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# An exploratory study of the role of contextualized leadership development in making a positive difference in the professional practice of Accounting Departmental Heads (DH) in low performing schools in Gauteng

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# ABSTRACT

The purpose of this doctoral research was to carry out an exploratory study intended to understand the situation of Accounting middle managers (Departmental Heads) in low performing schools in one Province of South Africa (Gauteng); their specific leadership development needs; and requirements for quality school management such that the content of existing and future specialized and focused Accounting development preparation could take into account, and better meet, the needs of Departmental Heads (DHs) in high school Accounting education. The viability of Accounting education as a high school discipline/subject is at stake. The numbers of learners writing Accounting at the Grade 12 level in South African public schools has dropped by approximately 36% over the last 12 Years. In 2010, 165 522 learners wrote the National Senior Certificate Accounting exam and in 2021 this number decreased to 105 894 (refer to table 1). This study has attempted to identify the context within which this situation has emerged and to identify the nature of the problems. A Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) framework suggests the reconceptualising of leadership of accounting education by elevating the potential of the Accounting DH within this tier of leadership**.** The study used a case study approach involving 111 DHs and 15 Subject Advisors from Gauteng low-performing public high schools in 2015 as the background of the study and 14 of these respondents were again the subject of this study in 2018. The data sources included an information sheet, semi structured interviews, focus discussion groups, and non-participatory observations at subject advisor meetings, as well as scrutiny of documents. Using thematic content analysis, a number of recurrent themes emerged. These encompassed overarching themes such as the state of education and Accounting education in low performing schools in Gauteng; the contextual realities of Accounting Departmental Heads (middle managers) and the development needs of these middle managers from DH leadership experiences through leadership development. The focus overall was on the support and development required to enable Accounting DHs in these schools to become more effective curriculum, subject and departmental leaders. Eight of the DH respondents and six of the Subject Advisors who participated in 2018 were able to include their reflections from the pilot leadership development skills course, designed and led by the researcher in 2015. The study was based on the assumption that understanding the context in which Accounting Departmental Heads lead will be essential to understanding their development needs and thus to designing support systems for them

to become effective leaders. The theoretical underpinnings of CLT enabled an understanding of the issues beyond the current picture of failure, decline and ineffectual leadership. CLT was suitable for encompassing the very challenging wider contextual realities of these schools along with widely experienced leadership failure within each school. Without this different lens, the current problems appear intractable and destined to lead in the foreseeable future to the government abandoning the subject of Accounting altogether as a high school subject, with consequent serious effects on the economy of the country.

The main research question was; Can leadership development in low performing schools contribute to school and subject leadership transformation? Sub-questions were; what challenges do low performing schools bring to the roles and responsibilities of DHs? What opportunities do low performing schools create for the transformation of effective DH practice? and What practical openings exist in current contexts for the realization of contextualized leadership development?

The findings indicated an almost universal interest in understanding better approaches to leadership amongst the participants (both DHs and Subject Advisors). This was evident from their keenness to attend the leadership short course in the first place, and from the extremely high scores recorded which indicated their strong appreciation of its content. Thus, the building blocks for success are clearly evident and present. Whilst each of these participants have spoken of pockets of enabling progressive ways of carrying out their roles, responsibilities and practice since the development process, the fairly limited evidence three years later of successful implementation of these approaches was however an indication of the remaining structural barriers to their success. It appears that complex adaptive leadership styles would need to be enabled by government policy if they are to reach down to the teacher in the classroom and her learners – but this should not be impossible to achieve.

The thesis adds to both the theoretical and empirical literature concerning middle management in secondary schooling, and particularly in Accounting education in low performing schools in South Africa. There is a lack of other research into the role of middle management/ middle leadership and the crucial role that Departmental Heads, as middle leaders, can potentially play in school improvement, especially in low performing schools. The theoretical underpinnings developed from complexity leadership theory and the framework provided are also innovative theoretically and of potentially key importance for further research in this area.

Keywords:

Accounting education; low performing schools; complexity leadership theory; middle leadership; (contextualised) leadership development.