

MONITORING AND CONTROL PROCESSES INFLUENCING SOCIAL SCIENCES LEARNER PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Effective curriculum management is a significant element of learner achievement. The study explores how monitoring (instructional support and teacher self-reflection) and control (accountability and policy compliance) processes in Grade 7 Social Sciences affect learner performance in primary schools within the Free State Province, South Africa. Grounded in Social Interdependence Theory, the research examines how collaborative dynamics between teachers and management foster positive interdependence to enhance educational outcomes. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological design within an interpretivist paradigm, data were collected through seven semi-structured individual interviews — comprising six Grade 7 Social Sciences teachers and one Department Head— across six primary schools. The study found that strong monitoring encourages professional growth, but systemic barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, inconsistent feedback, and stakeholder disengagement, often induce negative interdependence, undermining curriculum delivery.

Keywords: Curriculum management, monitoring and control processes, learner performance, education in social sciences, primary schools.

1. Introduction

Curriculum management is recognized as the central pillar of educational management because it integrates planning, organization, implementation, and evaluation within schooling systems (Bush, 2019; McLennan & Orkin, 2017). In the South African context, curriculum management encompasses the complex interactions between stakeholders, institutional structures, and instructional practices that collectively shape learner outcomes. These interactions facilitate the attainment of academic goals and the enhancement of learner achievement (Mncube, Ajani, Ngema & Mkhasebe, 2023). Monitoring in this study is defined as the tracking of curriculum implementation and the evaluation of progress, often involving instructional support and teacher self-reflection. In contrast, control refers to the mechanisms used to ensure compliance with standards prescribed by educational authorities (Maphalala, Govender & Khumalo, 2023). While these processes are intended to ensure that curriculum delivery aligns with policy expectations, research indicates that support from educational authorities is often suboptimal, which negatively impacts the implementation of curriculum policies. This inadequacy frequently manifests as incomplete curriculum coverage, thereby precluding sufficient learner engagement with assessed content and consequently compromising academic performance (Modiba, 2025). This study explores how these mechanisms influence student achievement in Social Sciences, a discipline that requires nuanced instructional approaches and thorough content coverage to facilitate deep learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework: Social Interdependence Theory

This study is grounded in Social Interdependence Theory (SIT), which proclaims that the structure of social interdependence shapes how people interact, which in turn shapes results (Butera & Buchs, 2019; Johnson & Johnson, 2005). Developed by Deutsch and extensively refined by Johnson and Johnson, SIT claims that the way individuals form their goals within a group strongly influences their interactions and outcomes (Jacobs & Greliche, 2017; Razmerita, Kirchner, Hockerts & Tan, 2019). Positive interdependence is when individual success is linked to the success of others, and negative interdependence is when individual success is dependent on others' failure (Jacobs & Greliche, 2017; Razmerita et al., 2019).

In school settings, positive interdependence is often fostered through cooperative learning, collaborative actions, mutual assistance, and shared responsibility among learners (Cagatan & Quirap, 2024).

2.2. The role of leadership in monitoring and control

A significant challenge in South African schools is the prevailing perception among principals that curriculum monitoring is the sole responsibility of subject heads and department heads. This perception often diverts the principal's focus toward administrative tasks and student discipline, neglecting instructional leadership (Maphalala & Mphahlele, 2023). Furthermore, an environment characterised by ambiguous responsibilities often results in poor policy implementation, particularly regarding school progression policies, where oversight mechanisms remain ill-defined. This highlights a critical need for principals to re-engage with their roles as instructional leaders, actively participating in curriculum oversight rather than solely delegating these crucial responsibilities (Bush, Fadare & Chirimambowa, 2021). This re-engagement necessitates a shift towards active modelling, consistent monitoring, and fostering professional dialogue, elements often lacking in current school improvement strategies (Bush & Glover, 2016). The absence of comprehensive, structured monitoring tools and consistent classroom visitation protocols in some South African schools exacerbates this issue, leading to less formal oversight practices and limited subject-specific support, particularly in under-resourced institutions (Madonsela, Jita & Badmus, 2025). This delegation of curriculum monitoring to departmental heads, without robust principal engagement, can diminish the overall effectiveness of curriculum management and learner performance (Maphalala & Mphahlele, 2023). This often leads to a disproportionate burden on Departmental Heads, who, despite their critical role in bridging management and classroom practice, often find themselves navigating complex leadership and management tasks in addition to their teaching duties (Kubheka, Naidoo & Oloba, 2025; Tapala, Fuller & Mentz, 2021). This situation is further complicated by principals who are often preoccupied with administrative, financial, and human resource management, perceiving instructional leadership as primarily the domain of DHs (Madimetsa & Saltiel, 2021).

3. Methodology

This study is underpinned by an interpretative paradigm to explore the monitoring and control processes in Social Sciences. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was used to explain the subjective meanings created by social interactions in the natural school context. The selected design allowed the researchers a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. Participants from the Fezile Dabi Education District in the Free State Province of South Africa were used to conduct purposive and convenient sampling. The education district was conveniently selected due to its closeness, while the participants were purposively selected due to the involvement of the participants in teaching Grade 7 Social Sciences or being a Departmental Head for the subject. The final sample size was seven, consisting of six Grade 7 Social Sciences teachers and one Department Head. Six DHs were targeted, but the researchers only managed to get one DH willing to participate in the study. Data was gathered through semi-structured individual interviews, conducted either face-to-face or via Microsoft Teams, lasting approximately 30 minutes each, and document analysis of monitoring tools, lesson plans, curriculum coverage, and moderation reports, ensuring triangulation for depth (Beyessa & Boru, 2024). Analysis followed inductive thematic content procedures using ATLAS.ti, comprising the following stages: pre-coding, codifying/categorizing, recoding/recategorizing, and theme development, consistent with Saldaña's methodology, yielding patterns aligned with Social Interdependence Theory (Proudfoot & Boyd, 2023). The researchers established trustworthiness through credibility (member checking, prolonged engagement), transferability (thick descriptions, data saturation), dependability (audit trail, triangulation), and confirmability (verbatim quotes, peer review) following Lincoln and Guba's criteria (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Ethical protocols included North-West University and Free State Department of Education approvals, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

4. Results

The inductive thematic analysis yielded four interconnected themes aligned with Social Interdependence Theory, illustrating the influence of curriculum management on learner performance.

4.1. Theme 1: The teacher-learner connection

The findings show that a key theme is the teacher-learner connection, highlighting how monitoring and control are closely tied to learner performance in primary school Social Sciences. Participants viewed monitoring and control not as separate administrative tasks, but as essential parts of teaching and learning that directly affect outcomes. They described them as a continuous, reflective cycle through which

educators assess instruction and learner engagement. This interconnectedness reflects positive interdependence, where learner success is tied to teacher actions and accountability. Monitoring is not only evaluative but also diagnostic, helping educators gauge gaps between teaching, learner understanding, and content delivery. As participants noted, it enables ongoing assessment of how well teachers connect with learners and how effectively learners engage with the subject. They also recognised that monitoring and control occur at multiple levels in the school system, aligned with formal roles and responsibilities. This multi-layered approach promotes collaboration among educators, where practices such as marking, feedback, and checking understanding enhance learner performance. By analysing performance data, teachers identify misunderstandings and adapt their strategies, which includes reteaching.

4.2. Theme 2: Characteristics of effective processes

With the second theme, participants identified four linked sub-themes: leadership in curriculum management, teacher effectiveness and development, feedback and reflection mechanisms, and administrative support for teaching practices and competence. Participants highlighted the role of principals and departmental heads in guiding and developing teachers through proactive efforts to educate, support, and motivate them to address instructional challenges. This includes promoting advance lesson planning and ensuring curriculum coverage. Participant accounts and document analysis also showed that recognising teachers' diligence and progress is part of effective monitoring. Participants indicated that effective monitoring and control reveal learner needs and instructional gaps, enabling teachers to adjust their strategies. Monitoring identifies learners who need extra support, supports separate instruction, and fosters responsive learning environments. These processes also drive teacher development by exposing areas for improvement and encouraging skill enhancement. Participants noted that teacher initiative is crucial, as effective monitoring begins in the classroom through deliberate planning, self-awareness, and engagement in professional development. Participants explained that monitoring and control processes provide ongoing feedback from learner performance and classroom activities. Informal assessments, learner engagement, and classroom interactions were key feedback sources shaping teaching practices. This feedback helps teachers judge whether objectives are met and adjust instruction. Reflection was critical, as teachers recognised the need to evaluate their own performance and seek support when needed. Participants noted that monitoring and control processes help DHs offer recommendations, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that teaching meets required standards.

4.3. Theme 3: Persistent challenges and barriers

The third theme highlights factors complicating effective monitoring and control with participants identifying four interconnected sub-themes: poor infrastructure, resource provision and utilisation; regressive stakeholder impact and parental involvement; ineffective curriculum management and teacher tendencies; and poor learner participation and engagement. Participants reported limited access to essential teaching and learning tools, including technology and internet connectivity, undermines effective instructional strategies. The lack of resources such as reliable Wi-Fi restricts teachers' use of pedagogical approaches, especially ICT integration. Participants reported that limited parental support and teacher unions can hinder curriculum implementation. Parents often lack the capacity to support learning at home, while unions may block initiatives such as extended teaching time. These factors create tensions between institutional expectations and classroom realities, complicating monitoring and control. The main challenges, however, lay in ineffective curriculum management and teacher tendencies. Interviews and documents showed that monitoring and control are poorly executed. Departmental heads' feedback was often incomplete, lacking clear guidance and timelines, which makes monitoring ineffective and not actionable for teachers. Participants also cited teacher reluctance, limited understanding of monitoring processes, and perceived lack of diligence. These tendencies lead to superficial and inconsistent implementation of monitoring and control, reducing their overall impact. Structural challenges further complicate this sub-theme, including excessive workloads for departmental heads and unevenly distributed responsibilities. Participants reported that limited engagement, low general knowledge, and difficulties with language and writing hinder teaching and assessment. Irregular task completion, late submissions, and differing learner abilities further complicate classroom management and pacing, making it hard for teachers to monitor progress and ensure meaningful engagement with the content.

4.4. Theme 4: Partial effectiveness and gains

The fourth theme explores how effectively current monitoring and control processes influence learner performance in Social Sciences. Participants reported positive outcomes but viewed the overall effectiveness as only partial, with both gains and limitations. Four interrelated sub-themes emerged: teacher development and support, alignment and adherence to CAPS and relevant policies, curriculum coverage, and curriculum monitoring and assessment alignment. Monitoring and control practices guide and

strengthen teachers' instructional capacity. Post-moderation evidence shows that departmental heads (DHs) identify areas of learner underperformance and support teachers through targeted interventions such as item error analysis and school improvement planning. This support includes professional development, classroom management, and curriculum delivery. Collaborative practices enable teachers to learn from one another and refine their approaches. The sub-theme of alignment with CAPS and relevant policies illustrates the effectiveness of current monitoring and control processes. Participants noted that these processes keep teaching practices aligned with curriculum standards and policy requirements. Monitoring activities—such as reviewing lesson plans, learner work, and assessment tasks—enable DHs to confirm that curriculum coverage follows the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) and CAPS guidelines. Document analysis showed that monitoring tools and criteria guide both teachers and DHs in maintaining compliance. Participants indicated that monitoring and control processes are central to ensuring completion of the prescribed curriculum. Regular tracking of teaching progress and learner work allows educators to judge whether they are keeping pace with curriculum requirements and to implement timely interventions, such as revisiting difficult concepts and introducing revision strategies. Some schools adopt innovative approaches—such as reallocating instructional time across subjects—to ensure full coverage. Participants indicated that effective monitoring ensures classroom instruction, learner activities, and assessment tasks are closely aligned. Learner workbooks and classroom activities directly reflect what appears in formal assessments, reinforcing the link between teaching and evaluation. Pre- and post-moderation of assessment tasks help standardise tests, ensure appropriate structure, and align them with required cognitive levels. This alignment limits gaps between instruction and assessment, enabling learners to perform better in formal evaluations.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a critical and complex interplay between systemic barriers and the theoretical objectives of curriculum management. It is evident that consistent supervision and the rigorous evaluation of pedagogical methodologies are non-negotiable for Social Sciences; a discipline that demands high-level critical thinking and deep content engagement from both teachers and learners. However, the data suggests that when monitoring processes are relegated to a "superficial" level, characterized by what this study terms "descriptive compliance", they fail to address the specific instructional needs of the learners. This is most clearly reflected in the unclear reporting procedures tied to school progression policies, where the lack of well-defined oversight results in uneven implementation from one institution to another. The results also indicate that while monitoring can encourage teachers to reflect on their work and improve their practice, it is only effective when instructional leadership is provided by the school principal; the practice of principals abdicating responsibility for monitoring to department heads to focus on other administrative and student discipline activities is a significant finding of this study, as it de-prioritizes curriculum quality and deprives DHs of the institutional support and funding to implement robust monitoring systems. From the perspective of Social Interdependence Theory, this study has shown how monitoring can either enhance or inhibit academic success through positive or negative interdependence between management and teachers with the common goal of academic excellence through coordinated, frequent, and constructive monitoring or the barriers identified, such as inconsistent feedback loops, insufficient infrastructure, and stakeholder disengagement, which lead to monitoring being perceived as a policing tool leading to teacher burnout or compliance for record-keeping rather than learning. The move to a performance-based approach to curriculum management in the Free State Province will be necessary to ensure that monitoring is a facilitative process rather than a policing exercise.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This study concludes that coordinated and encouraging monitoring mechanisms are essential for improving curriculum delivery and learning outcomes in Grade 7 Social Sciences. The research demonstrates that while current systems provide some level of policy alignment and assessment coherence, they are frequently undermined by systemic deficiencies and a lack of instructional leadership at the highest levels of school management. The reliance on "descriptive compliance" ensures that paperwork is completed, but it does not guarantee that meaningful learning is taking place in the classroom. By shifting the focus toward a collaborative model of monitoring grounded in Social Interdependence Theory, schools can bridge the gap between administrative oversight and genuine pedagogical improvement.

As recommendations, school principals must reclaim their central role in curriculum monitoring, and alongside the DHs actively participate in the supervision of instructional practices. Monitoring should be designed to address identified gaps in the knowledge and skills of Social Science educators to ensure that they are prepared to deliver Social Science instruction in the 21st century. Adequate physical spaces and instructional materials should be a top priority for educational authorities, and teachers must have

access to the basic tools to effectively deliver the curriculum if monitoring standards are to be met. School management should work with teachers to find ways for them to help each other and share ideas on how to improve student learning. This way teachers will see monitoring as support and not being checking up on. Schools should use monitoring tools to get an understanding of how students are learning and what they need help with. This will give teachers and parents a picture of what students have accomplished and what not.

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