Annals of the University of Craiova for Journalism, Communication and Management, Volume 12, 2026

2026, vol. 12, pp. 93-101

RESEARCH ARTICLE https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24091164

CHANGE LEADERSHIP OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS IN POST-COVID-19 PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN KZN, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread disruption to teaching and learning, compelling schools to implement rapid and sustained changes to instructional practices. In South Africa, primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) were particularly affected by interrupted curriculum coverage, learning loss, and increased demands on teacher capacity. This paper examines the role of Departmental Heads (DHs) in leading teaching and learning recovery in the post-COVID-19 context, using Change Leadership Theory as the conceptual framework. Drawing on data from a qualitative doctoral study, the article positions DHs as key change agents who interpret policy directives, provide instructional support, and cultivate collaborative professional practices within schools. The findings reveal that DHs who enact adaptive, relational, and instructional change leadership practices are better equipped to support teachers and sustain improvements in classroom practice. Through responsive leadership and shared accountability, DHs contribute to stabilising instructional processes and strengthening teaching and learning in post-crisis schooling environments. The article concludes by outlining implications for leadership development and emphasising the need for targeted professional and policy support to enhance the change leadership capacity of middle-level leaders in primary schools.

Keywords: Change leadership, Departmental heads, Instructional leadership, Post-COVID-19 schooling, Primary schools, KwaZulu-Natal

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a major disruption to education systems worldwide, significantly altering curriculum delivery, teaching practices, and leadership roles within schools (Harris & Jones, 2020. OECD, 2021). In South Africa, prolonged school closures, rotational attendance models, and the rapid shift to emergency remote teaching exacerbated long-standing inequalities, particularly in public primary schools serving historically marginalised communities (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020. Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2021). During this period, substantial learning losses, inconsistent curriculum coverage, declining teacher morale, and widening achievement disparities became prominent challenges (Van der Berg, Zuze, Bridgman & Shepherd, 2022). As schools moved beyond the immediate crisis, attention increasingly shifted towards recovery, adaptation, and the sustainable strengthening of teaching and learning.

Within this recovery phase, educational leadership has emerged as a critical driver of system renewal. Existing research shows the influential role of leadership in shaping instructional practices, supporting teacher development, and improving learner outcomes, particularly in times of large-scale change (Fullan, 2016. Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). However, leadership scholarship and policy in South Africa have largely centered on school principals as the primary agents of change (Bush, 2019. Mestry, 2017). While principals play an essential role, this emphasis risks overlooking the contribution of middle-level leaders, notably Departmental Heads (DHs), whose work is closely connected to classroom practice.

DHs occupy a pivotal position within school leadership hierarchies, operating at the interface between policy enactment, instructional oversight, teacher support, and learner performance monitoring (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). In primary schools, their responsibilities include curriculum coordination, assessment moderation, teacher mentoring, and ensuring coherence between departmental activities and whole-school priorities (Naicker & Mestry, 2018). In the post-COVID-19 environment, these responsibilities have expanded to encompass addressing curriculum backlogs, supporting pedagogical adaptation, managing assessment recovery, and leading instructional changes under conditions of increased accountability and limited resources (Hoadley, 2022). Despite their strategic importance, the role of DHs in leading and sustaining change remains insufficiently explored and theoretically developed within the South African primary school context (Ngwenya, 2021; Sibanda & Mabasa, 2024). This gap is particularly evident in KwaZulu-Natal, where schools continue to face challenges related to socio-economic inequality, overcrowded classrooms, constrained professional development opportunities, and

uneven post-pandemic recovery (DBE, 2022). Gaining deeper insight into how DHs enact leadership for change in such contexts is therefore crucial for strengthening school-level capacity for sustained improvement.

Against this background, this article investigates the role of Departmental Heads in leading changes to enhance teaching and learning in primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, using Change Leadership Theory as its conceptual framework. Change Leadership Theory foregrounds leaders' ability to influence professional beliefs, instructional practices, and organisational culture in response to complex and evolving contexts (Fullan, 2016). Rather than emphasising managerial compliance, the theory prioritises sense-making, collaboration, and continuous professional learning. Through this lens, the study seeks to illuminate how DHs respond to post-COVID-19 challenges, mobilise teachers towards instructional improvement, and contribute to school recovery and transformation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Change Leadership in Education

Educational change has become a persistent feature of contemporary schooling as education systems respond to curriculum reform, accountability demands, technological advancement, and enduring social inequalities. These pressures were significantly intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required schools to respond swiftly to large-scale disruption while maintaining continuity in teaching and learning (Harris & Jones, 2020). Within such volatile contexts, leadership is widely regarded as a decisive factor in determining schools' capacity to initiate, manage, and sustain meaningful change (Fullan, 2016. Leithwood et al., 2020). Change Leadership Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding leadership in environments characterised by complexity and uncertainty. In contrast to change management approaches that prioritise procedural compliance and technical control, change leadership places emphasis on the transformation of professional beliefs, instructional practices, and organisational culture (Fullan, 2016). Core elements of this perspective include sense-making, relationship-building, collaboration, and ongoing professional learning. Educational leaders are therefore expected to generate shared commitment, align moral purpose with instructional goals, and support innovation in response to evolving educational challenges (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

In the post-COVID-19 schooling context, the relevance of change leadership has become increasingly pronounced. School leaders are required to respond to learning losses, curriculum gaps, and teacher exhaustion while simultaneously restoring stability and rebuilding professional confidence (OECD, 2021). Effective leadership in such circumstances involves adaptive decision-making, distributed leadership practices, and sustained attention to teaching and learning, rather than reliance on short-term crisis management strategies.

2.2 Educational Leadership in the South African Context

Educational leadership in South Africa is shaped by a historical legacy of inequality, continuous policy reform, and persistent socio-economic challenges. Research consistently shows leadership as a key determinant of school effectiveness, particularly in under-resourced and disadvantaged contexts (Bush, 2019. Mestry, 2017). Despite this, leadership research and policy discourse have traditionally focused on principals as the primary drivers of school improvement, often neglecting the collective and distributed nature of leadership within schools.

South African schools operate within a centralised policy framework that requires school leaders to interpret and enact national directives at the classroom level (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2022). This interpretive role has become increasingly complex in the post-pandemic period, as schools implement curriculum recovery plans, revised assessment policies, and learner support interventions under constrained conditions. Emerging evidence suggests that leadership effectiveness in such contexts depends on the capacity of leadership teams, rather than principals alone, to drive instructional improvement (Naicker & Mestry, 2018). Provincial disparities further complicate leadership practice. In provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, schools continue to experience overcrowded classrooms, limited access to professional development, and uneven recovery following the pandemic (DBE, 2022). These conditions highlight the importance of examining leadership roles beyond the principalship, particularly those of middle-level leaders who are closely engaged with classroom practice.

2.3 Departmental Heads as Middle-Level Leaders

Departmental Heads (DHs) occupy a strategically important position within school leadership structures, functioning as middle-level leaders who connect senior management with classroom instruction (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). In primary schools, DHs are typically responsible for coordinating the curriculum, supervising instruction, moderating assessment, and mentoring teachers. Through these responsibilities, they exert a direct influence on

teaching quality and learner achievement (Ngwenya, 2021). International studies identify DHs as key instructional leaders whose leadership significantly affects pedagogical coherence and professional practice within departments (Bennett, Lockyer, & Agostinho, 2018). At the same time, research shows persistent challenges associated with the role, including unclear role expectations, heavy administrative demands, and limited opportunities for leadership development (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). These constraints often limit DHs' capacity to engage in transformational and change-oriented leadership. South African research reflects similar patterns, indicating that DHs are frequently tasked with leading instructional improvement without adequate preparation or systemic support (Naicker & Mestry, 2018; Sibanda & Mabasa, 2024). Although policy frameworks recognise DHs as members of School Management Teams, their role in strategic change leadership remains insufficiently conceptualised, particularly within primary school settings.

2.4 Departmental Heads and Instructional Change Post-COVID-19

The post-COVID-19 educational landscape has intensified the instructional leadership responsibilities of DHs. Curriculum recovery initiatives, learner support programmes, and revised assessment practices have increased both the scope and complexity of their work (Hoadley, 2022). DHs are increasingly expected to support teachers in addressing learning gaps, adapting pedagogical approaches, and responding to diverse learner needs under heightened accountability pressures. Research on middle-level leadership suggests that DHs play a crucial mediating role in translating policy reforms into classroom practice (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018).

In post-pandemic contexts, this mediation extends beyond technical implementation to include emotional support, facilitation of professional learning, and collaborative problem-solving (Harris & Jones, 2020). Such practices closely align with change leadership principles that emphasise relational trust and collective capacity-building. However, empirical evidence on how DHs enact change leadership in South African primary schools remains limited. Existing studies often emphasise compliance-oriented instructional monitoring rather than leadership practices that promote teacher agency, innovation, and sustained improvement (Ngwenya, 2021). This gap demonstrates the need for research that foregrounds DHs' leadership experiences through a change leadership lens.

2.5 Change Leadership Theory and the Role of Departmental Heads

Applying Change Leadership Theory to the role of DHs provides a conceptual framework for understanding how middle-level leaders influence teaching and learning in complex, post-COVID-19 contexts. Change leadership prioritises leaders' capacity to develop shared understanding, strengthen collaboration, and support continuous professional learning (Fullan, 2016). For DHs, this involves moving beyond administrative oversight towards leadership practices that empower teachers and encourage reflective, learner-centered pedagogy. In primary schools, where foundational learning is critical, DHs are well positioned to act as change agents who align departmental practices with broader school recovery and improvement goals. Examining their leadership through a change leadership perspective contributes to a more nuanced understanding of distributed leadership and instructional improvement within South African schooling contexts.

2.6 Conceptual Framework: Change Leadership Theory

In this study is grounded in Change Leadership Theory, which offers an explanatory framework for understanding how Departmental Heads (DHs) lead instructional improvement within complex and disrupted educational environments. Change Leadership Theory conceptualises leadership as a dynamic process through which leaders influence people, professional practices, and organisational culture to bring about meaningful and sustainable change, particularly in contexts characterised by uncertainty and ongoing reform (Fullan, 2016). In contrast to managerial or compliance-driven leadership approaches, Change Leadership Theory foregrounds adaptive leadership practices that promote shared vision, professional collaboration, and continuous learning (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Within the post-COVID-19 schooling context marked by curriculum backlogs, learning losses, and declining teacher morale, this theoretical perspective provides a relevant lens for examining leadership that extends beyond positional authority to influence beliefs and practice.

2.7 Core Constructs of Change Leadership Theory

The conceptual framework for this study is structured around four interconnected constructs drawn from Change Leadership Theory: vision and sense-making, capacity building, collaborative culture, and instructional focus. Vision and sense-making refer to leaders' ability to interpret change demands and develop shared

understanding among staff (Fullan, 2016). In post-COVID-19 primary schools, DHs are required to interpret curriculum recovery policies, revised assessment expectations, and evolving pedagogical requirements. Through sense-making processes, DHs support teachers in understanding not only what changes are required, but also the underlying rationale for change, thereby reducing resistance and strengthening professional commitment.

Capacity building involves strengthening teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and confidence to enact change effectively (Leithwood et al., 2020). Change Leadership Theory places emphasis on leadership practices that prioritise professional learning, mentoring, and instructional support. For DHs, this includes facilitating professional learning communities, mentoring less experienced teachers, and supporting pedagogical adaptation in response to learner needs following COVID-19 disruptions. Collaborative culture is central to sustaining improvement over time. Change leadership shows relational trust, shared responsibility, and collective problem-solving as critical enablers of school improvement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). As middle-level leaders, DHs are strategically positioned to foster collaboration within departments by encouraging peer support, reflective dialogue, and joint planning focused on addressing learner performance gaps.

Instructional focus demonstrates the primacy of teaching and learning as the core work of schools (Bush, 2019). Change Leadership Theory asserts that sustainable change must be anchored in improved classroom practice. In this study, DHs' instructional focus is examined through their roles in curriculum coordination, lesson monitoring, assessment moderation, and feedback provision, particularly within post-COVID-19 curriculum recovery initiatives.

2.8 Departmental Heads as Change Agents

Within this framework, DHs are conceptualised as change agents operating at the intersection of policy, school leadership, and classroom practice. Their middle-leadership position enables them to interpret and translate national and provincial policy directives into contextually responsive instructional strategies (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). In provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, where schools continue to face socio-economic constraints and uneven recovery patterns, the change leadership role of DHs becomes particularly significant.

Change Leadership Theory recognises leadership as a distributed process rather than the exclusive domain of the principal (Fullan, 2016). Accordingly, this study positions DHs not as passive implementers of top-down mandates, but as active leaders who shape teachers' beliefs, instructional practices, and responses to change.

2.9 Linking Change Leadership to Teaching and Learning Outcomes

The conceptual framework proposes that when DHs enact change leadership practices through sense-making, capacity building, collaboration, and instructional focus, they create enabling conditions for effective teaching and learning. These conditions include strengthened pedagogical coherence, increased teacher confidence, enhanced professional accountability, and more responsive learner support strategies (Leithwood et al., 2020). In the post-COVID-19 schooling context, such leadership practices are expected to support curriculum recovery, improve assessment practices, and promote sustained instructional improvement. The framework therefore provides a structured lens for analysing how DHs' leadership practices influence teaching and learning outcomes in primary schools.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design located within an interpretivist paradigm to examine how Departmental Heads (DHs) enact change leadership to support effective teaching and learning in primary schools in the post-COVID-19 context. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allows for detailed exploration of participants' meanings, experiences, and leadership practices within authentic school settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the study's emphasis on leadership processes and contextual influences, this approach enabled the generation of rich, in-depth data that could not be adequately captured through quantitative methods. The research was structured as a multiple-case study involving selected public primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. Case study methodology is well suited to investigating complex social phenomena within real-world contexts and to examining how leadership practices are enacted across different settings (Yin, 2018). This design allowed for comparative analysis across cases, facilitating the identification of both shared patterns and contextual variations in DHs' change leadership practices.

The study was conducted in public primary schools situated in KwaZulu-Natal, a province characterized by marked socio-economic diversity and enduring educational inequality. Many schools in the province continue to experience challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, resource constraints, and limited access to professional development opportunities conditions that were exacerbated during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

(Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2022). This context provided an appropriate setting for exploring how DHs lead instructional changes within post-pandemic schooling environments. The study population comprised Departmental Heads employed in public primary schools. A purposive sampling strategy was utilised to select participants who were information-rich and directly involved in leading teaching and learning at departmental level (Patton, 2015). Participants were selected based on the following criteria: Formal appointment as a Departmental Head. Experience serving in the role during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Responsibility for curriculum leadership within a primary school phase. The final sample included DHs from diverse school contexts and with varying levels of leadership experience, enabling the inclusion of a broad range of perspectives on change leadership practices.

Data was generated through semi-structured individual interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on their leadership experiences while allowing the researcher to probe emerging issues related to change leadership (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interview questions were informed by the four constructs of the conceptual framework - vision and sense-making, capacity building, collaborative culture, and instructional focus, ensuring alignment between theory and data collection. In addition, relevant school documents, including departmental improvement plans, curriculum recovery schedules, and assessment moderation records, were reviewed to contextualise and corroborate interview data (Bowen, 2009). The use of multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the study through data triangulation.

3.1 Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) analysed data using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework outlined. The analysis process began with repeated reading of interview transcripts and documents to achieve familiarisation. Initial codes were then generated and organised into broader themes aligned with Change Leadership Theory and the study's conceptual framework. Themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure analytical coherence and depth. The analysis adopted both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductively, themes were guided by the key constructs of Change Leadership Theory, while inductive analysis allowed new patterns and insights to emerge from participants' accounts. This combined approach ensured that the analysis remained theoretically informed while remaining grounded in participants lived experiences.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through the application of the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources, and the inclusion of verbatim quotations. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing, while transferability was facilitated by providing rich, contextual descriptions of the research setting and participants. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee and the provincial education authorities. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms. All data were securely stored and used exclusively for research purposes in accordance with established ethical research guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4. Findings

This section presents the study's findings on the role of Departmental Heads (DHs) in leading change to support effective teaching and learning in primary schools in the post-COVID-19 context. The findings are organised thematically and are informed by Change Leadership Theory, which places emphasis on leadership practices that enable adaptation, influence instructional practice, and sustain improvement during periods of disruption (Bush, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2022). Analysis of the data yielded three broad categories: leadership practices, challenges encountered, and support provided. This section focuses specifically on leadership practices as expressions of change leadership.

4.1 Leadership Practices in Leading Change

4.1.1 Reconceptualizing Leadership Beyond Administrative Functions

The findings indicate that DHs viewed leadership as extending beyond routine administrative duties to encompass vision-setting, instructional guidance, and the coordination of teaching and learning. Participants described leadership as a purposeful process of influencing classroom practice in response to post-pandemic

learning demands. This understanding reflects core principles of Change Leadership Theory, which highlight the importance of establishing direction and purpose during periods of change (Bush, 2020). Participants further reported that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift towards more adaptive and responsive forms of leadership. Leadership was described as guiding educators through uncertainty while maintaining instructional continuity. These findings resonate with Harris and Jones (2022), who argue that post-pandemic educational leadership requires flexibility and the ability to mobilise collective effort.

4.2 Leading Instructional Change in the Post-COVID-19 Context

The study found that DHs assumed expanded responsibilities in leading instructional change following the pandemic. These included coordinating learner catch-up initiatives, adjusting curriculum pacing, and supporting the integration of digital learning platforms. Rather than reverting to pre-pandemic practices, DHs actively guided changes in teaching and assessment to address learning losses.

Participants reported increased involvement in supporting teachers to adopt blended and hybrid teaching approaches through platforms such as Google Classroom and WhatsApp. These leadership practices align with change leadership actions aimed at embedding new instructional approaches into everyday classroom practice (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger, 2020). In addition, DHs coordinated rotational timetables and remediation schedules to support curriculum coverage and learner progression. Such actions illustrate intentional leadership focused on sustaining instructional change rather than responding only to immediate crises (Bush, 2020).

4.3 Enhancing Instructional Direction and Coherence

The findings reveal that DHs played a critical role in strengthening instructional coherence by establishing clear teaching goals, monitoring curriculum implementation, and promoting alignment across grades. Participants reported increased engagement in lesson observation, collaborative planning, and monitoring learner performance. These practices reflect change leadership principles that emphasise clarity, consistency, and accountability during periods of reform (Hallinger & Wang, 2022). DHs noted that providing clear instructional direction was essential for stabilising teaching practices following prolonged disruption and for supporting teachers in responding to revised curriculum requirements.

4.4 Supporting Educators and Promoting Professional Learning

The findings further show that DHs prioritised educator support and professional learning as key strategies for sustaining instructional change. Participants described organising professional development activities focused on digital pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and learner support strategies. Collaborative planning, peer mentoring, and informal coaching emerged as prominent leadership practices. These initiatives were aimed at strengthening teacher confidence and fostering commitment to new instructional approaches. Such practices align with Change Leadership Theory, which demonstrates capacity-building and shared ownership as essential conditions for sustainable change (Bush & Glover, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2022).

4.5 Leading Learning Recovery and Addressing Learning Gaps

Learning recovery emerged as a central focus of DHs' leadership practices. Participants reported leading the implementation of remedial programmes and catch-up interventions informed by diagnostic assessment data. Curriculum prioritisation and flexible pacing strategies were employed to address core learning needs. These findings illustrate leadership actions that redirected instructional effort in response to contextual demands. Spaull and Pretorius (2021) similarly emphasise the importance of structured recovery strategies in mitigating pandemic-related learning losses, particularly in disadvantaged schooling contexts.

4.6 Data-Informed Leadership for Instructional Improvement

The study found that DHs increasingly relied on learner performance data to inform instructional decisions and evaluate the effectiveness of implemented changes. Continuous assessment data and feedback mechanisms were used to identify learning gaps and refine teaching strategies. This evidence-informed approach aligns with Change Leadership Theory's emphasis on data-driven decision-making to legitimise and sustain change initiatives (Hallinger & Wang, 2022). Participants indicated that the use of data enabled more targeted support for teachers and learners, contributing to enhanced instructional responsiveness (Mandikonza & Moyo, 2023).

4.7 Strengthening Collaboration with Parents and Communities

The findings also indicate that DHs strengthened communication and collaboration with parents and local communities to support teaching and learning recovery. Participants highlighted the importance of regular communication regarding curriculum expectations and learner progress. These collaborative practices align with change leadership perspectives that recognise stakeholder engagement as vital for sustaining change beyond the school environment (Harris & Jones, 2022). DHs reported that increased parental involvement reinforced learner accountability and supported continuity of learning at home.

5. Discussion

In this study explored how Departmental Heads (DHs) led change to support effective teaching and learning in primary schools in the post-COVID-19 environment. Interpreted through the lens of Change Leadership Theory, the findings suggest that DHs acted as central agents of change who steered instructional adaptation, fostered educator commitment, and maintained coherent school-level responses to ongoing disruption. This discussion situates the findings within existing scholarship and illustrates how DHs shifted schools from short-term crisis responses towards sustained instructional recovery and improvement.

5.1 Departmental Heads as Change Leaders During Periods of Disruption

The findings show that DHs reconceptualised their leadership roles, moving beyond administrative compliance towards purposeful influence over teaching and learning. This transition reflects key principles of Change Leadership Theory, which views leadership as a relational and strategic process focused on setting direction, aligning stakeholders, and embedding new practices (Bush, 2020). In the aftermath of the pandemic, DHs were required to lead adaptive change rather than maintain established routines, responding to learning loss, disrupted curricula, and altered instructional conditions. In line with Harris and Jones (2022), the study confirms that leadership in and beyond the COVID-19 period demanded flexibility, ethical commitment, and contextual responsiveness. DHs demonstrated these attributes by interpreting policy requirements, adapting curriculum recovery initiatives to local contexts, and supporting educators through periods of uncertainty. These findings reinforce the view that middle-level leaders play a crucial role in mediating system-level reforms and translating them into meaningful classroom practices.

5.2 Leading Instructional Change for Teaching and Learning Recovery

A key contribution of this study is the evidence that DHs were instrumental in driving instructional change. Change Leadership Theory places emphasis on the alignment of change initiatives with an organisation's core purpose. In this study, instructional recovery emerged as the central focus of change, with DHs overseeing curriculum pacing, modifying assessment practices, and coordinating learner support interventions. These leadership practices are consistent with Hallinger and Wang (2022) argument that effective change leadership prioritises instructional coherence and ongoing monitoring. Rather than relying on directive or compliance-driven approaches, DHs enabled change by modelling effective practices, offering professional guidance, and assisting educators to implement blended and differentiated teaching strategies. This demonstrates the importance of instructionally focused leadership in achieving meaningful and sustainable change in schools.

5.3 Capacity Building and Educator Support as Foundations for Sustained Change

The findings highlight professional development and educator support as central mechanisms for sustaining post-pandemic change. From a Change Leadership perspective, long-term improvement depends on strengthening both individual and collective capacity (Bush & Glover, 2021). The use of mentoring, collaborative practices, and professional learning communities by DHs reflects leadership approaches that promote shared responsibility and collective ownership of change. These findings extend existing literature by illustrating how DHs employed supportive and relational leadership to address uncertainty, reduce resistance, and build educator confidence during periods of instructional instability. Similarly, Harris and Jones (2022) argue that relational leadership is essential for maintaining momentum and preventing a return to pre-crisis practices.

5.4 Data-Informed Decision-Making as a Strategy for Leading Change

The increased reliance on learner performance data points to a deliberate shift towards evidence-informed change leadership. Change Leadership Theory recognises data as a critical resource for legitimising decisions, strengthening accountability, and guiding continuous improvement. In this study, DHs used assessment data to

identify learning gaps, inform instructional adjustments, and assess the effectiveness of curriculum recovery strategies. These findings support Hallinger and Wang (2022) assertion that data-informed leadership enhances instructional focus and promotes equity. In addition, Mandikonza and Moyo (2023) contend that systematic data use enables school leaders to move beyond reactive responses towards more strategic and sustained change processes. The study therefore shows the role of DHs in embedding data use as an ongoing leadership practice rather than a temporary response to crisis conditions.

5.5 Extending Change Leadership Beyond the School

The findings further indicate that DHs expanded their leadership influence beyond the school by strengthening partnerships with parents and local communities. Change Leadership Theory places emphasis on stakeholder engagement as a key condition for sustainable reform. By actively involving parents in curriculum recovery initiatives and learner support, DHs promoted a shared commitment to improving learning outcomes. This finding aligns with Harris and Jones (2022), who identify collaboration and partnership as defining characteristics of effective post-pandemic schooling. The study demonstrates that instructional change is more likely to be sustained when leadership engages the broader social and community contexts that shape learner achievement.

5.6 Implications for Change Leadership in Primary Schools

Overall, the findings suggest that DHs occupy a strategic position in leading instructional changes in primary schools, particularly during periods of disruption. Change Leadership Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how DHs influence teaching and learning through setting direction, developing capacity, and sustaining improvement over time. In this study contributes to the literature by foregrounding the often-overlooked role of middle leaders in driving post-crisis educational reform and strengthening teaching and learning practices in primary school contexts.

6. Conclusion

In this study demonstrates the critical role of Departmental Heads (DHs) in facilitating teaching and learning recovery in KwaZulu-Natal primary schools following the COVID-19 pandemic. Framed by Change Leadership Theory, the findings suggest that DHs' conceptualisation of leadership, implementation of instructional practices, and ability to set contextually responsive and socially attuned goals substantially shape teaching quality and learner outcomes. In settings marked by disruption, uncertainty, and learning gaps, DHs emerged as essential change agents, translating policy directives into classroom practice while addressing the evolving needs of teachers and learners (Fullan, 2014).

The study also shows that effective change leadership by DHs extends well beyond administrative compliance. It encompasses instructional guidance, professional support, and emotional responsiveness. DHs who employed adaptive, collaborative, and reflective leadership approaches were better able to stabilise teaching routines, enhance teacher morale, and maintain instructional continuity. These findings corroborate existing research that places emphasis on the importance of instructional leadership in teaching and learning improvements during periods of systemic change (Hallinger, 2011). By fostering shared responsibility and reflective practice, DHs contributed to rebuilding professional trust and sustaining school-level improvement in the post-pandemic era.

Based on these insights, the study recommends the development of targeted professional development programmes designed to strengthen DHs' instructional, adaptive, and supportive leadership capacities. Such initiatives should integrate the principles of Change Leadership Theory with practical strategies for guiding teaching and learning in post-crisis contexts (Kotter, 1996). Future research could examine the longitudinal impact of DH leadership on school improvement and learner achievement, incorporating teacher and learner perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of post-pandemic leadership effectiveness.

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