


# Missing Seats at the Curriculum Decision-Making Table in South Africa: A Model for Teacher Inclusion

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher exclusion from vital curriculum decision-making processes remains an arching issue to date. Although there are enormous benefits when teachers participate in making decisions on curriculum-related matters, educational authorities in many parts of the globe sideline them. This study aims to find out how teachers understand their role as curriculum leaders and the challenges they encounter in fulfilling these roles. This qualitative study used a multiple-site case study approach. By purposively and conveniently selecting twenty teachers from four secondary schools, the researcher generated data through individual interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), meetings, and lesson observations. From the thematically analysed data, the findings indicated that teachers understand their role as partners in curriculum decision-making at any level, and as designers of learning and teaching materials (LTMs), facilitators, and subject specialists. The study also found that exclusion from vital curriculum decision-making processes is the worst challenge teachers face. The researcher proposed a model to include teachers in curriculum decision-making at any level. The researcher also recommended future studies with education authorities to obtain a better understanding of teacher exclusion from curriculum-related decision-making processes. It is hoped that the outcome of this study will contribute to closing the existing gap of teacher exclusion in vital curriculum decision-making processes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Excluding teachers from the curriculum development process has been a frustrating issue for teachers for decades. This robs teachers of their agency and empowerment as curriculum leaders.<sup>1</sup> The importance of teacher inclusion in the curriculum development process cannot be overemphasised. This inclusion implies upholding teacher agency and encouraging teacher empowerment in curriculum matters.<sup>2</sup> Teacher involvement in all curriculum matters has many benefits for learners, teachers, schools, and the nation.<sup>3</sup> These include improved student learning, teacher confidence, efficacy, innovation, effective school

<sup>1</sup> Irene Musengamana et al., "Teachers' Role in School Decision-Making Process: A Case Study of Teachers and School Leaders Perceptions in Rwanda Public Secondary School," *Asia Social Issues* 17, no. 4 (January 29, 2024): e267161, <https://doi.org/10.48048/asi.2024.267161>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew J Harris et al., "States' SORNA Implementation Journeys: Lessons Learned and Policy Implications," *New Criminal Law Review* 23, no. 3 (2020): 315–65.

<sup>3</sup> I. E. Obi and M. S. Obiorah, "Counselling for Educational Reform and Sustainable Development," *Coou Journal of Educational Research*, 8(1). 8, no. 1 (2023).

leadership, and an overall increase in the quality of education.<sup>4</sup> Learners spend most of their time at school interacting with teachers. Therefore, teachers are better positioned to articulate the interests and needs of learners, teachers, and schools. These interests and needs speak to the interests and needs of society.<sup>5</sup>

However, teachers in most parts of the world are excluded from vital curriculum-related decision-making processes, particularly at the macro and meso levels.<sup>6</sup> In a study by Pineda-Baez on the conceptualisation of teacher leadership in Colombia, the word “teacher leadership” was revealed to be absent from the vocabulary of Colombian education authorities.<sup>7</sup> Teachers' role as curriculum leaders is mostly manifested at the tail end of the curriculum development process, that is, its implementation, which Stosich et al., refer to as a peripheral role.<sup>8</sup> This explains why curriculum changes or revisions in most countries encounter resistance from teachers, who are expected to implement what they did not participate in the formulation.<sup>9</sup>

Like their counterparts in many parts of the world, teachers in South Africa are often excluded from decision-making processes that shape the education system.<sup>10</sup> Before 1994, education policymaking in South Africa was highly centralised, but with the dawn of democracy in 1994, teachers were hopeful of becoming partners in the curriculum development process.<sup>11</sup> Many policy documents thereafter, such as A Policy Framework for Education and Training by the African National Congress in 1994, and the White Paper on Education and Training in 1995, echoed teachers' hope with rhetoric of decentralisation.<sup>12</sup>

The South African education system has since then experienced three waves of curriculum reforms, but policymakers continued to play the tunes for teachers to dance. Teachers' frustrations were captured by Carl in his piece titled.<sup>13</sup> *The "voice of the teacher" in curriculum development: a voice crying in the wilderness?* To date, the voice is still crying as policymakers pursue teacher exclusion from curriculum development processes. Brezicha et al., concluded their study findings with calls for policies that support greater opportunities for teachers in shared decision-making.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, this study explores teachers' understanding and challenges of their role as curriculum leaders in South African secondary schools, intending to propose a model for teacher inclusion in curriculum decision-making at all levels. The following two questions were to be answered by this study:

<sup>4</sup> Roy Carr-Hill et al., “The Effectiveness of School-Based Decision Making in Improving Educational Outcomes: A Systematic Review,” *Journal of Development Effectiveness* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 61–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19439342.2018.1440250>; P. C.

Rwigema and H. Andala, “The Influence Of Teacher Related Factors On The Implementation Of The Competency-Based Curriculum In Rwanda. A Case Study Of Public Primary Schools In Kicukiro District,” *Strategic Journal of Business & Change Management* 9, no. 1 (January 5, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.61426/sjbc.v9i1.2161>.

<sup>5</sup> Musengamana et al., “Teachers' Role in School Decision-Making Process: A Case Study of Teachers and School Leaders Perceptions in Rwanda Public Secondary School.”

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Brown et al., “Empowering English Teachers: Teacher Agency in Australia,” *English in Australia* 56, no. 1 (2021): 26–33; Wangxin Peng and Subadrah Madhawa Nair, “Teachers' Participation in Decision-Making, Professional Growth, Appraisal, and Behavioral Intentions in the Promotion System Reform in Chinese Universities,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (June 30, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.932324>.

<sup>7</sup> C. Pineda-Báez, “Conceptualizations of Teacher-Leadership in Colombia: Evidence from Policies,” *Research in Educational Administration and Leadership* 6, no. 1 (March 30, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.30828/real/2021.1.4>.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Leisy Stosich et al., “Social Networks and Policy Coherence: Administrators' Common Core and Teacher Evaluation Advice Networks,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 29, no. January-July (May 10, 2021): 60, <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.29.5990>.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Louis Denis, Nancy Côté, and Maggie Hébert, “Manifestations of Collegiality Within Universities: Delocalisation and Structural Hybridity as Governance Forms and Practices,” in *Revitalizing Collegiality: Restoring Faculty Authority in Universities*, (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2023), 137–56, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X20230000087006>.

<sup>10</sup> Kristina F. Brezicha et al., “The Ownership Perception Gap: Exploring Teacher Job Satisfaction and Its Relationship to Teachers' and Principals' Perception of Decision-Making Opportunities,” *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 23, no. 4 (July 3, 2020): 428–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1562098>; Arend Carl, “The "Voice of the Teacher" in Curriculum Development: A Voice Crying in the Wilderness?,” *South African Journal of Education* 25, no. 4 (2005): 223–28; Stosich et al., “Social Networks and Policy Coherence: Administrators' Common Core and Teacher Evaluation Advice Networks.”

<sup>11</sup> C. Van Der Vyver, M. Fuller, and J. Khumalo, “Teacher Leadership in the South African Context: Areas, Attributes and Cultural Responsiveness,” *Research in Educational Administration and Leadership* 6, no. 1 (March 30, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.30828/real/2021.1.5>.

<sup>12</sup> Van Der Vyver, Fuller, and Khumalo, “Teacher Leadership in the South African Context: Areas, Attributes and Cultural Responsiveness.”

<sup>13</sup> Carl, “The "Voice of the Teacher" in Curriculum Development: A Voice Crying in the Wilderness?”

<sup>14</sup> Brezicha et al., “The Ownership Perception Gap: Exploring Teacher Job Satisfaction and Its Relationship to Teachers' and Principals' Perception of Decision-Making Opportunities.”

1. How do teachers understand their role as curriculum leaders?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter in performing their role as curriculum leaders?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, aspects of the literature on teachers' understanding of their role as curriculum leaders, the challenges teachers face as curriculum leaders, and the theoretical lens of the study are discussed.

### Teachers' understanding of their role as curriculum leaders

The findings of Brezicha et al., from a 29-country survey on principals' and teachers' perception gap for opportunities for teacher involvement in decision-making revealed that principals indicated there are opportunities for teacher involvement in decision-making, while teachers indicated very limited opportunities.<sup>15</sup> Teachers aspire for meaningful participation in curriculum decision-making rather than aspects such as student discipline and school-community partnership. Literature shows that teachers understand their role as curriculum leaders to mean teacher participation in decision-making on curriculum development processes,<sup>16</sup> and other curriculum-related matters such as determining learning and teaching materials (LTMs), content organisation, and pedagogic approaches.<sup>17</sup>

Putri et al., reported that as curriculum leaders, teachers design, redesign, and co-design LTMs for learners.<sup>18</sup> Teachers are well-versed in learners' needs and interests,<sup>19</sup> thus considering these during the preparation of LTMs. In the Netherlands, De Vries et al. found that teachers adapted the evaluation instruments and the level of practical activities for learners.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Iranian teachers modified syllabus presentations to a cyclical approach after determining that the linear approach imposed by the central agencies does not maximise student learning.<sup>21</sup> Teacher participation in these activities reflects their ability to decide on curriculum content at any level. As curriculum leaders, teachers are facilitators of learning.<sup>22</sup> Both teachers and learners engage in a discursive manner with the curriculum content. As curriculum leaders, teachers are assessors of learners' understanding of the taught curriculum content,<sup>23</sup> and they provide timely feedback to learners.<sup>24</sup> As mentors and coaches, teachers perform peer supervision,<sup>25</sup> guide pre-service teachers, and share their expertise with fellow teachers<sup>26</sup> in professional learning communities (PLCs). To continually be abreast with developments in their areas of specialty, teachers must be lifelong learners.<sup>27</sup> Drewery et al. assert that developing a lifelong learning mindset

<sup>15</sup> Brezicha et al., "The Ownership Perception Gap: Exploring Teacher Job Satisfaction and Its Relationship to Teachers' and Principals' Perception of Decision-Making Opportunities."

<sup>16</sup> Ling Li and Yan Liu, "An Integrated Model of Principal Transformational Leadership and Teacher Leadership That Is Related to Teacher Self-Efficacy and Student Academic Performance," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 42, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 661–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1806036>.

<sup>17</sup> Seyyed Ali Ostovar-Namaghi and Maryam Gholami, "Exploring Language Teachers' Perceptions of Cyclical Presentation of Materials in an EFL Context: A Grounded Theory," *English Language Teaching* 11, no. 3 (February 14, 2018): 60, <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v11n3p60>.

<sup>18</sup> Abida Abida Ferindistika Putri et al., "Teacher Function in Class: A Literature Review," in *5th International Conference on Education and Technology (ICET 2019)* (Atlantis Press, 2019), 5–9.

<sup>19</sup> Musengamana et al., "Teachers' Role in School Decision-Making Process: A Case Study of Teachers and School Leaders Perceptions in Rwanda Public Secondary School."

<sup>20</sup> Siebrich de Vries, Wim J.C.M. van de Grift, and Ellen P.W.A. Jansen, "How Teachers' Beliefs about Learning and Teaching Relate to Their Continuing Professional Development," *Teachers and Teaching* 20, no. 3 (May 4, 2014): 338–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2013.848521>.

<sup>21</sup> Ostovar-Namaghi and Gholami, "Exploring Language Teachers' Perceptions of Cyclical Presentation of Materials in an EFL Context: A Grounded Theory."

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin L. Moorhouse and Andrew M. Beaumont, "Involving Parents in Their Children's School-Based English Language Writing Using Digital Learning," *RELC Journal* 51, no. 2 (August 15, 2020): 259–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688219859937>.

<sup>23</sup> Huzaifah A. Hamid, Nur Farhana Nasri, and Norlizawati Ghazali, "Colours as a Form of Corrective Feedback in EFL Learners' Writing," *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies* 18, no. 4 (November 28, 2018): 106–23, <https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2018-1804-08>.

<sup>24</sup> Loan Thi Thuy Nguyen, "A Case Study of Teacher Feedback on Thai University Students' Essay Writing," *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies* 19, no. 2 (May 30, 2019): 121–38, <https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2019-1902-08>.

<sup>25</sup> Austin Musundire, "Peer Supervision," *International Journal of Teacher Education and Professional Development* 4, no. 2 (July 1, 2021): 97–115, <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJTEPD.2021070107>.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Carpenter, "Intellectual and Physical Shared Workspace," *International Journal of Educational Management* 32, no. 1 (January 8, 2018): 121–40, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-05-2017-0104>.

<sup>27</sup> Edda Polz, "Being a Teacher—a Lifelong Learning Process," *R&E-SOURCE*, no. 14 (2020).

improves career objectives and success. In performing all these curriculum leadership roles, teachers must engage in decision-making in one way or another.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, participation in curriculum decision-making is at the core of teachers performing their role as curriculum leaders. Teachers face different challenges in their attempt to fulfil their role as curriculum leaders.

### Challenges of Teachers as Curriculum Leaders

The teacher curriculum leadership role, although beneficial to all stakeholders within and beyond schools, is riddled with challenges brought about by the same beneficiaries. Researchers have reported exclusion from curriculum-related decision-making at different levels,<sup>29</sup> unfavourable school structures,<sup>30</sup> absence of associated values for teacher leadership,<sup>31</sup> lack of time and resources, and a heavy workload.<sup>32</sup>

Education authorities fail to recognise teachers as leaders,<sup>33</sup> perpetuating teacher exclusion from vital decision-making on educational matters. At the school level, school structure plays a major role in the practice of teachers as curriculum leaders.<sup>34</sup> Bureaucratic and centralised school structures reflect the absence of distributed leadership practices and teacher curriculum leadership practices.<sup>35</sup> In a survey that enquired into the level of teacher leadership, examining United States national representative data from 2003-04, Xie and Shen reported substantially low levels of teacher curriculum leadership in schools, especially in curriculum-related areas such as establishing the curriculum and selecting textbooks and other instructional materials.<sup>36</sup> As curriculum leaders, in the light of this study, these teachers are disarmed if they cannot be involved in the decision-making of such important curriculum activities. The exclusion practice is perpetuated through top-down school structures, which Xie and Shen blame on policy emphasis to maintain curriculum standards.<sup>37</sup>

Similar findings of top-down structures are reported by Asegu and Gedifew with Ethiopian teachers and Nkhambule with South African teachers.<sup>38</sup> Al-Taneiji and Ibrahim explained that some school administrators feel insecure when teachers show leadership charisma, resorting to excluding teachers from decision-making for fear that they may influence school operations.<sup>39</sup> The exclusion of teachers in decision-making in the South African context is contrary to policies such as the South African Schools Act of 1996,<sup>40</sup> and Role Number Three of the South African Norms and Standards for Educators of 2000,<sup>41</sup> which mandate that teachers be leaders. Teachers' roles as learning-area specialists, interpreters, and designers of LTMs mandate inclusion in decision-making at any stage of the curriculum development process. As curriculum leaders, teachers' input should not come only at the implementation stage in the classroom, which is currently the case.<sup>42</sup> This further explains why sometimes teachers

<sup>28</sup> David W. Drewery, Robert Sproule, and T. Judene Pretti, "Lifelong Learning Mindset and Career Success: Evidence from the Field of Accounting and Finance," *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 10, no. 3 (February 19, 2020): 567–80, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-03-2019-0041>.

<sup>29</sup> Pineda-Báez, "Conceptualizations of Teacher-Leadership in Colombia: Evidence from Policies."

<sup>30</sup> D A Asegu and M T Gedifew, "Lived Experiences of Secondary School Principals in Practicing Teacher Leadership," *Journal of Educational Administration and Management* 8, no. 3 (2022): 1–12.

<sup>31</sup> Wei Chuan Chua et al., "Unveiling the Practices and Challenges of Professional Learning Community in a Malaysian Chinese Secondary School," *Sage Open* 10, no. 2 (April 20, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020925516>.

<sup>32</sup> Shaikah Al-Taneiji and Ali Ibrahim, "Practices of and Roadblocks to Teacher Leadership in the United Arab Emirates' Schools," *International Education Studies* 10, no. 6 (May 30, 2017): 87, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v10n6p87>; Annalee G. Good et al., "A Seat at the Table: How the Work of Teaching Impacts Teachers as Policy Agents," *Peabody Journal of Education* 92, no. 4 (August 8, 2017): 505–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1349490>.

<sup>33</sup> Pineda-Báez, "Conceptualizations of Teacher-Leadership in Colombia: Evidence from Policies."

<sup>34</sup> Asegu and Gedifew, "Lived Experiences of Secondary School Principals in Practicing Teacher Leadership."

<sup>35</sup> Asegu and Gedifew, "Lived Experiences of Secondary School Principals in Practicing Teacher Leadership."

<sup>36</sup> Donghai Xie and Jianping Shen, "Teacher Leadership at Different School Levels: Findings and Implications from the 2003–04 Schools and Staffing Survey in US Public Schools," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 16, no. 3 (September 11, 2013): 327–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.690452>.

<sup>37</sup> Xie and Shen, "Teacher Leadership at Different School Levels: Findings and Implications from the 2003–04 Schools and Staffing Survey in US Public Schools."

<sup>38</sup> Asegu and Gedifew, "Lived Experiences of Secondary School Principals in Practicing Teacher Leadership."

<sup>39</sup> Al-Taneiji and Ibrahim, "Practices of and Roadblocks to Teacher Leadership in the United Arab Emirates' Schools."

<sup>40</sup> Van Der Vyver, Fuller, and Khumalo, "Teacher Leadership in the South African Context: Areas, Attributes and Cultural Responsiveness."

<sup>41</sup> Department of Education, *Norms and Standards of Educators* (Pretoria: Government Gazette, 2000), [https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/201409/20844.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/20844.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Stosich et al., "Social Networks and Policy Coherence: Administrators' Common Core and Teacher Evaluation Advice Networks."

struggle in the classroom to implement curriculum content or to use instructional materials they did not participate in establishing or designing.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, the lack of support and associated values pose hurdles to the practice of teachers as curriculum leaders. Chua et al., reported a lack of support for PLC activities from Malaysian school authorities because school authorities had inappropriate perceptions of the concept of PLCs.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, teachers struggle to engage or do not engage at all when resources are not available and collaboration is not given.<sup>45</sup> Of these challenges, teachers' exclusion from curriculum decision-making is the most crippling to teachers' role as curriculum leaders.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The discussion of the findings of this study is grounded on Grant's model of teacher leadership,<sup>46</sup> as presented in Figure 1 below. Grant formulated this model in 2008 with four zones: (zone 1 within the classroom; zone 2 outside the classroom with other learners and colleagues; zone 3 within the school, involving whole-school evaluation and decision-making and zone 4 across other schools and into the community). In a study by Fairman and Mackenzie,<sup>47</sup> these zones are termed spheres, while Muijs, et.al., called them boundaries.<sup>48</sup>

To improve the model in 2012, Grant added several indicators and six roles. Role 1- continuing to teach and improving one's own teaching (within zone 1); 2- providing curriculum development knowledge (within zones 2 and 4); 3- leading in-service education and assisting other teachers (within zones 2 and 4); 4- participating in the performance evaluation of teachers (within zone 2); 5- organising and leading peer reviews of school practice (within zone 3); and 6- participating in school-level decision-making (within zone 3).

The zones in Grant's model of teacher leadership situate the model in existing literature. The reason is that teachers engage in some form of decision-making with every action they take. In zones 1 and 2, instructional leadership is provided in and out of the classroom. In zone 3, by engaging in participative decision-making during peer or whole school evaluation and zone 4 collaboration with colleagues across schools in PLCs.

<sup>43</sup> Denis, Côté, and Hébert, "Manifestations of Collegiality Within Universities: Delocalisation and Structural Hybridity as Governance Forms and Practices."

<sup>44</sup> Chua et al., "Unveiling the Practices and Challenges of Professional Learning Community in a Malaysian Chinese Secondary School."

<sup>45</sup> Al-Taneiji and Ibrahim, "Practices of and Roadblocks to Teacher Leadership in the United Arab Emirates' Schools."

<sup>46</sup> Callie Grant, "We Did Not Put Our Pieces Together: Exploring a Professional Development Initiative through a Distributed Leadership Lens," *Journal of Education* 44, no. 44 (2008): 85–107.

<sup>47</sup> Janet C. Fairman and Sarah V. Mackenzie, "Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning," *Professional Development in Education* 38, no. 2 (April 2012): 229–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2012.657865>.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel Muijs, Chris Chapman, and Paul Armstrong, "Can Early Careers Teachers Be Teacher Leaders? A Study of Second-Year Trainees in the Teach First Alternative Certification Programme," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 41, no. 6 (November 5, 2013): 767–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213494188>.

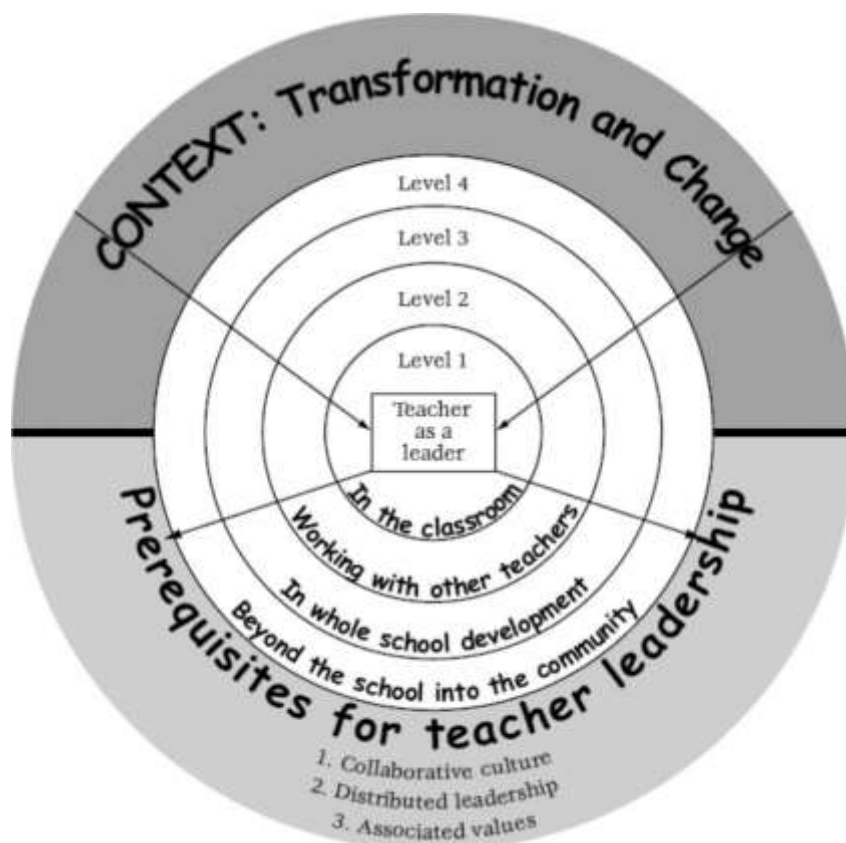


Figure 1: Teacher leadership zones (Grant, 2008, p. 93)

Grant avers that the prerequisites of teacher leadership, such as collaborative culture, distributed leadership, and associated values (trust, respect, recognition, ownership, transparency, and consultation) must be considered at the macro, meso, and micro levels where teachers should engage in curriculum decision-making.

The methodology for this study is presented in the next section. This is used to answer the following questions:

1. What do you understand to be your role as a curriculum leader?
2. What challenges do you face in performing your role as a curriculum leader?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The researcher employed a multiple-site case study qualitative design to investigate teachers' understanding of their role as curriculum leaders and the challenges they encounter in performing this role. Multiple-site case studies provide rich data that enhance the understanding of a phenomenon,<sup>49</sup> and enable the researcher to examine participants' stories in depth.<sup>50</sup> Qualitative studies allow participants to tell their stories.<sup>51</sup> Teachers in this study told their stories of what they understand to be their role as curriculum leaders and the challenges they encounter in fulfilling this role. The subjectivity of qualitative studies allows for diverse interpretations to derive meaning from others' experiences.<sup>52</sup>

### Population and sampling

<sup>49</sup> Roberta Heale and Alison Twycross, "What Is a Case Study?," *Evidence Based Nursing* 21, no. 1 (January 2018): 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.1136/eb-2017-102845>.

<sup>50</sup> Kurt Schoch, "Case Study Research," *Research Design and Methods: An Applied Guide for the Scholar-Practitioner* 31, no. 1 (2020): 245–58.

<sup>51</sup> John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017).

<sup>52</sup> Mohajan Haradhan Kumar, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects," *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People* 7, no. 1 (March 30, 2018): 23, <https://doi.org/10.26458/jedep.v7i1.571>.

All secondary school teachers in Soutpansberg East Circuit in Vhembe district in Limpopo Province made up the population for this study. Of these, twenty teachers were purposively and conveniently sampled. In the researcher's opinion, all teachers, irrespective of age and work experience, are curriculum leaders. For this reason, no specific criteria were used to select participants.

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study were generated through face-to-face individual interviews, focused group discussions (FGDs), lessons, and meeting observations. The researcher piloted the interview questions with eight teachers who were not part of the sample. The researcher obtained permission from each participant to audio-record the interviews and FGDs, and each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The researcher observed one lesson per teacher but observed only two instead of four school meetings for additional data. This was because two of the school meetings had already taken place before data collection began.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews into texts. The researcher listened to the audio recordings several times while reading the interview transcripts. This improved the researcher's familiarity with the data. All stages of data analysis were performed manually. By employing the reflexive thematic analysis approach,<sup>53</sup> the researcher coded and recoded the data to improve understanding of the data patterns. By grouping codes of similar meanings together, the researcher developed themes from the code groups.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher used the member-checking strategy to allow participants to review the data they had provided.<sup>54</sup> In doing so, the researcher attempted to eliminate any researcher bias. In addition, the researcher accurately presented the findings of the study and analysed participants' responses, making use of verbatim quotations.<sup>55</sup>

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria (number EM19/03/01) and received permission from the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education, Vhembe District Office, Soutpansberg East Circuit, school principals, and teachers. The researcher informed the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. By assigning pseudonyms to the teachers (T1-T5) and their schools (S1 to S4), the privacy of the participants was respected, and their interests were protected. The findings of the thematic analysis data are presented below.

### **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

The study findings provide answers to the questions this study aims to answer, namely "What do teachers understand to be their role as curriculum leaders? This was answered through answers to two sub-questions (i) How do teachers understand their role as curriculum leaders? (ii) What challenges do teachers encounter in their role as curriculum leaders? The findings are presented under two main themes (teachers' understanding of their role as curriculum leaders and the challenges of teachers as curriculum leaders).

### **Teachers' understanding of their role as curriculum leaders**

The focus of this theme is on the understanding of teachers about their role as curriculum leaders. Two sub-themes emerged that provided a deeper insight into this theme. These are teachers as partners in curriculum decision-making and teachers as subject specialists, co-designers of teaching and learning materials, and facilitators.

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<sup>53</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (London: Sage, 2019).

<sup>54</sup> Amber Candela, "Exploring the Function of Member Checking," *The Qualitative Report*, March 24, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.3726>.

<sup>55</sup> Irene Korstjens and Albine Moser, "Series: Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and Publishing," *European Journal of General Practice* 24, no. 1 (2018): 120–24.

### **Teachers as partners in curriculum decision-making**

Teachers in this study repeatedly indicated that they understand their role as curriculum leaders to mean partners or part-takers in curriculum decisions that affect their work life. Some teachers, individually and from FGD, expressed thus:

*“We are teaching and we actually understand the learning barriers that these learners have... the curriculum should not be a prescription...we must be among those who make the decisions. That is our job” (FGD-T1B).*

*“We are the ones who are going to implement that curriculum. It is important that we are included when planning is done” (FGD-T3C).*

*“...Being a professional you know...we have learnt...for the department to make us viable is to include us in decision-making processes (FGD-T1D)*

*“The educator is the person who is actually teaching the curriculum and therefore they should be on that bus” (T2A).*

*“We do it in practice, it is our duty to decide on what affects us and the children we care for... the curriculum people who set it up are only there in theory” (FGD-T5A).*

*“Those that are up there do not have the first-hand information what is it that is happening... at the grassroots ... it's not a matter of just designing something theoretically... what they need, is known directly by us. Not by somebody else sited at the office” (FGD-T5D).*

These teachers imply that their input in curriculum decisions is indisputable. They work with learners daily; they know the context where the curriculum is implemented. Consequently, they are well informed to advise and make suggestions about whether the curriculum must serve the learners for whom it is intended. They disagree with the prevailing situation of having people who are detached from the realities making curriculum decisions. People who will make decisions that they think would solve problems for which they have only theoretical knowledge but are void of contextual experience. By implication, teachers are requesting meaningful recognition as partners in curriculum decision-making.

### **Teachers as subject specialists, co-designers of teaching and learning materials, and facilitators**

The findings of this study also indicated that teachers understand that their role as curriculum leaders means being in charge of what is learned at a given grade, how the content is organised, and how the content is discussed with learners. As subject specialists, teachers in this study identify with and justify that teachers allow learning to occur by assisting learners to understand the content of a given subject or discipline. Some teachers indicated that, as subject specialists, they participate in selecting textbooks rich in information to obtain appropriate content knowledge of the subject. Another teacher expressed his prowess as a subject specialist by pointing out what he considers a misalignment of subject content with the grade level at which such content is introduced. These are depicted in the following narrations:

*“We sit together as a cluster, and then we decide which is the best book that... have got uh... thorough information that can be...imparted to learners” (T1D).*

*“... in Grade 8 in Geo,...we start off when the children are trying to adapt to high school...starting with coordinates, I found that it's very difficult... that is something I need to take up with my subject head...we have to have an open relationship and open channel with the people that are actually setting that because now every year I battle and actually I am wasting time because if I can swap around and do that later in the year I think that the children will get a hang of it in a much shorter time” (T2A).*

As with T2A above, T5C also complains:

*“... we need to be given a role to play as far as ...content is concerned. I'm a Life Science educator there are some of the items or topics which I feel were not supposed to be in particular grades...like...human reproduction... We pay special attention...only in grade 12...*

*it was supposed to be...at an early stage like in grade eight or grade 9... when they reach grade 12, they already have children... when I'm teaching, they shall be hearing say the contraceptive methods in detail for the first time” (T5C).*

These findings suggested that teachers' understanding of their role as curriculum leaders implies competence and agency in subject content selection, content organisation, and dissemination. Teachers are confident in their ability to perform their role as subject specialists and they take pride in doing so. However, they are sidelined. Teacher dissatisfaction with their tokenistic inclusion in curriculum decision-making matters, as expressed in T2A's statement above, which clearly indicates that inadequate alignment of subject content consumes the much-needed curriculum contact time without addressing the key components of the curriculum. In addition to avoiding time wastage, teachers also want to respond to learners' needs, while keeping abreast of the changing times by correctly aligning grade level and subject content. This is because a mismatch such as that indicated by T5C above implies that the learners lose essential and appropriate knowledge when subject specialists (teachers) are not involved during the compilation of subject content.

### **Challenges teachers encounter in performing curriculum leadership roles**

Teachers provide invaluable services as they carry out their role as curriculum leaders. Notwithstanding, teachers have to navigate their way through huddles as they guide and direct learners and their colleagues. Although the study found challenges associated with the DoE and schools (insufficient material and human resources, limited infrastructure, low achievement standards for learners, overcrowding, heavy workload, limited time, excessive learner protection by the law, teacher vulnerability or insecurity, insufficient departmental support and overcrowded curriculum content), challenges associated with other teachers, and challenges associated with learners and parents, for the purpose of this paper, only challenges associated with the DoE and schools that directly relate to decision-making are discussed.

Teacher exclusion from curriculum decision-making is the overarching challenge for teachers in this study. Departmental policies and teacher exclusion during decision-making on these policies stand out as major areas posing enormous challenges to teachers as they perform their role in leading curriculum-related matters. Some teachers postulated:

*“We have got a situation where now, policies are being made uh, uh, without us, they exclude us, and then they just make policies, and those policies we are the one who must implement those policies that why you know we usually have got complain about that”.* (FGD-T1D).

*“...the pass rate there that they said it is 30%...they need to look into it...if it can be raised to 50%, that will really motivate learners to study...learners will know that “if they get a 49, they have failed”. As a teacher myself, I am demotivated...A learner should be rejoicing to get maybe 75, 80%”* (T3B).

*“The system is very cumbersome. Sometimes it's very hard to understand why things... change very frequently... And it's not that the teachers are not willing to follow the guidelines that are pushed down towards them. It's that they often don't understand it... the ‘why’ question is always asked and then very seldom you feel like you got an answer to that”* (T1A).

*“...politically somewhere, somehow, some of the things you implement, or you just decide to create certain rules of which cannot be suitable... now there's the issue of QPs. You are saying they are qualified to pass because they're old, but being old does not mean that they are educated”* (T5B).

Central to all the statements above are teachers' disagreement with the decisions, and the non-involvement of teachers in these decision-making processes which directly affects their work life. Teacher

detachment from and non-ownership of education matters in which they are one of the key stakeholders is evident in their choice of words in the statements above, such as:

*...the pass rate there they said is 30%... (T3B).*

*...the guidelines that are pushed down towards them (T1A).*

*...You are saying they are qualified to pass (T5B).*

The individual views of these teachers above are echoed in the focus group discussion data, as shown in the following excerpts.

*"I only have one question; will you go to a doctor... if they had 30% or 40%?... I wouldn't want to go to a doctor that's got even a 50% pass rate, because then I only have half a chance to survive" (FGD-T2A).*

*"When they go there don't forget, there is bread. So, immediately they arrive, there, the bread is put in their mouth. When they come back down to you, they are similar to those union members same thing! Let's just continue" (FGD-T5D).*

*"You dare go there on your own! The first thing they are going to look at; is to which teachers' organisation you belong. Ok, Mr. X will say SATU, PEU, then...they will contact our union. Then the union will come hard on us; we have violated the constitution, and code of ethics, you know it's just like a fire when it destroys fire. This situation aiii!". (FGD-T1D).*

*"They bring us different literature books to choose from. You choose the best then you'll find a truck bringing a different book to the one you chose, and you find the very same book has been distributed all around here because someone bribed (T1D: Whispers; tender, tender) things like tenders" (FGD-T5D).*

Feelings of despair, fright, helplessness, frustration, demotivation, and a strong longing for recognition were evident among the teachers in this study. These teachers want to speak for themselves because they are dissatisfied with how the teachers' unions represent them. As curriculum leaders, they are supposed to be directly involved in or influencing curriculum-related decision-making; however, this is not the case. Their participation in textbook selections was just a window dressing, as they were not giving the textbook(s) they selected. The likely consequences may be an unwillingness to be innovative, resulting in routine performance and poor quality of education. The discussion of these findings is presented next.

## DISCUSSION

### **Teachers as partners in curriculum decision-making**

The teachers in this study perceived inclusion in decision-making and ownership of the entire curriculum development process as the role they should play as curriculum leaders. The findings suggested that curriculum leadership includes the participation of teachers in decision-making,<sup>56</sup> and guiding or leading other teachers on curriculum matters.<sup>57</sup> This was reflected in one of the school meetings observed (S2 observation notes 03/10/2019). Teachers in this school led the discussions on the results analysis of the previous term. Teachers gave suggestions, and it was concluded that intervention strategies to assist weak students should be determined by the nature of each subject. This aligns with role 6 within zone 3 of Grant's model on participative decision-making. This finding relates to and supports the views of Harris et al., who postulated that the professional judgment and decision-making of teachers in leading curriculum implementation is indispensable.<sup>58</sup> The opinion of Duncan also affirmed that teachers should

<sup>56</sup> Alma Harris, Michelle Jones, and Tom Crick, "Curriculum Leadership: A Critical Contributor to School and System Improvement," *School Leadership & Management* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1704470>.

<sup>57</sup> Carpenter, "Intellectual and Physical Shared Workspace."

<sup>58</sup> Harris, Jones, and Crick, "Curriculum Leadership: A Critical Contributor to School and System Improvement."

participate in all decision-making processes that have a bearing on their work life.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Role Number Three of Norms and Standards mandates that teachers be leaders, participating in the processes of decision-making.<sup>60</sup> The researcher believes that the work life of teachers is not mainly about the implementation of the curriculum. Therefore, it follows that teachers should be part of decision-making on curriculum-related matters.

The findings of this study align with existing literature on teachers' non-involvement in curriculum decision-making. This study is concerned with the mismatch between policy and ideals on one hand, and the reality or practice on the other hand. Teachers are involved in curriculum decision-making only at the level of schools (school-based related curriculum), which Stosich et al. refer to as a peripheral role.<sup>61</sup> Teachers are excluded at all other levels, even though policy mandates their inclusion in curriculum decision-making at every level (circuit, district, provincial, and national).<sup>62</sup>

### ***Teachers as subject specialists, co-designers of teaching and learning materials, and facilitators***

The findings of this study show that some teachers understand their role in leading curriculum issues as that of subject specialists. In a demonstration of their understanding of their role as subject specialists, the findings suggest that teachers select textbooks for their subjects and comment on subject content non-alignment. This aspect of the findings reflected those from the studies by Alsubaie, who praises positive teacher contributions in textbook content composition and arrangement.<sup>63</sup> Makgato and Ramaligela uphold teacher subject expertise as important in determining the nature of textbook content and the mode of content presentation to learners.<sup>64</sup> In Grant's Model, teachers' subject expertise is employed when teachers within a school (Zone 2) interact. Teachers provide curriculum-development knowledge (Role 2) as they take initiative in subject committee meetings (Indicator 3) to select appropriate textbooks for the school. From the perspective of this researcher, such recognition of expertise is an invitation to claim ownership and assume responsibility from the grassroots level, the level at which learners interact with the curriculum. This researcher considers the recognition of expertise advantageous to learners as teachers consider the school context before the selection of appropriate textbooks.<sup>65</sup>

Literature portrays teachers' roles as curriculum leaders in varying dimensions. Regarding the aspect of facilitation, many researchers believe that learning is more effective when learners take charge of their own learning.<sup>66</sup> Teachers, as curriculum leaders, facilitate the implementation of the curriculum by introducing the information learners need to learn, helping learners in the learning process. Teachers guide learners as learners engage in learning activities.<sup>67</sup> Literature attests that teachers facilitate not only learners' learning but professional development of fellow teachers as individuals, and teachers' communities of learning.<sup>68</sup>

Although teachers understand their role as facilitators of learning, research still attests to the use of a teacher-centered approach in classrooms.<sup>69</sup> The findings of this study corroborate those of existing literature in that the findings of lessons observed revealed teacher resistance to a paradigm shift in their pedagogy from sole bearers of knowledge for learners (teacher-centered) to learning facilitators (learner-centered). This pedagogic stance by teachers might be because of the challenges of overloaded curriculum

<sup>59</sup> A. Duncan, "Teach to Lead: Advancing Teacher Leadership," U.S Department of Education, 2014, <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/teach-lead-advancing-teacher-leadership>.

<sup>60</sup> Department of Education, *Norms and Standards of Educators*.

<sup>61</sup> Stosich et al., "Social Networks and Policy Coherence: Administrators' Common Core and Teacher Evaluation Advice Networks."

<sup>62</sup> Department of Education, *Norms and Standards of Educators*.

<sup>63</sup> Merfat Ayesh Alsubaie, "Curriculum Development: Teacher Involvement in Curriculum Development.," *Journal of Education and Practice* 7, no. 9 (2016): 106–7.

<sup>64</sup> Moses Makgato and Sylvia Manto Ramaligela, "Teachers' Criteria for Selecting Textbooks for the Technology Subject," *African Journal of Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education* 16, no. 1 (January 20, 2012): 32–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10288457.2012.10740727>.

<sup>65</sup> Irene Musengamana, "A Systematic Review of Literature on Parental Involvement and Its Impact on Children Learning Outcomes," *OALib* 10, no. 10 (2023): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1110755>.

<sup>66</sup> Moorhouse and Beaumont, "Involving Parents in Their Children's School-Based English Language Writing Using Digital Learning."

<sup>67</sup> Prakash Jagtap, "Teachers Role as Facilitator in Learning," *Scholarly Research Journal* 3, no. 17 (2016): 3903–5.

<sup>68</sup> Carpenter, "Intellectual and Physical Shared Workspace."

<sup>69</sup> Mpho Otukile-Mongwaketse, "Teacher Centred Approaches: Their Implications for Today's Inclusive Classrooms," *Lonaka Journal of Learning and Teaching* 9, no. 1 (2018): 142–61.

content vis-à-vis limited time for coverage, which seems to make the process of teaching and learning in the South African context examination-oriented. It is also likely that overcrowded classrooms are another barrier to the use of learner-centered pedagogy. Teachers are aware of the benefits of learner-centered pedagogy, but contextual challenges prevent teachers from employing such. As a result, teachers tend to teach to test learners rather than to develop learners into resourceful, independent individuals.

Another understanding of teachers' role as curriculum leaders brought forth by the participants in this study is the view of teachers as learning program designers. The findings of this study indicated that teachers adapt and contextualize curriculum content and TLMs to facilitate learners' learning. The findings of Putri et al. also revealed that teachers design TLMs in accordance with the expected outcomes.<sup>70</sup> Earlier findings from De Vries et al. with Netherlands teachers and those of Ostovar-Namagh and Gholami with Iranian teachers reported that teachers modified syllabi.<sup>71</sup> These findings on syllabus modification in the literature are antithetical to the findings in this study. Although participants in this study understand the design of learning programmes as an aspect of their role as curriculum leaders, they could not act to perform this role. The findings indicated that some participants noticed a non-alignment of topics within the syllabus, yet offered the topics in the order prescribed by the Department of Education (DoE). The rigidity of the South African secondary school curriculum and assessment structures leaves teachers focused on the possible content of common cycle and year-end tests and examinations set by the provincial and national DoE. Teachers' innovativeness, creativity, and the ability to apply their contextual intelligence in curriculum delivery are nipped by a top-down curriculum-delivery mode. Such curriculum-delivery directives may result in professional dissatisfaction and demotivation of teachers as curriculum leaders, with a possible negative effect on teaching and learning, as well as learning outcomes.

### **Challenges to teachers' role as curriculum leaders**

There are myriad challenges teachers face in performing their role as curriculum leaders. The findings of this study suggest that most of the obstacles teachers face in performing their role effectively as curriculum leaders emanate from education departments and schools. For the focus of this paper, only the most challenging challenge has been discussed. The main challenge revealed in this study is the exclusion of teachers from curriculum decision-making at the national level. Research carried out in other countries reported a top-down approach to curriculum innovation, with little or no teacher consultation.<sup>72</sup>

In contrast to the findings of this study, an earlier study in South Korea found that teachers refused curriculum autonomy because it was not full autonomy.<sup>73</sup> Hong and Young's findings suggested that curriculum content is still dictated by the central agency. Schools are only allowed to choose the subjects to offer and the number of hours per subject. Moreover, teachers perceived that the said autonomy brought job insecurity for them.

Teachers, being one of the most important stakeholders in curriculum matters, continue to suffer exclusion from other stages of the curriculum-development process. This may be because of the lack of trust in teachers' competency to contribute meaningfully. Exclusion continues to frustrate and estrange teachers whose profession they should own, collaboratively leading with other curriculum experts.

<sup>70</sup> Putri et al., "Teacher Function in Class: A Literature Review."

<sup>71</sup> Ostovar-Namaghi and Gholami, "Exploring Language Teachers' Perceptions of Cyclical Presentation of Materials in an EFL Context: A Grounded Theory."

<sup>72</sup> Pineda-Báez, "Conceptualizations of Teacher-Leadership in Colombia: Evidence from Policies"; Meidi Sirk, Reeli Liivik, and Krista Loogma, "Changes in the Professionalism of Vocational Teachers as Viewed through the Experiences of Long-Serving Vocational Teachers in Estonia," *Empirical Research in Vocational Education and Training* 8, no. 1 (December 26, 2016): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40461-016-0039-7>; Paul Nwakpa, "Management of Diversification at the Senior Secondary Education Level in Nigeria by the School Administrators," *Educational Research* 08, no. 01 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.14303/er.2017.016>; Nompumelelo Mandukwini, *Challenges towards Curriculum Implementation in High Schools in Mount Fletcher District, Eastern Cape* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2016).

<sup>73</sup> Won-Pyo Hong and Peter Youngs, "Why Are Teachers Afraid of Curricular Autonomy? Contradictory Effects of the New National Curriculum in South Korea," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 36, no. sup1 (January 15, 2016): 20–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2014.959471>.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Teacher education institutions should train pre-service teachers in curriculum theories, discourse, and critical pedagogy to ground teachers holistically and equip them with the relevant knowledge and skills for participation in curriculum decision-making processes at the macro and meso levels.

Teachers, as curriculum leaders, should be involved in the production of LTMs for insight and ownership. Publishers and authors should collaborate with teachers of specific subjects during content selection and compilation to ensure proper content ordering, as well as to avoid content and grade-level mismatch.

The study analysed only the views of teachers about their understanding of their role as curriculum leaders. Another study may be carried out that incorporates the views of education officials at national and provincial levels to gain a broader perspective on the reasons for teacher exclusion from curriculum decision-making.

### **The Proposed Model for Teacher Inclusion in Curriculum Decision-Making**

The study proposes a model for teacher inclusion in curriculum decision-making at all levels (macro, meso, and micro).

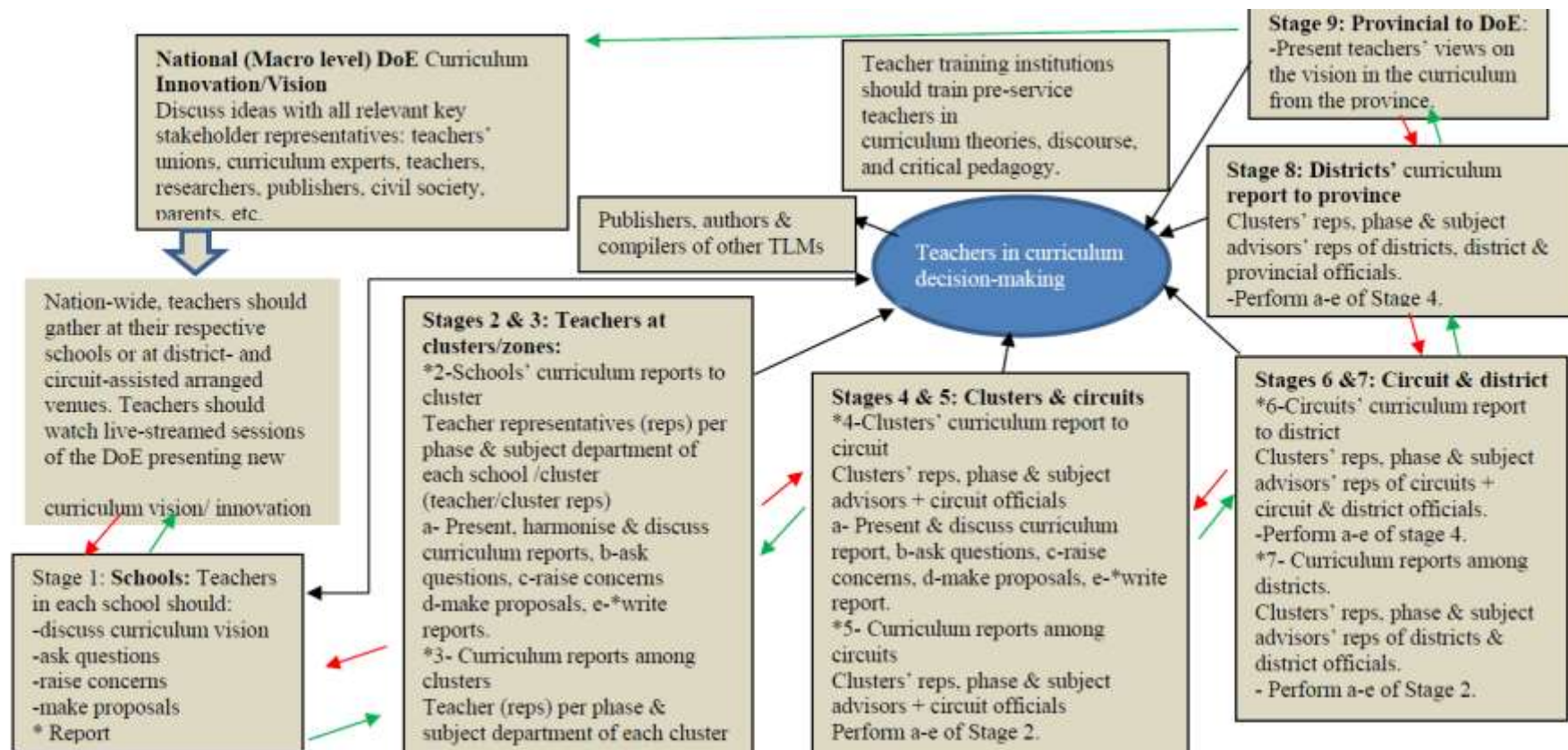


Figure 2: A model for teacher inclusion in curriculum decision-making

**Key**

- Summary discussions to the next level:
- Discussion feedback to the previous level:
- Ongoing support to teachers:

The diagram above illustrates a proposed bottom-up leadership model for teacher inclusion in curriculum decision-making at different levels (national, provincial, district, circuit, cluster, and school). The DoE is responsible for the development of the model, and the responsible education officer(s) at each stage is responsible for its implementation. For example, principals at schools, circuit managers at circuit levels and district directors at district levels. This model implies that teacher education institutions should train pre-service teachers in curriculum theories, discourse, and critical pedagogy. This would equip teachers holistically and equip them with the relevant knowledge and skills to participate in curriculum decision-making processes at the macro and meso levels.

Publishers, authors, and compilers of other LTMs should also work in close consultation with teachers in aligning content order and grade. Displaying the example of an innovation emanating from DoE, this model suggests that curriculum issues for discussion should be discussed as per the existing arrangement of the DoE, with all relevant key stakeholders in attendance. In addition, such sessions should be streamed live and the date and time made known to the public. The live streaming is particularly to offer mass participation of grassroots teachers, and to enable teachers to obtain first-hand dissemination or explanation of the relevant issue. This prevents the possibility of misinterpretations or diluted information to teachers through lead teachers, in cases where these lead teachers do not quite understand certain concepts. The model suggests that teachers nationwide gather at their respective schools or at district- and circuit-assisted arranged venues (in the case of some rural schools with network and connectivity problems) to watch live-streamed sessions.

## CONCLUSION

The thorniest issue in the South African school system has been its poor quality of education. In this study, the researcher investigated teachers' understanding of their role as curriculum leaders and the challenges they face in South African secondary schools. The findings of the study suggested that teachers have a good understanding of their role as curriculum leaders. Teachers understand that they should be partners in all curriculum decision-making and demand to be treated thus. However, this is not the case. The participants articulated teacher exclusion from vital curriculum decision-making processes at the macro (national) and meso (provincial and district) levels as their gravest challenge.

This implies that existing policies on curriculum decision-making at the macro level, which recognise teachers' unions as teachers' decision-making representatives, are failing teachers. Therefore, unless teachers are given meaningful participation in vital curriculum decision-making at every stage of the curriculum development process (design, dissemination, implementation, and evaluation) at the macro and meso levels, teachers cannot claim ownership of their profession. Lack of ownership breeds dissatisfaction, demotivation, lack of innovativeness, and lack of resilience, which are hindrances to effective and efficient teaching and learning. Such demotivation will hamper a possible teacher contribution to the improvement of the quality of education in South Africa as well as the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 on quality education. Various recommendations have been provided to address this problem. The research has also provided a model to promote teacher inclusion in curriculum decision-making at all levels. The applications of these strategies will go a long way to include teachers who are major stakeholders in curriculum development, leading to growth and development.

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