GREAT JOURNS

Journal of Education

Vol.1 No.2, July 2026

Heads of Departments' Workload: An Analysis of Its Components in Public Senior Schools in Butere Sub-County, Kakamega County, Kenya

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Great Journs
ISSN: 2328-4870
Vol.1 No.2, July, 2026

Journal homepage: www.greatjourns.com

ABSTRACT

Heads of Departments (HoDs) occupy a critical middle-leadership position in senior schools, linking school administration with classroom teachers through curriculum coordination, teacher supervision and examination management. This paper draws on a wider descriptive survey study conducted in 32 public senior schools in Butere Sub-County, Kakamega County, Kenya, to examine the specific objective of analyzing the components of HoDs' workload. Data were collected from 156 HoDs, 111 teachers and 240 students using structured questionnaires, and complemented by qualitative interviews with school principals. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations), while a supplementary one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed from the reported group means to test whether perceptions of workload differed significantly across the three respondent categories. The findings show that HoDs perform extensive instructional and administrative responsibilities, with examination planning and coordination (M = 4.43), curriculum coordination (M = 4.40) and teaching load (M = 4.36) rated as the heaviest contributors to workload. The supplementary ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in perceived workload across HoDs, teachers and students, $F(2, 504) = 4.82$, $p < 0.01$. The study concludes that departmental leadership in senior schools extends well beyond classroom teaching and recommends deliberate workload management to strengthen instructional leadership.

Keywords: Heads of Departments; workload; instructional leadership; senior schools; Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The contribution of Heads of Departments (HoDs) to teaching and learning outcomes is widely recognised within school leadership structures. As middle-level leaders, HoDs act as a link between school administration and classroom teachers by coordinating curriculum implementation, supervising instruction and monitoring student progress (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020). Through these responsibilities, HoDs influence both the quality of teaching and the consistency of learning experiences across subjects.

Despite the importance of this role, HoDs often operate under demanding conditions. In many schools they are required to balance leadership responsibilities with full teaching loads, alongside administrative duties such as preparing reports, coordinating examinations and managing departmental resources (Bush, 2023; Harris & Jones, 2022). EDUCATIONALal reforms, including the shift towards competency-based approaches, have further expanded these responsibilities by increasing the need for continuous assessment, learner monitoring and instructional adaptation (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). In the Kenyan context, large class sizes, limited staffing and inadequate teaching resources compound the workload of HoDs and may constrain their instructional leadership capacity.

Globally, comparative research on middle-level school leadership has shown that the effectiveness of HoDs is shaped as much by the conditions under which they work as by their

individual competence. Harris and Jones (2022) note that in many EDUCATIONAL systems, departmental leaders are appointed on the basis of subject expertise and teaching experience but receive limited structural support in the form of reduced teaching loads, administrative assistance or dedicated leadership time to enable them to carry out supervisory and mentoring functions effectively. This mismatch between the scope of HoDs' expected responsibilities and the resources allocated to support them has been identified as a recurring challenge in both developed and developing EDUCATIONAL systems, and provides the broader rationale for examining, in a Kenyan sub-county setting, exactly what HoDs' workload consists of.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

While the instructional leadership role of HoDs is well documented, the specific components that constitute their day-to-day workload in Kenyan public senior schools remain insufficiently understood, particularly within Butere Sub-County, Kakamega County, an area characterised by staffing shortages and fluctuating academic performance. Without a clear analysis of what constitutes HoDs' workload, interventions aimed at strengthening instructional leadership risk being poorly targeted. This paper therefore addresses this gap by systematically analysing the components of HoDs' workload as perceived by HoDs themselves, teachers, students and principals.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The paper is guided by the objective: to analyse the components of Heads of Departments' workload in public senior schools in Butere Sub-County, Kakamega County, Kenya.

1.4 Significance of the Study

An empirical understanding of the components of HoDs' workload is useful to the Teachers Service Commission and the Ministry of EDUCATIONAL in refining workload allocation guidelines, to school principals in distributing departmental responsibilities more equitably, and to HoDs themselves in prioritising instructional leadership tasks. The findings also extend the empirical literature on middle-level school leadership within a Kenyan sub-county context.

1.5 Scope and Limitations

This paper is delimited to the objective of analysing the components of HoDs' workload in the 32 public senior schools in Butere Sub-County, Kakamega County, and draws on data collected from HoDs, teachers, students and principals in these schools. As with any cross-sectional survey, the findings reflect respondents' perceptions at a single point in time and within a specific sub-county context; caution should therefore be exercised in generalising the results to schools with markedly different staffing levels or resource conditions. Similarly, the supplementary ANOVA reported in Section 4.3 was computed from group-level summary statistics rather than from raw individual-level data, and should be interpreted as an indicative, transparently-labelled extension of the original study's descriptive analysis rather than a re-analysis of primary data.

Great Journs
ISSN: 2328-4870
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Journal homepage: www.greatjourns.com

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Role of Heads of Departments in senior Schools

Heads of Departments occupy a critical position within the leadership structure of senior schools, serving as middle-level leaders who bridge the gap between school administration and classroom teachers. According to Hallinger and Murphy (2013), HoDs are expected to coordinate curriculum implementation, supervise teachers, monitor syllabus coverage and promote effective teaching and learning practices, while also mentoring teachers and supporting professional growth within their departments. Bush (2023) notes that the effectiveness of school leadership depends not only on principals but also on middle-level leaders such as HoDs, who directly influence classroom instruction through regular interaction with teachers. Harris and Jones (2022) further indicate that effective departmental leadership contributes to improved teacher motivation, better curriculum implementation and enhanced student achievement, although the ability of HoDs to perform these responsibilities effectively depends largely on the workload assigned to them.

2.2 Components of Heads of Departments' Workload

Workload refers to the total amount of responsibilities and duties assigned to an employee within a specified period. In the context of senior schools, the workload of HoDs consists of teaching responsibilities, administrative duties, instructional supervision, curriculum coordination and student mentoring, each of which is discussed in turn below.

2.2.1 Teaching Load

Teaching remains one of the primary responsibilities of HoDs. According to the Teachers Service Commission, an ordinary secondary school teacher is expected to teach a minimum of 27 lessons per week; HoDs are, in principle, expected to have a reduced teaching load to allow sufficient time for instructional leadership responsibilities such as teacher supervision and curriculum coordination. In practice, however, teacher shortages in many public senior schools mean HoDs are often allocated teaching loads close to those of ordinary teachers, which limits the time available for effective instructional leadership. Mulford (2020) observed that school leaders who carry heavy teaching loads often struggle to fulfil instructional leadership functions effectively, and that excessive teaching responsibilities may negatively affect departmental performance and learner outcomes.

2.2.2 Administrative Duties

Administrative responsibilities, including preparation of departmental reports, record keeping, examination coordination, attending meetings and managing departmental resources, constitute a further significant portion of HoDs' workload. Bush and Glover (2014) argue that administrative tasks are essential for accountability and effective school management; however, excessive administrative demands may divert attention from instructional leadership activities. As administrative workload increases, opportunities for mentoring teachers and monitoring instruction tend to decline.

2.2.3 Instructional Supervision

Instructional supervision involves monitoring teaching practices, evaluating lesson delivery and providing feedback to teachers. According to Gurr (2021), instructional supervision enables school leaders to identify areas requiring improvement and support teachers in enhancing classroom practices, promoting accountability, professional development and improved student outcomes. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of instructional supervision depends on the availability of time and resources, and excessive workload may limit the frequency and quality of supervision activities.

2.2.4 Curriculum Coordination

Curriculum coordination involves ensuring that instructional activities align with curriculum requirements and EDUCATIONALal objectives, including monitoring of syllabus coverage, assessment practices and instructional planning. Lunenburg (2020) argues that curriculum coordination is essential for maintaining instructional quality and promoting academic achievement, but that increased workload may hinder the ability of HoDs to monitor curriculum implementation effectively.

2.2.5 Student Mentoring

Student mentoring involves providing academic guidance, career advice and emotional support to learners. HoDs often participate in mentoring activities aimed at improving student motivation and performance, and research suggests that mentoring contributes positively to learner engagement and academic success. However, heavy workload may limit opportunities for meaningful interaction between HoDs and students.

2.3 Research Gap

Existing studies on HoD workload (e.g., Kalane & Rambuda, 2021; Mpisane, 2015) have largely been conducted outside Kenya or have focused broadly on instructional leadership challenges rather than systematically decomposing workload into its constituent components across multiple respondent categories. Few studies have triangulated the perspectives of HoDs, teachers, students and principals within a single Kenyan sub-county to establish which components of workload are perceived as most demanding. This paper addresses that gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, considered appropriate because it enabled the collection of information from a large population and the description of existing conditions without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative data were used to measure the extent of workload components, while qualitative data from principals' interviews offered deeper insight into respondents' experiences and contextual interpretations of workload dynamics.

3.2 Study Area and Target Population

The study was conducted in public senior schools in Butere Sub-County, Kakamega County, Kenya, an area characterised by resource constraints, staffing shortages and fluctuating KCSE performance. The target population comprised 32 principals, 160 HoDs, 160 teachers and 640 students drawn from the 32 public senior schools in the sub-county (Butere Sub-County EDUCATIONAL Office, 2024).

3.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A census technique was used for the 32 principals and 160 HoDs because they formed the key informants and their numbers were manageable. Simple random sampling was used to select 114 teachers from the target population of 160, while stratified random sampling (by Form Three and Form Four) was used to select 246 students from a target population of 640. Sample sizes for teachers and students were computed using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, yielding a total sample of 552 respondents across all categories .

Table 1. Sample Size Distribution

Category	Target Population	Sample Size
Principals	32	32
Heads of Departments	160	160
Teachers	160	114
Students	640	246
Total	992	552

3.4 Data Collection, Validity and Reliability

Data were collected using structured questionnaires for HoDs, teachers and students, and an interview guide for principals, complemented by a document review guide for KCSE records (2021–2025). Content validity was established through review by university supervisors and subject experts. Reliability was determined through a pilot study and computed using Cronbach's Alpha, with the workload scale yielding a coefficient of 0.821, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2019).

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data relating to the study objective were analysed using descriptive statistics, namely frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, computed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 30. Qualitative data from principals' interviews were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, and triangulated with the quantitative

Great Journs
ISSN: 2328-4870
Vol.1 No.2, July, 2026

findings. Because the objective addressed here is descriptive in nature analysing the components of workload rather than testing a relationship between two variables the original study did not subject it to inferential tests such as regression or ANOVA; those techniques were reserved in the parent study for the objective examining the workload–performance relationship (Pearson correlation, $r = –0.682$, $p < 0.05$). For the purposes of this paper, a supplementary one-way ANOVA was computed from the reported group means, standard deviations and sample sizes of HoDs, teachers and students (Tables 2–4) to test whether perceived workload differed significantly across respondent categories; this supplementary computation is clearly identified as such in the results section and should not be read as part of the original study's inferential analysis.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics

Of the 552 sampled respondents, 539 fully completed and returned usable instruments, giving an overall response rate of 97.6% (Table 5), which is well above the 70% threshold generally considered adequate for social science survey research (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2019).

Table 2. Questionnaire Response Rate

Respondent category	Sample size	Returned	Response rate (%)
Principals (interview schedule)	32	32	100.0
Heads of Departments	160	156	97.5
Teachers	114	111	97.4
Students	246	240	97.6
Total	552	539	97.6

Among the 156 HoDs who participated, 94 (60.3%) were male and 62 (39.7%) female, indicating that departmental leadership in the sampled schools was predominantly, though not exclusively, held by men. In terms of qualification, 95 (60.9%) held Bachelor's degrees, 49 (31.4%) held Master's degrees, 8 (5.1%) held Diplomas and 4 (2.6%) held Doctorates, suggesting that the majority of HoDs were professionally qualified to discharge instructional leadership responsibilities. Regarding experience, 56 (35.9%) had served as HoD for between five and ten years, 44 (28.2%) for between eleven and fifteen years, 32 (20.5%) for more than fifteen years, and 24 (15.4%) for less than five years, indicating that most respondents had accumulated sufficient practical experience to describe their workload reliably. Principals corroborated these findings, with one observing: "Our Heads of Departments are academically qualified. The problem is not their competence but the many responsibilities assigned to them."

4.2 Components of Workload: Heads of Departments' Perceptions

HoDs (n = 156) rated the extent to which various responsibilities constituted their workload on a five-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree).

Table 2. Components of HoDs' Workload According to Heads of Departments (n = 156)

Workload component	Mean	SD
Examination planning and coordination	4.43	0.71
Curriculum coordination	4.40	0.73
Full teaching workload alongside leadership duties	4.36	0.77
Preparation of departmental reports	4.35	0.76
Regular supervision of teachers	4.31	0.79
Departmental meetings	4.31	0.79
Student guidance and counselling	4.32	0.78
Mentoring of teachers	4.29	0.80
Overall mean	4.35	0.77

The overall mean of 4.35 (SD = 0.77) indicates strong agreement that HoDs perform numerous instructional and administrative responsibilities. Examination planning and coordination was the highest-rated component (M = 4.43), followed by curriculum coordination (M = 4.40) and teaching load (M = 4.36), suggesting HoDs spend considerable time coordinating examinations and monitoring curriculum delivery alongside regular teaching.

Great Journs
ISSN: 2328-4870
Vol.1 No.2, July, 2026

Journal homepage: www.greatjourns.com

4.2 Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of HoDs' Workload

Table 3. Overall Perceptions of HoDs' Workload by Respondent Group

Respondent group	n	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Heads of Departments	156	4.35	0.77	Agree
Teachers	111	4.30	0.74	Agree
Students	240	4.12	0.78	Agree

Teachers (M = 4.30, SD = 0.74) agreed that HoDs carried heavy instructional and administrative responsibilities, rating administrative duties as the heaviest contributor (M = 4.40). Students (M = 4.12, SD = 0.78) perceived HoDs as committed instructional leaders who encouraged academic improvement, although they also agreed that heavy responsibilities sometimes made HoDs less available to students (M = 4.12). Principals, interviewed qualitatively, corroborated these findings; one principal observed that "Heads of Departments perform many duties every day. Besides teaching, they supervise teachers, coordinate examinations, prepare reports and attend management meetings. Their workload has increased significantly over the years."

4.3 Supplementary Inferential Analysis: One-Way ANOVA Across Respondent Groups

To determine whether the difference in perceived workload across the three respondent groups shown in Table 3 was statistically significant, a one-way ANOVA was computed from the reported group means, standard deviations and sample sizes.

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA Summary for Perceived Workload Across Respondent Groups

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Between groups	5.69	2	2.85	4.82	0.008
Within groups	297.50	504	0.59		
Total	303.19	506			

The ANOVA result, $F(2, 504) = 4.82$, $p = 0.008$, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, indicating that mean perceptions of HoDs' workload differed significantly across HoDs, teachers and students. HoDs and teachers rated the workload more heavily than students did, which is consistent with HoDs and teachers experiencing the administrative and instructional demands directly, whereas students observe workload mainly through its effects on availability and support. As a further point of reference, the parent study's Pearson correlation between HoDs'

workload and students' academic performance (r = –0.682) implies a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.465$, meaning workload differences statistically account for approximately 46.5% of the variance in students' academic performance, underscoring the practical importance of the workload components analysed above.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that HoDs' workload in Butere Sub-County extends well beyond classroom teaching to encompass examination management, curriculum coordination, report writing, teacher supervision, mentoring and student guidance. This is consistent with Hallinger and Murphy's (2013) characterisation of departmental leaders as coordinators of curriculum implementation and teacher supervision, and with Bush and Glover's (2014) observation that administrative tasks, while necessary for accountability, compete with instructional leadership functions for HoDs' limited time.

The significant difference in perceptions across respondent groups (Table 4) suggests that workload is experienced differently depending on one's vantage point: HoDs and teachers, who are closer to the day-to-day administrative and instructional demands, rated workload more heavily than students, who primarily notice its downstream effects on HoDs' availability. This pattern aligns with Mulford's (2020) observation that school leaders carrying heavy loads often struggle to sustain consistent engagement with all stakeholders, including learners.

These findings support Instructional Leadership Theory, which holds that instructional leaders require sufficient time to supervise teaching, monitor curriculum implementation and mentor teachers; when workload becomes excessive, as demonstrated here, the effectiveness of these leadership functions is likely to decline (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020).

The finding that examination planning and coordination was the single heaviest-rated component of HoDs' workload (M = 4.43) is notable. Examination periods place concentrated demands on HoDs, who must coordinate setting, moderation, invigilation and results compilation on top of their regular teaching and supervisory duties. This finding resonates with Bush's (2023) observation that periodic administrative peaks, rather than routine duties alone, often account for the most acute pressure experienced by middle-level school leaders. Similarly, the closeness of the ratings for curriculum coordination (M = 4.40) and teaching load (M = 4.36) suggests that HoDs experience these three demands as a tightly interlinked cluster rather than as separable, sequential tasks, which has implications for how workload relief measures should be designed: addressing teaching load alone, for instance, without also easing examination-period administrative demands, may yield only partial relief.

The qualitative evidence from principals reinforces this interpretation. Principals consistently attributed the heavy workload of HoDs not to any deficiency in competence or qualification — the majority of HoDs held Bachelor's or Master's degrees and had accumulated several years of leadership experience — but to structural factors such as teacher shortages and the accumulation of administrative duties over time. This distinction is important for policy: interventions premised on further professional training alone are unlikely to resolve a problem that is substantially rooted in staffing and workload allocation rather than in HoDs' capacity.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that HoDs in public senior schools in Butere Sub-County perform numerous instructional and administrative responsibilities that extend beyond classroom teaching, including curriculum implementation, teacher supervision, examination management, report preparation, student guidance and mentoring. Examination planning, curriculum coordination and teaching load were identified as the heaviest contributors to workload. Perceptions of this workload differ significantly across HoDs, teachers and students, with HoDs and teachers perceiving it as more demanding than students do. The combination of these responsibilities constitutes a heavy workload that can limit the effectiveness of HoDs in fulfilling their instructional leadership role.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that: (i) the Teachers Service Commission strengthen the implementation and monitoring of existing workload allocation guidelines to ensure hods are assigned manageable teaching loads; (ii) school principals promote shared leadership by delegating appropriate administrative responsibilities to other staff to reduce unnecessary workload on hods; (iii) the Ministry of Education, through Quality Assurance and Standards Officers, regularly assess whether hods are adequately supported in curriculum supervision and teacher mentoring; and (iv) hods adopt deliberate time-management, planning and delegation strategies, and strengthen professional learning communities with teachers, to protect time for instructional supervision and curriculum monitoring.

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