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Leadership competencies for teacher professional development: perspectives of Namibian principals, heads of departments and teachers

Abstract

Using a blend of functional, distributed, and instructional leadership theories as a theoretical lens, this article presents the perspectives of Namibian principals, heads of departments (HODs) and teachers on the various leadership competencies that are required in their role of enabling school leaders to support their teachers' professional development. The study was approached from a pragmatist perspective employing a mixed-methods methodology. The sequential explanatory design employed combined quantitative and qualitative data obtained from school principals, HODs and teachers. Analysis entailed the generation of descriptive statistics using SPSS and open coding of qualitative data to generate themes. It was found that school leaders require multiple competencies, such as accountability, effective communication, good interpersonal relations, subject-matter competencies, administrative competencies, digital competencies and listening skills to be able to support their teachers' professional development efforts. This study provides insights into how school leadership competencies enable principals' and HODs to support teacher professional development within a Namibian context. The study also provides a new knowledge base for Namibian policy makers, political office bearers and administrators to avail human and financial resources to capacitate school leaders with much-needed competencies to be able support teachers' professional development through training.

Keywords: *distributed leadership, functional leadership, heads of department, instructional leadership, leadership competencies, school leadership, school principals, teacher professional development.*

1. Introduction and background

Owan and Agunwa (2019) define leadership competence as the ability of leaders to work together with their followers. There is a large volume of published studies describing the importance of competency in ensuring effective school leadership for enhanced teacher efficacy (Arman, Syamsul

& Darman, 2016; Owan & Agunwa, 2019; Podgórska & Pichlak, 2019; Yasin & Mustafa, 2020). Similarly, some literature from South Africa reveal that the apparent lack of appropriate skills among school principals affects their leadership roles (Evans, 2014; Manaseh, 2016). It is also argued that, despite being recipients of professional qualifications, school leaders should acquire certain competencies to influence much-needed educational change (Mehdinezhad and Mansouri, 2016). Hence, Yen *et al.* (2021) assert that the extent of school leadership cannot be measured by achieving successful appointment into the positions, but rather the application of knowledge and skills to achieve whole-school success. Therefore, competent school leaders are prerequisites of school success.

Several researchers have also established that the relationship between the competencies of school leaders and teacher professional development needs to be strengthened (Nghaamwa, 2017; Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016; Calik *et al.*, 2012; Tehseen & Hadi, 2015). This emphasises competence among school leaders as one of the prerequisites in aiding their efforts to guide teachers effectively, as incompetence is coupled with ineffective guidance to develop teachers' efficacy. Leadership competence plays a significant role in the much-needed development of teachers, as leaders who lack relevant competencies are constantly challenged when carrying out their functions. Kin *et al.* (2019) conclude that principals' competencies enable them to influence much-needed change in schools.

Within the Namibian context, school leadership teams comprise the principals who are the overall accounting officers and the heads of departments (HODs) who play a pivotal role in providing meaningful leadership and management support to teachers (Ipinge and Likando, 2012). The recruitment criteria for these school leaders are simply based on their years of teaching experience and their successful presentation of knowledge of Namibian education policies and processes, which are assessed through written tests and oral interviews. The preliminary short-listing of candidates for HOD posts requires of a teacher to have at least a three-year teaching qualification and a minimum of six (6) years' teaching experience (Ipinge and Likando, 2012) in the field that he/she is qualified. Similarly, candidates for principalship should also have at least three years' teacher training and seven (7) years of teaching experience, including being an HOD (Ministry of Education, 2020). As school leaders, Namibian principals and their HODs have the core mandate of providing "in-service development, inspection and guidance of staff members at their school" (Ministry of Education, 2020: 1). However, this study sought to understand the competencies principals and HODs need to have and the roles that such competencies play in supporting the professional development of their teachers.

2. Problem statement

Poor teacher professional development efforts by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, as well as the National Institute of Educational Development (NIED) present a burden to school principals and HODs, as they have to assume full responsibilities for the growth of their teachers' ever-changing professional needs. This raises a concern about their competencies and their role in addressing teachers' professional development. Consequently, the leadership competencies of school leaders become areas of concern. This study was also motivated by my personal experience as a teacher when I taught at a school where the link between teachers' efforts and subsequent support from school leadership members was weak, compared to my experience at a previous school. Therefore, the competencies school leaders possess to devise and implement support mechanisms for effective professional development

of teachers are questioned. Whether school principals and HODs are competent enough to support their teachers' professional growth and help them overcome challenges they experience professionally in their pedagogy and subject knowledge understanding is an area of concern. The central research questions that guided the findings reported in this article was:

- What is the relationship between leadership competencies and the professional development of teachers?
- How do teachers perceive the competencies of their school leaders in the promotion of their professional development needs?

3. Literature review

A number of researchers have sought to determine the competencies that are needed by school leaders for the effective functioning of schools and teacher professional development. In those studies, principals' competencies were intensively studied (Bafadal *et al.*, 2019; Kartini, Kristiawan & Fitria, 2020; May *et al.*, 2020; Mustamin & Al Muz-zammil bin Yasin, 2012; Wagithunu, Muthee & Thinguri, 2014; Yasin & Mustafa, 2020), while other school leadership ranks have not enjoyed the same level of research interest.

It also became evident from the literature that authors have identified an exhaustive list of such leadership competencies for successful school leaders (Bafadal *et al.*, 2019; Goden *et al.*, 2016; May *et al.*, 2020; Oluremi, 2013; Owan & Agunwa, 2019; Vlok, 2012; Wagithunu *et al.*, 2014; Yasin & Mustafa, 2020). This literature review discusses leadership competencies under four (4) broad categories as they emerged dominant in the literature.

4. Interpersonal competence

Numerous studies have reported both in their results and conclusions that school leaders need to be competent in building and maintaining good interpersonal relations with their followers (Bafadal *et al.*, 2019; Komalasari, Arafat & Mulyadi, 2020; May *et al.*, 2020; Oluremi, 2013; Vlok, 2012). For example, in a study among Nigerian principals, Oluremi (2013) reports that principals must have the ability to work amicably with school staff. Oluremi (2013) emphasises that 21st-century schools need principals that are intelligent and self-reliant. Similarly, May *et al.* (2020) conclude that principals' roles in the betterment of teachers' work output require competency in working cohesively with such teachers. Other authors, for example Goden *et al.* (2016) and Bafadal *et al.* (2019), found that principals must be able to provide encouragement to teachers and guidance on how teaching practice can be improved.

5. Administrative competence

Researchers are also adamant that school leaders need to have administrative competencies (Goden *et al.*, 2016; May *et al.*, 2020; Owan & Agunwa, 2019; Wagithunu *et al.*, 2014). Owan and Agunwa (2019) accentuate administrative competency, which include planning, organising, directing and collaborating. Also linked to this discussion, some authors affirm that principals must at least have a basic understanding of educational administration and management processes (May *et al.*, 2020; Oluremi, 2013). Recent research by Owan and Agunwa (2019) reveals significant results that reported on the correlation between principals' administrative competency and teachers improved teaching and subject administration.

6. Communication competencies

A variety of authors support the idea that school leaders need to be competent in effective communication (Bafadal *et al.*, 2019; Flauto, 1999; May *et al.*, 2020; Owan & Agunwa, 2019; Wilhite *et al.*, 2018). These authors connect communication competency to school leaders who are able to socialise effectively with teachers (May *et al.*, 2020) as it directly affects teachers' work output (Owan & Agunwa, 2019). Additionally, Bafadal *et al.* (2019) argue that beginner principals must be able to socialise with key stakeholders of the school to seek ways to improve the functioning of their schools. In a study aimed at profiling core competencies of school superintendents, effective communication was valued by most participants and had a higher mean score than other competencies (Wilhite *et al.*, 2018).

7. Instructional and professional competencies

Instructional and professional competencies are vital for school leaders (Bafadal *et al.*, 2019; Goden *et al.*, 2016; Komalasari *et al.*, 2020; Yasin & Mustafa, 2020). Goden *et al.* (2016) define professional competence as school leaders' ability to monitor and evaluate teachers' performance and facilitate programs aimed at improving teaching practice. According to Goden and colleagues (2016), instructional and professional competencies enable school leaders to manage teachers. Similarly, Yasin and Mustafa (2020) maintain that school principals with instructional competence have the ability to help their teachers to develop basic teaching documents in respect of subject planning and administration. In the next section, I discuss the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

8. Theoretical framework

This study was framed by a blend of functional, instructional and distributed leadership theories, something that may be referred to as 'functional-distributed-instructional leadership'. This blended model of school leadership, underlining the dynamic nature of leadership roles in schools, provides a theoretical framework to explore school leaders' competencies and their roles in teacher professional development. Functional-distributed-instructional leadership acknowledges that principals and HODs are tasked with the functions of facilitating teacher professional development (Makgato & Mudzanani, 2019), but such functions require multiple actors (Spillane, 2005); hence, the distribution of leadership to provide instructional leadership for improved teaching practice (Costello, 2015; Day & Sammons, 2016).

The functional leadership theory is a relevant ingredient to the blend of leadership theories underpinning this study, as it helps to explain that specific leadership competencies enable school leaders to perform their function of supporting teachers in their professional development processes.

As the name of the theoretical blend suggests, the study is also partly framed by the distributed leadership framework. This theory is argued to contribute to teacher efficacy when aligned with teacher professional development (Crespo, 2016). Distributed leadership assumes that all members of an organisation have unique skills and expertise and therefore they have influential abilities for the success of organisational processes (Gumus *et al.*, 2018). Based on that assumption, this study attempted to gain insight into the various leadership competencies that principals and HODs should have and the role of these competencies in enabling them to provide or facilitate professional development activities in schools.

The adopted blend of theories also includes the instructional leadership theory. The theory is of the perspective that instructional leaders should concern themselves with managing and supervising teaching and learning processes (Bhengu & Mkhize, 2013; Mestry, 2013). Therefore, they are expected to take action to promote excellence in teaching and learning (Heaven & Bourne, 2016). Based on this understanding, the study attempted to understand the role played by functional, instructional and distributed leadership competencies in enabling school principals and HODs to carry out their instructional supervisory responsibilities. 4C}

9. Research methodology and design

The study used a mixed-method approach with a sequential explanatory design. Data were collected in two phases using questionnaires and interviews. The study was carried out in the Otjiwarongo education circuit within the Otjozondjupa region in Namibia, which consists of twelve (12) primary schools and seven (7) secondary schools. Permission to conduct the survey was obtained from ten (10) schools, which excluded the two (2) schools of my professional practice. Participating schools were purposely selected based on spatial proximity and accessibility through convenience sampling. In addition, the principals' willingness to allow research at their school was another determining factor. Quantitative data were collected from 103 respondents. Simple random sampling was used to randomly obtain the respondents from the schools in the circuit, inclusive of the teachers, HODs and principals. This sampling strategy ensured equal opportunity for all teachers and school leaders to be selected (Leavy, 2017). The survey data were analysed using SPSS with the assistance of a university statistician. The results of this analysis were used to inform the interview questions during the second phase of the study during which semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with six principals, eight HODs and nine teachers that were more in the form of dialogues, as opposed to question and answer (Johnson and Christensen, 2013). The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 and 60 minutes. These interviews were aimed at mining the viewpoints and lived experiences of participants related to the phenomenon being studied (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Interviews therefore provided more descriptive data that consist of in-depth answers to the research questions from a relatively small sample (Morgan, 2014). Purposeful convenience sampling was used to select participants for the interview and the sample size was determined by the achievement of data saturation and no pre-determined sample size existed (Morgan, 2014). This sampling mode is used by researchers who are guided by the participants' availability and willingness (Morgan, 2014, Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017, Bryman and Bell, 2014), meaning the selection of individual participants for the interviews was based on the question, "Who is willingly available?" Another inclusion criterion was for participants to at least have three (3) teaching years of teaching experience at the school as a measure of their insightfulness. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. I used inductive data analysis as individual ideas in the collected data were combined to generate a broader and more comprehensive description of the research topic (Bryman and Bell, 2014). The inductive data analysis followed the steps identified by Akinyode and Khan (2018), which include data transcription, anecdotes, coding, and themes generation. The blend of functional-distributed-instructional leadership theory was applied as a theoretical lens through which to conceptualise and connect the findings as discussed earlier. The theories' key assumptions and dimensions guided the analysis aimed at gaining and in-depth understanding of the participants' views on the research question. It also focused on extracting participants' narratives that were more of an explanatory nature to the findings of the survey.

10. Profiles of the participants

The majority of the participants were females between the ages of 27 and 56. At the time of the interviews, the participating principals and HODs had between 2 and 23 years' experience in their current positions. Furthermore, of the 23 participants, 12 (52%) indicated that they had completed an honours degree, 5 (22%) a diploma and 4 (17%) a master's degree. Hence, the assumption is that the participants have a relatively high intellectual capacity and extensive experiential knowledge. The profiles of the participants are indicated in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Profiles of the participants

Category of participants: Principals				
Code	Gender	Age	Years' experience in the position	Qualification
Principal 1	Male	41	2	Master's
Principal 2	Male	46	3	Master's
Principal 3	Female	43	6	Bachelor
Principal 4	Male	41	3	Bachelor
Principal 5	Female	56	16	Honours
Principal 6	Male	54	23	Honours
Category of participants: HODs				
Code	Gender	Age	Years' experience in the position	Qualification
HOD 1	Female	28	2	Honours
HOD 2	Female	36	4	Diploma
HOD 3	Male	33	6	Honours
HOD 4	Female	35	6	Masters
HOD 5	Female	41	8	Diploma
HOD 6	Male	48	2	Diploma
HOD 7	Female	52	12	Honours
HOD 8	Female	48	8	Honours
Category of participants: Teachers				
Code	Gender	Age	Years' experience in the position	Qualification
Teacher 1	Female	32	10	Honours
Teacher 2	Female	28	8	Honours
Teacher 3	Male	26	4	Diploma
Teacher 4	Female	32	9	Honours
Teacher 5	Female	34	9	Honours
Teacher 6	Female	31	4	Honours
Teacher 7	Female	27	7	Honours
Teacher 8	Female	46	3	Diploma
Teacher 9	Male	31	9	Master's

11. Ethical considerations

Firstly, an application was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria for ethical clearance and it was successfully granted. Secondly, a request was submitted to the director of the Otjozondjupa Regional Directorate of Education, Arts and Culture in Namibia to obtain permission to collect data at the selected schools

within the Otjiwarongo circuit. All the prospective respondents and participants were provided with letters in which their rights and responsibilities were explained. They were required to sign a consent form in which they acknowledged that they were informed of their rights and responsibilities and possible consequences of their participation.

12. Trustworthiness of the qualitative phase

The trustworthiness of the textual data obtained from the face-to-face interviews and the findings were enhanced through member checking (Morgan, 2014, Johnson and Christensen, 2013) and triangulation (Johnson and Christensen, 2013, Creswell, 2014b), respectively. Triangulation in the study was possible, as both the questionnaires and the interviews served as sources of information to answer the research question; therefore convergence of multiple data sources was possible (Creswell and Clark, 2017, Johnson and Christensen, 2013).

13. Findings and discussion

According to the survey results, the principals and HODs are perceived by the respondents to be competent in being visionary, creative thinkers, problem solvers, good listeners, relationship builders, socially aware, good communicators, change agents and results-oriented leaders. The interview participants are also of the perception that school leaders possess other competencies related to accountability, effective communication, listening skills, digital literacy, administrative skills, interpersonal skills and subject matter skills. These competencies are discussed in the following sub-sections.

14. The competency relating to accountability

The quantitative data indicated that 78.33% of the respondents agreed to strongly agreed that school principals and HODs take ownership of teacher and learner performance. Similarly, the qualitative data revealed that school leaders must have the competency of accountability and that the participants indicated that they should accept responsibility for the envisioned achievements of their schools; most importantly, for the quality of teaching provided by teachers at their schools. This is demonstrated by some of the participants' responses:

I must say they are accountable because they don't leave us alone. Like my principal always says: "Colleagues, your success is my success, and your struggles are my struggles". (Teacher 7)

My teachers' performance is partly my responsibility that why I do not only do class visits or moderate their work for formality purpose but this class visits reports informs me of where they struggle and need assistance. (HOD 4)

Confirming the views of Teacher 5, her principal had this to say:

I am the head of my people, so I am responsible for what happens to my teachers professionally. I need to think ahead, think smart to help them. I must say: "I am the accounting officer". (Principal 3)

This responses affirm the literature from previous studies that school leaders with high levels of accountability are able to improve classroom practices as they assume full responsibility for the quality and outcomes of teaching (Bell and Bryman, 2015, Johnson and Christensen, 2013). Bambi (2013) argues that HODs with high accountability are able to assess the quality of classroom activities and are zealous towards providing appropriate support to teachers.

This study also established that the competency of accountability enables HODs to take ownership of individual teachers' performances and to support such teachers by analysing and reflecting on their classroom practices (Creswell and Clark, 2017). Additionally, the competency of accountability also help HODs to be innovative to improve teachers' practices after successful classroom observations.

15. The competency of effective communication

During the survey, 81.67% of the teacher respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their school leaders had good general communication skills. The majority of the teacher participants were quick to point out that good school leaders are effective communicators. Similarly, some of interviews with principals and HODs also confirmed the importance of the ability to communicate effectively. This finding supports evidence from studies by Jaca (2013), Blase and Blase (2017), Van Wyk (2020) and Giese *et al.* (2009), who established that good communication is essential for school leaders who are focused on change. According to the qualitative data, principals and HODs who are good communicators are able to consult teachers on their intended support programs and create a clear understanding on how instructional practices may be improved. This is illustrated by the following comments of some of the participants:

I have created a WhatsApp group where I can post agenda points of meetings and in that way, they internalise planned discussions and that's why I always feel our meetings are really productive ... the teachers' debate and share ideas in such meetings ... I mostly play the facilitator role. (HOD 7)

Our management hands out annual and termly plans when meetings and upcoming workshops are. Using that, I know there are workshops and I talk to them if I can be considered for a workshop or what I can ask or discuss during the meetings. (Teacher 1)

The above comments are consistent with the study of Van Wyk (2020) ,who established that principals need to have the ability to communicate the intended outcomes of professional development clearly so that it can be agreed upon and implemented without any rejection.

16. The competency of good interpersonal relations

Prior studies have noted the importance of school leaders being able to establish and nurture good interpersonal relations with their followers (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2012; Blase & Blase, 2017; Jaca, 2013; Yen *et al.*, 2021; Yunus, Abdullah & Jusoh, 2019). This study also established that some of the Namibian principals and HODs seem to be competent in forming healthy interpersonal relations with their teachers. According to the survey results, 81.67% of teacher respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their principals and HODs were competent at relationship building. This is also illustrated by the following comments of some of the participants:

Our school management, especially my HOD, has a good relationship with us and not only that, but he also encourages us to get to know other teachers that we can learn from and share resources. (Teacher 4)

I have good interpersonal skills. When my colleagues have problems with their work, they are able to reach out to my office and discuss their problems and we solve it amicably. I have an open-door policy. (Principal 2)

Implied in the above quotations is the fact that the importance of the competency of forming and maintaining good interpersonal relations is evident among the Namibian principals and HODs. It is also evident that this competency enables school leaders to support the professional development efforts of teachers through stimulating staff collaboration, teamwork and the creation of an enabling environment that promotes teachers' learning. This finding lends support to the findings of a study by Onn and Bak (2010), affirming that interpersonal skills enable school leaders to form and nurture staff collaborations effectively. Also, Blase and Blase (2017) report that principals' ability to form collaborative networks with teachers encourage co-teaching and sharing of best practices among teachers. It is also argued that leaders with good interpersonal skills encourage teamwork where followers seek solutions to their problems as a team (Kumar, 2018).

17. Subject matter competencies

The survey results showed that only 38.33% of teacher respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their school leaders are knowledgeable on school subject content. Similarly, during interviews with nine (9) teacher participants, only two (2) of them could agree that their HODs are competent in the subjects they teach, while none of the teacher participants could narrate that their principals have subject matter knowledge. These were their sentiments:

My head of department is an excellent chemistry teacher. (Teacher 1)

I would probably say my HOD has great knowledge of Biology. When it comes to that subject, she knows a lot and as someone that teach Life Science, I like her class visits or her moderating my exam papers because every time I learn something new from her. (Teacher 2)

The above may be attributed to the fact that principals have an indirect role to play in terms of instructional supervision, by only creating conditions needed for quality teaching and learning (Creswell and Clark, 2017, Kumar, 2018). Hence, Van Wyk (2020) argues that principals rely on HODs to provide instructional supervision and these HODs should therefore be competent in subject content. Underpinning this concern is the fact that HODs are expected to provide instructional supervision and support to multiple teachers who are teaching multiple subjects in which HODs are not necessarily competent. However, some HODs indicated that they are indeed competent in the subjects they teach and could explain how that equips them to provide better instructional supervision to support TPD efforts. Their comments were as follows:

I am good in languages, especially English, so I co-teach with a novice teacher ... I sit and discuss how to teach the subject and the type of correct activities. (HOD 4)

My major is Mathematics, my minor is Sciences, and for all my life, I have been a Mathematics teacher. Maybe I can say I am [a] competent Maths teacher and with my vast experience, I can mentor other Mathematics teachers. (HOD 8)

The above seem to indicate that although participating HODs have subject matter knowledge in the subjects they teach, it is not the case in all the subjects that are offered in their departments. This contributes to their inability to provide meaningful support to all the teachers in their departments. This finding is supported by research which suggested that HODs should be knowledgeable in various pedagogies and subject fields (Leavy, 2017). This is because their instructional supervision can be crippled if they are not competent in a variety of subject matters (Kumar, 2018). Goden and colleagues (2016) also argue that subject matter skills

which are part of professional competencies enhance and qualify school leaders to be effective instructional supervisors that are able to evaluate teachers' classroom performances and generate relevant feedback that will contribute to the professional development of teachers.

18. Administrative competencies

Studies on effective school leadership have suggested the need for school leaders to have administrative competencies to facilitate processes geared towards improved teaching and subject knowledge management (Leavy, 2017, Creswell, 2014a, Maree and Pietersen, 2014). Earlier studies also reported that administrative competencies equip school leaders to monitor and evaluate teachers' lesson plans, work schemes and moderate assessment activities effectively (Creswell, 2014a). In line with this literature, this study established that principals and HODs were considered by their teachers and themselves as being competent in administrative skills. Below are some extracts from the interviews that validate these findings:

Being able to plan in advance, do proper planning and the ability to monitor the plans. I must brag and say I have a good monitoring system in place for teachers. (HOD 8)

Another thing about her is I think she has very good monitoring skills because she makes time to monitor everything from files to lessons plans, to learners activities and there are always comment papers attached after she is done ... Yes, mostly when there are bad comments we sometimes discuss them in our department meetings. (Teacher 5)

Furthermore, some participants indicated that administratively competent principals and HODs use their ability to monitor and evaluate teachers' performances to devise intervention strategies to improve teachers' pedagogical practices as illustrated in the extracts below:

My administration is always done on time, and I am able to evaluate and help my HODs and teachers with the challenges they have with good administration. Sometimes it does not have to be a big training exercise but guiding the teacher or HOD on how to do it correctly. (Principal 2)

I am good at planning, ask my teachers ... This way I am very clear on how I will source funds and experts for PD activities. With that I end up having a program that needs to run in so far as capacity building of teachers is concerned. (Principal 3)

Some researchers cautioned that incompetency in administrative skills is coupled with the inability to support teachers' instructional processes (Tian et al., 2016, Kumar, 2018). Hence we can argue that it leads to poor support towards the professional development of teachers by their leader. Additionally, findings by Ali and Botha (2006) reveal that there is a lack of administrative competencies among HODs in public secondary schools in the Gauteng province in South Africa and subsequently they have a shallow understanding of how to support their teachers. Similarly, a study by Onn and Bak (2010) also shows that HODs are not competent administrators and hence struggle to execute instructional supervision and mentoring. These literature findings contradict the current study's empirical findings and this may be attributed to the situational context of the studies.

19. Digital competence

Technology plays a significant role in the quality of professional development of teachers (Karakose, Polat & Papadakis, 2021). Hence, the 21st-century teacher development efforts require competencies in information technology (IT) (Leavy, 2017). This then necessitates school leaders to elevate their digital competencies to enable them to create a school climate that promote life-long learning (Kumar, 2018). Consistent with this literature, this study revealed that teacher participants agree that their school leaders should be competent in digital skills. The participants emphasised that this competency plays a significant role in them embracing the benefits of new technological advancements for improved pedagogical practices. The data further revealed that principals and HODs with digital competencies are able to cascade their skills through school-based teacher trainings. This is evident in the following extracts:

Our principal is a technology guy. Somewhere last year he gave us training on how to use notes [and] master and access online question papers ... Obviously, it contributed to my professional development. (Teacher 3)

I am computer literate, so where I am, everything is done on the computers. We have school write and school link programs, so when we get novice teachers that are coming in with that skill that I have, I am able to train my teachers how they are supposed to do their work. (HOD 5)

This finding supports evidence from studies by Karakose *et al.* (2021), who found that school leaders can support teacher professional development through digital innovations. The researchers further established that principals provided such support through in-service training and workshops on the use of technology for improved teacher efficacy (Kumar, 2018).

The data further revealed that by using their digital competencies, principals and HODs are able to encourage teachers to embrace digital teaching and to apply the benefits of modern technology. This is demonstrated by the following comments by participants:

I think they have good skills with technology. During COVID-19 they spearheaded the creation and use of Google classrooms, something I never knew, but try me now. I can teach through Google classroom, he [HOD] taught us a lot in that. (Teacher 6)

She is good with computers; your question papers will not be approved until you improve on some technical things. You will be called in and she will show you step-by-step how to do it better. (Teacher 2)

I completed my ICDL training, so I think I have better computer skills and I usually assist my teachers by guiding them, like on how to do marksheets using Excel, using PowerPoint ... some of them I see are now using PowerPoint. (Principal 3)

Similar to the above, Karakose and colleagues (2021) also found that teachers in their study perceived their principals as competent in digital literacy and that their skills became relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. These researchers conclude that school principals use their digital competencies to support technology-based professional development as part of promoting effective teaching practices (Kumar, 2018) This is because digital competencies of school leaders are associated with life-long learning focused on providing solutions to everyday teaching challenges (Leavy, 2017). Within this context, the necessity of principals and HODs to have digital competencies became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic when the need to change from the more conventional pedagogy could no longer be ignored.

20. Listening skills

The interview data revealed that school leaders should have good listening skills. 81.97% of the teacher respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their principals and HODs have good listening skills that contribute their professional development. These findings demonstrate that principals and HODs are able to gather vital information about teachers, for example their subject knowledge and classroom teaching practices, which in turn helps them to make sound decisions. This was articulated by some of the participants as follows:

... being ready to listen and being ready to learn about their challenges or strengths to make improvements. (Principal1)

So, it really helps that you are able to listen to people and understand their problems. (HOD 5)

He is a good listener that leads with his ears. Once a teachers' need is communicated, he caters to that need. (Teacher 1)

The above views are supported by other studies (Creswell, 2014a, Johnson and Christensen, 2013). This finding is corroborated by a study conducted by Giese and colleagues (2009), who identified good listening skills as being vital for school principals to develop teachers' abilities and skills. Tate (2003) also established that school leaders need to apply good listening skills to understand individual teacher's concerns, motivations and frustrations. This will enable them to understand and appreciate different viewpoints of teachers before deciding on a course of action (Kumar, 2018). Therefore, it is argued that principals and HODs with good listening skills are effective leaders that can affect change through implementing TPD activities and plans that have contextual and situational relevance. These activities and plans emanate from varied views of teachers that are informed by their strengths and weaknesses.

21. Limitations and suggestions for future research

I could include the broader Namibian context by sampling respondents from across all 13 (thirteen) education regions of the country, but logistically it was not feasible. Hence, I only gathered data from respondents and participants in the Otjiwarongo education circuit. Additionally, as the study aimed to explore school leaders' abilities to influence change among the teaching staff, there was reluctance from some principals and HODs in providing factual information. Therefore, I used a mixed-method approach with sequential explanatory design to help counterbalance such limitations.

Further research into each of the leadership competencies for teacher professional development as identified in this study is required, for example, how school leaders acquire and use these individual competencies in promoting teacher professional development. This will be particularly valuable within the Namibian context.

22. Recommendation and practical implication

According to the results, it is evident that Namibian school principals and HODs have certain leadership competencies that aid their efforts in supporting teachers' professional development. Therefore, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture in collaboration with the institutions of higher learning develop a mandatory insert program or short courses focused on further enhancing and/or imparting new essential leadership competencies except

those identified in this study and that are needed for effective instructional supervision and support. This will help ensure that the principals and HODs have a boarder competency-base to initiate and support TPD activities. Through that, leadership competencies such as digital competencies can be further developed and enhanced through mandatory attendance of principals and HODs into the International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL) courses provided within the region. The Programs and Quality Assurance (PQA) Division within the Ministry should facilitate this type of capacity development programs.

23. Conclusion

As part of the blend of functional, distributed and instructional leadership theory that framed this study, the functional leadership theory supports these findings. According to the functional leadership theorists, leaders who subscribe to functional leadership focuses on specific actions that will have significant impact on the effectiveness of the team (Kumar, 2018, Cohen et al., 2007). Thus, their competencies play a major role in their leadership functions. Furthermore, the distributed leadership theory argues that all members of an organisation has unique skills and expertise and therefore has influential abilities for the success of organisational processes (Johnson and Christensen, 2013). As is evident in the above-discussed findings, the Namibian principals and HODs who participated in this study have a variety of competencies that enable them to provide a wide range of support towards teacher professional development through distributed leadership.

This study provided valuable insights into the roles of leadership competencies for teacher professional development. It was established that school leadership competencies are significant towards enabling principals and HODs to support the professional development of teachers. These competencies include accountability, effective communication, good interpersonal relations, subject matter skills, administrative competencies, digital competency and good listening skills. Generally, the absence or presence of certain leadership competencies among school leaders affects the quality of support they provide towards the professional development of their teachers. This is because competent principals and HODs are more active and practically involved in the teaching and learning activities of teachers and are able to respond to the challenges faced by teachers.

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