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## Creating Space for Teachers as Curriculum Leaders in Secondary Schools

Rebecca Bessong\* 

Department of Educational Studies  
University of Venda, South Africa

**Abstract.** Although the inclusion of teachers in curriculum leadership is essential for efficient teaching and learning, opportunities for teacher participation remain sparse. To address this gap, the present study aims to examine how school principals create opportunities for teachers as curriculum leaders (TCL) in secondary schools in South Africa. Employing a qualitative research approach through a multiple case study design, eight school principals were purposively (study was on principals) and conveniently selected (those who were willing to participate). Principals were individually interviewed and some school meetings were observed to obtain the empirical data. The thematically analysed data revealed that principals create opportunities for teachers to serve as curriculum leaders through teacher empowerment (teachers being delegated to analyse whole-school results). Principals also create participative decision-making structures (in which teachers freely suggest solutions to problems and principals share their visions through open communication). The findings also revealed that, through the professional development (PD) of teachers (time allocated for continuous PD and platforms provided for teacher collaboration), principals create opportunities for TCL. The implications of this study are that these strategies provide opportunities for teacher inclusion in matters such as curriculum development processes, as teachers are better informed of students' needs. The study contributes to the knowledge of effective means of conducting and improving teachers' PD that will culminate in desired student outcomes. Further research is recommended with a larger sample that may permit the generalisation of findings. Future studies could seek teachers' perceptions on their preferred strategies for creating these opportunities.

**Keywords:** curriculum leaders; distributed leadership; Grant's model; principals; teacher leadership

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\* Corresponding author: Rebecca Bessong; [agbor.bessong@univen.ac.za](mailto:agbor.bessong@univen.ac.za)

## 1. Introduction

Teacher curriculum leadership is of the utmost importance in achieving efficient teaching and learning in schools. Consequently, the issue of creating opportunities for teachers to take the lead in matters relating to the curriculum is of great concern to all stakeholders in education. It is challenging for principals to share leadership of the school with other potential leaders. However, experience shows that even dysfunctional and poorly performing schools can be turned around when principals create curriculum leadership opportunities for teachers. Teacher curriculum leadership can be developed by providing teachers with opportunities to take the lead in curriculum matters. When given the opportunity, teachers collaborate with colleagues and develop professionally, experiencing inclusion and a sense of ownership of the school (Seth & Ntirandekura, 2022), thus becoming more innovative. As a result, teaching and learning becomes more efficient, leading to a higher quality of education.

Post-apartheid, South Africa's education system remains fundamentally bureaucratic, with high accountability measures in place (du Plessis & Heystek, 2020) due to existing policies. The Department of Education (2009), through the Task Team on Education Management and Development (2009) and the Norms and Standards for Educators in South Africa (Department of Education, 2000), has called for decentralised and democratic schools. Such a paradigm shift from autocracy to democracy in terms of school leadership has introduced significant responsibilities and challenges for school principals (Bhengu & Myende, 2016; Chikoko et al., 2014; du Plessis, 2013). One such responsibility is to engage in the practice of distributed leadership (DL), which will create a space in which teacher curriculum leadership can emerge. TCL have enormous potential to contribute to efficient teaching and learning that can, in turn, promote high quality education.

Furthermore, the practice of teacher leadership (TL), which includes teacher curriculum leadership, is dependent upon the leadership style of the principal. The results of a case study by Cooney and Cohen (2024), involving district curriculum leaders, principals and teachers in the United States of America, showed that a style of participation that values the concepts of teacher voice and shared leadership is critical in managing institutional complexity. Similarly, the results of a qualitative study by Nkhambule (2023a) in South Africa showed that when principals engage in participative and transformative leadership styles, they promote curriculum and knowledge sharing. Consequently, this enhances teacher curriculum delivery processes (a form of professional development), leading to improved student learning. In addition, a survey conducted in Nigeria by Idhalama and Echedom (2021) found that the principals provided a conducive environment for knowledge sharing. This resulted in allowing both experienced and inexperienced teachers to thrive in knowledge management relating to their professional growth. Contrary to the findings above, in another study of three schools in South Africa, Nkhambule (2023b) found that only one of the three schools practiced knowledge sharing. Principals' practices in the other two schools were dominated by ineffective knowledge sharing, characterised by counter-collaboration, top-down communication and decision making, inaccessibility to non-managerial staff and chronic teacher absenteeism.

Nkhambule's (2023b) findings illustrate that in the absence of any opportunity for teacher curriculum leadership, almost no learning takes place. The "solo leader" in the person of the principal cannot be everywhere and do everything at the same time.

Harris et al. (2020) refers to teacher engagement in curriculum leadership as a distinctive form of teacher agency. Principals' leadership styles must include the creation of opportunities for teachers to take up curriculum leadership roles. However, while noting that the contemporary literature on curriculum leadership is less well developed, Harris et al. (2020) found that principals voice their intentions of creating space but in reality, they fail to do so.

A case study by Asegu and Gedifew (2022) showed that principals in Ethiopia continue to practice the traditional style of leadership. Such an individualistic style of leadership creates no opportunities for teacher curriculum leadership. Thus, confirming earlier reports by Harris et al. (2020) from their study on curriculum leadership as a critical contributor to school and system improvement, that curriculum-focused leadership practice enacted by teachers is not prominent.

Specifically, in the South African context, there is a need for more studies on teacher curriculum leadership development. Research (Asegu & Gedifew, 2022; Nkhambule, 2023a) has shown that it is impossible for schools to be led effectively when principals cling to autocratic forms of leadership. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine how school principals create opportunities for teachers to take the lead in matters pertaining to the curriculum within schools. By examining the ways in which principals create opportunities for teachers to lead in curriculum matters, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on teacher curriculum leadership in particular and on curriculum leadership in general, in order to further promote school improvement and better student outcomes.

## **2. Literature Review**

The following section presents a synopsis of the previous findings relating to principals creating opportunities for TCL. This includes the literature on school leadership, distributed leadership, and teacher leadership, TCL and principals creating opportunities for TCL.

### **2.1 School Leadership, Distributed Leadership, and Teacher Leadership**

School leadership strives to create favourable teaching and learning conditions for all learners. Furthermore, it involves fostering environments that can empower and support teachers to engage usefully in teaching and learning activities (Swart et al., 2021). Thus, the quality of school leadership has a significant impact on teaching, learning and the overall success of the school (Zuze & Juan, 2020). Amongst the many educational leadership theories that exist, such as autocratic, transactional and instructional leadership theories, distributed leadership speaks to the core of this study. Grant (2019) defines distributed leadership as a form of leadership consisting of many leaders who interact with their followers in meaningful, dynamic ways. Bush (2018) describes it as a leadership model that

cuts across an organisation, empowering staff to develop their own leadership capabilities.

Within schools, the practice of distributed leadership creates an environment that is conducive to the emergence of teacher leadership, which involves teachers taking up both formal and informal leadership roles within schools and into the community (Zhang et al., 2021). In their systematic review, Schott et al. (2020) define teacher leadership as the process of non-positional or ordinary classroom teachers influencing others with the goal of developing students. Swart et al.'s (2021) framework consisted of a combination of the diverse school contexts in South Africa, school leadership, organisational climate and servant leadership. This conceptual mix illustrates the pivotal role of school leadership, of which teacher leadership is a component. Also in South Africa, Zuze and Juan (2020) employed a quantitative methodology in their study of school leadership and school context; their findings also emphasised the importance of teacher leadership in schools.

## **2.2 Teachers as Curriculum Leaders**

The concept of TCL falls within the ambit of teacher leadership, under the umbrella of school leadership. As leaders, teachers perform various roles, among which curriculum implementation is considered pivotal (Muijs et al., 2013). The multifaceted nature of teacher leadership roles incorporates teachers as leaders, administrators, and managers (Shahrill, 2014). Furthermore, teachers also serve as subject specialists (Makgato & Ramaligela, 2012), interpreters and designers of learning programme materials (Ostovar-Namaghi, 2017; Putri et al., 2019). Teachers are facilitators (Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2020), assessors (Nguyen, 2019) and lifelong learners (Polz, 2020). Additionally, they are pastoral caregivers and role models (Putri et al., 2019; Sekhu, 2019). In addition, teachers help to form the culture of the school and serve as mentors, coaches, and collaborators (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012). All these roles are curriculum-related and yet the literature relating to TCL is very sparse. Therefore, this study seeks to provide information on how principals create opportunities for TCL, thereby contributing to increasing the sparse volume of knowledge on TCL. The next section analysed previous studies on how principals attempted to create curriculum leading opportunities for teachers.

## **2.3 Principals Creating Opportunities for Teachers as Curriculum Leaders**

Many countries around the world are moving away from the bureaucratic management and "principal-oriented" form of school leadership, including Albania, the United States of America and China (Elmazi, 2018; Hart, 2021; Murphy & Brennan, 2024). The literature (Chen et al., 2021) shows that principals endeavour to create opportunities for TCL by giving teachers autonomy over curriculum tasks, establishing structures for participative decision-making, communicating the school's vision and by supporting teachers' professional development (PD), which includes allocating time for PD activities and creating collaborative platforms for teachers.

### 2.3.1 Empowerment of teachers

Teachers are empowered to lead when duties are delegated, participative decision-making structures are established, and principals share their visions for the school. A descriptive survey by Aja-Okorie and Oko (2021), which involved 5,676 secondary school teachers of Ebonyi State in Nigeria, revealed that principals delegate curriculum duties to teachers, such as the supervision of internal and external examinations. In a qualitative study, Driescher (2016) explained that by assigning or approving teachers' self-assumed informal positions – such as subject leads, grade leads or phase leads – principals motivate teachers to serve in such capacities. Szeto and Cheng (2018) report that, in China, teachers who have been designated as subject leaders with clearly defined expectations are highly motivated. As a result of their mixed method study, Seth and Ntirandekura (2022) suggest that principals should delegate tasks to teachers that align with their expertise, as this results in efficiency, effectiveness and job satisfaction. Successful task completion motivates teachers to further aspire to increase their service, thereby fostering principals' trust of teachers and building confidence in teachers. However, having used a mapping framework to analyse knowledge production and distributed leadership in schools in England, Gunter et al. (2013) declared that delegation as a form of distributed leadership is indistinguishable from allocative distributed leadership, which is prescriptive as opposed to emergent. In response, Zhang et al. (2021) explained that teacher readiness (indicated by self-efficacy and teacher competence) for leadership opportunities is crucial for achieving meaningful teacher leadership.

- **Creating structures for participative decision-making and vision-sharing**

Principals should establish participatory leadership structures in schools (Li & Liu, 2020). In line with this, Hallinger and Walker (2017), aver that such decision-making structures enable teachers to work collaboratively with colleagues, building trust and interdependence. In their study, Szeto and Cheng (2018) reported that although Chinese principals had their own opinions on school issues, they considered the teachers' views prior to making informed decisions. In a qualitative study of successful principals in the Philippines, Kilag et al. (2023) indicate that principals engaged in collaborative decision-making, resulting in a wide range of perspectives being considered. These principals ensured that decisions were made with the best interests of all stakeholders in mind, thereby promoting ownership and accountability among all stakeholders.

When principals share their vision for the school with teachers (Corrigan & Merry, 2022) and seek teachers' ideas to inform decisions and practices (Li & Liu., 2020), it gives teachers a sense of worth and belonging. Szeto and Cheng (2018) indicated that principals share their vision with teachers through regular and constructive planned and unplanned communication, in addition to modelling their expectations of teachers thus instilling coherence in output. Such inclusion has inspirational and empowering effects on teachers. Contrary to these findings however, Malaysian principals (Chua et al., 2020) were found to have failed to share their vision and had not allowed for the teachers to benefit from the activities of professional learning communities (PLCs). Consequently, the

teachers could not comprehend principals' lack of support regarding PLCs activities. In addition to teacher empowerment, principals enable teachers to engage in professional development activities as shown in the next section.

### 2.3.2 Professional development of teachers

- **Principals allocating time for PD**

By allocating time, and creating platforms for teacher collaboration, principals can create space for TCL. A survey by Baharuddin et al. (2023) found that principals in Indonesia who integrated instructional and transformational leadership styles had a positive effect on teachers' professional development. This leadership style encourages principals to provide teachers with additional professional development activities (Bellibas et al., 2022). Another survey by Hosseingholizadeh et al. (2023) showed that principals in Iran engaged in instructional leadership activities, which positively impacted teachers' professional learning and development. Thus, these studies indicate that principals can and should create curriculum leadership opportunities for teachers in schools.

Carpenter (2018) studied Californian teachers and principals and reported that, when teachers collaborate in PLCs, they share both physical and intellectual workspaces that result in beneficial activities and products. Szeto and Cheng (2018) also found that some principals in their study sought out and provided teachers with information about external resources for PD. Furthermore, they also granted teachers leave of absence to attend such PD training.

However, several studies show contrasting results. Sintayehu (2020) reported on the findings of a descriptive survey in Ethiopia, stating that principals practice autocratic leadership. Their subordinates, despite feeling inclined to resist their principals' influence, complied in order to avoid punitive measures. Such principals do not attempt to create any PD opportunities for TCL. Similarly, the findings from Ajani's qualitative study (2020) indicated that, in both South Africa and Nigeria, in-service teachers do not receive regular monitoring or support from principals. In addition, the PD opportunities offered were found to be too general, not being directed towards any specific group of teachers, which made them ineffective. The findings of Sasere and Makhasane's study (2023) in Nigeria confirmed Ajani's (2020) findings on Nigerian teachers.

Thus, the literature shows that PD is crucial for teachers' professional growth, irrespective of the context. Principals must make balanced judgements and follow strategies that align with their individual school context. Hence the gap this study seeks for fill.

- **Principals creating platforms for teacher collaboration**

A study by Mthanti and Msiza (2023) on the role of school principals in the PD of teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in South Africa revealed that principals provide a teaching and learning environment that is conducive to teachers' PD. For example, the principals always informed teachers about upcoming PD sessions that had been organised by the Department of Education or any other

organisations and encouraged and motivated teachers to participate in them. Hallinger and Walker (2017) conducted a review of leading learning in Asia and reported that principals introduced PLCs to facilitate staff learning and encourage participation in PD. These formal school-level frameworks were found to enhance teacher capacity, collaboration, and peer learning.

Similarly, Kim and Lee (2020)'s quantitative study involved teachers from Japan, Singapore and South Korea, who mostly participated in the traditional types of PD, involving workshops and courses. However, teachers in Japan further engaged in mentoring, conferences, and class observation visits to other schools, while teachers in Singapore and Korea focused more on engaging in teacher networks, peer observation, coaching and research-oriented activities.

In summary, the literature discussed above suggests that, as a general aim, both principals and teachers need to contribute to the realisation of these leadership opportunities. When principals engage in activities that encourage teacher leadership, teachers should be prepared to embrace the opportunity for growth. However, the literature on how principals create these opportunities for teachers remains limited, especially in the context of South Africa (the gap this study attempts to fill), where school leadership has been dominated by a top-down model. The following section presents the theoretical framework containing the tools used to analyse the data for this study.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The discussion of this study's findings is grounded on Grant's model of teacher leadership (Grant, 2008), as presented in Figure 1 below. Grant first formulated the model of teacher leadership – consisting of four zones, impacted by context and prerequisites – in 2008. Zone 1 refers to teachers' leadership within the classroom; Zone 2 relates to teachers' leadership outside of the classroom with other learners and colleagues; Zone 3 refers to teachers' leadership within the school, involving whole-school evaluation and decision-making and Zone 4 describes the area of leadership in which teachers engage outside of the school, across other schools and into the community. Fairman and Mackenzie (2012) referred to these zones as spheres, while Muijs et al. (2013) called them boundaries.

In 2012, Grant improved upon the model by adding several indicators and six roles (Grant, 2019). Role 1- Continuing to teach and improving one's own teaching (within Zone 1); 2- Providing curriculum development knowledge (within Zones 2 and 4); 3- Leading in-service education and assisting other teachers (within Zones 2 and 4); 4- Participating in the performance evaluation of teachers (within Zone 2); 5- Organising and leading peer reviews of school practice (within Zone 3); and 6- Participating in school-level decision-making (within Zone 3).

The link between the existing literature and Grant's (2008) model of teacher leadership is in the zones, in which principals create opportunities for teachers to lead in curriculum matters. Principals empower teachers in Zones 1 and 2 through instructional leadership and by sharing their vision with teachers. In Zone 3,

principals create opportunities for teachers by engaging in participative decision-making. Similarly, PD opportunities are created in all four zones; for example, class visits and lesson modelling (Zone 1), collaboration with colleagues within the school (Zones 2 and 3) and collaboration with colleagues across schools in professional learning communities (Zone 4). Principals' engagement in such activities in different zones informs the research question regarding the ways in which principals create opportunities for TCL.

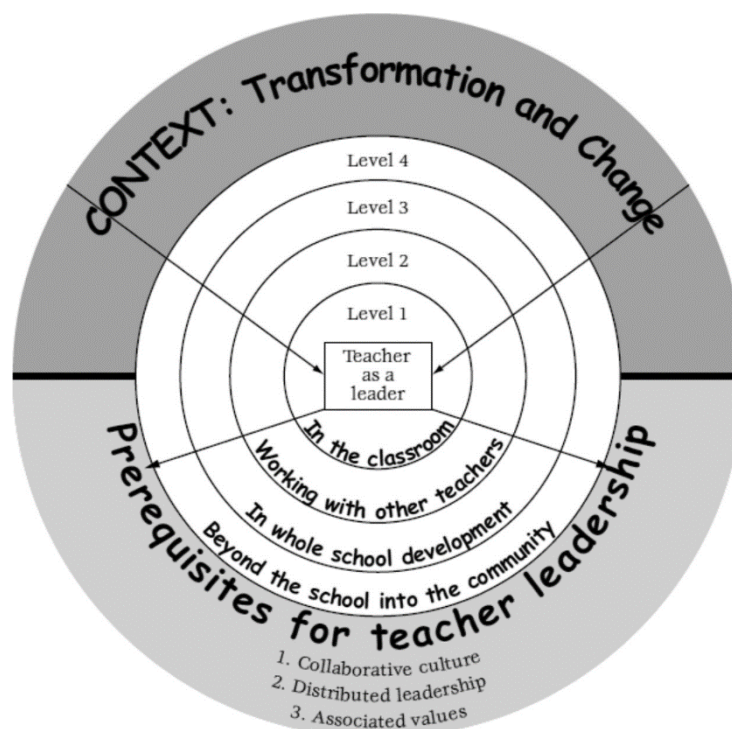


Figure 1: Teacher leadership zones (Grant, 2008, p. 93)

As can be seen in the model, Grant (2008) suggests that the necessary prerequisites of teacher leadership are collaborative culture, distributed leadership, and associated values (trust, respect, recognition, ownership, transparency, and consultation). These prerequisites must be taken into consideration in those contexts in which principals intend to create space for teacher leadership in curriculum matters in order to realise the expected transformation and change in teachers as curriculum leaders. The findings of some teacher leadership studies – such as those of Seth and Ntirandekura (2022) in Uganda, Wang et al. (2022) in China and Bektaş et al. (2022) in Turkey – align with Grant's model on the prerequisites for teacher leadership. These studies affirm the significant effect of distributed leadership on teacher leadership.

#### 4. Methodology

Using a multiple-site case study with a qualitative design, the researcher investigated how principals create opportunities for TCL. Multiple-site case studies provide a broader base for rich data that can help to better understand the phenomenon (Heale & Twycross, 2018). Qualitative study offers participants the opportunity to tell their story and is best employed in cases where there is little



existing knowledge about a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017); this is the case with regard to the ways in which principals create opportunities for TCL. Multiple-site case studies afforded the researcher the opportunity to examine principals' stories in depth (Schoch, 2020) and offered a broader scope from which to obtain data (Mohajan, 2018) on how principals create opportunities for TCL. The subjectivity of a qualitative study allows for multiple interpretations to derive meaning from others' experiences (Mohajan, 2018). Eight secondary school principals in Soutpansberg East Circuit in Vhembe district in Limpopo Province were selected through convenience sampling. Through this sampling method, the researcher worked with eight principals who opted to participate in the study (Etikan et al., 2016) out of 20 who were initially identified and contacted. Principals were also purposively sampled because the study focuses on principals. All of the initial 20 principals were selected based on the proximity of their schools to the researcher. Eight of those principals agreed to participate in the study and thus comprised the study sample.

All of the participants were between 45 and 54 years old. Participants' work experience as teachers ranged from 12 to 32 years, and as principals ranged from four to 19 years of service. No specific criteria were used to select participants of this age group nor range of work experience because the researcher is of the opinion that all principals, irrespective of age and work experience, lead teachers and are therefore expected to create opportunities for TCL in their schools. The literature (Chua et al., 2020; Mthanti & Msiza, 2023) guided the construction of the semi-structured open-ended interview guide questions and the meeting observation tool used for the study.

The researcher piloted the interview questions (see Appendix 1, attached) with two other principals who were not part of the sample. With permission from the eight participants, the researcher audio recorded the face-to-face individual interviews, asking predetermined questions. The focus was on the research question "How do principals create opportunities for teachers as curriculum leaders?" Furthermore, the researcher also probed participants' responses, where necessary, for clarity. Each interview session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

During the in-person observations, the researcher adopted the non-participant observation stance. In other words, the participants were aware of the observer's presence, but the researcher did not interact with the participants. During observations, the researcher completed the observation guide based on what was observed. The researcher observed only two school meetings for additional data, rather than eight, because six of the meetings had already taken place prior to the commencement of data collection. No other opportunities were available to the researcher during the data collection period for observing whole-school meetings in the other six schools. Data were collected from July to October, 2019. During the interviews, the researcher asked participants the following four questions: *Briefly discuss your understanding of the concept of teachers as curriculum leaders in schools; Please tell me how you create opportunities for teachers to perform their role as curriculum leaders; What helps you in creating opportunities that enable teachers to perform their role as curriculum leaders; What challenges do you encounter in your efforts to create opportunities for teachers as curriculum leaders?* These questions were

designed to relate to activities within the zones of Grant's model. Knowledge from the literature reviewed for this study, assisted the researcher for example to focus on the responses to the questions of "*Please tell me how you create opportunities for teachers to perform their role as curriculum leaders*"; and "*What helps you in creating opportunities that enable teachers to perform their role as curriculum leaders?*" These questions align with Wan's (2024) recommendations for creating an environment in schools that nurtures the development of TCL.

In order to analyse the data, the recorded interviews were transcribed into texts. The researcher listened to the audio recordings several times while reading from the interview transcripts. This helped to increase familiarity with the data. All stages of data analysis were performed manually. By employing the reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019), the researcher coded and recoded the data to enhance understanding of the data patterns. Recoding was also undertaken to ensure that no interesting aspects had been omitted. The researcher grouped codes of similar meanings together, before developing themes from the code groups. Next, the researcher checked each theme against its relevant data extracts. The meanings derived from the data extracts enabled the researcher to achieve the objective of determining how principals create opportunities for teachers to lead in curriculum matters. This process of reflective thematic analyses enabled each participant's response to be studied for the meaning it conveys (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thus, answers to the research question of how principals create space for teachers as curriculum leaders were identified.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher accurately presented the findings of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) and analysed participants' responses, making use of verbatim quotations. Furthermore, the researcher also made use of a checking strategy to validate the findings (Candela, 2019). Member checking enabled the participants to review the data they had provided. This also assisted in eliminating researcher's bias. The findings of this study were sent to the participants, all of whom expressed their satisfaction. Additionally, the researcher clearly linked the data and findings for confirmability (Lietz & Zayas, 2010).

Prior to data gathering, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee (Number EM19/03/01), receiving permissions from the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education, Vhembe District Office, Soutpansberg East Circuit, and school principals. The researcher informed the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. By ascribing numerical pseudonyms to the principals (P1-P8) and their corresponding schools (S1 to S8), the participants' privacy was respected, and their interests protected. Moreover, the researcher upheld participants' privacy by interviewing them individually. In addition, participants' ages were the only seemingly private information collected for the study. Data were stored securely in digital format at the university. No personal information relating to the participants has been reported in the study results. Furthermore, the participants gave their informed consent at the outset of the study.

## 5. Findings

The findings of this qualitative study provided answers to the research question of “*How do school principals create opportunities for teachers as curriculum leaders in schools?*” From the collected and analysed data (from interviews and observations), two main themes and five sub-themes were developed. Theme one is principals’ empowerment of teachers for curriculum leading activities. As sub-themes, this theme includes: delegating curriculum tasks to teachers; creating structures for participative decision-making; and principals sharing their vision with teachers. Theme two is the PD of teachers, which has two sub-themes: allocating time for PD; and creating collaborative platforms for teachers. When principals empower teachers by sharing the school vision with them, creating structures in school that give teachers a voice in decision-making and assigning certain curriculum tasks to teachers, they create opportunities for teachers to perform their roles as curriculum leaders. The theme of teacher empowerment relates to Grant’s (2008) model of teacher leadership as the principals are engaging in two core aspects of the model (distributed leadership and collaborative school culture), which allow for the emergence of teacher leadership. Similarly, the theme of teacher PD relates to the research question as leaders must be knowledgeable and masters of their art. By allocating time and resources for teacher PD, principals create enabling conditions (collaboration and nurturing values such as trust, respect, interdependence), as advocated in Grant’s model. Skills gained during collaboration, both within and beyond the school, provide further opportunities for teachers to lead curriculum matters.

### 5.1 Teacher Empowerment

The findings in this theme indicated that the principals create opportunities for teachers to lead curriculum matters by delegating curriculum tasks to them, creating participatory decision-making structures and sharing their vision of the school with teachers.

#### 5.1.1 Delegating curriculum duties to teachers

Principals in this study reported that they provide opportunities for teacher leadership in curriculum matters when they delegate responsibility to teachers for certain activities. Those teachers had to account for their progress and ensure that the activities were brought to successful completion. Among the principals’ comments were the following statements:

*“I give them responsibilities, like making someone head of sports committee, assessment committee or award committee.” (P3)*

*“We delegate them. For example, we say this is the group of people that must run Sport... So now every educator is given an opportunity to be a leader in [the] curriculum.” (P5)*

One principal went further than simply delegating to teachers. To an extent, he shared leadership roles with teachers. He explained this as follows:

*“I cannot do everything alone; I cannot always be at point A, B and eh... C always; that is why I usually encourage and assign them...” (P2)*

Delegating curriculum duties to teachers gives them a sense of recognition and confidence that their leadership potential and contribution to the school is acknowledged. This also contributes to teacher self-efficacy, positive identity, and a desire for professional growth. This aspect of delegation demonstrates principals' efforts towards shared leadership, which is a prerequisite for the establishment of teacher leadership in curriculum matters. The principals' quotes, shown above, align with a curriculum meeting observation in S2 (observation notes 03/10/2019 appendix 2), in which the teachers of Science and Mathematics presented an analysis of the whole-school results from the previous term. This task had been delegated to them by the principal. The aim of the analysis was to determine the next steps of the school in assisting students who were performing poorly. Teacher empowerment and PD contribute to teacher leadership and school improvement in that the acquisition of knowledge and skills enables teachers to become more confident and self-efficacious in taking up their agential role in teacher leadership. In addition, it is likely to contribute to better classroom management, more time spent on task, improved student learning and overall school improvement. However, principals might encounter challenges if some teachers fail in the tasks delegated to them or do not make use of the enabling conditions provided for their development as curriculum leaders.

#### 5.1.2 Creating participative decision-making structures

By creating participative decision-making structures in schools, principals made space available for TCL. Some principals explained the ways in which they give voices to teachers in curriculum decision-making, as shown below:

*"We sit down as a school in a formal meeting, come up with the statistics of the SGB, ...the educators and come up with one decision that will lead to the development of our school." (P6)*

*"As indicated, I do inclusive decision-making... During the staff meetings we allow everybody to raise issues so that we can discuss and ... work on that point that we have agreed upon." (P8)*

The findings suggest that although principals are the leaders of leaders, they do not make all of the decisions and delegate some to teachers. The principals acknowledged and respected the pivotal role that teachers perform as curriculum leaders, without whom the curriculum withers and dies. Participative decision-making structures create a sense of belonging, ownership, and unity and spark creativity. This was expressed in the words of some of the principals:

*"...during trial examination, the learners were staying at school... at home they are not reading...we...talk to other stakeholders and get learners at school until they finish their examination. I have seen an improvement of 51, 33 pass with raw marks." (P6)*

*"...educators are free to say how about doing things this way...of course there are policy issues where I strictly have to stick to them...we have a real problem here that they brought to me...of learners coming late to school and the way they (educators) want to solve it (stop learners from coming late) is that those learners who are late should not be allowed into the classroom. Which is not allowed as per policy. But as they engaged*

*parents about their learners coming late and those learners not changing [to arrive early] but lateness continuing, I said let's try that...and to a certain extent, it works." (P7)*

The use of the plural pronoun "we" in participants' (P6 & P7) comments, shown above, suggests that there is a genuine culture of participative decision-making in the schools. During the whole-school meeting at S4 (01/10/2019 appendix 2), all of the teachers participated and freely contributed to each decision that was made, including the agenda of the meeting, as teachers proposed issues to be added for discussion. When teachers are involved in the decisions that are made, they feel more inclined to go the extra mile to deliver on whatever has been decided.

### *5.1.3 Principals sharing the vision of the school with teachers*

Principals also indicated that they share their vision of the school with teachers, so that they can also see the bigger picture of the whole school's success. Some principals explained as follows:

*"I talk with them during the meeting and during the subject committee meetings and also to encourage them to motivate them. If I motivate them they can work very hard... When they see that I am working very hard they will also work very hard. Because they will be learning from me as an example." (P4)*

*"When we start our academic year with our academic programmes, we hold a meeting of which we are all reminded of the vision and the mission of the school and if we move per the mission and vision of the school we are not going to deviate, and we shall always be right." (P2)*

The findings indicate that principals overtly and continuously communicate their aspirations for the school to benefit all of the stakeholders. Not only do these principals share their vision verbally, but they also put their words into practise by exhibiting the same performance they expect of teachers. As teachers work towards the goal of attaining the school's mission, there is a collaborative attitude amongst them as they keep the school's vision in mind.

## **5.2 Teacher Professional Development**

As indicated above, this theme has two sub-themes of providing time for continuous professional development and the provision of collaborative platforms.

### *5.2.1 Creating collaborative opportunities*

Continuous PD is central to teachers' control over their own careers. The principals in this study indicated that they ensure teachers are regularly upskilled, making use of every opportunity that arises. For example, some participants explained:

*"We hold workshops, we pick up an aspect, say, classroom management, we consult educators that are good on that aspect and we allow them to go and prepare something that they can present in order to develop others. So, we usually hold workshops. Sometimes we invite curriculum advisers... we invite people from other institutions to come and deal with*

*some aspects strictly in the school and a section of a thing that we want the educators to develop.” (P5)*

*“Um, we have eh, WhatsApp groups among the teachers, where they discuss some of the papers afterwards and some memo discussions they have. And um, obviously in the teaching some teachers make available their worksheets or work charts um, um and are willing to share it with other people if they can use it to their advantage to teach their children.” (P1)*

It is clear from the statements above that the principals are aware that it is their responsibility, as leaders of leaders, to ensure that teachers participate in workshops and any other PD activities that will benefit them. Also, principals encourage teachers to make use of digital platforms for collaboration. Collaboration also nurtures the associated values of trust and respect, as well as upholds the school culture. These teacher collaborations align with the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs). Such opportunities enable teachers remain up to date in their areas of specialisation, in terms of new content and methodologies.

#### *5.2.2 Allocation of time for continuous PD opportunities*

In addition to encouraging teachers to attend workshops, further their studies and partake in other forms of continuous PD, principals also permitted teachers to collaborate with colleagues within the school and across schools. The following excerpts illustrated this:

*“Our school is blessed with very good educators. Most of them are good. We allow them to go and help in the neighbouring schools and we do the same with other educators from different schools. They can come here...” (P5)*

*“I am a physical science educator of grade 12, but there are people who are teaching grade 10 and 11 physical sciences. We usually [sit] together and plan. How do we move forward, how do I want to fine my learners in grade 12, who are coming from grade 11. Must I teach grade 11 work in grade 12 when they have passed grade 11...No!.” (P4)*

*“There is also what is done now...the Memo discussions, where all educators of a subject from one circuit discuss exams marking guides. It’s very important. They will be able to see that, ‘Oh! I was doing this problem this way, but it can also be done this way, and these my kids will understand it better...’ So in this way, teachers learn from their peers.” (P8)*

*“Yes, uh, we allow them to go for professional development. If there are workshops, we try and make sure that they attend such workshops without failing. We create space for these people; if they want to go for professional development, we give them days...and we encourage them to enrol with other institutions like universities and other institutions that*

*might enhance their professionalism; we give them chance to do that.”*  
(P3)

The participants' responses suggest that, as teachers themselves, principals are aware of the enormous benefits of teacher collaboration. Teachers are willing to share their expertise with colleagues for the overall benefit of less experienced teachers, student success, and the school. The themes of teacher empowerment and teacher PD both align with Grant's model in that the opportunities principals create enable teachers to perform roles reflecting various indicators in all four zones of Grant's model. Furthermore, these themes also align with the theory of distributed leadership because principals engage in its practice (delegating tasks, participative decision-making, vision sharing) to create opportunities for teachers as curriculum leaders. The impact of principals engaging in teacher leadership and distributed leadership can be seen in the creation of opportunities for teachers as curriculum leaders. Hence, the principal as a leader can lead the school by dividing tasks, sharing authority, involving all stakeholders and potential leaders, and developing teacher professionalism to enhance effective and efficient school leadership and student learning.

## **6. Discussion**

This section discusses the findings, in line with the themes of teacher empowerment and teacher PD.

### **6.1 Teacher Empowerment**

The findings in this theme revealed that principals create space for teachers as leaders in curriculum matters in different ways. First, the study findings indicate that principals create opportunities for TCL by assigning teachers curriculum tasks, such as leading the sports committee, assessment committee, and examination committees and analysing whole-school results, as in the meetings observed in S2 (observation notes 03/10/2019). This finding is in line with those of Aja-Okorie and Oko (2021), who found that teachers in Nigeria are delegated curriculum duties (supervisors of internal and external examinations). Furthermore, these findings also relate to Zone 3 of Grant's model on participative leadership. These principals also heed the precepts of the National Tasks Team on Education Development by The Department of Education (2009), which advocates the sharing of powers with anyone with leadership potential at school. The enthusiasm with which the teachers of S2 reported the analysed results to the rest of the school portrayed that the space created was readily taken up by teachers with leadership potentials (Seth & Ntirandekura, 2022) and willingness to lead (Zhang et al., 2021) in curriculum matters.

Furthermore, the findings of this study show that in creating opportunities for teachers to lead in curriculum matters, principals empower teachers by creating participative decision-making structures. The analysis report in S2 resulted in a collective decision by teachers to use subject-specific strategies to assist underperforming students. This finding reflects role 6 in Zone 3 of Grant's model, which refers to participation in school-level decision-making. It also correlates with the findings of Kilag et al. (2023), who found that principals in the

Philippines engage in collaborative decision-making with stakeholders, including teachers. Such opportunities not only promote teacher leadership, but also foster ownership and accountability, trust, respect, interdependence and collective efficacy, which – as Grant’s model indicates – are values associated with shared leadership and collaboration.

According to the literature (Bellibas et al., 2022; Corrigan & Merry, 2022), principals model instructional practices and share their visions with teachers as a means of teacher empowerment to lead curriculum matters. This study’s findings support the earlier findings (Baharuddin et al., 2023; Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023) that reported on principals sharing their vision for the school with teachers through constant open communication and by providing a role model. By so doing, principals present teachers with the bigger picture of how to jointly raise the school standards. With the big picture in mind, teachers are better motivated to collaborate and contribute to the collective goal of student success and improved school performance. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies (Kilag et al., 2023; Zuze & Juan, 2020), indicating that principals are aware that teacher involvement in curriculum leadership benefits student learning and general school performance. Moreover, it is impossible for principals to single-handedly lead successful schools. This study extends the existing knowledge by illustrating how principals create opportunities for teachers to serve as curriculum leaders in the context of Vhembe District.

## **6.2 Teacher Professional Development**

The findings of this theme illustrate that, by enabling teachers’ professional development through creating platforms for teacher collaboration and allocating time for teachers to collaborate on these platforms, principals create opportunities for teachers to lead in curriculum matters. This study unveiled that principals create collaborative platforms by organising school-level PD sessions, making use of both in-house and outsourced expertise. These sessions are planned according to the developmental needs of teachers. This resonates with the findings of Mthanti and Msiza (2023) in the Free State province of South Africa. It also links with the findings of Qian and Walker (2013), who noted that Shanghai principals also context-modelled their teachers’ PD activities. This links to the aspects of context, transformation and change in Grant’s model. In addition to in-house development sessions, principals encourage and provide all of the necessary resources (time and transport) for teachers to participate in training sessions organised by the Department of Education. Furthermore, the study found that principals encourage teachers to enrol in institutions of higher learning to improve on their content and pedagogical knowledge. This aligns with the findings of Kim and Lee (2020), who found that teachers from Japan, Singapore and South Korea mostly participate in workshops as a vehicle for continuous professional development.

In addition, the principals in this study stated that they encourage teachers to collaborate in subject-specific developmental sessions, both within and across schools, such as collaborating to plan lessons and discuss teaching and marking guides, including using digital platforms. Furthermore, this correlates with the findings of Hallinger and Walker (2017), who reported that principals in Asia had



established school-based PLCs. Affirming these findings, Carpenter (2018) attests that when teachers collaborate in PLCs, they share both physical and intellectual space for growth.

However, contrary to the findings of this study, Chua et al. (2020) reported that Malaysian principals were failing to allocate time for teachers to participate in PLC activities. Such lack of support for PLCs participation may be attributed to the fact that Malaysian principals may be unaware of the importance of PLCs. The divergence of this study's findings from those of previous studies might be linked to the differences in contexts and existing policies. The findings of this study align with Grant's model of teacher leadership (upholding the importance of distributed leadership theory in school leadership), which emphasises the prerequisites of distributed leadership practice, promotion of collaborative culture and associated values of trust, respect and interdependence. By ensuring the presence of these conditions in schools, principals can empower teachers and foster their professional development and transformation. Moreover, by engaging in activities that promote teacher empowerment and PD, principals are responding positively to the National Task Team's mandate to decentralise and democratise school leadership practices (also upholding the importance of distributed leadership theory in school leadership). The findings of this study thus advocate for the practice of teacher as curriculum leaders as it has positive effects on teacher efficacy, school effectiveness and student learning. If principals do not empower teachers and encourage their professional development, the practice of teacher leadership will be stifled and school performance may be negatively affected, possibly hindering student outcomes.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study examined how principals create opportunities for TCL. Data were collected from individual face-to-face interviews with eight principals and from school meeting observations at two schools. Informed by the interpretive paradigm, this study revealed that principals create opportunities for TCL through empowerment and teacher PD. Therefore, this study contributes to existing knowledge in the literature relating to the creation of opportunities for teachers to lead in curriculum matters within Vhembe District. Furthermore, the findings are significant in promoting the concept of distributed leadership, which is highly advocated for schools, providing practical reasons for principals to create opportunities for teachers to lead in curriculum matters.

Practically, schools should keep moving towards the decentralisation and democratisation of leadership. Thus, principals should strengthen the leadership potential of teachers by empowering teachers and encouraging their PD. In relation to policy, the findings of this study further emphasise the decentralisation and democratisation of school leadership as this has positive effects on teacher efficacy, student achievement and overall school effectiveness. Theoretical implications are that, using Grant's model, the importance of teacher leadership is emphasised. By implication, this affirms the core role of distributed leadership theory in effective school leadership.

Regarding the limitations of this study, the small sample size of eight principals may not be representative of principals and therefore the findings cannot be generalised. Similarly, the results are from only one district and might therefore have been influenced by the context of Vhembe District; thus, they may not be generalised to other districts of the wider population. Future studies could be conducted with a larger sample that may permit the generalisation of the findings. Additionally, this research focused only on the principals' perspectives. Further research should be carried out to investigate teachers' views on how opportunities could be created for them as curriculum leaders.

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## 9. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest exists.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview guide on school principals creating opportunities for teachers as curriculum leadership

#### Section A: Biographical information

1. How long have you been in your position as a school manager?
2. What is your highest qualification?
3. In which of the age brackets do you belong: 25, 26-35, 36-44, 45-54, >55?
4. How many learners are in your school?

#### Section B: Aspects of creating space

- Briefly discuss your understanding of the concept of teachers as curriculum leaders in schools.
- Please tell me how do you create opportunities for teachers to perform their role as curriculum leaders?
- What helps you in creating opportunities that enable teachers to perform their role as curriculum leaders?
- What challenges do you encounter in your efforts to create opportunities for teachers as curriculum leaders?
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your role of creating opportunities for teachers as curriculum leaders?

### 2. School Meeting observation guide

1. Type of meeting \_\_\_\_\_
2. Person (s) leading meeting \_\_\_\_\_
3. Collaboration during meeting \_\_\_\_\_
4. Types of activities (curricular, extra or co-curricular)  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Agenda arrived at before, during, matters added on prepared agenda  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Teachers discuss freely/censored \_\_\_\_\_
7. Decision-making model (democratic, consensus, imposed)  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Distribution of duties during meeting (delegated or volunteered on)  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2

### Observation results

Observation items	S2 -03/10/2019	S4 - 01/10/2019
Type of meeting	Academic-result analysis of previos term	Academic-result analysis of previos term
Person (s) leading meeting	teachers	principal
Collaboration during meeting	Opened shared	Opened shared
Types of activities (curricular, extra or co-curricular)	curricular	curricular
Agenda arrived at before, during, matters added on prepared agenda	Agenda arrived at before and matters added on prepared agenda	Agenda arrived at before and matters added on prepared agenda
Teachers discuss freely/censored	freely	freely
Decision-making model (democratic, consensus, imposed)	consensus	consensus
Distribution of duties during meeting (delegated or volunteered on)	delegated or volunteered	delegated or volunteered