There should be a clear division of roles within the overall SMT structure. For policymakers, the following recommendations are provided. Grant different quintiles varying priorities related to the upgrade and construction of infrastructures. There should be a ring-fenced budget specifically associated with SMT.

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