

Original Research

Exploring Departmental Heads' Leadership Actions and Perceptions in a High School Setting

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ABSTRACT

Departmental heads (DHs) are at times the quiet and unsung leaders behind school success. School principals act as instructional leaders who are accountable to parents, educational officials, and other stakeholders. However, principals heavily rely on DHs to inform them on how educational instruction is being enacted. In this study, the researcher recognised this DH's indispensability but was more interested in obtaining specific leadership actions. Importantly, too, the researcher wished to establish how six DHs in a high school perceived their own leadership in relation to working with subordinates and the top leadership. A qualitative approach helped gather findings that showed the school showed an inclination towards distributed leadership. This allowed productive leadership that organised both human and other resources. The DHs made important school-wide decisions regardless of praise and acknowledgement. This proved that the DHs were more task-oriented, empowered to be proactive, and perceived work as more important despite challenges and frustrations. This study recommends empowering DHs to be central in school leadership aspects, and they must, in turn, extend their leadership to other department members to empower their subordinates to improve school performance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Besides looking at leadership from a principal point of view, DHs are the flip side of a coin that makes schools function effectively. Departmental heads are progressively recognised as fundamental instructional leaders within schools, and serve as a bridge between classroom practice and senior management (Kubheka et al., 2025). Schools generally experience different levels of environments, success, and culture because of the ethical behaviours and leadership abilities that principals depict (Webster & Litchka, 2020). Debatably, the DH's actions influence the implementation of the vision that principals have for their schools (Abolghasemi et al., 1999). So much so that the schools' successes and failures are both dependent on how DHs support school vision and also on their perception of their own leadership as requisite in meeting perceived school needs.

While principals are instrumental to school improvement, it is also widely recognised that their impact is indirect, via teacher actions that include DHs shaping school culture (Bush, 2022). This study pivots greatly on the importance of a recognition of the devolution of school leadership. This concept is

centred on a bilateral approach that, on one hand, a principal recognizes the importance of participatory and distributed leadership (and practises it with subordinates). On the other hand, DHs recognize the fact that they hold very important positions in running schools and should be emboldened to lead. Besides the importance of participatory leadership, literature seems to shy away from contributory roles and the power that DHs hold in supporting school management. Thus, an examination of DH perception and individual actions in this study opens up a discussion on how schools can depend on DH leadership to help run schools.

1.1. Understanding school leadership

Multiple definitions of school leadership emerge in the literature. However, Gurreea (2021) describes it as a process that mobilizes and manages talents, abilities, and energies that exist in students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders with the aim of attaining educational objectives. The term is usually synonymous with school principal roles and their leadership style in most literature (Acera & Tan, 2023; Maseko, 2025). These roles connect to how principals can influence teaching practices to reveal direct and indirect impacts of instructional and distributed leadership on classroom instructional quality, incorporating teacher collaboration and improving job satisfaction (Bellibaş et al., 2021). Consequently, principals as sole leaders can face a multitude of challenges because of the multiplicity of roles they need to play and the high achievement expectations that result. Of concern is whether they are able to develop a definite vision (and its enactment) for their schools' success (Bush & Glover, 2016). In many countries (including Eswatini), a teaching qualification and teaching experience are considered adequate for someone to be chosen for school principalship (Bush, 2018). Thus, principals are supposed to guide in areas where they may not have full confidence (Flanagan & Jacobsen, 2003).

For decades now, the discussion on school leadership and development has emphasised collaborative practices, active participation, and distribution of roles and responsibilities (Ahtiainen & Heikonen, 2023). The incremental understanding of the participation of others in decision-making in schools calls for flatter management and decentralized authority structures to promote school effectiveness (Somech, 2010). Although this is not a quick fix for all leadership problems, sharing responsibilities lightens certain burdens. In particular, DHs in high schools are expected to fulfil leadership purposes and influence school culture (Abolghasemi et al., 1999). This neither means that principals no longer provide leadership nor overreliance on DHs for leadership, but a balance of context and what needs to be done. In promoting effective school leadership, a principal should develop a supportive school culture, positive school climate, teacher advocacy, and participatory decision-making (Tedla & Kilango, 2022). Principals should thus create empowering and suitable environments that allow DHs to explore leadership in their departments and collectively work together with an appreciation that they are a vital extension of school leadership.

1.2. Departmental heads' leadership

Most schools have a structure that consists of subject departments that are composed of a group of teachers with similar specializations (Alsaleh, 2022; Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021). Such teachers probably have similar denominational qualifications and professional development. In this context, teachers' conduct and teaching practices are directly observed and influenced by a DH who works with the school administration to provide support, time, and resources. In more specific terms, De Lima (2008) identifies three major roles that are played by departmental heads, namely: (1) ensure curriculum integration by promoting cooperation among department members, and between their department and other structural units of the school; (2) ensure that there is harmonization of department members' pedagogy and assessment practices; and (3) identify the department members' up skilling needs and promoting adequate in-service training.

DHs play an important role in the distributed leadership structure of a school (Munje et al., 2020). This is because teaching, learning, and curriculum implementation pivot on power dynamics that put distributed leadership into focus. DHs then function as the school's administration's eyes and ears and help to direct teaching and learning according to set objectives and standards. It becomes imperative then to explore more about the departmental heads' leadership practices and to understand their impact on effective school leadership (Munje et al., 2020). Several studies have been done to show the importance of DHs in a school setting. Globally, literature exposes that for departmental heads to be effective leaders, they need preparation through constant, continuous, and coherent in-service training and school support (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Tapala et al., 2021). For example, Alsaleh (2022) investigated the influence of departmental heads' instructional leadership and administrative support. In total, 649 teachers answered a quantitative questionnaire. Multiple regression analysis exposed that positive learning experiences were created partially though collegial cooperation and DHs' instructional leadership. However, this study created a void when data was obtained from teachers and did not involve the DH themselves.

Lipscombe et al. (2023) carried out a systematic review of school middle leadership, which represented DH's actions. The authors intended to identify and analyse empirical peer-reviewed studies from 2006 to 2020, to understand how middle leadership is defined, the responsibilities held, and the impact it had on professional development. Using Nvivo and narrative synthesis, the articles showed, amongst other findings, that middle leadership had both a direct and indirect impact on teacher practice, school reforms, team development, and professional learning. They also found out that middle leadership and responsibilities vary significantly and were best understood in the context in which they are found. For this reason, this study also intends to add to the existing literature. Besides what everyone knows about DH leadership in schools, prevailing conditions and effects vary from one school to another. Most importantly, this study brings about contextual issues related to how DHs relate to a relatively new principal and how their perception helps reinforce, restructure, and execute school management.

1.3 Distributed leadership

A distributed perspective was chosen as a theoretical framework in this study. This theory acknowledges that leading and managing schools involves multiple individuals, whether there is a formal designation or not (Spillane et al., 2015). This theory was developed and publicised by Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond, who sparked interest in leadership that focuses on the interactions that exist between leaders, followers, and their prevailing situations (Harris et al., 2022). Traditional leadership theories focus primarily on the "what" of leadership-structures and functions, rather than the "how" of school leadership in the daily functioning of a school (Spillane, 2005). To improve this through distributed leadership, leadership is not viewed as a product of a leader's knowledge and skill, but rather an outcome of the interactions between people and situations.

This notion of shared or 'stretched' leadership (Harris et al., 2022) has both a direct and indirect impact on school performance, dependent on alignment with individual leadership capacity and set goals (Jakobsen et al., 2023). In a nutshell, school principals do not single-handedly lead schools to greatness, and leadership should involve a selection of individuals with various tools, know-how, commitment, and experience (Spillane, 2005). Thus, each DH has something to offer in the school leadership, and collectively, their ideas can help solve problems. Distributed leadership has its pitfalls, too. For instance, the potential shortcomings associated with distributed leadership include challenges such as role ambiguity, power struggles, and, at times, conflicting priorities (Baştea et al., 2023). Some DHs can take an opportunity to lead as a way to gratify principals or market their potential to their superiors. However, distributed leadership is significant in this study in revealing the (re)construction (and significance) of leader-follower identities, to show mobilization of collective engagement (Bolden, 2011).

1.4. Research objectives

The overarching research objectives were related to DH actions and responsibilities and hence included: (1) how DHs enacted leadership in leading their departments, (2) how their decision-making showed competence and commitment in leading the school, and (3) how the DHs' perceptions of their principal's leadership exposed leadership strengths and limitations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was a qualitative case study that was done in one school in Eswatini. This choice came up because the objectives implied an approach that explored and aimed to understand meaning ascribed to by individuals in their natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). A qualitative approach was appropriate because of its interpretive and representational approach to prevailing conditions on the ground (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, this approach proved to be the most suitable way to interact with the participants to get an in-depth understanding (Yin, 2018) and to best explain 'why' and 'how' questions behind participant actions and decision-making.

A constructivist philosophical standpoint aligned with the research data collected, as well as enabled the researcher to make interpretations of the meaning made from the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A case study design also gave an opportunity for comprehensive data collection and created an understanding of the phenomenon in great depth (Yin, 2018). Thus, a high school of choice and convenience was chosen. The school was within walking distance of the researcher's place of abode and had a number of different departments. Permission was sought from the Ministry of Education and Training to gain access.

It was a relatively smaller school with about 250 students and a total of seven DHs. A smaller school afforded a few advantages. Firstly, it was easier to schedule meetings and establish rapport. Secondly, the volume of data with a smaller sample is easier to organize and analyse. All DHs in the school agreed to partake in the study. The DHs interviewed were six in total. Because of time limitations and other commitments, one of the DH was not available for an interview during the research time of data collection. The writer acknowledges

that six is not a good number as a representative for generalizing results. However, the research design was a case study, which focused on only a single school. The principal had been in the school for a year and was considered new by some participants. Although the study was about leadership, the principal and the deputy principal were not intended for inclusion. This was because the study was crafted to focus solely on DH actions and perceptions as middle leaders.

A semi-structured interview was used with all the participants because of flexibility, ordering of questions, and levels of probing (Saunders et al., 2019). Data reading and re-reading started off the initial stages of data analysis, which led to the data reduction and emergence of themes (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Open coding was used to involve the initial picking of common core ideas. For example, how duties were enacted, common roles, and standpoints. Then, axial coding refined ideas to develop more salient themes by combining similar open codes (Saunders et al., 2019). Resultantly, themes were summarized into DH actions, responsibilities, decision-making, and limitations observed. These themes were used to come up with the research findings section. The themes have the researcher's interpretation from the data collected and are supported by the most revealing participant verbatim quote. The trustworthiness of this study was determined by participant member-checking, to see whether the findings reflected the DHs' individual and collective actions at their school (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Data analysis yielded three themes that were related to DH activities, in their departments, decision-making as linked to leadership, and limitations that they saw in their leader. All the DHs are referred to according to their designation to hide their identity as individuals.

3.1. DH actions and responsibilities in the departments

The DHs provided the much-needed leadership in their departments. They led instructional leadership through guiding teaching and learning. They all showed competence in aspects of syllabus content and were familiar with the major textbooks used in their subject areas. They functioned as advisors to their teachers and required the current application of knowledge. The DHs also evaluated the teaching and learning process by lesson observations, checking official books in lesson plans, and schemes of work. It was revealed that they helped guide students across the board to make subject choices, as well as give general advice.

In response to what actions and responsibilities the Mathematics DH had this to say:

As an HOD, I'm supposed to know syllabi, especially for all the classes. I am supposed to help the teachers to interpret the syllabuses and make sure that they have almost all the necessary material that they need to teach the subject successfully.

The humanities DH also narrated that:

I make sure I request all the necessary books (and other materials) for each of the subjects in my department. That's the starting point. And then I organise trips and educational tours for my department. Then I make sure that I encourage and motivate my department to have their official books (lesson plan preparation and scheme books in order so that I can check them and submit them to the administration when required.

All HDs mentioned how they collaborated with each other in their departments to make teaching and learning effective. For instance, the vocational subjects, DH said:

At the departmental level, we discuss how we are going to work during the term. We look at the challenges that we are having, maybe with some students or with some textbooks, and if there is a need for us to order a new textbook or whatever help they need. We look at all logistics and requirements to make sure that we have a smooth flow throughout the term or even the year.

The DHs also helped teachers in their departments in various ways to implement instruction in the classroom and bring functionality on a daily basis. The Science DH mentioned that:

Getting supplies (chemicals and equipment) can be a challenge. At times, I use my own money so that lessons can continue. But in most cases, it is sitting down with colleagues to see what we can do and also use what we already have. So, we try to improvise. For example, we try to search for video links or simulations to use in class. Sometimes there are things you need to sacrifice, but you can't sacrifice everything.

The English DH revealed that her department had experienced a teacher reshuffle, and one teacher had left. She mentioned that her department was not having it easy. She explained how she tried to help her colleagues in meeting expectations as well as lending a hand.

We are very busy in this department. The workload can make one go insane. We have distributed teaching periods amongst ourselves because of the teacher who transferred. And it is not like our hands were not already full. There was another teacher who left and was not replaced. Anyway, I am always available for my department, giving them advice and solutions that try to keep their heads above water.

These findings show that DH actions demonstrated their hard work to make their departments functional. As depicted, most teaching and learning depended on their input in directing instruction. The DHs showed sacrificial leadership to make sure that learning occurred smoothly. It is clear from the submissions that some of their actions were independent of the school administration's direction. Taking the initiative and showing resourcefulness proved the indispensability of their leadership.

3.2. Departmental heads' actions in decision-making

As part of the school leadership, DHs had an influence on the decision-making process in the school. The DHs were mandated to hold departmental meetings to discuss common issues. Then take suggestions and requests to the principal. Together with the deputy principal, the DHs formed the school's academic team that provided instructional leadership. Functionalities like timetabling, disciplinary actions, student motivation, and organizing school events were generally done with the consultation of the deputy principal. The principal's leadership was nevertheless consulted and guided all major decisions.

The SiSwati DH was asked about his part in decision-making and had this to say:

If there is a need for anyone to step in and do something for the school, I am always willing to be that person to say, I am available, that is the word. Besides heading the SiSwati department, I also decided to assist with ensuring that there's order and discipline in the school. So, I help with decisions connected to that. There is a lot of ill-discipline that can occur here. For example, students bunking classes, disrespect, bullying, and even bringing illegal substances to school. Such cases are reported to me, and with other members of staff, we take appropriate actions.

As part of an academic body, some DHs mentioned that they were always looking for ways to improve student performance generally and ultimately in the public examinations. Suitably, the Mathematics DH revealed that:

We always have to come up with ways of making these students pass. The DHs have suggested and helped implement certain decisions. For example, students who no longer participate in sports must always have supervised study. We have requested and revolutionized how we reward performing and improving students. We have requested certain teachers to help with struggling students on Friday afternoon after school. I am one of those teachers that remains to teach.

The Humanities DH also added this information:

We forge a way forward on how we can help with the academics in the school. For instance, when it comes to subject selection when students start the IGCSE curriculum, all DHs must be there with selected teachers so that we guide them in making informed decisions based on their different capabilities and future interests.

Some decisions for the school operations were shaped by the sports department. This department managed all sports, clubs, and activities like chess, environmental management, public speaking, culture, drama, and dance. All these events were timetabled and played a crucial role in making sure that students developed holistically. The sports department DH remarked that:

We have very productive meetings for sports with relevant teachers (especially at the beginning of the year). It is a good time to plan the year and the goals we need to meet. Based on the sports and activity calendar, we plan for the activities and evaluate our results. There are a lot of ideas that are valuable for how we could improve the department. Together, we search for discipline coaches, suitable venues, and competitions to join.

This theme yet again showed service to the school. DHs stood out as decision-makers. When faced with responsibility, they came up with ingenious ways of executing the tasks at hand. The success that the school had could be explained in the sense that DHs were confident decision-makers. They were not hesitant to show their subordinates that they did not know everything and believed in collegiality, too. They sought help where they needed it from the administration or from colleagues. These findings showed that their perceptions of leadership could be linked to paying more attention to the task at hand rather than acknowledgement or praise.

3.3. Limitations observed in the school leadership

This theme deals with questions that were asked of the DHs related to challenges observed in the school. So far, the data presented show how instrumental DHs were in leading instructional leadership and other day-to day

occurrence. Nonetheless, the researcher got information that revealed that at times the principal and the DHs did not work together as a unit. For instance, when probing about how productive meetings with the principals and other DHs were, the science DH recounted that:

They are productive, but it's just that sometimes you can agree on something as a group. Then, when the administration implements a decision, they do not really do as you agreed on. So sometimes, that can be frustrating.

The vocational subjects DH seconded this assertion and said that:

Occasionally, we meet with the principal and the deputy principal to plan and find common ground. There must be that trust that we are the leadership team. However, sometimes the decisions we make as a unit are not the ones taken. So why bother consulting? At least tell us why you have gone against the common agreement. But never are we informed.

The Siswati DH talked about decision-making, but also added another problem with communication. He said:

Of late, our meetings with the principals have not been productive. It is just meetings that you just do not even wish to attend. You find that at times, the things that you talk about are important things that are going to help the school. But I think the meetings should be more about us taking a collective decision, rather than meetings where it looks like just getting an order. Then you hear things from students or from parents, and you wonder why. The communication can be that bad.

The Mathematics DH had issues with what she thought was a change in the vision of the school and remarked:

The challenge I have with her (principal) is the vision that she has. She has not shared those visions with our department. So, we talk about different things. For example, we have our own policy on how we select students for which examination. Cambridge allows students to choose between a 'core' or an 'extended' examination. And then she goes ahead to talk with parents and oppose our policy that she knows nothing about. She makes decisions on things she does not know. At least she should ask us to talk to and advise parents.

In any system, there are some things that do not go as expected. Unfortunately, the principal seemed to exert autocratic leadership in some instances where distributed leadership could have been preferred. For instance, decisions on students' examination component selection could have best been left with the respective DHs, as they had first-hand understanding of the students and the subject. The DHs also had more experience with the curriculum and the school than the principal did. DHs were keen to point out the discrepancies that occurred against what they expected to be the right way of operation. A highlight of meetings that are not productive shows a lack of synergy between middle and top leadership.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings showed that DHs worked as a team that provided a strong pillar for educational functionality and endeavours at the school. The findings show that they worked as per the role and responsibilities of the requirements of the office. In some instances, they went a further mile to foster change and development at the school.

Firstly, DHs developed collegial relationships with colleagues whom they led. This position helped produce synergy and a support system that helped in planning for the academic year and meet different departmental and student needs. This scenario is similar to Leithwood's (2016) study, which indicated that DHs' influence in their departments and on students was consistently positive and practically meaningful. As in du Plessis & Eberlein's (2018) study, DHs worked as an important link between principals and teachers in their classrooms and had formal responsibilities and accountabilities. With various functions they had, the DHs' actions in this study are also similar to those of Lipscombe et al. (2023) study. These scholars established that 1) DHs' leadership positions and responsibilities vary and are best understood in context; 2) they directly and indirectly impacted teacher practice, school reform, and professional learning.

A major duty carried out by the DHs was the evaluation of teaching and learning, and literature supports this function. For example, Maseko (2025) and Kubheka et al. (2025) found out that DHs provided leadership through monitoring teaching and teachers' work, making class observations, checking lesson plans, checking learners' books, and assessment tasks, amongst other functions.

The findings show that DHs 'work ethics were grounded in a distributed leadership perspective. Although there were indications that the principal did not always practise it, the DHs believed in functionality instead of position. The principal allowed DHs the opportunity to lead in instructional leadership. The DHs also utilized consultations in their departments to allow collective decisions as well. In this case, the DHs, subject and classroom specialists need to account for student performance in their departments. The DHs were given chances to come up with initiatives and solutions to problems, and they were proactive and self-driven in decision-making. These structures of distributed leadership were also established in a study by Munje et al.

(2020). The DHs showed instructional leadership, but their actions were also ingrained in collegiality. Comparably, Alsaleh (2022) revealed that teaching and this learning were strongly related to collegial cooperation, DHs instructional leadership, and the school administration support.

The DHs in this study also mentioned frustrations they encountered when they executed their duties. A big problem was cited to exist in the decision-making process. They cited that decisions could be made collaboratively, but the principal would deviate from the agreed-upon standpoint without communication. Based on a literature review, Sowiyah and Umigiarini (2021) found that interpersonal communication helps school principals carry out their duties by communicating with anyone in ways that create relationships, openness, clarity, consideration, and trust. Similarly, Aluan (2025) discovered that principals' effective communication skills improved all teachers' job performance. Ökdem (2025) unearthed problems teachers faced while communicating with their principals. In this particular study, a difference in status was posed, and a lack of empathy created problems that led to misperceptions and misunderstandings. In the current study, the principal allegedly withheld information that DHs thought was meant to be shared. This could also be attributed to the principal tendency to, at times, think that they are the chief decision-makers in everything.

Other problems were unearthed by Mokoena (2017), who found out that DHs experienced both role conflict and role ambiguity, specifically when principals lacked enquiry-based decisions, reflective practices, and skilful collaboration. However, principals can also change decisions and seem autocratic when they reconsider what needs to be done (Bahadar et al., 2023).

The principal presence and influence were seen at the school. But there were instances where DHs were not sure of her leadership and where her motivation and interests stood. Nonetheless, the findings show that collectively and as individuals, DHs showed an inclination towards performing their duties. Their actions exhibited different levels of leadership of self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-concept. The self-knowledge emanated from both the subject content, the people in the department, and the ability to lead them. Through self-regulation, the DHs found motivation and focus despite the frustrations and challenges they faced. Lastly, the DHs stood out and presented a persona of service and control, which was tied to self-concept and positive attitude.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has a major limitation in that it is difficult to extrapolate the findings to other schools and studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The focus here was directed towards DHs, and all data was collected from their perspective. The one weakness is thus the missing 'voices' of the principal and deputy principal. The study could involve principals to understand their point of view. Using just the qualitative approach was also problematic in measuring the effectiveness of the highlighted leadership. Perhaps a mixed-methods approach could sufficiently incorporate all scenarios involved and improve the findings.

6. CONCLUSION

DHs are a vital inclusion in school leadership. As seen in this study, they stood as a bridge between teachers and the school administration. They were at the point of managing and overseeing content delivery and effective teaching and learning. Thus, this study advanced the notion that effective school leadership depended on both the principal and the DHs propping each other. Not to deride principals or to put them at par with the DHs, but a recognition that increasingly, leadership is more sustainable when 'others' are involved in the management. DHs in this study understood their roles and responsibilities and undertook them to guide proceedings. They were important decision-makers to fix operational issues in the school. Leadership cannot be without challenges, but the DHs showed the importance of distributed leadership to alleviate common challenges and highlighted the need to support their principal and the overall improvement of their school. Moreover, the DHs in this study showed that, in their functionality, they needed self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-concept as important leadership traits. This happened even when they did not understand how their leader was operating at times.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that principals extend aspects of school leadership to other designated leaders (DHs) for the smooth running of schools. Principals and DHs should also promote distributed leadership in all areas of school leadership. The DHs should extend leadership to their department members and stimulate teacher participation in school leadership. For more actionable leadership in schools, DHs can receive timely training and other professional development sessions that tap into skill and leadership development.

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AI USE STATEMENT

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

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