

**LEADERSHIP IN SUPPORT OF TEACHERS' ACTION  
RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS: Heads of Departments Positioned  
for Purpose**

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Participation by secondary school teachers in an in-service Diploma in Education (Dip. Ed.) programme at one university site in Trinidad and Tobago requires untrained teachers to juggle the roles of full-time teacher in their schools and part-time students seeking professional certification. In conducting action research under these circumstances, student-teachers need support. Data gathered via an online survey provided information on the support (or lack thereof) that student-teachers received from the Head of Department (HoD) while they conducted research during the programme. Using a focused stratified purposeful sampling strategy to ascertain further the nature of support provided by the HoD, I interviewed 5 student-teachers via telephone. Drawing on the work of Kaldi and Xafakos (2017) and Seider and Lemma (2004), I analysed teachers' responses. Data revealed that the personality of the HoD, the relationship between the HoD and teacher, and the nature of involvement of the HoD served as contributors to the psychological, pedagogical and administrative support provided by the HoD. Teachers recommended strategies for enhancing a supportive leadership role for the HoD. Recommendations based on the study include a conceptualisation of the HoD as mentor and coach; engagement in deliberate efforts to enhance communication and collaboration among key stakeholders; addressing the policy context in which the HoD and teacher function; and engaging HoDs in meaningful professional development.

**Introduction**

Action research (AR) is currently recognised as a means by which practitioners can investigate issues or problems in schools. Stringer (2007) views AR as “a distinctive approach to inquiry that is directly relevant to classroom instruction and learning, and provides the means for teachers to enhance their teaching and improve student learning” (p.1). The major influence of AR is its impact on teachers' ability to engage intellectually

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with what is happening in their classrooms, and to connect theory with practice; the gains in an understanding of the teaching-learning process leading to an actual change in pedagogy and classroom practice; and a sense of empowerment derived from such understanding and its outcomes (Mertler, 2014). AR thus can drive teachers' growth and professional development, especially during pre-service or in-service teacher education programmes.

In facilitating teachers' competence in research into teaching by means of AR, writers underscore the role of teacher education programmes. Vaughan and Burnaford (2016) identified three goals of action research in teacher education programmes: "action research as reflection; action research as participatory, critical inquiry; and action research as preparation for teacher leadership" (p. 280).

Seider and Lemma (2006) posited that there is always the hope that engagement in AR as part of teacher education programmes will lay the groundwork for further active engagement in AR in schools. While AR in teacher education programmes is also valued as a means of addressing educational reform (Hine, 2013; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), the primary purpose of AR in such programmes is to help participants engage in inquiry into their practice through observation, planning, action and reflection on an issue in their immediate contexts (James & Augustin, 2017; Johnston, 1994).

Engaging teachers in AR as a pedagogical strategy in teacher education programmes has, therefore, been viewed as a powerful source of teacher learning and teachers' construction of new knowledge about practice and improving practice (Kosnick & Beck, 2000), and for school improvement. Van Looy and Goegebeur (2007), in making a case for teacher engagement in AR as part of teacher training that makes the link between theory and practice, note: "Rather than perceiving this as an additional assignment for the parties involved, this is put forward as an inherent part of the profession" (p. 107). They further suggest "cooperation between schools and teacher training departments, with a view to increasing the efficiency of such [action research] initiatives" (p. 116).

Ulvik (2014) also highlighted the need for a relationship between university and school personnel who may be considered as mentors. She asserts,

As I see it, doing AR in teacher education offers opportunities because the students are able to try out tools in a secure situation where they have access to mentoring... [T]he school-based mentors need to be part of what happens. (p. 531)

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She underscored the need for

better communication between the school and the university in order for the institutions to pull in the same direction and thereby make it easier for student-teachers to conduct their research projects. Too many students were left on their own carrying out their projects. (p. 531)

Against that backdrop, this article presents the views of student-teachers on the nature of support provided to them by Heads of Departments (HoDs) while they conducted AR projects in their school contexts during their participation in a teacher education programme. This focus emerged from responses to an online survey which sought the views of one cohort of student-teachers on their experiences of conducting AR. The AR is a core component of a yearlong, postgraduate in-service Diploma in Education programme conducted by the School of Education, The University of the West Indies (SoEUWI), St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago on behalf of the Ministry of Education (MoE). It was designed to provide initial training and professional development for teachers who hold undergraduate degrees in their subject disciplines, and who have been teaching for at least two years in secondary schools. In addition, the programme includes an educational administration specialty for persons who hold positions as HoDs or Deans in their schools. During the year in which the study was conducted, teachers, HoDs and Deans were withdrawn from the schools for one day a week to attend classes at the university. For the rest of the week, they were expected to put into practice what they were learning while on the programme. Faculty supervisors visited schools over two semesters to observe and guide participants.

This model reflects the early designers' awareness of the efficacy of AR as a key contributor to teachers' professional learning. It predates Van Looy and Goegebeur's (2007) assertion that "The gain for teachers' and lecturers' general knowledge about the profession could be considerable if departments or institutes of education would support, coordinate and propagate this type of research as part of their responsibility towards their graduates" (p. 123). During the programme, participants identify an area of concern within their own schools or classrooms, which may be worthy of an intervention, and engage in one cycle of an AR project. The project is planned and implemented under the guidance and supervision of faculty supervisors.

The initial study was conducted at the end of the programme in a previous year. Data from a survey questionnaire revealed some reference

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to the support (or non-support) given to teachers by HoDs during the implementation of the AR. The findings pointed to a relative lack of involvement by HoDs during teachers' research. Few respondents made any direct reference to support obtained from the HoD.

The finding noted above was unexpected. Given the existence of a formal middle leadership/management organisational structure in schools, one would reasonably expect that the HoD would be most strategically positioned to support teachers during their AR projects. Two assumptions were made: firstly, that HoDs, having previously participated in the programme, and having been granted the diploma certifying satisfactory completion, would themselves have conducted AR and would have gained knowledge and awareness of the process and developed a measure of competence in AR. They, I intuited, would serve as instructional leaders to members of their departments and would, therefore, be supportive of teachers. Secondly, their formal position in schools requires the monitoring of teachers' performance in classrooms as part of their official duties and responsibilities (Government of Trinidad and Tobago, n.d.), and they were, therefore, positioned to monitor and provide support for activities in which teachers were engaged, including the conduct of AR. The following issue, warranting further exploration, emerged.

Conducting AR as a way of influencing a change in practice, can prove to be a challenge. This is a reality for teachers engaged in a professional development programme which requires that they juggle competing demands – function as part-time student-teachers engaged in an AR project which is an assessment requirement, and continue to serve in full time teaching positions in their schools. In light of the challenges faced in attempting to meet both demands, support is required. This brings into focus the nature of support offered by the HoD, as student-teachers manage the conduct of AR at their sites while on the programme.

### **Purpose and significance of the study**

As a follow up to the online survey, I sought to ascertain and describe the nature of the support from the HoD that teachers indicated was available to them while conducting their research. Simultaneously, I also sought to determine whether, and in what ways, teachers experienced an absence of or insufficient support from the HoD during the research process.

Given the positioning of the HoD in providing leadership of teachers for improving teaching and learning, I also attempted to raise awareness about the potential of the middle leadership in secondary

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schools for providing such support to teachers engaged in AR. This study, therefore, points to the significance of a leadership role for HoDs, highlights ways in which leadership may be provided, and makes a case for a more robust role for middle leaders in providing support. In in-service programmes such as the Dip. Ed. where teachers are not completely removed from their classrooms for the duration of the programme, and where the human element may be identified as key to teacher support, the potential role of the HOD as a within-school resource, a “critical learning partner” (McNiff, 2013), becomes significant.

The dual positioning of the student-teacher also underscores the need for a more formally structured relationship between faculties/departments of education and schools, and between the university as providers of teacher education programmes and the MoE, the teachers' employer, to facilitate such support.

The study also draws attention to the implications for policies that may inform school organisation, especially as the post of HoD in schools is a formal one. There are, therefore, implications for how the roles and responsibilities of HoDs are conceived, particularly with regard to teacher learning and its impact on student learning, school management, school effectiveness and school improvement and reform.

The following questions guided the research:

- (1) To what extent did student-teachers believe that HoDs had a supportive role to play during the conduct of their AR projects?
- (2) To what extent did student-teachers experience the involvement and support of HoDs while engaged in AR in their schools, and what was the nature of that involvement and support?
- (3) What were the areas of need in which student-teachers felt support of the HoD was lacking?
- (4) What recommendations do student-teachers make with regard to the role of the HoD in supporting teachers' AR in schools?

## **Literature Overview**

### **Teaching and researching**

Teacher engagement in AR serves as a way of investigating and developing solutions to problems and contributing to their practice with the goal of school improvement (Mertler, 2014). “The flexibility of action research ...provides the means to solve many of the significant problems that are part of the complex life of a school” (Stringer, 2007, p. 1). Views

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on researching and teaching as simultaneous aspects of a teacher's professional practice vary. One view is that action research is "not a natural process for teachers" (Johnston, 1994, p. 39) so that the concept of the teacher also performing the role of researcher within the teaching and learning process remains an uncomfortable one. Phillips and Carr (as cited in Putnam & Rock, 2018) observe that "teacher as a researcher is not an image our culture gives us" (p. 7).

While Putnam and Rock (2018) agree, they suggest that "*teacher* and *researcher* can be synonymous in the right context" (p. 12). This view of teacher as researcher as an inherent aspect of a teacher's practice is based on the premise that "Action research within the context of teaching represents an opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the familiar domain of their classrooms ... involving connected processes where research impacts practice and practice influences research" (Putnam & Rock, 2018, p. 12). While the debate exists as to whether teaching and researching can or should coexist and has been commented upon (Ulvik, Riese & Roness, 2017), AR is viewed as "research done *by* teachers *for* themselves" (Mills, 2014, p. 5). In essence, AR represents "an opportunity to assess and improve teaching practices and learning by actively changing and investigating ... processes and using information gained from the outcomes of the changes to reflect and inform our future practices" (p. 12). This synergy was captured by the response of one participant in a study: "I could do my action research project while I was teaching; it was practical" (Seider & Lemma, 2004, p. 229).

Katsarouand Tsafos (2013) advanced:

Linking teaching and inquiry is a promising practice, as it entails much more than simply having students investigate theoretical conclusions in practice or trying out different teaching models. The systematic investigation of practice through the action research process leads to forming questions and revealing needs that enhance learning, enriching not only the body of knowledge but also the process of the students' learning and the ways in which they learn. (p. 532)

Throughout their careers, the task of development lies in teachers' ability to deepen understanding of teaching and learning processes. That deepened understanding is constructed in situ as teachers' practice is honed through effective professional development. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) highlighted several characteristics of effective professional development which have implications for teachers engaging in research into their practice:

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- It must engage teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development.
- It must be grounded in inquiry, reflection, and experimentation that are participant-driven.
- It must be collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators and a focus on teachers' communities of practice rather than on individual teachers.
- It must be connected to and derived from teachers' work with their students.
- It must be sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching, and the collective solving of specific problems of practice.
- It must be connected to other aspects of school change. (p. 598)

They further noted that a

policy problem for professional development...extends beyond mere support for teachers' acquisition of new skills or knowledge. Professional development ... also means providing occasions for teachers to reflect critically on their practice and to fashion new knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy and learners. (p. 597)

They point to the implicit value of research into teaching and its contribution to teachers' growth in practice. Burton et al. (2014) also endorsed this view, stating:

[R]esearch proficiency provides it [the teaching profession] with depth, robustness and a sense of potential future progress. To support this, research should be viewed very much as a process-driven activity. While the outcomes of individual research studies are important and can have a significant impact on future actions, the process provides a tool that can become an essential element of a teachers' long-term development aspirations. (p. 10)

**Action research in schools**

The issues of teaching that teachers face and the contextual factors which they reflect on - the learners, the contexts of teaching, the curriculum to be enacted, suitable instructional strategies and learning activities to be employed, ways of assessing learning, resources available – require teachers to engage in “systematic processes of inquiry as an ongoing feature of their classroom life in order to enable their students to

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attain effective learning outcomes” (Stringer, 2007, p. 14). In essence, a teacher’s work is a constant cycle of reflection, planning, action and observation. “[A]ction research therefore provides them with a framework of activities that enables them to systematically accomplish ...tasks” (Stringer, 2007, p. 15).

Seider and Lemma (2004) indicate that “not all schools currently offer teachers opportunities for professional development through action research” (p. 219). Additionally, Peters’ (2004) experience has given rise to a “growing awareness of the extent to which teachers struggle to implement action research within contextual conditions that are inconsistent with the process of teacher inquiry” (p. 536). We may thus surmise about the challenges that teachers may face if or when conducting action research in their schools, and what must be put in place to facilitate such an activity.

Borg (2006) identified ten conditions which foster the occurrence of action research in schools, namely: “(1) awareness, (2) motivation, (3) knowledge and skills, (4) choice, (5) mentoring, (6) time, (7) recognition, (8) expectations, (9) community, and (10) dissemination potential” (p. 22). He contends that the more the conditions are met, the greater will be the incidence of research by teachers into their practice.

Notwithstanding such optimal conditions, barriers to teachers conducting AR in the ebb and flow of their daily school lives have been identified. A key barrier cited is the lack of time, either to engage in AR as an individual activity, or to form groups or communities in schools for it to happen. Another barrier is the distinction that is drawn between the isolated nature of teaching which may tend to mitigate against the collaborative nature of AR. Thirdly, research as an activity is viewed as belonging to the domain of universities, while practice is viewed as the primary concern of teachers. In school contexts, then, the teacher as researcher does not emerge as a part of the culture of teaching (Johnson, 1994).

### **Supporting teachers’ action research**

*Conceptualising support and identifying areas of need.* Kaldi and Xafakos (2017) describe support as “various behaviors and activities from people who are engaged in ... a teacher education program in order to provide knowledge-based and/or pedagogical guidance, psychological encouragement and reinforcement, feedback on pedagogical and instructional issues” (p. 248). Although conducted in a student-teaching practice context, their study allows us to extrapolate to teachers’ engagement in AR, to conceptualise support within a research context and

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consider these areas of need for which support may be provided. The psychological dimension encompasses encouragement and reinforcement. With regard to teachers' practice, guidance can be provided in developing teachers' knowledge of content and pedagogy, and help with regard to planning and implementation for teaching and learning, and the teacher's development as a reflective practitioner. Feedback is related to issues and problems of teaching which focus on pedagogy and instruction.

As Ulvik, Riese and Roness (2017) contend, AR is "complex, challenging and time-consuming and needs to be supported" (p.5). Where engagement in AR is a significant part of teacher education programmes, we may argue that student-teachers need such support, especially given the concern for establishing connections between the programme and the teacher's responsibilities in schools.

Another dimension focuses on where support occurs along a continuum from informal to formal support, from indirect to direct. Along this continuum are networks of persons or organisations that contribute to a teacher's growth and development as a classroom practitioner. Within the school context, such networks of persons include school mentors and classroom teachers as peers organised within the official school structure. Kaldi and Xafakos (2017) indicate that research suggests that "a large amount of support is needed by the people who are closer to the student teachers especially in the school context" (p. 248). Moreover, they further advance that in each of the above areas of need, various strategies may be employed to provide such support.

*Key strategies to support AR in schools.* On the assumption that research contributes significantly to teacher learning, growth and development, conducting research requires the development of a research attitude. "A research attitude is difficult to maintain in isolation; such an attitude is fostered by interaction with other professionals" (Santa & Santa, 1995). This suggests that a climate of collegiality is desirable if teachers are to view their research as valid and valuable, assisting with solutions of problems at the chalkface. James and Augustin's (2017) review supports this. They indicate that "a key condition that should exist for facilitating action research is an environment in which opportunities exist that encourage teachers to engage at the level of skill development and in the affective realm where positive attitudes to engaging in research can be fostered" (p. 8).

Also citing AR as a popular form of teacher research that is collaborative in nature, Borg argues for the existence of a community of practice to ensure that teacher research has a greater probability of

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emerging. He contends that “teacher research is more likely to be productive when the support teachers receive enables them to exercise choices about what to study and how to do so” (Borg, 2006, p. 24). He goes on to note that “teachers are likely to consider the lack of institutional and collegial support for their research to be a barrier to such an activity” (p.25). He cites “encouragement from school leaders and colleagues ... opportunities to discuss the research with others” (p. 26) as a possible form of community support.

*The role of leadership.* Schleicher (2009) refers to a study conducted by the OECD which identified the following as one of the key leadership responsibilities for school leaders:

*Supporting, evaluating, and developing teacher quality as the core of effective leadership.* Leadership responsibilities associated with improved teacher quality include coordinating the curriculum and teaching program, monitoring and evaluating teacher practice, promoting teacher professional development, and supporting collaborative work cultures”. (p. 54-55)

Giancola and Hutchinson (2005) identified ten leadership roles that may contribute to transforming the professional lives of teachers, all related to and directly supportive of teachers’ practice. Some underscore ways in which support through specific leadership roles can be provided when teachers are directly engaged in inquiry. For example, as *action research advisor*, the leader’s responsibilities would include the range of activities that are involved in the stages of AR: from taking note of what is happening in the teaching context, identifying a problem, posing questions, searching the literature for possible solutions, developing and implementing an intervention plan, collecting and analyzing data, and reflecting on the process. The role of *lesson analyst* allows the leader to provide assistance with that core teaching tool, the lesson plan. As a *peer coach*, the leader provides continuous support through classroom observations of practice and provision of feedback. In a *mentor* role, leaders serve as “resident scholars or master teachers” (p. 106) engaging in observation, conferencing and counselling.

In support, Borg (2006) noted the potential inherent in a positive approach to teacher research when exhibited by school leaders:

At the institutional level, if management sends positive messages about teacher research and values and acknowledges such activity as part of the institutional culture... teachers are more likely to engage in research. On the other hand, if management does not value attempts by teachers to research their own practices, or

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actually obstructs their research (research is sometimes seen as an activity that will highlight deficiencies in the school system), then research by teachers is less likely to occur.(p. 26)

Ways in which leadership in schools has supported or failed to support teachers' conduct of AR has also been highlighted. Seider and Lemma (2004) concluded from their study that there was general support from the principal for participants engaged in action research. Support took the form of the provision of resources, encouragement to innovate, and allowance of time to share projects with colleagues. In one instance, a participant indicated that support was forthcoming where the "administrator is research-oriented" (p. 223). Where there was a lack of administrative support or even interest in their projects, participants indicated that support came from other members of school staff. While the contribution of the Principal or senior administrator in supporting teachers' AR in schools is recorded in the literature (Blasé & Blasé, 1999), empirical literature on the role of a department head in supporting teachers' engagement in AR is scant.

Yet, the subject head (as the HoD is invariably called) holds a position of leadership. Busher and Harris (2000) have suggested that subject leaders need to develop professional relationships with members of the department as well as facilitate relationships among members. AR helps to foster such relationships which must work for the purpose of improving teaching and learning as continuing professional development contributes to improved departmental performance, and functions to support teachers' professional development when undertaken in the form of AR. This, therefore, serves as a basis upon which heads must provide support to all members of the department.

They identify various ways in which heads/subject leaders can provide such support and a rationale for so doing (Busher & Harris, 2000). Firstly, HoDs, given their middle leadership position, are aware of the demands placed on teachers to contribute to school development and improvement as well as undertake responsibility for their own professional development. This tension ultimately makes demands on school resources, and it is incumbent upon subject leaders to advocate on behalf of their department members for adequate resources for their professional development.

Busher and Harris (2000) also reiterate that HoDs themselves can provide support by serving as mentors to members of their department. The role of mentor requires the development of effective interpersonal and

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communication skills. Observing the practice of a member of one's department, making suggestions for change, and providing a culture and climate in which the teacher researcher can reflect on practice without a sense of anxiety that one may obtain an adverse report, with a view to making changes to practice, may be an uncomfortable situation. The head has to serve as both mentor and coach, earning trust and, at the same time, developing a measure of self-efficacy, thus providing the emotional and psychological support needed (Kaldi & Xafakos, 2017).

Borg (2006) also echoes the view that support in the form of a mentor can facilitate teachers' experience of research in their schools. He writes:

key roles for mentors of teacher research are (1) assisting in setting up a general framework for the conduct of the research, (2) helping teachers to find a focus, and, importantly, (3) commenting on teachers' initial attempts to collect and analyse data. Mentors can also function as an audience who responds to teachers' efforts to communicate their work by, for example, commenting on drafts of reports they write. If we acknowledge that most teachers have not had a sound research education, the role of the mentor becomes crucial. ... [T]he mentoring role can be assumed by a local colleague. The availability of a mentor who teachers know will value and support their attempts to be teacher researchers can encourage more teachers to assume this role. This is perhaps even more important where teacher researchers feel isolated and where a research culture does not exist. (p.25)

Mentoring is a supportive function. The likelihood of initiating and sustaining action research is enhanced when there is a mentor who will support teachers' research initiatives.

The HoD must also be cognisant of the fact that professional development programs are sites which serve as the training ground where teachers acquire new knowledge and skills and undergo changes in dispositions. In the process, teachers are then required to transfer these skills to the workplace. In ensuring transfer of learning and sustainability in the long term, the HoD must therefore provide "on-the-job-support" (Busher & Harris, 2000, p. 138).

***Cross-site connections.*** Sound relationships between sites of teacher professional development such as universities where AR occurs as a part of training programmes can serve as another source of support for teachers when HoDs are cognisant of the phenomenon of post-training relapse (Ford & Weissbein, 1997). As Busher and Harris (2002) indicate,

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It is difficult to transfer teaching skills from INSET sessions to classroom settings without alterations to the workplace conditions within the classroom, department and school. However, few schools have adapted the workplace to meet such staff development needs. In most schools the workshop [that is, INSET training sessions] and workplace remain separate and in-service training has little impact upon day-to-day classroom practice. (p.138)

The HoD is in a strategic position to address this phenomenon. Some strategies include observation, mentoring and coaching as well as encouraging partnerships among staff members to minimise feelings of isolation.

Additionally, there is a seeming disconnect between the teacher education institutions which include AR as part of the programmes and the stance taken toward AR within school contexts. As a means of facilitating and supporting AR in schools, Van Looy and Goegebeur (2007) draw attention to the

role of teacher-training departments or institutes ... in making trainees, teachers, in-school instructors/mentors, departmental practice instructors, and department heads aware of the individual and collective growth possibilities of professional action based on research. This is achieved by coordinating research initiatives of various individual participants, offering methodological support, supplying evaluation tools and creating a forum where research results can be made public. (p. 116)

## **Methodology**

In my follow up to the above-mentioned initial research, I employed a qualitative, interpretative approach as I sought to elicit student-teachers' views specifically on the nature of the HoD's support (or lack thereof) as they conducted their AR projects.

## **Participants**

From the initial cohort which included student-teachers from various subject disciplines, I purposively selected the subgroup of 32 teachers of English. Of this group, 22 student-teachers responded to the initial questionnaire - 5 males and 17 females. Of the 22 respondents, 4 taught at government-assisted schools, 17 taught at government-controlled

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schools, while 1 respondent did not identify the place of work. Years of teaching experience ranged from 2 to over 10 years. None of the participants had ever participated in action research before pursuing the programme. In the survey responses, 9 of the 22 participants referred to the support or lack thereof of the HoD during the action research project. Using a stratified purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) to explore further the involvement of the HoD during the AR, and to ascertain the nature of that involvement and the support or lack thereof, I sampled 5 out of the 9 participants to be interviewed. The 5 – 1 male and 4 females – all taught at government-controlled schools. At the time of the study, their years of teaching experience ranged from 4 to 14 years.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The telephone interview as the means of data collection provided several advantages. It was a quick and effective means of communication in a digitally driven age. It facilitated participants' ease during the interview as there were no constraints on place, and interviewees were free to indicate the most convenient time (Burke & Miller, 2001; Cachia & Milward, 2001; Carr & Worth, 2001; Glogowska, Young & Lockyer, 2011; Novick, 2008; Opdenakker, 2006). The participants were particularly amenable to this as they were on school vacation, and, as the interviewer, I was mindful of not intruding on what, for many teachers, is considered sacred and protected 'down time'.

I made initial contact with each prospective interviewee via telephone to determine his/her willingness to be interviewed. A date and time for the interview were then negotiated. The interview protocol consisted of 10 questions that sought elaboration or clarification on the role of the HoD in their perceived leadership capacity. The focus was on whether the HoD, in fact, provided support or whether support from the head was a felt need that was not fulfilled. The nature, timing and type of support given were also explored. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Before the interview, the interviewees were informed that the telephone was on speaker and that the interview was being taped. Interviewees were assured of confidentiality.

The data were thematically analysed based on categories, suggested by Kaldi and Xafakos (2017) and Seider and Lemma (2004), and synthesised. A synthesis of each individual interviewee's response was emailed to each interviewee as a form of member checking to ensure that his/her views had been accurately captured, interpreted and represented, and to ensure validity and credibility. In reporting the

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findings, I assigned pseudonyms to each interviewee to maintain confidentiality. The views of the 5 respondents are presented below.

## **Presentation and Discussion of Findings**

### **Initial perception of role for HoD**

On commencing the AR, participants' views on whether the HoD had a role to play varied along a continuum from 'no anticipated role' to a view that the HoD had a strong role to play. Neither Lily, Helen nor Brenda either envisaged or anticipated that their HoD would be involved. Engaging in the AR was perceived as an experience couched in a climate of isolation, oriented around individualism and individual effort. Lily indicated, "I had to do it on my own", echoing Seider and Lemma's (2004) concern about how teachers experienced AR. In addition, given that the research was being supervised by university faculty who communicated what the expectations were, and who were expected to provide support, no role for the HoD was envisaged. In Lily's case, therefore, there was "no involvement", and she did not experience the conditions as proposed in the literature (Borg, 2006; Giancola & Hutchinson, 2005; Schleicher, 2009). Similarly, Helen did not perceive that there was a role for the HoD when she started her AR. She submitted, "In terms of actually having an input...that was not the case."

Both Brian and Maria anticipated that the HoD would play a role during the conduct of the AR project, but their circumstances and, therefore, rationales differed. Maria faced more than the usual challenges in dealing both with her responsibilities as a teacher and the requirements of her role as a student-teacher. She assumed that the HoD, in her role as administrator of departmental affairs, would have anticipated the kinds of challenges she would face. This, therefore, meant, in Maria's view, that the HoD's involvement at the start was to be expected.

From the onset, Brian viewed the HoD as "the one responsible for you." He highlighted the general scope of the HoD's responsibilities: the HoD was required to supervise teachers. This involved collaborating with teachers on how to go about teaching content; looking at teachers' unit and lesson plans and providing feedback; assisting with the procurement of resources; conducting clinical supervision and providing guidance for teacher improvement. This understanding and experience of the role of the HoD (Busher & Harris, 2000) framed his expectations of what the HoD would do during his project. He felt that the HoD should also carry out

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these responsibilities during teachers' AR, given that the programme was an in-service one and the teacher was still engaged in teaching every day. He further indicated that the faculty supervisor was not resident in the school on a daily basis but visited intermittently to view lessons; thus, the HoD was positioned to provide additional support during the research process.

Despite the nature of their expectations at the beginning, most participants indicated that during the course of the programme, they volunteered information about their various projects to the HoDs, or the HoD enquired about their projects. In these circumstances, they were able to provide further details about the nature of the HoD's involvement.

Some participants expressed the view that several factors seemed to pre-determine the support provided or deemed to be lacking. These included: their perceptions of the HoD's personality, the nature of the relationship between them and the HoD in general, the nature of the interaction between them and the HoD during the research process, and the extent of the HoD's actual involvement in the research process. These varied across the participants' experiences.

Brenda described her HoD as "not one of those openly welcoming to people", "not forthcoming." Believing that this was "just the way she is", Brenda indicated that for the duration of the research, the HoD "never asked me anything" and took a "hands-off" approach. It was Brenda's second attempt at conducting the AR, and based on what had obtained during her first attempt, Brenda never anticipated the HoD's involvement. Brenda acknowledged, however, that she could have gone to her if she needed help, although "while she would help she keeps her distance" (Brenda); but Brenda chose to rely on another senior teacher for support.

In contrast, Maria, Helen and Brian described their relationships with their HoDs in positive terms. Maria's HoD was "very approachable" (Maria) and she would offer to help as needed. Helen intimated that she had always had a good relationship with her HoD, "a collegial professional relationship" (Helen), "very supportive", that encouraged dialogue and engagement that bode well for the conduct of the research.

### **Nature of HoD's support**

Using the work of Kaldi and Xafakos (2017) and Seider and Lemma (2004), we can, therefore, identify four areas of support rendered by HoDs and ways in which support was provided. They were: psychological encouragement and reinforcement; pedagogical guidance; feedback on pedagogy and instruction; and administrative and logistical support.

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*Psychological encouragement and reinforcement.* Support can be of an emotional kind (Kaldi & Xafakos, 2017), involving attention to student-teachers' feelings during the research process and concerned, therefore, with meeting psychological needs. The responses by the HoDs to teachers' AR set the emotional tone for the support provided. Helen described her HoD as being "excited" about her AR focus. She "encouraged" her and "was interested." Helen felt free to ask for help and support and noted that supporting teachers in AR requires an awareness of and sensitivity to teachers' work environments and a demonstration of care in mitigating disruptions or other negative aspects of that environment. Helen's HoD exhibited this care when she believed that the experience may have been proving overwhelming for Helen and provided necessary support.

Brian also highlighted this disposition of care. He reported that his HoD would deliberately seek him out to determine his needs. Brian noted that "the relationship with the HoD impacts the ease with which you can conduct your action research." When this occurs, the focus is on ascertaining how effective the teacher's lessons are and facilitating teachers' growth in competence. This ease, when it exists, is exemplified in the way in which dialogue and engagement serve to facilitate emotional and psychological support.

At the end, Brian's HoD provided him with a letter of attestation that he could include in his portfolio representing his work and experience while on the programme. This was one example of the "moral support" (Maria) which HoDs provided.

*Pedagogical guidance and feedback on pedagogy and instruction.* The scope of the responsibilities of the HoD as it related to providing guidance and feedback to teachers related to pedagogy and instruction involves collaborating about teaching of content; advising on the design of unit and lesson plans and provision of feedback; assisting with procurement of resources; monitoring of teachers' performance through clinical supervision and providing feedback on instruction – all towards teacher learning and improvement. In referring to these duties, participants elaborated on the nature of support provided during the AR process.

In collaboration with the HoD, Brian was able to identify an area of focus for the research. In the cases of Brian, Helen and Maria, the HoD viewed lessons of the AR, provided feedback and advice and suggested suitable instructional strategies. They, in turn, used the feedback to adjust their lessons. In this way, the HoDs facilitated growth in competence of these teachers.

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In Helen's case, support was seen in the HoD's respect for Helen's autonomy in making professional pedagogical decisions. Helen noted, "She basically gave me room to do what I had to do.... She allowed me to do my own thing because I do not like people crowding me." Helen was assured of her support and help whenever necessary.

Brian also cited another dimension of the supportive role of the HoD. Indicating the itinerant nature of the faculty supervisor's role, the HoD as on-site supervisor was able to provide support in a more responsive manner by virtue of her physical presence and accessibility (Busher & Harris, 2000). Further, Brian noted that the HoD acknowledged the primary role of the faculty supervisor in providing direction for the implementation of the study. As Brian's study progressed, the HoD continued to provide support, proactively and deliberately, in a way that Brian described as "a benefit to him." In fact, during one of the visits of the faculty supervisor, Brian, with the supervisor's acquiescence, invited the HoD to join the supervisor in observing his lesson. This, Brian indicated, provided him with insights into his teaching from two perspectives.

Interestingly, Brian articulated a well-known observation: some teachers tended to create well-thought out lessons for enactment when faculty supervisors would visit; however, in many instances, teachers reverted to former ways of teaching when the spotlight had been removed. He suggested that the HoD could then play a major role on site in the continued professional development of teachers, possibly minimizing post training relapse (Ford & Weissbein, 1997).

*Administrative/logistical support.* The AR was conducted during the regular operations of school life and at times required administrative or logistical interventions by HoDs, especially to ensure the smooth implementation of the curriculum through teaching and learning on a daily basis. When necessary, the HoD served as a liaison with senior administrators, other HoDs and other teachers, making accommodations in the school's timetable or negotiating class schedules so that participants had access to classes involved in the intervention (Brenda, Helen, Lily, Maria). Helen indicated that the administrative support provided was premised on the HOD's awareness of the rhythms of school life and a consciousness about when student-teachers would need help and support. Sometimes the HoD supervised or taught classes which teachers may have had to miss in order to conduct research with selected classes (Brian, Brenda, Helen). Furthermore, the HoD facilitated access to physical spaces so that lessons could be conducted without undue disruption (Brian). The HoDs also ensured access to required material resources

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(Brian, Helen, Lily) including technology (Lily) to support the research. As Lily indicated, the HoD “assisted in ensuring that you had what you needed.”

**Areas of felt need**

Participants also identified areas in which support could have been more forthcoming. Lily, as did the other participants, acknowledged that the HoD would have gained knowledge and understanding through previous participation in the research process and was, therefore, positioned to provide pedagogical guidance. Both Lily and Brenda, however, pointed to the lack of support from the HoD in this area. Lily, for example, felt that the HoD’s experience could have better facilitated her research process were her HoD more involved. This was echoed by Brenda who indicated that “the knowledge and experience which the head had gained could have been used” to support her endeavor. They did not feel as though the HoDs, in their position of leadership, contributed to their growth through the sharing of knowledge which the head should have previously gained.

This lack of involvement by the HoD, as seen particularly in the experiences of Lily and Brenda, contributed to feelings of isolation. Lily indicated that conducting the AR “was not an easy journey.” This seems to suggest that in her circumstances, some psychological support was required as she indicated, “I had to do it on my own”. Brenda asserted that her HoD “did not display any extra interest” and “never asked me anything.” She reflected that when engaging in AR for the first time, teachers are “unsure of themselves” (Brenda). This was how Brenda felt, and she noted that “it would have been nice for the head to have a more hands-on approach.”

**Envisaging a more supportive role of the HoD – Teachers’  
recommendations**

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences, to envisage a future role of the HoD, and to make recommendations for future practice. Except for Lily, the interviewees advanced recommendations.

Given the lack of pedagogical guidance and, therefore, support which Lily experienced, hers was the lone voice that did not anticipate a future role for the HoD. She cited the administrative and logistical support which the HoD provided to facilitate the actualization of the research, as indicated by Seider and Lemma (2006). However, she contended from the

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outset that the faculty at the university directed the entire process so that for her, a future role for the HoD did not emerge as a salient issue, and she did not provide any recommendations.

Maria, Helen, Brenda and Brian expressed a different view and advanced recommendations which they felt could improve future student-teachers' experiences of conducting AR during their participation in the programme. Their recommendations with regard to the future role of the HoD addressed the following: a conceptualisation of teachers' continuing professional development and the role of AR; policy directions with regard to the role of the HoD as part of the middle management school structure; collaboration and synergy among key education stakeholders through attention to communication; and relationship building.

The development of teachers' pedagogical and research skills was not a "one-off thing... but developed through practice until habits are formed" (Brian). Brian believed, therefore, that the HoD needed to be viewed as a facilitator of teacher development, of which AR is but one strategy. Possessed of necessary skills, attributes and dispositions, the HoD could contribute on-site to teachers' development. Endorsing this, Maria recommended that it should be "mandatory and part of the HoD's job to ensure that the teacher is being facilitated" in conducting their research. For her, it is "an extension of the HoD's duty" as she perceived them as "trying to cultivate a group of professional educators." The HoD, she said, "should be an advocate to ensure that teachers are facilitated", as suggested by Borg (2006). Echoing this sentiment, Brenda recommended that "maybe the duties and responsibilities of the head need to be amended."

The participants advocated for a strengthening of the role of the HoD during the teachers' research process through formalised policies or mechanisms. Brian acknowledged that teachers themselves needed to develop and display the kinds of attitudes and dispositions that would serve them in their quest to develop as teachers and researchers. This, he felt, could be augmented by the way in which the role of HoD was conceptualised and the policies and structures which could be put in place to enhance teacher research, quality teaching and school improvement. Rather than a formal approach, however, involving "telling [which] suggests that a policy or rule is being enforced", Helen recommended "suasion rather than policy." She believed that making policy might encourage the view among heads that their roles and responsibilities were being increased and could leave teachers open to victimisation.

To facilitate the best possible outcomes for teachers in conducting research, most of the participants recommended greater collaboration and,

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therefore, communication between the university and other stakeholders. Brian called for an “alignment, a synergy” amongst the key players in the context of teachers’ action research: firstly, the MoE as the policy-making arm, viewed as responsible for strengthening of the role of the HoD through formal policy and associated mechanisms; secondly, the SoEUWI as the provider of the programme and the institution that has major responsibility for facilitating teachers’ conduct of research while on the programme; finally, the school administrators themselves, especially the HoD. In conceptualizing a more formal role of the HoD as facilitator of teachers’ research, Brenda suggested that written guidelines from the SoE could serve to make HoDs more aware of the nature of the process and of what they can do to assist teachers. Helen concurred, indicating that “somehow or the other there should be something in writing to the HoD, explaining and outlining what is going to happen and some of the areas where the heads can facilitate and assist the teacher.”

All participants, except Lily, acknowledged the connection between the nature of the relationship between the HoD and the teacher and the kind of support that was provided. Recommendations with regard to the role of the HoD, therefore, also focused on relationship building. Brian and Helen believed that both parties needed to take a proactive approach in terms of information sharing, by extending professional courtesy, or soliciting information and requests for or provisions of support. They both recommended, however, that HoDs needed to exhibit greater awareness and sensitivity about the nature of the research process that teachers may be experiencing, the challenges they may face, and exhibit care (Helen) and proaction (Brian) in providing support. This is in keeping with the views of Busherand Harris (2004).

HoDs are recognised as having a professional responsibility, as laid out in the job specifications, towards teachers in their departments. How then can HoDs provide meaningful support in light of the experiences of a small number of respondents who singled out the HoD as playing a role in their research process? What concepts does the educational literature offer that may be used to make a case for a robust role for the HoD in this endeavour?

The findings raise the question: What is the nature of the leadership that can provide teachers with the necessary support when conducting research as part of professional development? Further, if we accept, as Stringer (2007) indicates, that action research can serve as a frame for teachers’ understanding of their daily practice, then the role of a department head in actuality transcends a focus on research but has

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implications for the development of effective teaching – which engagement in AR is expected to facilitate (Kosnick & Beck, 2000).

That support has several dimensions – the emotional dimension which includes an attitude of care and the exhibiting of dispositions such as interest, concern and sensitivity, among others. Another dimension relates to the role of the head or department leader in facilitating and honing the development of teachers' pedagogical skills, and the encouragement of a reflective stance which underpins the practice of AR.

The concept of mentoring provides a conceptual frame for investigating support for teachers' research activities in schools and is implicit in participants' responses during the interviews. Hughes (2010) posits that,

Traditionally implicit in mentoring are the support and nurturing offered by a mentor who has the knowledge, skills and attributes of the wise and trusted counsellor, someone who has travelled the mentee's path, and understands the challenges. The mentor is there, as an expert, to advise, to guide and to use her greater understanding and skills to support the mentee. (p. 95)

We may infer from the experiences of all the participants that the role of the mentor seems to fall squarely within the realm of support provided by the HoD for teachers' engagement in research and aligns with the areas identified by Kaldi and Xafakos (2017). Some participants in fact referred to them as such (Brian, Helen) while others signalled the need for such a role by their identification of areas in which support was lacking.

Day (1997) has asserted:

...practice based research does offer teachers the opportunity to engage in development which generates professional knowledge through systematic investigation with the help of a research 'mentor' or critical friend from inside or outside the school which otherwise might not be available. (p. 275)

## **Conclusion**

This investigation pointed to some critical issues in considering the leadership role of the HoD in supporting teachers as researchers. Firstly, there is need for a different way of thinking about and responding to the role and practice of AR in improving teachers' practice and teacher learning particularly after teachers have completed teacher education programmes. The view of AR as a training activity conducted under the auspices of a tertiary institution such as a university and within the

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confines of the university context is valid and is common practice. However, it does not exclude a view of AR as one aspect of a teacher's practice which facilitates problem solving within school and classroom contexts (Seider & Lemma, 2004), even if facilitated by university personnel with the requisite expertise.

Secondly, there is a need to rethink teacher professional development in school contexts, exploring the linkages that can be made between the conduct of teacher education programmes that include teacher inquiry which may be enacted in schools. There is, furthermore, a need to review the policy context in which teacher development occurs as it relates to how that development can be supported. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin's (1995) view was instructive then and holds now:

Capacity-building policies view knowledge as constructed by and with practitioners for use in their own contexts, rather than as something conveyed by policy makers as a single solution for top-down implementation...[W]e will need to undertake a strategic assessment of existing policies to determine to what degree they are compatible with a vision of learning as constructed by teachers and students and with a vision of professional development as a lifelong, inquiry-based, and collegial activity.(p. 598)

Given the HoD's position, the above exhortation requires a reconceptualisation of the role of the HoD as a leader of teacher learning (not just as manager of a department) and a greater understanding of the implications for the kind of policy environment required to support both the work of the HoD and the teacher researcher. Therefore, a review of the job description for heads with the requisite focusing on teaching and learning – the instructional core – is necessary as the specifications of those roles and responsibilities of heads are directly related to the instructional core and to the role of teacher as researcher.

Schleicher (2009) has noted, "The bottom line is that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and their work" (p. 50). A teacher's work involves an inquiry stance, which Cochran-Smyth and Lytle (2009) described as:

a world view and a habit of mind – a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational contexts and various points in one's professional career and that links individuals to larger groups and social movements intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo. (p.viii)

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AR viewed in this way, as more than submission of a project for a teacher education programme, as more than a sequence of steps for intervening into one's practice, requires support from those best positioned to provide it.

### **Recommendations**

In exploring the issue of support for teachers conducting AR in their schools while on a teacher education programme, and the role that HoDs played, several recommendations for addressing how HoDs can legitimately supervise teachers' conduct of AR during an in-service programme arise from the study.

Firstly, it may be argued that the supervision of teachers' research does not fall within the ambit of the school; rather, it is the responsibility of the university's faculty supervisors to ensure that the research is properly executed. It may be further stated that HoDs themselves have their own duties and responsibilities to perform and supervision of teachers' research may therefore be perceived as additional work which heads may have every right to ignore. Focused inquiry into how HoDs enact their roles and responsibilities, especially as potential mentors, is needed. This would include attention to how HoDs perceive what might be their responsibility in the role of mentor; what challenges and constraints they might face in carrying out their 'normal duties' as middle leaders in schools and how the middle leadership structure might be enlisted to further assist teacher development through AR. If HoDs are themselves considered teacher leaders who are expected to provide guidance and support to teachers within their departments to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and the accompanying development of research proficiency which can inform teaching and learning, then we must explore how heads can be engaged to perceive themselves as future supporters of teachers' AR for advancing teaching, learning and administration. This opens the door to further research on how HoDs perceive themselves in relation to teachers conducting AR.

Another possible line of inquiry can seek to ascertain the nature of the relationship between the university where the programme is conducted and the schools, which are the actual research sites. Some participants perceived an apparent distance between the two and suggested that there should be greater communication between the university faculty and school administrators (including HoDs) so that teachers' research could be better supported and teachers' performance in the classroom enhanced.

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The findings also suggest that there is need for attention to policy issues. Certainly, there would be need for involvement of key stakeholders in this analysis and attention to the policy environment that must support policy goals and strategies. This policy environment includes the role of teacher education institutions and the relationships or synergies to be established among stakeholders. "Teacher education institutions - both as purveyors of teacher education and as determinants of what "counts" as knowledge, expertise and successful performance - figure prominently in the policy context that surrounds professional development" (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 602). Policy affecting school organisation with regard to the roles and responsibilities of the HoDs as they relate to the role of research in teacher development in schools, emerges as a possible area of concern, and subsequent inquiry for policy makers.

Teachers' engagement in AR may be better supported if HoDs participated in ongoing professional development. For HoDs to be able to provide such support, attention to their professional development is a necessity. Such professional development may occur on site, at strategic points throughout the system, or offered by external agencies such as universities. This aligns with Fullan's (2009) view that "leadership development needs to be job-embedded, organisation-embedded, and system-embedded" (p. 45). Such professional development can address and subsequently facilitate HoDs' ability to do the following: understand the way in which research and teaching inform each other; gain deepened knowledge of the curriculum and its enactment via instruction and assessment; develop skills such as mentoring and coaching; and exhibit requisite attitudes in support of less experienced colleagues.

Being able to influence others towards achieving a common goal and providing support in the process, presupposes a connection between persons on a human level and an awareness of and sensitivity to the affective dimension of leading. Leadership development programmes for middle leaders must therefore include attention to the emotional intelligence of HoDs as leaders in their contexts.

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