

SUPPORT TO TEACHERS FROM CURRICULUM SPECIALISTS

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1. The Need for Curriculum Support to Teachers

Given the challenges in teacher content knowledge and pedagogy outlined in Page 3 and evidenced extensively in the literature, the support given to in-service teachers (and improving the professional preparation of pre-service teachers) to improve their professional practice is essential in any serious effort to improve learning outcomes across the curriculum – and for the focus of this advisory, especially in improving reading and mathematics.

Goal 16 of the DBE Action Plan to 2030, “Improve the professionalism, teaching skills, subject knowledge, and computer literacy of teachers throughout their careers”. This is a priority goal of the Action Plan. (2015, p. 34)¹.

The DBE (DBE, 2011, p. 21²) acknowledges that,

‘Teachers experience significant difficulties in accessing and receiving support, resources and continuing professional development opportunities close to where they live and work. For the large majority of teachers who work in rural areas, the difficulty is even more pronounced’.

Given these challenges, it is important that strategies are developed that respond to these conditions.

The mechanisms that the DBE has at its disposal to address poor content knowledge and to improve pedagogy are generally subject and phase specific. There are a variety of institutional mechanisms that exist, or are being developed, to support the continuing professional development of teachers (CPTD). These will be examined in the next section CPTD.

The most immediate institutional form to support teachers and provide guidance are the *Curriculum Support Specialists* at district level (or, unusually, at circuit level). These are often referred to as ‘subject

¹ DBE, 2015. Action Plan to 2019 Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030

² DBE, 2011. Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa, 2011–2025.

advisors’ – but subject advisors are only one ‘level’ within this category. The levels are Chief Education Specialist (CES), Deputy Chief Education Specialist (DCES), and Senior Educational Specialist (SES), and these are constructed in policy to work as a team. The work of the SES are phase and subject specific in both content and in deployment.

Key to understanding the capacity of the curriculum specialist to support teachers is an analysis of the operational consequences for meaningful teacher support of the disjuncture between:

- **The role of curriculum specialists** as articulated in collective agreements and policy documents and other directives and therefore the expectation of the system with regard to the work done by of curriculum specialists.
- **The resources available to curriculum specialists** – including the number of schools and of teachers they are expected to support. Additional issues include distances to be travelled, density of school distribution, and budget restrictions on travel.

The disjuncture between the expectations of curriculum advisers and the document, *Minimum Norms and Standards For Provincial Teacher Development Institutes and District Teacher Development Centres In South Africa* will be explored in the section on Provincial Teacher Development Institutes and District Teacher Development Institutes.

2. Policy Regarding the Role of ‘Subject Advisors’

The Collective Agreement of the Education Labour Relation Council (ELRC, 2017) stipulates the job purpose of the curriculum support specialist at Senior Education Specialist (SES) level is to provide ‘clarity, monitor the implementation of policies in schools, and to render support and development to educators that fall under their area or responsibility.’ In each district SES report are accountable to the DCESs for their operations, and District CES (who sit on District Management Committees) is required to provide strategic and managerial leadership as well as coordinate the implementation of programmes within the area of responsibility. This includes managing the DCESs and SESs
Their key performance areas (KPAs) of SES include:

- Providing professional guidance through the implementation of systems and structures that allow for effective management. These will include the following:
 - Conducting regular on-site support visits to teachers in schools.
 - Working collaboratively with schools to improve learner performance.
- Facilitating the correct interpretation and ensure effective planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies.
- Conducting analysis of data collected in order to inform and improve teaching and learning.
- Facilitating workshops and training sessions on behalf of their sections/area of responsibility.
- Collating and compiling reports based on visits and provide feedback to learning institutions.
- Reporting to line managers regarding interventions and progress at learning schools.
- Monitoring and supporting the implementation of the curriculum in the relevant subject.
- Ensuring that educators have all the requisite curriculum and assessment documents for the subject.
- Guiding and supporting educators in effectively delivering the curriculum in the classroom.

- Supporting teachers in strengthening their content knowledge and organising relevant/related co-curricular activities.
- Keeping, analysing, and interpreting examination results (assessment of learners' and educators' progress) and drawing up intervention strategies to provide professional guidance to educators/ learners.
- Having a thorough knowledge and understanding of the relevant subject/phase Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPs).
- Building CAPs knowledge and understanding among educators and keep files/records regularly updated with recent and relevant subject policy documents.

This list of responsibilities, if fulfilled, would provide significant support to teachers as they seek to deepen their professional practice and improve learning outcomes.

The DBE District policy, *Amended Policy On The Organisation, Roles And Responsibilities of Education Districts*³, published on 19 January 2018, provides guidelines for the number of Curriculum Support Specialists in each district for each level: Chief Education Specialist (CES), Deputy Chief Education Specialist (DCES), and Subject Educational Specialist (SES).

According to the DBE's district policy document, SES should not have an SES-schools support ratio of more than 1:80 in the Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase, and Senior Phase; and not more 1:30 in the Further Phase. It is noted that the District Guidelines state that the minimum norms for staffing education districts, "are aspirational and must be implemented progressively (paragraph 83) with short, medium, and long-term plans' (paragraph 86)".

There are several issues of concern in relation to the prescribed guidelines. Of particular concern in relation to adequate support for the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase is that language specificity is not taken into account in these guidelines. The challenge of language-specific support applies across all four phases, but the assumption in the policy that Foundation Phase, Home Language is a 'subject' requiring one advisor is problematic. There is no district in the country in which there is a single home language, and there are districts in which all languages of South Africa are represented. While this is uncommon, in provinces which have a wide range of languages this becomes a serious resource challenge. The situation is less complicated in relation to the 'first additional language' (FAL) as many schools currently choose the FAL that will be adopted as the medium of instruction in Grade 4. Depending on the language complexity of the province, curriculum support would need to be provided for each language in the province – and discussion is needed as to whether this expertise is the same for home language, and for first (and second) additional language.

There is an urgent need for a more nuanced approach to language-specific specialist curriculum support and delivery. The importance of language in learning – to which the DBE is strongly committed and is being re-invigorated in the DBE's resuscitation of *Extending the use Home Languages as the Medium of Instruction/ Language of Learning and Promoting Multilingualism* requires that this support to teachers be re-considered. This is vital in regard to early reading where methodologies of teaching language specific grapheme/ phoneme correspondence and morphological patterns are critical. It may also be important to interrogate the extent to which PED and the DBE employ language-

³ Department of Basic Education. (2018). *National Education Policy Act 1996 (Act No. 27 of 1996): Amended Policy on the Organisation, Roles, and Responsibilities of Education*

specific expertise in the staffing of the curriculum sections at GET (and especially Foundation Phase) level.

A second problem in the guidelines is that the GET phase extends over primary and secondary schools, so SES in the GET phase are required to visit both primary and secondary which implies that more SES are required at for the nine Learning Areas in the Senior Phase GET level in all districts. This is generally not the case, and the SES in the GET phase often carry a heavy burden of schools.

There appear to be three key policy assumptions in the guidelines:

- **Strong operational supervision and teamwork:** The curriculum content and pedagogy teams supporting schools are organized on the basis of phases (primary/ intermediate/ senior/ further) with subject/ phase experts collaborating to provide generic and subject specific support to schools within a phase, Each team is led by a DCES. The specific aspect of the job description of a DCES which this structure seems to support is, 'Institutionalise the multi-disciplinary team approach within the curriculum component'. The extent to which these posts are filled is important as this will affect the achievement of the supervisory and teamwork intentions.
- **Strong subject specific expertise at all levels:** From Foundation Phase to the FET phase, the assumption is that subject specific expertise is required for curriculum support withing the pedagogical orientation of each phase..
- **Direct engagement with all schools:** The SES: School ratio is limited so that the SES can take forward their expected role and fulfil their KPAs.

These three assumptions are appropriate to support a strong system of professional support to teachers and consistent with the expectations of the role of the SES as outlined in the agreed job description.

3. Planning Failure in Implementing this Policy

Van den Berg et al 2016 used DBE School Monitoring Survey data to show that,

“district resources are being disproportionately targeted towards secondary schools relative to primary schools. This is reflected in principal reports of the intensity of district visits to their schools, which types of district officials visit their schools and what types of activities are carried out during these visits where principal reports are also triangulated using nearly 15 000 teacher responses on their personal experience of subject advisor visits ... FET-phase teachers were considerably more likely to have been visited by a subject/curriculum advisor in 2011 (the year of the survey) as compared to Foundation Phase teachers. While 61 percent of FET teachers reported at least one visit by a curriculum advisor, only 45 percent of Foundation Phase teachers did so. This difference is statistically significant⁴.

Firstly, it is clear that the low rates of teachers having been visited by a curriculum advisor is patently inconsistent with the intention of the policies outlined above - and in terms of the focus of this advisory

⁴ van der Berg S, Spaul N, Wills G, Gustafsson M, and Kotzé, J. 2016. *Identifying Binding Constraints in education synthesis report for the Programme to support Pro-poor Policy development (PsPPd)*. RESEP, Stellenbosch

- planning aimed at supporting improvement in reading and maths, it is problematic that only 45 percent of FP teachers were visited.

Secondly, while the bias towards FET is clear in many components of resource allocation, it must be noted that van der Berg's observation does not mean that there are not serious problems in the availability of FET SES. One of the factors contributing to these problems is the downward pressure of the expanding number of FET subjects. The challenges of providing subject-specific support in the FET phase are considerable, and this is where it could be argued that subject-specific support is particularly crucial as learners prepare for writing the National Senior Certificate in the subjects they have selected. The number of subjects offered in the FET phase has increased exponentially since the district policy guideline were issued. Data on the number of Curriculum Specialists deployed in districts is difficult to access at national and at provincial level – both because of definitional variation in the interpretation of policy, and because of changes related to departures and the processes of filling vacant posts. In 2023, planning for the DBE Learning Recovery (LRP) process sought to access data on SES across all provinces by subject and phase. Whereas the policy guidelines provide for '14 SES per 30 schools' for the '14 high enrolment' subjects, the 2023 LRP study showed that in the six provinces that responded to the survey, and in their 38 districts, there were as many as 9 to 11 districts which had **no subject advisor** at all in FET for: Electrical Technology, Mechanical Technology, Technical Maths, Engineering Graphic Design, Civil Technology, and Afrikaans FAL.

More recently, system wide data available the key findings of a 2020 DBE study⁵ shows the disjuncture between human resource allocation and role. The study showed that while,

“Subject Advisors understand their core mandate ..and their chief function of as to monitor and support curriculum delivery in order to ensure that quality teaching and learning takes place in schools ... in line with relevant policy documents and advisor Key Performance Areas ... The majority of GET Subject Advisors were seen to be assigned too many schools to adequately support teachers. (p.1)

“It is not economically feasible to appoint more advisors in line with policy norms. Provinces with the highest human capacity shortages at the time of data collection include KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. Advisors supporting the Grade 4 to 9 level were seen to be particularly overburdened and reported supporting the highest numbers of schools across the different phases” (p.2)

“The study also acknowledged that “Subject Advisors can be utilised more efficiently: Although most of advisors' daily responsibilities were within their core duties, they do also reportedly spend a significant amount of time on tasks that fall outside of their job scope (e.g. monitoring Matric examinations” (p. 1).

This study found that, again, it is teachers in the poorest provinces KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo that experience fewer resources to support their work. The observation that the time of

⁵ DBE, 2020, Subject Advisor Profiling Study South Africa (unpublished). The study was conducted by the Centre for the Advancement of Science and Mathematics Education (CASME), and supported by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) and the Zenex Foundation

curriculum specialists is eroded by non-core duties is not insignificant in its impact on the work of this valuable – and thinly stretched – resource.

The DBE study recommended several short-term priority actions (p. 4) including:

- Address critical shortages of advisors in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, and Limpopo
- Ensure all advisors have access to devices and data to work remotely
- Reallocate monitoring of NSC duties to more appropriate officials/sub-directorates

It would be useful to know if any of these have been implemented anywhere as yet.

In 2023 Spaul⁶ estimated that,

“in four of the nine provinces (Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal), the average Foundation Phase Subject Advisor is responsible for more than 500 Foundation Phase teachers. In KwaZulu-Natal the average Foundation Phase Subject Advisor is responsible for more than 1500 Foundation Phase teachers. These ratios make meaningful training and support impossible”⁷.

This is consistent with work done within the DBE in 2023 as part of the planning for the post-COVID Learning Recovery Programme where the allocation of DCES and SES to subjects and phases was shown to vary considerably across provinces and districts. The highest number of schools that an individual SES is allocated in in the Foundation Phase, Intermediate and the Senior phase is in excess of 200 schools in the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal, with particularly high ratios in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal. For each school there would be a minimum of three teachers to support..

The LRP data indicated that the average ratio of schools supported by SES in the Foundation Phase was above 100 in the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu-Natal, and Limpopo, with the average in KwaZulu-Natal being higher than 300.

Thus, provinces identified in the 2020 DBE study, and in 2023 in the LRP work, and by Spaul (2023) which require urgent attention in terms of SES: school ratios include KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga.

It is simply not possible for Curriculum SES to do the work of supporting schools and teachers as outlined in their KPA with such high numbers of schools. Given that the DBE indicated that the stipulated ratios must be “implemented progressively (paragraph 83) with short, medium, and long-term plans’ (paragraph 86)”, the planning process to improve reading and maths performance must indicate the steps that will be taken to address the consistently and unacceptably high ratios of support between the curriculum specialists and schools in some provinces.

The section on CPTD will re-visit the role of curriculum specialists.

4. Restrictions on budget for travel to school and distances to be travelled

All provinces implement a policy of ‘restriction on kilometres’ that can be claimed for travel to schools. This should not be a common policy across all provinces, or within provinces across districts because districts are not equal. In, KwaZulu-Natal for example, an SES serving rural districts such as Zululand

⁶ 2023 Reading Panel Background Report

⁷ Spaul & Taylor (2022) using data from CASME (2020), DBE (2019) and Van der Berg et al (2022)

(with 767 schools in an area of 14 799 sq. km⁸) or uMkhanyakude (with 540 schools in an area of 12 824 sq. km) will travel considerably more than an SES in Umlazi (with 511 schools in an area 788 sq. km) – or more strikingly – in high density metropolitan areas such as Johannesburg Central (with 224 schools in an area of 153 sq. km) or the Western Cape’s Metro Central (with 257 schools in an area of 251 sq.km) (see section xx). These distances and school loads are manifestly unequal, and fewer schools can be visited by some officials within the travel restriction. The impact of these restrictions creates another level of inequality in the resourcing, and therefore of the support provided, to teachers in rural areas.

5. Findings of the Auditor General of South Africa in relation to the work of Subject Advisors

Given the crippling systemic weakness in the adequate provision of Subject Advisors, it is inevitable that the performance auditing of the Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA) would produce negative findings in respect of subject advisor performance. This auditing is based on expectations of subject advisors (SES) suggested in district policy and collective agreements outlined above. However, SES do not have the resources to achieve the stipulated performance expectations, and hence negative performance audit outcomes are inevitable.

The findings of the Auditor General’s 2015/2016 Sector Audit Report (pp. 29-30) found that while Goal 18 of the Action Plan to 2014 emphasises that,

“education district officials should pay more attention to pacing the year’s teaching and learning processes in schools, in particular at those schools that do not perform well in ANA, to ensure that learners cover all the topics and skills areas that they should ... **48,57 percent of the classes audited did not receive any on-site curriculum monitoring and support by subject advisors during 2014.**” (p.29).

The report identified, *inter alia*, the following “deficiencies in on-site curriculum support and learner improvement strategies:

- “Subject advisors did not assist and support educators by identifying learners experiencing learning difficulties (7 provinces)
- “Subject advisors did not assist and support Educators by assessing interventions and recommending alternatives to deal with learners with learning difficulties (6 provinces)
- “Subject advisors’ first visit for the academic year was conducted after the first school term (4 provinces)
- “Subject advisors did not assist and support educators by providing guidance on how to address shortcomings identified during school visits (7 provinces)
- “Subject advisors did not formally monitor/follow-up and report on progress of schools and educators in implementing their (subject advisors’) recommendations. (All provinces)
- “Management information was not readily available on whole school performance to target support where needed and / or to effectively monitor and evaluate curriculum monitoring and support provided. (All provinces)”

Two possible responses to these findings of the AGSA would be for the DBE to:

⁸ DBE, District profiles.

Either ensure that the identified weaknesses in the performance of ‘subject advisors’ be addressed so that the ratio of SES to schools is such that they are able, as suggested by the AGSA, to:

- Assist and support educators by identifying learners experiencing learning difficulties.
- Assist and support Educators by assessing interventions and recommending alternatives to deal with learners with learning difficulties.
- Visit schools timeously (where this is required)
- Assist and support educators by providing guidance on how to address shortcomings identified during school visits.

Or amend the policy so that both performance auditing expectations and internal operational expectations are realistic. The assumption that curriculum specialists visits schools and assist and support individual educators is not sustainable. This assumption is, however, based on the DBEs own policy documents which must be reviewed if performance audits are to be based on resource realities.

6. Solutions must be found that provide for effective teacher support

This discrepancy between policy and the resources needed to implement the policy undermines the professional integrity of SES, the effectiveness and quality of the support Districts can offer schools and system dependence on subject advisors for strengthening professional education practice is compromised. The (varied) operational collaboration between the curriculum advisory and the teacher development functions at provincial level might be strengthened to ameliorate this.

There are many anomalies in provincial design of alignment of provincial allocation of subject advisors to national policy. Some of these are definitional and these bedevil comparative analysis. Given the resource (fiscal and human) constraints provinces face in meeting the national norms, it appears that some provinces have sought to work within the principles of the guidelines to find workable solutions despite resource constraints. Much can be learned from understanding these solutions – and if they have worked.

It would be useful for the DBE to report on the reports it has received from provinces on actions taken to develop the short, medium, and long-term plans to meet the national norms since publication of the district policy in January 2018.

What is clear is that more posts need to be budgeted for and/ or filled if teachers are to be adequately supported by specialist curriculum advisors services to support teachers to improve learning outcome. No province is budgeting (approved posts) at the levels expected in national policy.

Funding for increasing the numbers of subject advisors will come from the provincial education personnel budgets. Establishing additional SES and DCES posts would happen within the provincial budget consultation processes outlines in the PAM about the post establishment in a province and implications for School PPN. These provincial consultations include the split between school-based and office-based educators, and planning to improve reading and mathematics would require reaching a common understanding of the minimal impact of increasing teacher support would have on class sizes (which are higher now than they have been since 2006) especially within an increasingly constrained budget.

If additional posts cannot be created to reduce the extreme over-load, then the expectations of advisors must be re-thought. The KPA for SES, for example, currently include: '**Conduct regular on-site support visits to teachers in schools**'. This is clearly not possible for SES on current patterns of provisioning. A credible model for school engagement should be developed and job descriptions adjusted accordingly as the Job Descriptions and Key Performance Areas for curriculum specialists are unrealistic and the purpose of providing curriculum specialists support is undermined.

Of particular concern is that given these pressures, where direct school support is provided, the visits often become compliance checks (a curriculum 'inspection'), rather than being than a developmental and collegial relationships that is based on developing teachers as professionals.

The orientation to compliance and inspection undermines the potential value of these visits. While teachers might benefit from professional support in their classrooms, that support should be designed and operationalised in a way that deepens the exercise of professional judgment by the teacher. To be meaningful this should have a professional development orientation rather than being compliance-driven, with the SES '*keeping in touch with practice*' and learning from classroom visits in order to in diagnose and inform more systemic initiatives of targeted support outlined in the KPA. The reports from SES on their work, should enable the DCES to provide leadership to the SES, across the phase to:

- Use the information gathered in the interaction with teachers to identify areas where professional development can be supported in the curriculum support work in the district, and then to design, plan and facilitate workshops and training sessions to support teachers.
- Use assessment information to draw up intervention strategies to provide professional guidance to educators/ learners.
- Identify schools which should be prioritised for supportive visits.

South African research has shown that despite Subject Advisors perceiving their practices of supporting teaching and learning as focusing on teachers in order to improve learner outcomes', and viewing 'teacher motivation as crucial in the process of supporting teaching and learning in schools... support for teaching and learning was dominated by checking and control [with] little if any attention [being] paid to how teachers teach their subjects' and no 'indication of any focus on how learners learn what is taught by teachers. Furthermore, the approach was top- down as there was no indication of whether teachers participate in the planning of their own support programs. This means that Subject Advisors' practices of supporting teaching and learning were based on inspection rather on coaching teachers at classroom level' (Mavuso, 2016, p. 190⁹). Mavuso recommends that 'Subject Advisors have sessions with teachers and interactively develop a coherent support program together with their teachers" in a 'two-way traffic approach' where 'teachers ... air their views on their teaching experiences and, in return, Subject Advisors ... plan and support teachers based on their needs' (2016, p. 191).

⁹ Mavuso, M. *Scratching the Outside? Perspectives of Subject Advisors on their Practices in Supporting Teaching and Learning in South African Schools*. International Journal of Education Science, 12(3): 184-191 (2016)

Nkambule's research¹⁰ on professional development found that schools feel that:

- "Site visits from district officials 'focus on surveillance intended mostly to ensure compliance with prescripts that seldom focused on areas of support'"
- "Representatives from the district and national offices focus on the output rather than the input, thus missing the vital point of supporting educators".
- "Officials do not come back to 'check' whether they are on the right path as far as classroom implementation of changes goes".

The perspective of teachers is crucial in determining teacher support interventions

Many of the system improvements needed to improve reading and mathematics may be resisted if implementation is characterised by a hierarchical notion of professional authority. Establishing relationships of reciprocal respect and responsibility would be a pre-condition for the success of these initiatives. Curriculum specialists should not be perceived or operate as curriculum inspectors.

The need to clarify and strengthen the role of curriculum specialists has been developed further in the background paper (5) on CPTD . The CPTD paper also examines the line-function location of curriculum specialists.

7. Recommendations

- It is recommended that the location in the District coordination function in the DBE should be re-examined so that the full scope of the work of the curriculum advisers is incorporated in the line function.
- Addressing the challenges identified in this paper should be a priority focus in the MTDP for the next 5 years
- This should be a focus of the planning work recommended in Background Paper 2
- These recommendation should be read in parallel with Background paper 5 in CPTD

¹⁰ Nkambule, G and Amsterdam, C: South African Journal of Education, Volume 38, Number 1, February 2018