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LEADING THROUGH SCARCITY: STRATEGIC SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM INTERVENTIONS IN MANAGING THE LIFE SKILLS CURRICULUM WITHIN RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED TOWNSHIP ENVIRONMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Life skills is a subject under the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) known for its benefits as it fosters learners' holistic development. This article focuses on the strategic interventions by the School Management Team (SMT) to ensure effective implementation of the life skills curriculum within resource-constrained primary schools in South Africa. Within the context of SMTs, Heads of Department (HODs) are responsible for curriculum management and work closely with Life Skills teachers. The main aim of this article is to explore in great depth the strategies employed by HODs, as part of the SMT, to manage the Life Skills curriculum within resource-constrained township environments. The research was conducted in 5 primary schools under the Ekurhuleni North District. This study employed a qualitative case study design to gather rich information from 10 HODs and 2 school principals. Purposive sampling was used to intentionally select participants who were aligned with the study's objectives. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that resource constraints affect not only SMTs but also Life Skills teachers and learners. The findings revealed that, despite significant resource, funding, and infrastructure limitations, SMTs adopt various strategic interventions to sustain teaching and learning. A major recommendation from the study was for the Department of Education to stop the marginalization of life skills so that it is given the same priority as subjects like Mathematics. This study also recommended that school managers should ensure that in the school budgets, life skills are accommodated.

Keywords: challenges, strategies, school management team (SMT), resource constraints, intervention

1. Introduction

As per the CAPS document the main aim of life skills curriculum is to promote learners' social, personal and cognitive development. However, meeting this aim in primary schools is a challenge due to lack of resources, adequate infrastructure, lack of funding and lack of human resources. Nevertheless, in these high-stakes environment the School Management Team (SMT) are expected to provide effective leadership to make certain that the aims of life skills curriculum are met.

Many studies have examined the challenges associated with implementing the Life Skills curriculum, but few have investigated the successful strategies that ensure its effective delivery. This article explores the specific strategic interventions employed by SMTs to facilitate the effective implementation of Life Skills within resource-constrained primary schools in South Africa. Recent scholarship identifies the chronic scarcity of educational resources as a national crisis that compromises both pedagogical efficacy and learner outcomes (Chuene & Teano, 2024). This resource deficit creates a dual burden, it prevents learners from achieving their maximum potential while simultaneously eroding teacher motivation and professional engagement, (Sakusita, 2021). By exploring the strategic interventions by SMT this study seeks to identify contextually appropriate leadership strategies that can strengthen teaching and learning in resource constrained environments

2. Literature Review

Life skills is a subject under CAPS curriculum, a curriculum that have been criticised by many studies. Many scholars investigated the implementation of CAPS curriculum and revealed a number of its implementation challenges. A study conducted by Mabunda (2023) examined the challenges associated with the implementation of the CAPS curriculum and identified several obstacles affecting its effective enactment. These included resource constraints such as inadequate teaching materials, limited infrastructure, and insufficient support for educators, which collectively hinder successful curriculum delivery. Mqina and Goosen (2021) explained that the School Management Team (SMT) comprises individuals in positions of authority above classroom teachers, including departmental heads, deputy principals, and the principal. The SMT plays a pivotal role in supporting teaching and learning, offering leadership direction, and ensuring the smooth functioning of the school as an organization. In

agreement, Klinck, Thutulwa, and Pelser emphasized that one of the SMT's central responsibilities is overseeing the effective implementation of the curriculum.

Nithyanantham and Kachingwe (2023) argued that it is the responsibility of School Management Teams (SMTs) to ensure effective curriculum implementation; however, many SMT members do not possess the necessary managerial skills to carry out this role successfully. According to Hlatshwayo (2023) one of the key challenges faced by SMTs in ensuring the effective implementation of life Skills is the lack of teaching resources and adequate learning spaces. In addition, the teaching of Life Skills often requires the use of technology, which remains a major constraint in many township schools due to limited access and insufficient infrastructure. An investigation conducted by Delta and Nwaham (2023) on the impact of resources in education found that the goals and objectives of schools cannot be achieved without adequate resources, highlighting that resources form the foundation of effective teaching and learning. This underscores the critical role of resource availability in ensuring successful curriculum implementation.

To mitigate the challenges associated with the implementation of Life Skills, particularly those related to resource constraints, Heads of Department (HODs), as curriculum managers, need to develop and implement effective strategies. This includes planning innovative approaches to resource utilisation, supporting teachers through continuous guidance, and fostering collaboration within the school to ensure that teaching and learning remain effective despite limited resources. In agreement, CAPS123 (2023) elucidates that the management of the Life Skills curriculum within the primary phase constitutes a significant instructional challenge, necessitating a highly strategic and deliberate leadership framework.

Matope (2021) expressed concern that it is unfortunate for the Department to expect quality academic results from teachers while many schools lack adequate resources. The study further noted that under-resourced schools, such as those examined in the research, often struggle to produce competent learners and achieve strong academic outcomes. It also highlighted that such learners are less empowered and therefore find it difficult to engage in practical activities that require the use of resources. In a similar view, Sebaeng (2022) argues that the provision of adequate resources enhances teachers' understanding and effective implementation of curriculum policy. Conversely, a lack of resources compels teachers to modify or adapt the curriculum to fit the limited materials available, which may compromise the intended policy outcomes.

2.1 Strategic SMT interventions

Resource constraints are the greatest barrier to effective implementation, therefore SMT should intervene to ensure effective implementation of life skills. Since life skills have different focus areas, HODs have to design a detailed plan, taking into account the challenge of resource constraints, how and when will each focus area will be implemented. Seabang (2022) maintained that, in addition to other planning responsibilities, HODs are expected to ensure that life skills teachers have developed teaching programmes, assessment plans, lesson plans, as well as intervention programmes and corresponding intervention timetables. The effective delivery of life skills curriculum is often hindered by a lack of consideration for the diverse requirements of individual students especial in schools with limited resources (Rens, 2021). Consequently, McGuire (2023) emphasizes that School Management Teams (SMTs) must proactively address learning disabilities by developing strategic plans that ensure both instructional design and assessment methods are inclusive and accessible to all learners. It proves to be a challenge to ensure inclusivity in schools with inadequate resources. Improving the delivery of the Life Skills curriculum requires a dual strategy of state support and local agency. While Mafaila (2024) advocates for increased government intervention in resource provision, the study also emphasizes that SMT must proactively engage their local communities for additional assistance. This collaborative effort is further refined by Diba, Modise, and Kimanzi (2023), who argue that district support teams must move beyond generic resource distribution; instead, their interventions should be strategically aligned with the specific, identified needs of classroom teachers and learners.

2.2 Theoretical framework

This article is anchored in a dual-theoretical framework comprising Transformational Leadership Theory and Human Relations Theory. These frameworks serve as critical lenses within the fields of educational management and curriculum implementation, particularly in understanding how School Management Teams (SMTs) navigate and respond to resource limitations.

2.2.1 Instructional leadership theory

Bush (2023) conceptualises instructional leadership as a framework that emphasises the role of school management in creating a structured and coherent environment for teaching and learning, while clearly defining leadership responsibilities within educational institutions. The study further highlights that this approach recognises teaching and learning as the core purpose of schooling, and therefore stresses the need to continuously support and strengthen these processes in order to achieve institutional goals. The Education Hub (2021) highlights that earlier studies aimed to conceptualise this theory, consistently agreeing that it underscores the centrality of learning, the setting of educational goals, and a strong focus on learner support, assessment and evaluation, teacher support, and effective curriculum implementation.

In contexts of scarcity of resources, SMTs are not just administrators, they become active drivers of curriculum delivery. Instructional leadership theory explains how SMTs prioritise the core business of the school (teaching and learning) by organising resources, monitoring classroom practice, and guiding teachers in the effective implementation of the Life Skills curriculum. Even when material resources are limited, this theory supports the idea that strong leadership can optimise what is available through careful planning, curriculum alignment, and ongoing support to teachers.

2.2.2 Transformational leadership Theory

Cherry (2023) notes that Transformational Leadership Theory was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns in 1978 and later expanded by Bernard M. Bass, who refined it into what is now widely known as Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory. The theory underpins this study as it highlights the role of leaders in guiding, supporting, and developing members of an organisation to promote growth and improved performance. This study employed this theory to investigate how SMT navigate the challenges of curriculum delivery in resource constrained environments.

While resource constraints often lead to the marginalization of Life Skills, transformational leadership provides a mechanism for SMTs to manage, guide, and develop staff despite limited physical resources. By focusing on the growth and resilience of teachers, the SMT acts as the primary determinant of success in the enactment of the Life Skills curriculum, transforming systemic scarcity into an opportunity for innovative, support-driven instruction.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative case study design to facilitate a nuanced understanding of leadership within resource-constrained environments. As Juma (2023) suggests, qualitative methods are ideal for extracting rich, primary-source data that allows for an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena. This is particularly relevant given the argument by Ugwu and Eze (2023) that qualitative approaches are indispensable for investigating human emotions and personal perspectives. By employing this design, the study effectively captures the lived experiences of School Management Teams (SMTs), providing a detailed account of how they navigate the systemic and situational challenges of managing the Life Skills curriculum under conditions of scarcity.

In accordance with the principles of qualitative inquiry, which prioritize understanding participants within their authentic environments (Bhasin, 2023), this study was situated in five primary schools within the township of the Ekurhuleni North District. This setting provides a critical backdrop for investigating "leadership through scarcity," as township schools often face unique systemic pressures. The study employed purposive sampling to select 10 Department Heads and 2 Principals, ensuring a multi-layered perspective on the management challenges inherent in curriculum delivery. By focusing on these specific leadership tiers, the research captures a comprehensive view of how SMT members navigate resource constraints to facilitate the enactment of the Life Skills curriculum.

Data for this study were gathered via semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its inherent flexibility in facilitating deep dialogue. This approach aligned strategically with the study's focus on "leading through scarcity," as it enabled participants to elaborate on the nuanced workarounds and innovative strategies SMTs employ when formal resources are unavailable. By moving beyond a rigid, predetermined interview schedule, the researcher was able to capture emergent insights into how different leadership tiers navigate the unpredictable systemic and situational barriers to the enactment of the Life Skills curriculum in township schools. This methodological choice ensures that the invisible labour" of leading in a resource-constrained environment is fully documented. Interviews were held at participants' schools to ensure convenience and minimize travel costs through geographic clustering.

While a standardized interview schedule was used to facilitate comparative analysis, the semi-structured format maintained the flexibility for participants to share their lived experiences openly. Data were organized

through content analysis and subsequently refined into core themes using thematic analysis. This descriptive approach enabled a rigorous examination of the data, moving beyond surface level resource shortages to uncover the systemic origins of curriculum barriers and the strategic interventions SMTs employ to navigate them.

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was secured from the University of South Africa (UNISA), ensuring compliance with all institutional and national research protocols. Formal authorization was further obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) and the Ekurhuleni North District, with additional permission granted by the participating school principals. All twelve participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, its voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw without prejudice. To mitigate the sensitivity of discussing management challenges under scarcity, strict confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms. Participants were informed that no financial incentives were provided and were briefed on data storage and archiving procedures to ensure long-term data security.

3.1 Data Analysis

Strategic SMT interventions in managing the life skills curriculum within resource constrained township environments

Principals' responses

During the data collection process, principals were interviewed regarding the support structures they provide to their Department Heads (HODs) to facilitate the enactment of the Life Skills curriculum within resource constrained environments. While both principals affirmed their commitment to supporting their subordinates, they highlighted the profound difficulty of leading through scarcity without adequate external assistance. A significant theme emerged regarding the lack of departmental support; the principals argued that their ability to intervene effectively is compromised when they themselves are neglected by the broader educational system. PRINCE 1 articulated the complexities of leading through scarcity and said:

"I actively participate in professional workshops to align the school with national expectations, but our practical challenges remain largely unaddressed. Systemic barriers, such as the acute lack of resources, are often dismissed by the Department as part of a national crisis. My school is a non-fee-paying institution, we are entirely dependent on state funding, which is currently insufficient for the practical demands of the Life Skills curriculum. The mere provision of textbooks and basic stationery by the department is an inadequate intervention, as it fails to address the subject's dual requirement for both theoretical knowledge and practical resources".

The principal responded to the question asked about successful interventions the employ to ensure effective implementation of life skills given the challenge of lack of resources. Below is the response:

"We have partnered with private companies that provide technological support, which helps to reduce the burden of doing everything manually. For instance, one company has sponsored us with tablets, which are very useful for Life Skills teachers because they use them to upload learners' work and share creative arts videos that guide learners on how to design and draw. However, it is difficult for me to provide support when I also require support myself. Without adequate support, I am unable to fully support my subordinates."

The data revealed a high degree of thematic consistency between the participating principals, suggesting a shared leadership reality within the primary school context. This alignment in feedback underscores that the barriers to leading through scarcity are systemic rather than anecdotal. PRINCE 2 echoed these common insights, reflecting a unified perspective on the difficulties of curriculum enactment and the persistent lack of external support.

"We receive very little support from the department to ensure that HODs and life skills teachers are adequately supported. As the school principal, I am often forced to find my own ways of managing. The condition of the school infrastructure is extremely poor. We only have soccer and netball playgrounds, yet Physical Education and Creative Arts in Life Skills require a variety of practical activities. We do not have a safe and suitable space for these activities. Despite our repeated complaints as principals, the department has taken no action. At times, I question the value of attending workshops because we are only given empty promises. I try my best to support HODs and life skills teachers by finding ways to address their challenges. For instance, we previously experienced resistance from teachers who did not want to teach Life Skills. During a phase meeting, I requested volunteers, but only two teachers agreed. I then proposed that awards be given to teachers who teach Life Skills, as they go the extra mile. Over time, teachers have gradually become more willing and are now doing their best to teach the subject. I have encouraged life skills to improvise and be creative in using whatever that is available to teach life skills since we do not have resources."

Prince 2 explained that even though teachers and HODs attend developmental workshops these are ineffective since they don't address the issue of lack of resources and explained that:

"I ensure that teachers and HODs receive transport costs to enable them to attend professional development workshops. I continuously encourage my subordinates to further their studies and I openly share all information from the district regarding bursaries and available training courses. This doesn't address the challenge of lack of resources but they get an opportunity to meet with other school and share successful strategies used by other schools. Although our school is a no-fee institution, I still appeal to parents to contribute towards Life Skills resources such as booklets, but only a few parents respond positively. I strongly feel that the government is failing us as Quintile 3 school principals in terms of adequate resource allocation and support."

Interviews with principals revealed that departmental workshops often prioritize administrative compliance over the core objective of quality education. While provincial officials provide oversight through school visits, a fundamental lack of funding persists, hindering the SMT's ability to support Department Heads effectively. Furthermore, a critical paradox exists regarding resource provision: while the department consistently supplies textbooks and lesson plans, these are frequently dismissed by subject advisors as outdated. Despite a clear need for technological integration to modernize curriculum delivery, these schools remain restricted by traditional methods and the systemic constraints of scarcity.

HOD's Responses

Participants expressed a clear understanding of their roles as subject managers while acknowledging that resource constraints has forced them to develop strategies to ensure effective implementation of like skills. Below are their responses.

"I provide continuous support to teachers by ensuring they have access to essential instructional materials such as annual teaching plans (ATPs), lesson plans, and other resources. In situations where these materials are unavailable, I encourage teachers to be resourceful and adopt alternative approaches. Additionally, I have promoted collaboration with neighbouring schools and participation in professional learning communities (PLCs). Within these PLCs, teachers engage with experienced colleagues to exchange knowledge, share resources, and explore diverse teaching strategies". DH 7

"The shortage of educational resources remains a significant challenge. To address this, I encourage teachers to utilize their personal devices—such as laptops, mobile phones, and internet access—to enrich their lessons. However, this approach is not always feasible, as financial limitations often hinder the consistent use of such tools". DH 2

"To overcome resource limitations in my school I encourage teachers to actively collaborate with colleagues from nearby school clusters and within their district. By forming these networks, educators can share valuable teaching materials, exchange best practices, and collectively develop innovative approaches to lesson delivery. Such collaboration not only reduces the burden on individual teachers but also fosters a supportive professional community that enhances the effective implementation of Life Skills programs". DH 9

"In our school we have no resources at all for life skills so I always encourage teachers to adopt creative approaches by repurposing recyclable materials during Physical Education (PE) and Performing Arts (PA) lessons. For example, bottles, boxes, and plastic containers can be transformed into drums for music activities or cones for organizing running exercises. This not only reduces dependency on costly equipment but also promotes environmental awareness among learners". DH 3

"As a life skills manager I always ensure that at the end of each academic year, life skills teachers compile a comprehensive list of resources required for the upcoming year. This list is then be shared with parents, local businesses, private companies, and non-profit organizations to solicit donations and sponsorships. By engaging these stakeholders, our schools can secure additional teaching materials and support needed to ensure the effective implementation of Life Skills programs despite limited internal resources".

4. Summary of Findings

To ensure clarity and coherence, interview findings were organized into thematic categories. Across all participants, there was unanimous recognition of the significance of the Life Skills curriculum and the necessity of fulfilling its objectives as outlined in the CAPS framework. Nevertheless, despite the acknowledged benefits of the program, the results highlighted that inadequate resources remain the most critical barrier to the effective implementation of Life Skills in the township schools studied. Patil (2021) argued that Life Skills activities are inherently resource-efficient, yet emphasized that the absence of adequate resources poses a significant challenge to their effective implementation. The findings of this study align with the findings of Pathan and Amin

(2023) which highlighted that resource constraints pose significant implementation challenges that obstruct the learning process. Furthermore, this study emphasized the importance of ensuring that schools are adequately equipped with both human and material resources to enable the effective implementation of Life Skills education, given its wide-ranging benefits.

Although challenges in implementation persist, the School Management Team (SMT) demonstrated a clear understanding of their responsibilities within the school context. They outlined several strategies aimed at strengthening the delivery of the Life Skills curriculum. Participants emphasized that the effectiveness of Life Skills largely depends on the SMT's capacity to mentor, develop, and support teachers. Importantly, the findings revealed that most participants were not only aware of the underlying causes of these challenges but also recognized their broader implications—affecting both individual educators and the education system as a whole.

5. Discussion of Findings

The SMT expressed frustration over inadequate infrastructural, human, and financial resources, noting their negative impact on Life Skills implementation. Participants reported dilapidated classrooms with cracked tiles, posing safety risks during Physical Activities (PE). They also highlighted shortages of desks and chairs, linked to overcrowding and limited funding, which often forces teachers to waste instructional time managing seating arrangements. Additionally, the absence of proper playgrounds emerged as a major barrier to Physical Education, with teachers reluctant to use unsafe spaces due to concerns about learner safety and accountability. A study by Ntelo (2023) who affirmed that successful implementation of the curriculum is dependent on the availability of relevant resources, hence the determination of the SMT to find effective strategies to ensure successful implementation of life skills in the resource-constrained schools.

The SMT carries the responsibility of providing guidance and support, and in response, they have developed their own strategies. SMT revealed that they adopt various strategies, such as collaborating with neighbouring schools, forming WhatsApp groups to strengthen parental engagement, and participating in subject cluster meetings, to help address some of the challenges they encounter. The participants reported that, in their managerial roles, they ensure Life Skills teachers attend professional development workshops to strengthen their pedagogical competencies. They further provide support by soliciting assistance from colleagues when necessary and by allocating the subject fairly to qualified teachers who are capable of improvising in the face of resource limitations.

The SMT indicated that they ensure curriculum policies and plans are implemented as intended. This commitment is particularly beneficial in resource-constrained environments, as it provides a structured framework that guides teachers in prioritizing essential content and maintaining consistency despite shortages of teaching materials. By enforcing policy compliance, SMTs help mitigate the negative impact of limited resources, since clear curricular guidelines enable qualified teachers to improvise more effectively, ensuring that learners still receive equitable access to the Life Skills curriculum. SMT indicated that in their schools they have adopted proactive measures by mobilizing support from their surrounding communities. In resource constrained environments, this approach enables schools to supplement limited government provisions through community partnerships, volunteer initiatives, and locally driven fundraising efforts. By taking ownership of their challenges and seeking assistance from parents, local businesses, and civic organizations, SMTs foster a collaborative culture that not only alleviates resource shortages but also strengthens community engagement in the Life Skills curriculum.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Participants acknowledged the inherent difficulties of implementing a subject such as Life Skills, which requires substantial resources, within township schools that are severely constrained. They further admitted that, despite their managerial responsibilities, there are circumstances beyond their control where interventions fail to fully resolve the challenges. This recognition underscores the persistent tension between policy expectations and the realities of resource scarcity, highlighting the need for systemic support and innovative leadership strategies to ensure equitable curriculum delivery. The study highlights that resource scarcity remains the most pressing barrier to the effective implementation of the Life Skills curriculum in township schools. To address the persistent challenge of limited resources, school principals should ensure a fair allocation of budgets without prioritizing other subjects over Life Skills. Schools already conduct textbook audits at the end of each year, and the SMT should extend this practice to Life Skills resources, emphasizing accountability among teachers.

Teachers must be made aware that they will be required to account for any resources lost while in their possession. At year's end, the SMT should compile a list of required resources for the following year and share it

with parents, private companies, and non profit organizations to solicit donations. Since most learners and parents have access to cell phones, SMTs should encourage teachers to share lessons digitally. In schools equipped with smartboards, SMTs should upload Life Skills content onto USB drives and allow teachers to use educational videos, which save time and promote learner engagement through visual learning. Furthermore, SMTs should build strong working relationships with neighbouring schools to enable the sharing of teaching materials and encourage teachers to use low cost, improvised resources. In addition, the Department of Education should prioritize township schools in resource allocation, while curriculum developers adopt consultative approaches that reflect classroom realities. Subject advisors should provide targeted support to Life Skills managers, and SMTs should elevate the status of Life Skills by recognizing achievements in school awards. Finally, schools should actively mobilize community partnerships to supplement government provisions, thereby fostering collaboration and sustainability in the delivery of the Life Skills curriculum.

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