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## Challenges Faced by Economics Teachers who did not Receive Specialised Training in the Subject

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**Abstract.** Many teachers globally are faced with the challenge of teaching subjects without specialised training in those subjects, and the researchers of this study form part of those teachers. This study investigates the challenges experienced by Economics teachers who did not receive specialised training in the subject. The problem identified by this study was the poor academic performance of learners in Economics, which could be attributed to the teaching of the subject by teachers who have not specialised in this subject. The study was grounded in systems theory and pedagogical content knowledge theory. The study adopted a qualitative research approach that used face-to-face semi-structured interviews and document reviews to collect the required data. Purposive sampling was used to select participants: four educators who teach Economics without specialisation, one School Management Team (SMT) member, one principal, and one subject advisor. The study uncovered challenges such as learners' struggle to understand English as a language of learning and teaching, and teachers overloaded teachers' lack of content knowledge and support as challenges experienced by these teachers. It recommended that teachers teaching subjects without specialisation should be reallocated to teach the subjects of their specialisation, and/or the teachers should enrol in a study course(s) specially designed for them to capacitate themselves.

**Keywords:** Economics; specialisation; subject; challenges; teachers

### 1. Introduction

In teaching, all over the world, several teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching subjects without having specialisation in the content of those subjects. The researchers have also experienced teaching without specialisation as one of the researchers taught Life Orientation in grades 8 and 9, Social Sciences and Creative Arts in grade 7 during his years of teaching, even though he was a

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qualified Economics teacher. Economics, Science, Physics, Mathematics, History, and Geography are among others taught without specialisation in countries like Australia, Ireland, England, Germany, Indonesia, Nepal, Nigeria, and the United States of America (USA) respectively (Boh, 2021; Hobbs & Porsch, 2021; Khadka, 2016). In South Africa, Du Plessis (2015) argues that Less than half of teachers are unsuitably qualified for their specific positions in the subjects they teach. As a result, many of these teachers have faced and are still facing serious challenges in teaching these subjects. They have inadequate teaching strategies and methods, and their learners struggle to have a deep understanding of the subject (Khadka, 2016). The researchers have also had some challenging experiences, which are, among others: struggle in lesson preparations, lack of confidence in the lesson execution, lack of understanding of the jargon, unable to fully utilise available resources, and low level of effectiveness as well as efficiency in teaching the subjects. Therefore, the researchers opted to investigate the challenges experienced by these teachers teaching subjects they have no specialisation in. The investigation was focused specifically on Economics in Amathole West Education District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa because of the poor grade 12 results in the subject in the region.

Teaching Economics without a specialisaion in the subject results in poor learner academic performance (Boh, 2021). Poor academic performance is also indicated by the Eastern Cape Department of Education (2020), as the Education District under study was either the lowest or the second last performing in the province of Eastern Cape in Economics grade 12 results with 49%, 56%, and 57% in matric results in 2017, 2018, and 2019 respectively. Therefore, the poor academic performance of learners who are taught by teachers with no specialisation in Economics is regarded as the research problem of the study. Consequently, to the problem statement, the purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges experienced by teachers teaching Economics without specialisation in the subject in the Amathole West Education District in order to devise strategies that can be used to support them.

## **2. Research question**

In achieving this purpose, the study was guided by the following research question: What challenges are faced by the teachers teaching Economics without specialisation? The researchers attempted to answer the research question with the hope of ultimately coming up with support that can be used to help these teachers and improve the research problem of poor academic performance of learners.

## **3. Theoretical framework**

The researchers used Bertalanffy's (1972) system theory to align with the study. A system is a set of interdependent elements that function as a unit for a specific purpose (Lai & Lin, 2017) The researchers adopted this theory to identify the challenges experienced by Economics teachers without specialisation in the subject and find ways to support these teachers by looking at the whole system. The researchers believe that teaching Economics as a subject is also a system with

elements like teachers, learners, subject advisors, parents/community, and the Department of Education (DoE) that depend on each other for the attainment of the subject's purpose. This theory assisted the researchers in examining and presenting in detail the data collected from participants to explain the challenges they face and develop ways to support the affected teachers. In doing so, the researchers analysed the inputs of each element on achieving the subject's purpose. They found out that the inputs of these Economics teachers as elements of the system, in terms of teaching the subject, may not be to the required standard since they may be lacking certain competencies (Hobbs & Porsch, 2021). The result of this phenomenon is said to be poor academic results of the learners in Economics (Boh, 2021). These results are feedback that shows that there is a malfunction in the system and that measures must be taken for the system to operate effectively and efficiently.

The second aspect of the theoretical framework adopted in this study is Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) suggested by Shulman (1986). This is about teachers' Content Knowledge (CK), Pedagogical Knowledge (PK), and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). Content Knowledge represents teachers' deep understanding of the subject matter taught, PK refers to teachers' specialised knowledge for creating effective teaching and learning environments for all learners, and PCK is the knowledge needed to make the subject matter accessible to learners (Kruger, 2017). The researchers used this theory because it was argued by Fernandez (2014) to be a fruitful model for investigations aimed at documenting the knowledge that makes one a good teacher. According to Fernandez's views, the researchers believed that the teachers in this study are not good as they lack the pedagogical content knowledge to teach Economics. Therefore, this theory assisted the researchers in developing ways to support these teachers in improving their pedagogical content knowledge of the subject through professional development and enrolment in institutions of higher learning.

## **4. Review of Literature**

### **4.1. Low level of understanding of Economics**

Teachers without specialisation in Economics, according to Du Plessis (2015), have a very narrow understanding of how the subject links to the real world and other subjects, find it difficult to decide which concepts require more attention, and that will affect the quality of teaching these teachers provide to learners. The researchers concur with this statement because you cannot teach what you do not know. Khadka (2016) added that these teachers find teaching Economics challenging and difficult for them to achieve the purpose of teaching and learning. Consequently, these teachers struggle to set well-constructed assessments that require complex thinking skills, attitude, and social skills; instead, low-order thinking skills dominate assessment (Nalova & Ferdinand, 2017). The researchers believe these teachers might be setting lower-order questions in assessments because they are afraid to ask questions they may be unable to mark if learners give complex and critical responses. This, in turn, results in learners having difficulties in applying knowledge learned, comprehending current affairs and economic problems, and thus engaging themselves in rote memorisation.

#### **4.2. Struggling to impart subject knowledge of Economics**

If teachers struggle to understand the subject they teach, the researcher is concerned about how teachers impart the subject knowledge to their learners. Ngwenya (2014) states that these Economics teachers struggle to impart the required knowledge and skills to learners. The researchers argue that the limited understanding that these Economics teachers have in Economics may also be imparted to their learners. Boh (2021) suggests that lack of understanding of the Economics content by teachers makes them struggle with choosing appropriate teaching methods and strategies to apply in class to facilitate learners' understanding and interest. Learners face difficulties mastering this subject, their Economics performance drops, and some schools stop offering it altogether (Thaba-Nkadimene and Mmakola (2020). This indicates a problem within the system when one aspect of the system (teachers) struggles to perform its core function and requires adequate support for the system to function smoothly.

#### **4.3. Lack of adequate academic support**

If a teacher is having some challenges with regard to teaching a subject, that teacher should get the necessary support he/she needs to improve teaching and learning. However, Du Plessis (2015) points out that these teachers sometimes do not feel valued because when they seek help with teaching a subject where they do not have specialisation, they do not get support to deal with their challenges. Not receiving adequate support when challenged with teaching a subject where you lack specialisation may lower the esteem of the affected teacher even further and affect teaching and learning negatively. Du Plessis adds that the challenges faced by teachers without specialisation are ignored in some schools as information from agendas and minutes of subject and staff meetings reveal that the phenomenon is not part of discussions in these meetings. Nonetheless, Du Plessis further points out that the teachers under study are assessed as if they are teaching a subject they are specialists in. There are high expectations and pressure upon them to attain the same level of effectiveness and quality as specialist teachers despite their teaching Economics without specialisation. The European Commission (2013) supports the above statements by stating that more than half of a third of teachers report never being sent to professional development to improve their content knowledge, skills, and methodology of the subjects they teach. The researchers believe that the teachers under study should first be capacitated with adequate knowledge and be familiarised with the standards expected of them prior to teaching and learning as well as being assessed. However, the affected teacher should also take it upon him/herself to capacitate and venture upon solutions to his/her challenges.

### **5. Methodology and data used**

The study used an interpretivism research paradigm to interpret the participants' personal experiences with regard to the phenomenon under study. The study was qualitative research which attempted to study participants' experiences in their natural settings (Mohajan, 2018). The research approach employed in the study was a qualitative approach to collect and analyse data through a thematic data analysis method to answer the research question.

Multiple case study design was used to gain a sharpened understanding of the phenomenon, sought answers to the research question in three schools with low academic results in the Education District, and what might become important to look at more extensively in future research (Brink, 2018). The researchers employed multiple cases by collecting data from selected participants in the cases and collating the data to arrive at the best possible responses to the research question. The sample comprised four teachers teaching Economics in the Amathole West Education District without specialisation, one principal and one SMT member of the lowest performing schools, and Business Studies subject advisor as there was no Economics subject advisor in the Education District. The sample was selected purposively because the teachers did not receive specialised training in Economics and the subject in their school was one of the poorly performed in the Education District and the Province. The main data collection tool used in this research study was the interviews for all the above-mentioned participants, and learners' books and assessment files were reviewed as a secondary data collection tool. The researchers adhered to ethical considerations, permission to conduct the study was granted; informed consent from the participants was granted; participation was voluntary; no harm and risk were encountered; the identity of participants remained private, confidential, and anonymous; honesty and trust were adhered to; credibility and trustworthiness were adhered to.

## 6. Data analysis

### 6.1. Understanding English as the Language of Learning and Teaching

The research found that these teachers are challenged by: learners who struggle to understand English as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT), a lack of participation from learners, and a shortage of textbooks. Mudaly and Singh (2018) argue that the language barrier is not only a challenge for Economics learners but rather a common challenge in most schools in South Africa as instruction is given in a language both learners and teachers do not normally use outside of school and often do not master very well. The researchers believe that learners should be familiarised with the use of English in teaching Economics concepts in lower grades. This should help learners not struggle to understand the language and concepts used in the subject in higher grades. The shortage of textbooks is a widespread problem in many schools, which the DoE should address by ensuring that textbooks are delivered on time to schools. Providing textbooks to learners could assist teachers in teaching the subject efficiently because Lau et al. (2018) say textbooks provide teachers with a clear outline to follow, thereby giving learners a sense of structure and progress. In this context, the researchers suggest that schools must also have strict measures to manage their textbooks, as learners destroy and lose them without accounting for them. The following is what a participant had to say about the language barrier and shortage of textbooks as a challenge faced when teaching Economics without specialisation.

*"There's a language barrier, if you will be talking Economic Concepts, whereas the children struggle to make sense of simple English. So, you first have to be an English teacher before you are an Economics teacher. ....We have been lacking textbooks and now it is difficult as a teacher to teach Economics where the child has nothing in front of him/her." (T4)*

## 6.2. Teacher workload

Teachers and the subject advisor reported being overloaded with much work as they teach all grades from 8 to 12, with no free periods during the week, and also conduct extra classes in afternoons and weekends. In some cases, this resulted in the teachers not planning their work properly, and their work not being monitored in schools, as files were neither signed nor stamped. This is what participants reported about their work overload:

*“I don't have a free period for five days and it is so stressful that I was even thinking of resigning. The principal consulted me and said I need to take autumn classes and I said no, I need a rest, I need a break.”* (SMT)

*“I am the only teacher who is teaching grades 10 to 12, I also teach EMS in grades 8 and 9, as well as Business Studies in grades 10 to 12. This is a lot of work for me. ...we have 6 grade 8 classes.”* (T4)

The workload issue has been an issue in schools, not only in South Africa but all over the world. Tancinco (2016) reported that a number of teachers throughout the world are preoccupied and overloaded with their duties and responsibilities. These teachers are assigned too many subjects and too many grades to teach and are required to teach more than their normal human capacity can deliver and causing a strain on their well-being. Other teachers are or, at some point in their teaching, have taught two or three subjects in the same year and grade. These teachers give more attention to grade 12 at the expense of other grades as there is too much attention for grade 12 learners from the department. This means these teachers end up not covering the whole syllabus, especially in lower grades. This is one of the reasons learners in lower grades end up with no fundamental background in the subjects taught. Additionally, Abbasi (2015) pointed out that some of the conditions that create work overload for teachers are having fewer holidays or breaks and pressure to work overtime and complete tasks in a limited time. This overload affects the quality of instruction and other related activities by reducing teachers' efficiency. Teachers who are given appropriate loads of work are likely to attain a better level of teaching performance (Tancinco, 2016).

## 6.3. Compromised Assessment

It was reported by Nalova and Ferdinand (2017) that some teachers struggle in setting well-constructed assessments; instead, assessment activities are dominated by lower-order questions. This was confirmed while perusing assessment tasks set by teachers as part of document reviews in the study. It was discovered that the quality of assessment tasks set by the teachers is compromised because activities are not balanced in terms of the cognitive levels (30% lower order, 40% middle order, and 30% higher order) of questioning recommended by CAPS (Department of Basic Education, 2011). For every subject, there is a CAPS document that guides teachers on how to implement the curriculum in terms of planning and delivering a lesson as well as assessing learners. The CAPS document even further states how to, when, and what to assess. It suggests assessment programmes that inform teachers about the number of assessment activities they should administer per term and that each lesson should be accompanied by an assessment activity.

However, the findings in the study reveal that teachers did not assess according to CAPS requirements, which means they were failing to implement the curriculum. Below are statements given by the interviewees which show that teachers did not implement the curriculum as they were supposed to:

*“When they develop those tasks on their own, they are of poor quality because the tasks are made up of lower order questions while the requirement requires a variety of questions as per NCS and Bloom Taxonomy. That surprises us because we develop tasks for these teachers with memos that are supposed to be administered to learners daily.” (SA)*

*“I cannot be sure that the small tests and tasks I am preparing for them are what is required, so I can only wait until the department sends me the common tasks. Even with the internal moderation, I am not of an opinion that I will get information that will put me in the light because we don't have an HOD for commerce. I take my subject work and send it to the Accounting teacher, who gives me her work to moderate.” (T4)*

Emanating from the assessments administered by the teachers under study is mediocre to poor learners' academic performance in Economics. Statistics presented by the Eastern Cape Department of Education (2020) for the schools under study showed poor academic results in Economics as they did not produce quality. They only had 2% of learners achieving 60% and above, 31% achieved between 40% - 59%, and 67% achieved 39% and below in the subject over three years (2017 - 2019).

#### **6.4. Lack of adequate support**

Support from the workplace and Education Officials is the most popular strategy to help teachers deal with their challenges in a subject matter when teaching outside their area of specialisation, according to Hobbs and Porsch (2021). However, the teachers under study complained about not receiving the support they required as there were insufficient professional development workshops organised for them to be adequately equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. Some teachers added that they did not get any support from within their schools with regard to teaching the subject without specialisation. The following are responses from teachers regarding the lack of necessary support from the people who are supposed to be assisting.

*“I am having a problem with not having a subject advisor who will guide me. As I said, it's my 1st year of teaching the subject. So I need someone who is experienced, who will actually be there to guide me and tell me to do this; you need to be here now; there are the strategies you need to be using.” (T4)*

*“There is no support from my school... No support that I get from the principal.” (T3)*

*“Normally, there is only one workshop to be attended in a term to look into the work of the term... one workshop to someone who has a gap in the content knowledge of the subject is not enough.” (T1)*

Education Labour Relations Council (2016) argues that the Department of Education employs subject advisors to guide and support educators in effectively delivering the curriculum in the classroom, strengthening their content knowledge, and organising relevant/related co-curricular activities. Unfortunately, the teachers under study in the Education District did not get the guidance and support they required from the subject advisor. This guidance and support that teachers lack was also stated by Du Plessis (2015) when the literature was reviewed stating that the teachers feel less valuable when not supported. However, the Business studies subject advisor came to the rescue and assisted the teachers under study. Unfortunately, she later dropped them, complaining of overload of work and citing health issues.

## 7. Discussion

Literature reviewed revealed that most of the teachers investigated by the study lack deep understanding of the subject content and topics they teach and end up teaching only the topics they feel most comfortable with, especially in lower grades. Some teachers had low proficiency in English as LOLT and struggled with relating content to real-life experiences and choosing appropriate teaching methods and strategies to facilitate learners' understanding and interest. As a result, they struggle to impart the required knowledge and skills to learners (Ngwenya, 2014). The low proficiency in English as LOLT was a new discovery from the data analysed from interviews and the researchers did not foresee that, especially from the teachers. Literature reviewed and interview responses were in agreement with teachers struggling to choose appropriate teaching strategies to facilitate teaching and learning.

Lesson plans were not monitored or controlled in some schools, Economics textbooks were sometimes in shortage or unavailable and that influenced some teachers not to plan their work as they knew there were no departmental heads employed to monitor their work. When reviewing teachers' files, researchers noted that the lesson plans did not match the number of topics covered and some teachers did not submit the files to be reviewed. On the contrary, if teachers are challenged by the content of the subject, English as LOLT, are properly planning their lessons, and have a shortage of textbooks, it is likely that they may have some challenges administering adequate assessment activities. Nalova and Ferdinand (2017) in the literature mentioned that teachers under study struggle in setting well-constructed assessments, instead, low-order questioning skills dominate assessment. Teachers' and learners' files proved Nalova and Ferdinand's (2017) sentiments to be true as some of the activities were not in line with the curriculum requirements.

The literature reviewed presented that the teachers investigated lacked the necessary support to fulfil teaching and learning duties. Data collected from participants further mentioned that Economics teachers in the study struggled to get ongoing support and guidance from the subject advisor because the district under study did not have a subject advisor for Economics. The teachers also complained about a lack of support in the form of professional development workshops and support from within their schools. This surprised the researchers



as the first form of support a teacher should have when encountering academic-related challenges should be from the departmental head and principal of the school the teacher is employed in.

One of the distinct findings from the literature the study came with was an overload of work the teachers and the subject advisor experienced. However, the overload did not come as a surprise as most teachers the researchers know are also overloaded with a lot of work. All these challenges the teachers experience culminate in a compromised quality of these teachers' work, lead to learners not getting a solid background of the subject, poor learner academic performance, and/or learners progressing to higher grades without grasping the subject content because they were taught by teachers who lacked the background knowledge.

## **8. Conclusions**

This study aimed to investigate the challenges experienced by teachers teaching Economics without specialisation in the subject in the Amathole West Education District. The investigation revealed that the teachers under study possess low levels of understanding the content of Economics, struggle to assess and impart learner's learning, do not receive adequate support, and their teaching is yielded by poor learner academic performance. Therefore, this study is significant in helping to assist in the employment of Economics teachers, improving quality of teaching and learning of the subject, which could help learners achieve better academic results in Economics. However, the limitation of this study was that it was conducted in only three schools with the following participants: four teachers, one SMT member, one principal, and one subject advisor. Documents reviewed were also from the three schools. Therefore, findings from the study could not be generalised across the province, country, or globally. Moreover, future research could build from the findings of this study with regard to the role Heads of Departments, principals and subject advisors play in providing adequate support to newly appointed or teachers under study. Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the growing body of evidence with regard to the challenges teachers experience in schools in order for researchers, policymakers, and Department of Education officials to devise strategies to support these teachers.

## **9. Recommendations**

Based on the literature reviewed and data collected in the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Teachers teaching a subject without specialisation, need to plan to have plenty of time to capacitate themselves by studying the subject, doing necessary research, consulting, and asking for help where they encounter challenges.
- Amathole West Education District should employ subject advisors for Economics to lessen the workload on Business Studies subject advisors and provide adequate guidance and support to Economics teachers and HODs in the district.

- There should be frequent professional development workshops conducted by proficient people with adequate content knowledge, skills, and experience in the subject for teachers, especially those who teach Economics without specialisation, those who teach the subject for the first time, and those who are newly appointed directly from the university.
- The Department of Education must collaborate with Institutions of Higher Learning to develop teacher capacitation programs specially designed for teachers with no specialisation in the subjects they teach, and those challenged by the content they teach to equip teachers with content and pedagogical knowledge and skills in the subjects they teach.
- All teachers who teach Economics without specialisation in the subject need to be reallocated with their respective subjects of specialisations and bring all those teachers who have specialisation in Economics but are teaching other subjects to teach Economics. This is to make sure that those teachers with specialisation in Economics are the ones who teach Economics. The Department of Education should control and monitor the process so that no teacher is left teaching without specialisation.

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