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## Examining the Role of Principals in Monitoring Instructional Practices in the Literacy Classroom: A Scoping Review

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### Abstract

Literacy is essential for children's academic success from the start of their school career up to their tertiary education. It is regarded as a crucial part of the language subject. School principals as instructional leaders are responsible for ensuring the comprehensive and effective implementation of the instructional program. They should therefore show a keen interest in literacy instructional practices. Despite being a crucial aspect of literacy instruction, monitoring instructional practices remains an overlooked area in research. This qualitative study explored the role of principals in monitoring literacy instruction practices through a scoping review of the literature, using the Instructional leadership theory as a theoretical lens. The findings revealed that monitoring literacy instruction has failed for several reasons, including principals' lack of subject knowledge. Furthermore, the findings showed the need for better monitoring in literacy instruction according to a distributed approach. Since the study showed serious shortcomings in monitoring practices, further empirical research on this topic is imperative.

**Keywords:** *Instructional leadership, literacy, reading and writing, monitoring, instructional practices.*

### Introduction

Several studies endorsed that sound literacy skills form the foundation of students' academic success and overall well-being (Howell 2022; Alramamneh et al., 2023; Carter et al., 2024). As a result, improving students' literacy skills is a top priority globally and nationally. Ernasari et al. (2024) claimed that the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is putting its serious efforts to ensure that all individuals can read, write, and comprehend information. Furthermore, literacy plays a critical role in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which is to ensure literacy and numeracy among youth and adults (men and women) by 2030 (Zua, 2021). Despite the importance of literacy, little progress has been made in South African schools. The results of the 2016 and 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) revealed for instance that the reading achievement of South African learners was low compared to their peers abroad. (Howie et al., 2017; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023). Learners' persistent poor PIRLS performance prompted the country's education authorities to implement various policies and interventions (Sapire et al., 2024). Some of these include an education section in the South African National Development Plan, the National Reading Strategy, the Ithuleng campaign, the African National Literacy Initiative, the Masifunde Sonke campaign, and the Foundations for Learning Campaign (Mbhalati, 2017). At the policy level, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which contains the curriculum requirements for literacy education in South African schools and offers improved directives to teachers, was implemented (DBE, 2011). Despite these and other notable interventions, poor literacy performance persists, especially in the quantile 1-3 schools. These schools serve marginalized communities and low-income households characterized by immense contextual challenges. Addressing disparities in resources and support to achieve quality instruction remains a pressing concern for educational role players (Echavez et al., 2024).

Studies in literacy education have focused mainly on the role of the educator in instructional improvement. Bellibaşa et al. (2021) argue that such an emphasis is justified because it confirms the significant effect of educators

on learner accomplishment. Nevertheless, research on the contribution of principals in improving literacy instruction seems to be insufficient (Plaatjies, 2019; Plaatjies, 2020; Andrin et al, 2024), although studies have consistently demonstrated that effective instructional leadership is essential in promoting literacy in schools (Groenewald, 2024). Therefore, this review aims to offer some perspectives on the monitoring role of principals concerning instruction.

This study sought to examine principals' monitoring of instruction practices in literacy classrooms. The following objectives were formulated:

- Evaluate the importance of principals monitoring literacy instruction practices.
- Examine the obstacles to effective monitoring.
- Propose strategies to improve literacy practices.

This review is anchored in the instructional leadership theory, which is regarded by Vogel (2018) as a key undertaking by school principals. Its focus is on improved instruction, advancement of the curriculum, support of teachers, and the enhancement of teaching strategies (Awan & Ali, 2022; Kilag & Sasan, 2023). Mehnaz et al. (2022, p. 363) pointed out that "Instructional leadership refers to the direct participation of principals in the teaching and learning process". It has a confirmed influence on learner performance beyond and across school contexts and can narrow the achievement gap between low-achieving learners (Vogel, 2018). Instructional leadership comprises various key dimensions (Liu & Hallinger, 2024). Supervision, for instance, includes the observation of classrooms and lessons, and the monitoring of teaching and learning (Naidoo, 2021; Bellibaş et al., 2021). Rodrigues and de Lima (2024) asserted that monitoring, on the other hand, includes leadership practices such as monitoring learner progress and protecting learning time. Kilag and Sasan (2023) argued that monitoring, together with evaluation, forms a vital aspect of principals' responsibilities.

## **1 Literature Review**

Abella et al., (2024) argued that literacy practices in primary schools involve a variation of actions including curriculum development to promote a reading-centric environment within the school. Carter and Abott (2024, p.79) affirmed features such as "reading comprehension, decoding, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, writing simple sentences, conventions, fluency, and spelling" characterize reading and writing instruction. Considering the scope and depth of literacy requirements, Andrin et al. (2024, p. 107) advocated therefore "a holistic approach to educational leadership, one that acknowledges challenges, embraces innovation, and prioritizes the lasting impact of literacy interventions".

### **2.1 Conceptualizing Literacy and Monitoring Literacy Classroom Practices**

Echavez et al. (2024, p. 145) argued that "Literacy, which encompasses reading, writing, and comprehension skills, forms the cornerstone of academic achievement and lifelong learning". In terms of monitoring, the Personnel Administration Measures (PAM) document (DBE, 2016, p. 42) entrusts principals with the following responsibility: "To ensure that all evaluation forms of evaluation conducted in the school are properly and efficiently organized".

### **2.2 The Importance of Monitoring Literacy Instruction Practices**

The South African Standard of Principalship stipulated that "the principal should know strategies for effective monitoring and evaluation of performance related to the national curriculum" (DBE, 2015, p. 16). This policy requirement obliges principals to oversee effective instruction through monitoring. Bada et al. (2024) maintained that rigorous monitoring practices will prevent or minimize learner failure and ensure greater educator accountability; promoting a culture of effective literacy instruction. In this regard, Prabowo and Suyitno (2023, p. 516) affirmed that "the principal has control over the success of implementing a literacy culture in schools". Therefore, it can be concluded that monitoring teaching practices forms a substantial part of the responsibilities of principals as instructional leaders. Mahlatji et al. (2023) agreed that although teachers are responsible for driving the literacy curricula, it will only be effective if instructional leadership is exercised.

### **2.3 Monitoring Focus Areas for Improved Literacy Instruction**

Monitoring the alignment of the curriculum and instructional practices according to the prescribed curriculum should serve as the first focus area. This should be reflected in the planning of teachers. Planning should include literacy teachers' planning files, lesson planning, assessment tasks, and the status of curriculum coverage. According to the Western Cape Education Department (WCED, 2021), these aspects resort under curriculum management and implementation. Saleem et al. (2020) contended that the workbooks and assessment tasks of

learners should also be monitored. This highlights the alignment of the curriculum, planning files and the work in learners' workbooks, including the workbook prepared by the Department of Basic Education for literacy improvement.

Mejia-Tiamwatt (2023) argued that teachers need help in the execution of their lesson plans. To assist them, they need support from principals through the monitoring and management of lessons and activities. Domke et al. (2024) believe that the continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of teaching methods will prompt teachers to adjust. In doing so, strengths and weaknesses in instruction, which can serve as a springboard for targeted literacy intervention strategies, can be identified. Saleem et al. (2020) noted that principals should guide teachers in improving themselves. However, research shows that the complexities of literacy instruction present a significant monitoring challenge for principals, particularly if literacy does not fall within their subject and pedagogical expertise (Plaatjies, 2019). Mahlatji et al. (2023) pointed out that principals should understand inclusive literacy practices, including theoretical perspectives in dealing effectively with the challenges related to literacy instruction and the contextual challenges in school settings (Bush, 2024). As Townsend (2024, p. 9) rightfully declares: "The school effectiveness research has shown us that context matters".

Monitoring and observing the interaction between teachers and learners in the classroom literacy learning environment is another crucial area. Domke et al. (2024) advocated that learner-centered learning environments should be inclusive of different cultures, as it should help students to interact, communicate, and relate with individuals who hold different perspectives, beliefs, and experiences. Furthermore, learners should be empowered to think critically to improve their achievement. Principals should demonstrate awareness of these dynamics during the monitoring process and promote innovative teaching and learning approaches, as well as safe and respectful environments (Western Cape Government, 2021). Hence Andrin et al. (2024, p. 106) declared: "Leaders who create a culture that values and rewards innovative approaches to literacy instruction foster an environment where teachers feel empowered to experiment with novel strategies". Creating trust through effective communication is also vital, as Vlăduțescu (2020) pointed out that lack thereof can affect the educational process leading to practices such as substantial gatekeeping. This should not be the aim of monitoring practices, as principals should demonstrate trust in the integrity of their staff.

Close monitoring and analysis of literacy practices can guide principals to implement informed choices about the effectiveness of instruction and adopt data-driven approaches in response to learner needs (Kilag et al., 2024). For this reason, principals should collect data during the monitoring process as it can provide evidence of the approaches of teachers, and of the literacy environment. Kelly (2020) concurs that school principals have a critical role to play in crafting educational approaches informed by student performance results. Mahlatji et al. (2023) alluded to the significant contribution of performance data in standardized assessment in reading and writing.

The multi-faceted and demanding nature of a school principal's duties demands a distribution of their responsibilities so that they can find time to manage literacy practices (Adrin et al., 2024). One way to reduce a principal's burden is to empower teachers and School Management Team (SMT) members to improve literacy teaching actively, collaboratively, and through professional learning communities (Myers, 2022; Liu & Yin, 2024). This approach may lead to better informed and collaborative decision-making and foster a sense of ownership (Mahlatji et al. 2023).

## 2 Method

This qualitative study utilized a scoping review methodology. Munn et al., (2018, p. 951) averred that "Scoping reviews identify and map the breadth of evidence available on a particular topic, field, concept, or issue, often irrespective of source within or across particular contexts". The purpose is to identify knowledge gaps and clarify concepts. Mak and Thomas (2022) claimed that scoping reviews are sometimes viewed as less rigorous. However, this review process was approached rigorously and scientifically, and the concepts of empirical research ensured transparency and replicability. This method reduces the possibility of bias (Lame, 2019). As Xiao and Watson (2019) suggested, the neglect of monitoring and improving literacy instruction practices to improve literacy instructional practices was first defined. This was followed by a series of systematic exploratory evaluations and a more focused search. Key terms related to the topic like "instructional leadership", "literacy practices", "principal" and "monitoring role", were entered to find applicable texts. Academic databases such as ERIC, Education Source, Scopus, and Google Scholar were searched. Boolean operators such as AND, OR, NOT, and quotation marks were entered to manipulate the search parameters and to refine the search for the most relevant results. Below is a summary of the search criteria:

**Table 1**

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Studies focusing on the supervision function of principals in instruction.	Studies not published in English.
Research conducted over the past decade.	Studies that do not specifically address the monitoring function of principals in literacy instruction.
Studies that have a specific focus on the participation of the principal in instruction program practices.	Studies that have a general focus on principal leadership practices.
Freely accessible articles published in scholarly journals.	Inaccessible non-refereed works.
	Grey literature, blogs and newspapers.

The search was narrowed down to a total of fifty-nine studies varying in terms of research approaches, design, and methodology. Furthermore, following Lame's recommendation (2019), I adopted a predefined strategy to evaluate the standard of the included literature. Shaheen (et al., 2023) argued that this is a crucial part of the process to counter possible bias and flawed findings established by studies included in the assessment notwithstanding methodological issues and the standard of the report. Therefore, I approached two senior and impartial colleagues in my department to review the standard of the studies (Shaheen et al., 2023). To ensure comprehensive and transparent reporting, I used the PRISMA-ScR- checklist. This checklist included key sections of the paper, namely the title, abstract, introduction, methods, results (findings), discussion, conclusion, and limitations. Each section comprised items that provided guidelines to ensure thorough coverage of the different sections (De Oliveira, n.d.).

### 3 Findings

The themes that emerged from the review will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### 3.1 Theme 1: Barriers to Effective Monitoring

This review revealed that literacy instruction is a daunting exercise for teachers, leaving them to often feel unprepared to teach literacy. Furthermore, principals may not have the time and subject-specific expertise to do their job. This study uncovered a scarcity of literacy professional development programs focusing on monitoring instructional practices, and a disregard for resource monitoring.

#### 3.2 Theme 2: Ensuring Effective Literacy Planning: A Key Responsibility

This study exposed the lack of monitoring tools for the various components of planning such as educator planning files, learner workbooks and assessment tasks. The literature is scanty on how principals monitor the planning of teachers, including lessons, assessment tasks, and learner workbooks.

#### 3.3 Theme 3: Developing Inclusive, Learner-Centered Learning Environments

Concerning learner-centered literacy learning environments, this study confirmed the need to respond to the unique learning and cultural contexts in South African schools. As far as literacy culture is concerned, this study emphasized the value of a powerful literacy culture in the contemporary educational landscape. The findings underscore the necessity for stronger monitoring practices in marginalized education settings (mainly quantile 1 to 3 schools), many of which are still characterized by crumbled infrastructure and poor teaching and learning practices.

#### 3.4 Theme 4: Classroom Observation

This study laid bare the need for classroom observation, which is consistent with previous research that sees appropriate classroom observations as a possible solution for instructional improvement (Hompasshe, 2018).

### **3.5 Theme 5: The Need for Distributed Leadership Approaches**

The general findings point to the need for distributed leadership practices owing to the myriad of responsibilities principals must shoulder. These findings reinforce the recommendations of the Standard (DBE, 2015) that principals should encourage staff to participate in shared instructional leadership practices. Another reason for the distribution of responsibilities is that some other members of the SMT may be specialists in literacy education and have more experience.

## **4 Discussion and Conclusions**

The data revealed several barriers that make literacy education to be challenging for teachers. Howell (2022) came to a similar conclusion, namely that teaching learners with complex educational needs requires inadequate training or professional development of teachers. Teachers may not engage in discussions about literacy instruction or classroom observations. These results align with those of Plaatjies (2019), who alluded to principals' insufficient literacy expertise. Kilag and Sasan (2023) found that principals lack the time to fulfill all their leadership roles. Because research on the monitoring of instructional practices in literacy is limited, it is suspected that the topic is viewed as insignificant. Although this study was unable to confirm this view, it reminded us to pay more attention to literacy monitoring practices. This notion was confirmed by the research of Mahlatji et al. (2023) who pointed out the value of monitoring as a key instructional leadership responsibility. The study revealed a lack of professional development programs and insufficient resources, which hampers instructional support as confirmed also by (Andrin et al., 2024).

The findings showed poor monitoring practices. In her study, Mbhalati (2017) also found that principals seldom monitor lesson plans and learner books. It is presumed that the absence of policy directives concerning principals' monitoring roles in the Standard (DBE, 2015) and the PAM document (2016) contributes to carelessness in this regard. As a solution to this challenge, Mbhalati (2017) suggests that the DBE review its capacity building for school-based instructional leaders. It should be noted that the Western Cape Government (2021) has directions for principals referring explicitly to the monitoring of instructional practices. Similarly, Abella et al. (2024) affirmed that school leaders who dynamically participate in determining and supporting the literacy curriculum are contributing immensely to ensure enhanced reading performance. However, the implication of this finding should be viewed with skepticism, as this requirement may be an unreasonable expectation for principals with expertise in other subjects. Literacy content, instructional methods, assessment, and skills are wide in scope and complex (Abella et al., 2024; Carter & Abbott, 2024). The evidence presented thus far confirms the challenges for principals and is supported by Mahlatjie et al. (2023) contended that principals who participated in their study struggled to stipulate their main roles in promoting literacy.

This study exposed the need for context-responsive leadership practices, which is supported by Domke et al. (2024) and Andrin et al. (2024) who asserted that instructional leaders should demonstrate context-responsive awareness, create conducive learning environments, cultures, and innovation. Hompashe (2018) agreed and claims that inadequate classroom and instructional practices affect the performance of historically disadvantaged learners. It may be said that principals who fail to shoulder their monitoring responsibilities may never fully understand literacy dynamics in challenging contexts. This understanding is vital if principals are to lead the way in employing context-responsive instructional practices (Domke et al., 2024; Andrin et al., 2024).

The need to monitor practices is underscored by Howell (2022) who bemoaned the dearth of research on effective literacy strategies. Through regular monitoring, principals may get a good grasp of the challenges and dynamics associated with literacy instruction paving the way for reflection and participation with teachers aiming at targeted interventions. As explained earlier, teachers should collect data on student performance, attendance, and behavior. This strategy is commended by the Standard (DBE, 2015) recommending that principals should develop and implement a data-driven instructional framework. Such data may guide decision-making such as adjusting teaching strategies or allocating resources for better literacy instruction and the identification of specific needs (Mahlatji et al., 2023).

Dangin et al. (2021) echoed that principals find it difficult to perform their instructional duties. There are numerous potential explanations for this phenomenon. Mbhalati (2017) for example asserted that HODs may be far more effective than principals when it comes to providing literacy leadership. Flemming (2024) on the other hand, pointed out that collaboration can cause teachers to distribute their responsibilities based on their talents and abilities. This study pointed out the need for collaboration and commitment across the entire school, an idea supported by Merga et al. (2024).

In conclusion, this review highlighted the important role of principals in monitoring literacy practices through instructional leadership practices. The findings suggest that school leaders, policymakers, and researchers should emphasize monitoring, distribute leadership responsibilities, and support continuous professional development.

Further research is needed on best practices for monitoring educator progress and their impact on student achievement and school improvement.

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