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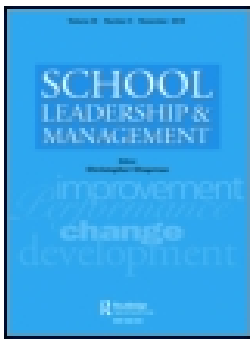


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# The challenges faced by heads of departments in selected Lesotho high schools

Tebello Tlali  and Ntjoetso Matete

Department of Educational Foundations, National University of Lesotho, Roma, Lesotho

## ABSTRACT

The role of the Heads of Departments (HoDs) in the school structure is to provide middle leadership. They assist the principals on the day to day leadership of the schools. They are responsible for ensuring the achievement of their departmental and school vision and mission. This study sought to explore the nature of the challenges faced by the HoDs in the Lesotho context. The study was framed within the interpretive paradigm and adopted a qualitative approach. The participants consisted of sixteen HoDs and eight school principals. These participants were purposively selected and then interviewed through the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that the HoDs face several challenges that hinder their performance. For example, they lack the requisite skills to perform their duties. They also encounter considerable resistance from their peers. In the light of the findings, we argue that it is crucial for the HoDs to be afforded the empowerment and support that they need so that they can do their job efficiently. This support may benefit their schools as well as the entire education sector.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Head of department; teacher leadership; middle leadership; instructional leadership; management; management tasks

## Introduction and problem statement

The Lesotho schools are classified on the basis of their ownership, management and administration. This means that they are classified as government, church, community or private schools. The churches own more than 90% of the schools (Lekhetho 2013). However, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) determines the educational policy as stipulated in section 28(a) of the Constitution of Lesotho (Kingdom of Lesotho 1993). The MoET pays 95% of teachers' salaries except for those who are privately employed by the church or the community schools. The payment of teachers' salaries is administered by the Teaching Service Department (TSD) of MOET (Lekhetho 2013). Though teachers get salaries which are comparable to those of the civil servants, these are considered as relatively little compared to those in other countries in the SADC region (Jacobs and Tlali 2015). In addition to their basic salaries, teacher leaders

ought to get a responsibility allowance as an incentive and a form of recognition for their leadership role (Matete 2018).

The MoET has decentralised its authority through the Inspectorate at district level, where District Offices provide professional guidance and administrative support to the schools. The school boards are responsible for the governance of the schools. According to the Lesotho Education Act of 2010 (Kingdom of Lesotho 2010, Section 25) the school board is responsible to: (1) manage and administer the school for which it has been constituted and to (2) oversee the management and the proper and efficient running of the school. Furthermore, the school boards make the recommendations with regard to personnel matters such as appointments, transfers, promotion and demotions and liaise with the local authorities on matters pertaining to the development of the school (Lekhetho 2013; Jacobs and Tlali 2015; Matete 2018).

The school principals are appointed by MoET and they serve as the secretaries of the school board. They are further responsible for the overall management and leadership of the schools. They are therefore regarded as the chief accounting officers (Motsamai, Jacobs, and de Wet 2011). The principals delegate some of their duties to the Heads of departments (HoDs). Experienced teachers from within the schools apply for the vacant HoD positions. They are short-listed and interviewed by the school board. The school board, through the principal, recommends the short-listed HoD candidates to the MoET where they undergo further scrutiny and interviewing. The successful candidates are then appointed by the MoET. Even though the minimum requirements for their appointment are not documented, experienced teachers are the ones considered for the HoD positions (See Table 1: Demographic details of the HoD participants).

The roles and responsibilities of the Lesotho schools HoDs are outlined in the *Manual for Principals of Secondary and High Schools* (MoET 2006). These include

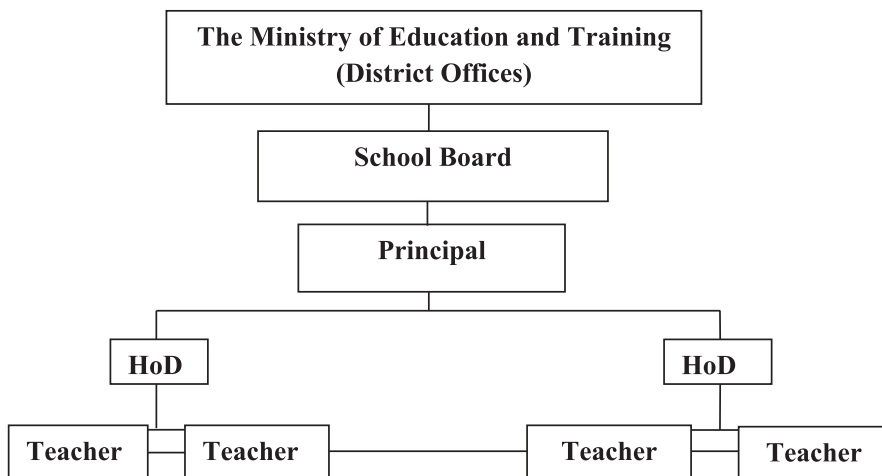
**Table 1.** Demographic details of the HoDs.

Participants	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	Experience in HoD's position
1. HOD-1	F	41	15	5
2. HOD-2	F	48	20	10
3. HOD-3	M	45	17	10
4. HOD-4	F	39	15	5
5. HOD-5	F	40	15	5
6. HOD-6	M	33	10	3
7. HOD-7	M	35	12	5
8. HOD-8	F	45	18	8
9. HOD-9	F	37	15	5
10. HOD10	M	35	9	2
11. HOD-11	M	42	16	6
12. HOD-12	F	44	20	10
13. HOD-13	M	37	14	7
14. HOD-14	F	38	12	7
15. HOD-15	F	44	16	8
16. HOD-16	M	52	25	12

ensuring that the school is working on the correct syllabi as laid down by the MoET, ensuring that there is a scheme of work for the subjects under their supervision; advising the principals on the purchase of books and equipment and proper use and allocation of those books. They assist newly appointed teachers on the teaching of their subjects. The HoDs have also been mandated to lead the development of respective school subject as well as their teacher peers in their respective departments. The HoDs are therefore referred to as subject leaders, middle managers and curriculum coordinators. Against this background, the organogram below illustrates the position of the HoDs within the Lesotho school structure.

As depicted in [figure 1](#), the HoDs are placed on the third tier of the school management structure. They serve as a link between the office of the principal and the teachers in their respective departments (Bambi 2012; Matete 2018). According to Harris and Jones (2017) the HoDs lead from the middle. Harris and Jones further point out that ‘the idea of leading from the middle has emerged as a strategy for the school system reform where the middle tier is recognised as being particularly significant in strengthening the capacity and coherence of the school system’. By virtue of their position in the hierarchy of school administration, the HoDs are strategically positioned to engage in class teaching, while at the same time they ensure effective functioning of their departments. They also organise relevant academic and extra-curricular activities to ensure the development of their subject areas (Bambi 2012).

Empirical studies reveal that the HoDs are however faced with numerous challenges in their task to provide middle leadership. For instance, Harris and Jones (2017, 214) indicate that ‘the middle leadership role in schools is particularly challenging as it attracts pressure from both the top and the bottom of the organisation’. This therefore suggests that middle leaders in schools need



**Figure 1.** A typical high school management organogram.

specific forms of support and development to maximise their potential. Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2019) also note that middle-leaders' tasks are demanding and time-consuming. Hence the HoDs sometimes struggle to find a balance between these tasks and their classroom instruction. Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2019) add that teachers in middle-leading positions also tend to feel isolated and in conflict with their peers.

Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) identify significant tensions affecting HoDs, namely: the expectations to have a whole school focus and their loyalty to their departments. There is usually some resentment and resistance from the peers who deliberately try to counteract the success of the middle leaders. In addition, Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) indicate that the development needs of middle leaders are often overlooked to the extent that they are sometimes inadequately prepared for their roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2019) rightly observe that recognition strongly contributes to the middle leaders' sense of empowerment and satisfaction, both in the form of monetary compensation and through appreciation shown by colleagues and the principal. However, such expected recognition is sometimes not availed.

Previous studies further indicate that middle leaders are often under prepared for the key aspects of their role. For example, Basset (2016) points out that although it is assumed that middle leaders are appointed because they possess the requisite leadership skills to carry out their role effectively, this is not always the case. In this case, Basset (2016), Ling, Abdulla and Ismail (2015) as well as Norhasma, Hassan, and Yusoff (2019) concur that effective leadership development is required to equip HoDs to efficiently undertake their roles. For instance, the MoET, the school boards and principals ought to see to it that the HoDs are motivate and empowered to do their job.

In Lesotho, a lot has been written about the principal's position and the pertaining experiences and challenges. However, very little attention has been paid to the HoDs, yet they also play a pivotal role in the success of their departments and schools. As indicated earlier, the HoDs perform a role that is both complex and multifaceted. They are responsible for leading the teaching and learning tasks, liaising with a wide range of stakeholders, developing collegial relationships and managing departments (Harris and Jones 2017). It was assumed that the Lesotho HoDs are not immune to the challenges raised by the empirical studies cited above. Against this backdrop, this paper sought to understand the nature of the challenges faced by the HoDs in the Lesotho context. In line with this aim, the study on which this paper is based was guided by the following research objectives:

- (1) To explore the challenges faced by the HoDs in some high schools in Lesotho.
- (2) To suggest the ways in which the HoDs' challenges can be mitigated.

## Theoretical framework

Instructional leadership is a theoretical framework that defines the role of the school leadership as far as it influences the school curriculum and empowers the teachers to deal effectively with pedagogical issues (Hallinger and Lee 2014; Ramazan, Hanifi, and Mahmut 2020). While instructional leadership is commonly associated with the roles and responsibilities of the school principals, it can also be seen collectively as those actions that are taken by all levels of the school leadership to facilitate student learning (Ismail et al. 2018). Instructional leadership can be summed up in three features, namely: (1) defining the school's vision and mission, (2) managing the instructional programme or the curriculum and (3) promoting a positive school learning climate. These features are discussed by Hallinger and Wang (2015), Ismail et al. (2018) as well as Ramazan, Hanifi, and Mahmut (2020), Shatzer et al. (2014) as follows:

- (1) Defining the school's vision and mission includes working with the staff to ensure that the school has clear and measurable goals which are primarily concerned with the academic progress of the learners. These goals are to be communicated throughout the school community.
- (2) Managing the instructional programme is a feature that implies that school leadership should be involved in the school's curriculum which includes supervising instruction in the classroom, managing the curriculum and monitoring the learners' progress.
- (3) Improving the school's climate is a feature that urges the school leadership to ensure that there is a high standard of excellence adopted by the school community. This includes providing incentives for the learners and staff, maintaining visibility as well as ensuring that classroom instruction time is not compromised for other non-instructional matters.

To sum up the above features, instructional leadership is regarded as a leadership strategy that is goal-driven. It focuses on ensuring that the school leadership takes the forefront in ensuring effective teaching and learning (Bush 2011; Hallinger and Lee 2014; Hallinger and Wang 2015). It needs to be emphasised that all levels of leadership in a school need to be competent and empowered as instructional leaders who can advocate for improving the quality of teaching and learning (Hallinger and Lee 2014; Hallinger and Wang 2015).

It is also essential for the school leadership to establish and maintain a positive school culture. This is a powerful symbolic tool for influencing teaching and learning in the school (Sahin 2011). The school culture filters down into values and traditions which play an important role in creating an environment that nurtures excellence. By virtue of their position, HoDs are considered as the prime creators of the school culture and subcultures in their schools. They are

regarded as the agents who create and sustain the school cultures. Thus they ought to bind teachers to the common ethos of caring, concern and commitment to excellent teaching and learning (Ghamrawi 2013, 32). As part of instructional leadership, the HoDs should provide professional leadership to their peers and they should have a direct and positive effect on the quality of teaching and learning (Bush 2011; Shatzer et al. 2014; Harris and Jones 2017).

In line with this theoretical background, the role of HoDs as leaders and managers has been highlighted in the subsequent sections. The role of the HoDs has further been discussed in relation to the four management tasks (Hallinger and Wang 2015).

### *Heads of departments as leaders*

Leadership can be understood as a process of influencing others to achieve organisational goals. Leadership also explores effective ways of doing what needs to be done. Simultaneously, leadership should implore individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared vision (Grant et al. 2010; Bambi 2012; Ali and Abdalla 2017). Leadership is a two way interactive process between the leader and the followers. In line with this definition, HoDs are considered to be leaders. As put but Harris and Jones (2017), the HoDs are referred to as 'middle leaders'. They are therefore expected to equip and influence their peers to uphold the departmental and the school's vision. As instructional leaders, the HoDs have to convey a departmental vision in a manner that resonates with the subordinates' beliefs and values. They should inspire their peers so that they may willingly and enthusiastically exert their efforts to achieve the school goals. Grant et al. (2010) concur that as departmental leaders, the HoDs need to define and communicate a clear mission and vision to their departmental members in order to achieve their buy-in.

### *Heads of departments as managers*

Management refers to the process through which efforts of members of the organisation are coordinated, directed and steered towards the attainment of the organisational vision. According to Bambi (2012), management can be seen as a process that includes strategic planning, setting objectives, managing resources, record keeping, measuring results and deploying the human and financial resources to achieve the objectives. In addition, Naidu et al. (2008) concisely define management as a process of planning, organising, leading and controlling the efforts of members of an organisation as well as harnessing all other organisational resources to achieve the stipulated organisational mission and vision.

As indicated in the organogram presented earlier (Figure 1), the HoDs are middle managers. They serve as a link between the principal's office and



teachers (Bambi 2012). They have the responsibility to advocate for and create an environment that nurtures quality teaching and learning (Bush 2011; Bambi 2012; Ali and Abdalla 2017). Just like their line managers (school principals), the HoDs management (1) plans, (2) organises, (3) coordinates and (4) controls. The next sub-sections therefore summarise the role of the HoDs in relation to the outlined management tasks.

- (1) Planning is a process through which the managers identify and select appropriate goals and actions for the organisation. Wetshuizen et al. (2005) indicate that managers should strive to achieve the organisational goals as well as the strategies and harness resources to attain the set goals. Planning is thus a management function that entails the setting of goals and devising the means to achieve those goals. The HoDs are therefore responsible for planning the year's programme for their departments, lesson preparation, appraisal of teachers and professional development programmes for teachers.
- (2) Organising entails the creation of structures that enable the members of staff in a school to work together effectively towards achieving its mission and vision (Bush 2011). In order for the plans to flow smoothly in the school as an organisation, the HoDs should work out a systematic coordination of the various tasks by delegating the duties and responsibilities to their subordinates. They should also ensure availability of resources and manage the activities which are to be followed with the view to accomplish the school goals. The MoET also regards the Hods as organisers. MoET (2006) emphasises that one of the duties of the HoDs is to organise the setting and marking of school examinations in their subjects.
- (3) As Bush (2011) indicates, coordinating is a process through which school managers organise people, tasks, resources and the time schedule in such a way that they are complementary. In this regard, the HoDs have to coordinate the teacher activities in their departments to ensure synergy towards achieving the departmental mandate and agenda. Typically, coordinating takes place in meetings and other planning sessions to ensure all the staff members are on the same page in terms of departmental and school vision (Matete 2018). Hence, the HoDs should promote teamwork and ensure cooperation among teachers.
- (4) Controlling is a management function that focuses on efforts directed towards monitoring both organisational and employee performance (Wetshuizen et al. 2005). In the school context, the HoDs perform the controlling task by means of assessing and regulating the teaching and learning so that the schools' objectives may be accomplished (Grant et al. 2010). Furthermore, the HoDs are expected to supervise and monitor the subject teachers through lesson observations, checking the schemes of work and

preparation books, as part of their task to control the quality of teaching and learning (MoET 2006).

The management tasks mentioned above permeate the duties and responsibilities of the HoDs the way in which they permeate the principals' work. With this theoretical background and literature in view, the next section discusses the adopted research design and methodology.

## Research design and methodology

In the study we adopted an interpretivist approach and utilised a qualitative research design (Merriam 2009; Nieuwenhuis 2015). The Interpretivist approach seeks to explore human experiences in their natural setting. This paradigm assumes that researchers do not find knowledge; rather they construct it (Merriam 2009). A total of twenty four participants from eight schools were interviewed. This number consisted of sixteen HoDs and eight principals. A purposive participants' selection approach was adopted. Thus the schools were selected based on their geographical location. Four urban schools and four rural schools were selected. The purpose was to establish whether the HoDs in the different geographical locations differ in the experiences and challenges that they face in their work place. To complement the views of the HoDs, we also involved the principals since they work together in leading the schools. Table 1 illustrate the demographic particulars of the HoDs.

As indicated above, the school principals also participated in the study. Hence Table 2 illustrates the demographic detail of the principals.

As depicted in Tables 1 and 2, most teachers enter the profession between the ages of 20–22 when they graduate from the teacher education institutions. Their retirement age is 65 years (Jacobs and Tlali 2015). They are most likely to be HoDs from their mid or late 30s to 40 years of age. Correspondingly, teachers are most likely to become principals in their 40s. Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2019) underscore this view; they indicate that teachers who are drawn to leadership positions are generally achievement and learning-oriented, are typically in mid-career and mid-life, and have substantial teaching experience. Matete (2018) concurs that teachers who become HoDs and principals are relatively

**Table 2.** Demographic details of the principals.

Participants	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	Experience in principals' position
1. Principal-1	M	55	25	10
2. Principal-2	M	60	35	20
3. Principal-3	F	60	30	17
4. Principal-4	M	57	32	12
5. Principal-5	F	60	36	21
6. Principal-6	F	61	37	18
7. Principal-7	M	58	33	20
8. Principal-8	M	64	38	23

experienced and senior to their counterparts in the respective departments and schools.

### Data collection

In order to ensure crystallisation of methods, we utilised both focus group and semi-structured interviews (Nieuwenhuis 2007). The focus group interviews were conducted with the HoDs. As Greeff (2011) points out, focus group interviews create an environment that encourages participants to share perceptions, views, experiences and concerns without feeling pressurised. These widening the range of responses and activate some of the responses that may have otherwise been overlooked (Nieuwenhuis 2007). The follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals, with a view to complementing the data from the focus-group interviews (Greeff 2011). The intention was to explore the principals' views regarding the challenges faced by the HoDs in their schools. The principals provided valuable insights in this regard. Probing techniques were used in both phases of interviewing, thereby allowing further clarification on some of the issues.

### Ethical and trustworthy considerations

We audio-recorded and then transcribed the interviews verbatim. The data audio files and transcripts were safely locked away to ensure that nobody, besides the researchers, accessed them (Whiting and Vickers 2010). To further enhance integrity of the paper, we paid attention to the ethical and trustworthiness issues. For example, we issued consent letters to the participants. We also ensured confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study so that we could protect the dignity of the participants (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). Hence, the participants were allocated codes to disguise their identity. The HoDs were labelled HoD-1 to HoD-16 and the principals were labelled Principal-1 to Principal-8 respectively. This also ensured ease of reference when reporting the results.

There was no pressure or influence on the participants. Instead, participation was entirely voluntary. The participants were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the research study at any stage if they so wished (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). We employed strategies such as respondent validation (Birt et al. 2016) whereby we shared the interpreted data with the respondents to check for accuracy and resonance with their views. Furthermore, we made use of direct quotes from the data to enhance the credibility of the paper.

### The findings

The findings from both the focus-groups and semi-structured interviews were merged as we observed some overlapping themes whereby both the HoDs

and principals were unanimous on some of the issues. The findings revealed a number of challenges that the HoDs encounter while performing their duties. These challenges are presented in the following four themes which were derived from the data itself (Merriam 2009): (1) lack of training, (2) ambiguity and heavy workload (3) resistance from peers and (4) low motivation.

### *Lack of training*

Participants pointed out that the HoDs do not receive any training before they assume the headship duties. Due to lack of training, the HoDs are ill-equipped to handle the demands of the headship position. The following are the participants own words said:

I never received any formal training except the assessment that was done after I was appointed. The inspectors from the Ministry of Education and Training just gave a short interview on the roles and responsibilities of the HoDs. From there, I had to rely on my principal for the direction. (HoD-1)

There should at least be an induction programme that mainly focuses on equipping HoDs with adequate communication skills and professional strategies of solving problems, among others. (HoD-2)

Training is needed to help us grow professionally so that we can be in a position to overcome the challenges that we encounter while performing our duties, especially because we are dealing with adults in this position. (HoD-4)

The position requires problem solving skills, the ability to effectively manage time, ability to manage and work in a team; hence there is a need for us to undergo training that focus on the skills that the role demands. (HoD-7)

As far as I can remember, there has never been any training that the HoDs received after being appointed to the posts. I don't remember any training that was directly meant for HoDs in the many years that I have served in the school management structures. (Principal-1)

HoDs are chosen from a pool of senior teachers who have the highest experience. The assumption is that because of their experience in teaching, they will be able to lead the departments. However, being an experienced teacher does not guarantee that one will transition well into the headship role. The HoDs learn on the job and they depend on the support from the senior management. (Principal-2)

In the Lesotho schooling system, there is nothing in place to prepare the HoDs, There are no professional courses, seminars and workshops to equip HoD's with appropriate skills that they need in enhancement of their leadership abilities. (Principal-5)

I give them duties according to the requirements in the manual then allow them to practice and later have review meetings with them. (Principal-8)

From the above findings, the HoDs confirmed that they never received any formal training after they were appointed. The principals reiterated that the MoET does not provide any training for the HoDs: Both groups acknowledge

that being an experienced teacher does not necessarily make one settle smoothly into the headship role. One principal conceded that he uses the *Manual for Principals of Secondary and High Schools* (MoET 2006) as a guide for the HoDs since there is no training provided for them. Both the principals and the HoDs were unanimous that the HoDs need to be trained or at least be inducted to ensure that they settle-in well into the new role.

### *Role ambiguity and heavy workload*

Participants highlighted a number of duties that the HoDs are expected to perform in addition to their own teaching. These involve the leadership of their departments and assist in the overall administration of their schools. They indicated that it becomes difficult for them to balance these duties. These are some of the issues that they highlighted:

My duty is to monitor teacher's work, to ensure that the teachers attend classes and plan their work properly, as well as to offer help where needed ... not only that, and I also have my own classes to teach. (HoD-2)

I have to teach my own classes, assist the principal in the overall administration of the school when the principal is absent from school, I have to stand in. This disturbs my own teaching. (HoD-4)

I teach 20 lessons in a week, leading a big department of 19 teachers whose work I am expected to supervise and monitor. That's really a big challenge for me. (HoD-8)

I have a huge amount of work which includes teaching of my own classes, leading my departments and the general administration of the school, sometimes I can't cope. (HoD-11)

Due to my heavy teaching load, I end up compromising my supervision and leadership role. (HoD-12)

As middle managers, the HoDs have to find a balance between their leadership tasks and their own instructional duties. Sometimes they become overwhelmed. (Principal-5)

Based on the above findings, it can be noted that the HoDs are struggling to find a balance in their responsibilities as subject instructors, supervisors and leaders. Thus they feel over-worked and overwhelmed. It can be observed that these challenges may hinder them from efficiently and effectively carrying out their duties.

### *Resistance from peers*

Participants identified another major challenge of the HoDs as colleagues who are uncooperative and who undermine the HoD position. In this regard, the following issues emerged:

It is difficult to deal with some teachers who have negative attitudes. Such teachers disregard the departmental goals. They also refuse to observe the HoDs' leadership.

Sometimes such teachers negatively influence other colleagues, thereby frustrating me as their leader. (HoD-1)

Uncooperative behaviour of some teachers is a major challenge to me. They are sometimes resistant to my suggestions and ideas as a head of department, for no good reason. (HoD-3)

Some teachers are so arrogant that it becomes difficult to work with them. When I ask to check their lesson plans and scheme books, they just ignore me. (HoD-5)

Teachers know very well that they are required to submit lesson plans and scheme books for checking, but they give me a run-around when they are supposed to submit. (HoD-10)

I think teachers take advantage since they know that the Ministry of Education and Training does not fully recognise and support the position of HoDs, as a result teachers undermine the HoDs. (Principal-1)

One of the roles of HoDs is to lead the departments, to set good examples for their peers. However, one finds that some of the HoD's do the opposite, they are not punctual at work, they practise favouritism among teachers and sometimes miss classes; it becomes difficult for such teachers to have other teachers account to them. (Principal-5)

From the above findings it seems that some colleagues are insubordinate and uncooperative to the HoDs. Even though instructional leadership seeks to inspire individuals to look beyond self-interests and focus on their role of ensuring the success of their school, some fail to cooperate. In addition, the last quotation reveals that some challenges are caused by the HoDs themselves. For instance, some HoDs lack discipline and professionalism, which make their peers not to take them seriously.

### *Low motivation*

The findings also reveal that due to the lack of incentives, the HoDs motivation levels are low. Participants were unanimous that HoDs need to be somehow incentivised and encouraged to do their work. The following are the participants' own views:

I am not paid for this position; therefore there is no need for me to exhaust my energy on something that I don't even get paid for. (HoD-2)

After being appointed into the HoD position in 2008, I was getting an acting allowance of M250 on top of my salary, which unfortunately stopped in 2009 without any explanation; instead I have been underpaid since then. (HoD-16)

We all need motivation to do the job, whether intrinsic or extrinsic. We need to know that what we are doing is worthwhile and that our contribution is appreciated. HoDs are no exception. (Principal-8)

From the above findings, it seems that the HoDs feel unsupported and unappreciated because the MoET does not give them training or offer monetary

incentives for the HoD position. The HoDs feel that their efforts are in vain. It can be observed that while the Lesotho's MoET reckoned that it was necessary to appoint the HoDs to buttress the management in the high schools structure, the ministry has however neglected the HoDs, by failing to empower and motivate them. This has negatively affected their work.

## Discussion and recommendations

The findings indicate that although the HoDs play a crucial role in the school management structure (Bush 2011), they never receive any formal training. It is further indicated that even though some of the HoDs may have had considerable experience as teachers, they do not necessarily have the required skills and competences to fulfil the headship roles and responsibilities. For instance, some HoDs attested that they have had to rely on studying the *Manual for Principals of Secondary and High Schools* (MoET 2006) in order to find out what is expected of them. In the light of these findings, it is recommended that the HoDs be provided with some form of training or induction programme that will enable them to efficiently and confidently do their job. Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2019) observe that the middle leaders need to be empowered as this would and could yield job satisfaction for them.

In addition, the HoDs are expected to monitor teaching and learning. Hence they need to be trained in their subject areas and leadership skills required for them to become effective. Thus, they can be trained before they assume their duty as HoDs. From time to time they can also be given the opportunity to undergo relevant continuous professional development. From the findings, it seems that the principals are not doing much to develop the capacity of the HoDs. Rather, they shift the blame to the MoET. It is significant that the participating principals acknowledge their own leadership shortcomings which negatively impact on the HoDs. They (the principals) also have to apply instructional leadership by building the capacity and inspiring the HoDs to reach their maximum potential (Harris and Jones 2017).

While the HoDs play a crucial role in steering the school to achieve its mission and vision (Hallinger and Wang 2015), it has been pointed out that the role of middle leaders can however be particularly challenging (Harris and Jones 2017). The HoDs perform numerous tasks that can exert a lot of pressure on them. For example, their tasks include teaching, administrative duties, monitoring of teacher's work, curriculum instruction, work allocation, budgeting and supervision as well as assisting the principal in the general management of the school. The demands of the role can be exhausting and time consuming. Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2019) also reiterates that middle-leaders' tasks are demanding and time-consuming. In order to relieve the HoD from a heavy workload, it is recommended that the HoDs delegate some of the duties to their colleagues so that everybody can have a share in the leadership of their department. In

addition, it is recommended that their job description be clarified and streamlined in such a way that they can find a balance in their day to day duties. In addition they should be afforded all forms of support and development that may maximise their potential to lead their departments (Harris and Jones 2017).

It was also noted that some of the HoDs are given a hard time by colleagues who resist their leadership. For instance such colleagues refuse to be assigned duties by their HoDs. They also disregard deadlines when asked to submit lesson plans and scheme books for checking. This may be caused by the fact that they are aware that the position is not fully recognised by the MoET in terms of monetary incentives. This behaviour causes stress and frustration for the HoDs. They feel undermined and unsupported by their colleagues. Against this backdrop, it can be recommended that the HoDs should have a representative body which can advocate for their support and recognition by all the stakeholders. This recommendation supports that of Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2019) who note that recognition contributes to the middle leaders' sense of empowerment and satisfaction. Such recognition could be both in the form of monetary compensation and through appreciation shown by colleagues and the principal. In-keeping with the instructional leadership theory, all the stakeholders at all levels should take part in supporting and ensuring the effectiveness of the HoDs (Sahin 2011).

### Limitations and future directions

The study reveals that as instructional leaders, the HoD's are of great assistance to the principals on the day to day running of the schools (Hallinger and Wang 2015); however they encounter the challenges while performing their duties.

By adopting the qualitative approach, the study only focused on a relatively small group of participants. A quantitative survey could have illuminated the magnitude of the challenges and the breadth of the affected HoDs population. The views from the MoET could also have shed some light on some of the HoDs issues. Hence we note that future studies should consider a quantitative angle and seek the views of the relevant MoET officials.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we focused on the challenges faced by the HoD's in selected Lesotho high schools. While it has been noted that the HoDs play a crucial role as middle leaders and managers in their schools, it has however, become evident that they encounter several challenges which sometimes render them inefficient. The challenges include lack of training, role ambiguity and heavy work load, resistance from peers and low motivation due to lack of incentives. These challenges can be mitigated through a vigilant application of instructional leadership. Thus the MoET and the principals should take it upon



themselves to motivate and empower the HoDs. In the final analysis, we envisage that if the support and development mechanisms suggested in the recommendations are employed, these may improve the HoDs efficiency. Without such requisite empowerment and recognition, the HoD title could merely remain ceremonial.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributors

*Dr. Tebello Tlali* is a senior lecturer at the National University of Lesotho.

*Ms. Ntjoetso Matete* is Master of Education graduate at the National University of Lesotho.

### ORCID

*Tebello Tlali*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1570-3369>

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