

Dichotomy In the Foundation Phase: Are Departmental Heads Educators or Curriculum Leaders?

Makhananesa Joseph Lesiba

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0806-3319>

Mmalefikane Sylvia Sepeng

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4472-169X>

University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

The curriculum leaders in the infancy phase of schooling are challenged. They engage in mammoth tasks that lead to confusion as to whether they are level one educators or curriculum heads in terms of their daily functions. Recent research studies demonstrate that many primary schools' performance is questionable in the Foundation Phase in areas such as reading comprehension and numeracy. Such anomalies could be related to the inefficiency of departmental heads in the phase. This article investigated the underlying dichotomy that exists for Foundation Phase departmental heads. Using a qualitative approach, data was generated from selected primary schools in South Africa. The findings reveal that it is common among Foundation Phase departmental heads to concentrate much on classroom teaching and learning activities and lag on management functions because they lack effective assistance. The study recommends that workable remedies ranging from review of personnel administration management duties for departmental heads to the provision of education assistants (EA's) can provide long-lasting solutions.

Keywords: Departmental head, foundation phase, primary school, effectiveness, performance, education assistant.

Introduction

Departmental heads in the Foundation Phase are somehow compromised as they encounter a plethora of challenges; there is insufficient time to attend to management duties as they are also full-time class educators. In this phase, educators are expected to lay a strong educational foundation. The magnitude of this great threat has been revealed by studies that outlined the downward trajectory of learners' abilities to read with understanding and to do basic mathematics. As such, this causes an undesirable effect on the academic performance of learners, and the overall disfunction of the school is experienced (Horverak, 2023).

Literature Review

The literature highlights the complications that accompany the role of a Foundation Phase departmental head. One notable aspect relates to meddling with the management demands and the need to effect meaningful teaching and learning activities in the classrooms (Burns, Bally, Burles, Holtslander & Peacock, 2022). This involves managing curriculum coverage while also maintaining meaningful engagement with the learners. By the same token, the need to enhance their efforts on management and administrative responsibilities as curriculum heads in this phase is equally essential.

Exploring Foundation Phase Departmental Heads 'Work

Existing literature suggests that the role of a Foundation Phase departmental head is multifaceted and demanding in nature. One hurdle noted is that they need to maintain effective full-time teaching responsibilities. Additionally, they have to model effective teaching and pedagogical practices; as full-time classroom educators, they have to teach all four subjects in their grades. This includes managing the co and extra- curricular activities (Burns et al., 2022).

As departmental heads in the Foundation Phase, they are mandated to provide support for subordinate educators. Often, departmental heads are mentors, coaches and resource persons for other educators. They ensure that there is in-service training for the newly appointed educators and avail all the necessary teaching and learning resources for them. Given the fact that they partake in classroom activities, a lot of them are often overwhelmed with management duties. Some even remain behind after contact time with learners to attend to management functions (Beam, Caxton & Smith, 2016). As such a very thin line is created between their management and classroom related duties. In line with the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement, learners in the Foundation Phase receive tuition in First Additional Language (FAL), their Home Language (HL) (6 hours) and have a notional time of (4/5 hours) per week and are mostly taught by classroom-based educators without any assistance. Often, the management duties suffer.

Regulations Central to Foundation Phase Departmental Heads

According to Brown (2019), several Acts, regulations, declarations (local and international) and other legislative prescripts govern the teaching and learning environment in the Foundation Phase. This is intended to ensure effective and efficient teaching and learning environment. Interestingly, every departmental head is the custodian of the development and implementation of some of these mandates (Akala, 2021). They are responsible for bringing all the relevant policies and resources such as Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) and copies of relevant Acts to the attention of all educators within their department or phase.

Personnel Administrative Measures

In accordance with Section 4 of the Employment of Educators Act 1998 (DoE, 1998), the Minister of Education outlined the terms and conditions of employment for educators as listed in the Personnel Administrative Measures of 1999 Schedule.

Departmental heads are tasked with the responsibilities of leading their departments and ensuring that they are subject specialists in their grades and phases (Buthelezi, 2021; Buthelezi & Anjani, 2023). The position of the departmental head is clearly outlined in terms of post-level (Level 2), aim of the job, core duties and responsibilities of the job, and obligations for all educators as provided in (DoE, 1999). In summary, departmental heads are mandated by the Personnel Administrative Measures of 1999 to render teaching and learning activities, participate in extra and co-co-curricular activities, and provide personnel management roles. In addition, they are to perform general and administrative roles and participate in communicating messages with stakeholders.

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996

In the spirit of the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 (DoE, 1996), departmental heads' work comes into the picture as they have an obligation to foster collegial relationships between parents and the school. In some schools where there are no deputy principals, departmental heads act as principals in their absence. Therefore, it is imperative that they should comprehend the South African Schools Act to master and implement Chapter 2 (6A) and 3, which deals with curriculum and assessment and learners' compulsory attendance, respectively. The departmental head may examine the conditions surrounding the learners' absence from school. Thereafter, take suitable action to resolve the situation. It is further incumbent upon the departmental heads to enforce compulsory learner attendance. Regardless of departmental heads' multiple roles, they must uphold the SASA's aims in doing so. The biggest question then revolves around their efficacy in the scenarios mentioned above.

The Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998

The departmental heads should comply with the mandates of the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998 (DoE, 1998) without deviation. Primarily, the Act stipulates acts of misconduct, for example, the educator is deemed to be non-compliant if they fail to uphold the provisions of the Act, connive or perform in solidarity matters relating to discipline, administration in any office of the Department of Education. Furthermore, they commit an offence if they, without legal leave or a valid reason, are found absent from office or duty with a view to gaining any freedom or advantage in connection with the employer's official position or duties. Therefore, all members in the school fraternity are expected to behave professionally at all levels, according to the Employment of Educators. Therefore, it is considered essential for the departmental heads to always adhere to the stipulations of the Employment of Educators in mind when performing their professional obligations.

The South African Council of Educators Act 31 of 2000

The South African Council of Educators Act 31 of 2000 (DoE, 2000) is applicable to all employed teachers in line with Section 3 (b), such as college lecturers, their management, and educators in schools. The departmental heads, as guardians and promoters of educator professional growth, educator mentors and supporters, and managers, have the responsibility to comply with the mandates of the South African Council of Educators. The Act promotes professional and ethical conduct by all in the

education sector. The Departmental Heads need to take note of the following for compliance by their subordinates regarding Section 23 (which deals with deletion of an educator from South African Council of Educators inventory list): The Council through its Chief Executive Officer may institute investigations which can lead to deregistration of the educator if they are found in contravention of any related offences. This can also be applied even in cases where an educator fails to pay the subscriptions set by the Council within a prescribed period or the educator dies.

Related Theory in the Foundation Phase

Transformational Leadership Theory

In the context of this study, the transformational leadership theory, emphasises inspiring and motivating educators within the department to achieve shared goals and improve overall performance at their utmost best. Educators within the department are encouraged to move beyond simply managing tasks and focus on fostering a shared vision, students' performance targets, and empowering educators to contribute their best (Ghazali, Rahman & Ghani, 2021).

Departmental Heads Should Exemplify these Four Components

Idealised Influence: The Departmental heads should act as a role model, exhibit high ethical standards, dedication, and passion for education in this particular phase. This inspires trust and respect among educators, thus encouraging them to emulate the leader's behaviour and commitment (Brown, 2019).

Inspirational Motivation: The departmental head needs to communicate a clear and compelling vision for the department, setting high and achievable expectations and inspiring their educators to work towards common goals as a collective (Hotmire, 2018).

Intellectual Stimulation: The departmental head should encourage innovation and critical thinking among educators by building a safe universe for exploring new ideas, questioning existing teaching practices, and challenging assumptions. In addition, they discuss the need for understanding effective school leadership and its impact (Ghazali et al., 2021).

Individualised Consideration: The departmental head recognises and attends to the individual needs and developmental goals of each educator (Ghazali et al., 2021; Hotmire, 2018). Applying transformational leadership can assist the departmental head to create a positive and productive work environment where educators within the department are motivated, engaged, and empowered to contribute to the success of the department and the school in its entirety. Eventually, job satisfaction and positive educator morale can reign among educators.

Research Design and Methods

This study regarding exploring the dichotomy that exists for the departmental heads between management and teaching was based on the perceptions and experiences of primary school principals, their deputies, Foundation Phase departmental heads, and their curriculum advisors. The study was based on revelations by the 20 participants (eight principals, three deputy principals, six Foundation Phase departmental heads, and three Foundation Phase curriculum advisors) using one-on-

one semi-structured interviews for each. The research study involved 17 primary schools and three office-based educators. Thus, it is not possible to generalise its outcomes to a bigger population. The views of the participants were represented through a qualitative research approach. The participants in the study were recruited, and appointments were secured in advance due to their relevance and their proximity in location to the researchers. The chief participants in the study were primary school principals, their deputies, Foundation Phase departmental heads, and Foundation Phase curriculum advisors who are custodians in the education of a child and development of educators.

This study followed a qualitative design. This design stresses conducting research for in-depth examination of the dichotomy that exists for departmental heads in leadership and teaching within its real-life context. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the researchers were able to comprehend the participants' perspectives and experiences related to the departmental heads' work predicament. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. The choice was based on the research questions and their relevance as all principals, deputy principals, and curriculum advisors are custodians of departmental heads' work environments. Convenience sampling was also preferred because it allowed for easier access to participants, given that the Mopani East District is composed of five local municipalities which are split and apart from each other. Semi-structured interviews together with an interview guide with open-ended questions were used, where participants were granted the opportunity to share their practices and perspectives in full. This kind of interview is set up to provide participants with flexibility and allow the researchers an opportunity to discover emerging themes and follow up on interesting ideas raised by participants. Pilot testing of the interview guide was used to perfect the questions and ensure ease of understanding. For data analysis, the study followed thematic analysis which involved logically identifying, establishing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within the data. Research steps such as initial coding, searching and reviewing themes were followed by definition and naming of themes (Hannes et al., 2022). This methodology was considered appropriate for the research question. The qualitative research method seemed relevant in exploring the complex phenomena and understanding participant perspectives at the school and office milieu where the events take place.

Findings: Challenges faced by Departmental Heads in the Foundation Phase

Departmental heads' responses

Theme: Departmental head's daily routine

The Foundation Phase departmental heads mostly associated their roles with leadership roles where they oversee multiple angles of the Foundation Phase daily, spanning from the class-based to enhancing the performance of the school educators by supporting them and providing the necessary learning and teaching resources. Foundation Phase departmental heads agreed that there were factors that defined their current state of teaching and their management affairs.

Subtheme: Management of day-to-day tasks

All six departmental heads (100 %) indicated that they were engaged in monitoring teaching and learning activities, the actual process of teaching and learning, and the availability of teaching and learning materials. Of the six departmental heads

interviewed, one indicated that she was not tasked with class-based activities and was not present in classes daily but was still able to perform monitoring activities.

"...I monitor the availability of the teaching and learning materials and I monitor the teaching and learning process. Although I don't have to go there every day, I only visit when I need to monitor."

Participant 7: *"My role as a departmental head in the Foundation Phase is challenging. I spent my entire stay at school busy with teaching my grade 3 learners. I am responsible for Sepedi, English, Mathematics and Life skills. I also have to moderate twelve other assessment tasks. In addition, I also serve as liaison personnel between parents of learners in the phase and educators. At the end of some days am left dejected and exhausted"*

Participant 6 posited: *"My biggest worry is the support I get from the management, especially my principal. I find myself in a position where educators run short of basic teaching resources like Assessment Teaching Plans, personal timetables, period registers and some textbooks."*

Curriculum Advisors' Responses

Theme: Teaching and learning activities

All curriculum advisors agreed that Foundation Phase departmental heads were classroom-based educators and were expected to fulfil activities of teaching learners and supervision of other educators. They also identified the role of the departmental head as a leader who provides monitoring, supervision and assessments of teaching and learning activities.

Subtheme: Teaching Activities

Department heads were also classroom-based and were expected to provide teaching like any other educator in the Foundation Phase. They also taught and provided teaching support to the educators in the same phase.

Subtheme: Monitoring or teaching activities

In this cohort, the departmental head was also seen as an individual who oversee the activities of the Foundation Phase through monitoring teaching and learning, ensuring that educators followed the Assessment Teaching Plans and monitoring assessments.

Participant 3: *"Departmental heads Foundation Phase level find it very much difficult to render with their management and teaching duties. A certain school has only one departmental head who must supervise all the phases alone. In practice, this departmental head has a lot in their plate and quality of work is compromised."*

Deputy Principals' Responses

All curriculum advisors agreed that the departmental heads were class-based teachers and recognised as Level 2 teachers and were expected to fulfil activities of teaching learners. They also identified the role of the departmental head as a leader who provides monitoring, supervision, and assessments of teaching. DHs were also class-based and were expected to provide teaching just as any other teacher in the

Foundation Phase. They monitored all curriculum-related matters, educators, and extracurricular matters.

Deputy Principal 2: *"... monitoring and support the daily teaching and learning. If in schools we have enough manpower, the departmental head can sit down and observe lessons. And the other thing that they do, they do lesson demonstrations, for example, if there are new teachers, is their responsibility to make sure that the teachers are inducted, and they take them through the methodology of teaching in the Foundation Phase."*

Departmental heads were also seen as individuals who oversee the activities of the Foundation Phase through monitoring that teaching and learning was taking place.

Principals' Responses

Principals defined the role played by Foundation Phase departmental heads through three themes: They expressed mixed feelings regarding the core responsibilities of the Foundation Phase departmental head and echoed that it encompasses classroom management, monitoring educators' work and supporting them.

Leadership and Administration Activities and governance.

The theme of Leadership and Administration Activities has two subthemes: Supervision Monitoring, and Support. The second theme of Governance had the subthemes of the availability of documents and following of guidelines. Theme awareness of available plans has the following subthemes: Inclusion in the process associated with Monitoring and Support of the Departmental Head and associated planning activities.

Theme: Leadership and Administration Activities

The principal understood the role of the departmental head to be a leader of other educators in the same phase. They supervise, train new teachers, identify teaching and learning gaps, monitor, and continuously improve the performance of the phase.

As explained by PRINCIPAL-1: *"I have two departmental heads in our school, and they are both overwhelmed by a lot of work. They are full-time teachers with no relief educators or an assistant educator. I strongly believe that to render effective Foundation Phase departmental heads effective, there should be a "stand-by educator" who will take over when they are busy with their administrative chores."*

The complexities in the role of a Foundation Phase departmental head are developing concerns, but they have become increasingly difficult to manage; this greatly affects the effective delivery of the curriculum. Thus, learners' academic performance appears to be compromised. To date, studies allude to the need to create a balancing effect between management and teaching and learning activities. Participants also called for the review of Personnel Administrative measures of 1999 guidelines and the introduction of permanent educator assistants for Foundation Phase Departmental Heads to assist in alleviating the menace in the dichotomy of the role of Foundation Phase Departmental Heads.

Summary of Research Findings

In general, the study aimed to examine the disparities and confusion that exist for Foundation Phase Departmental heads when carrying out teaching and management responsibilities. To attain the research aim, the research put the Personnel Administrative measures of 1999 and the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998

under scrutiny. These two Acts, as espoused by the participants, need further review with the aim of improving the working conditions of the departmental heads. A successful review could lead to effective teaching and management responsibilities for the Departmental heads. Participants further argued that educator assistants should be a permanent feature in the Foundation Phase as a contingency measure of application for the Departmental heads, especially when they were committed to management or teaching responsibilities rather than leaving the classes unattended.

The study revealed that in line with the Personnel Administrative Measures of 1999 (DoE, 1999), Foundation Phase daily teaching routine and activities encompass teaching all four subjects (in Grades 1–3). The subjects are Home Language, FAL, Numeracy, and Life Skills: the same applies to departmental heads who also have a class to attend. These functions include marking of attendance registers and period registers, and addressing welfare cases, among others. In terms of teaching responsibilities, both the educator and the Foundation Phase departmental heads render the same amount of teaching work; hence, the study investigated the dichotomy that exists and the effects thereof. All the participants in the study indicated the level of difficulties and strain that existed for the Foundation Phase departmental heads in carrying out their management functions. Departmental Heads' responsibilities include having to support and monitor all their educators in the phase. They also should mentor and coach the novice educators. They also have to control and moderate their educators' work on daily basis. For their effectiveness, there is a need to have conflict resolution, administration and leadership skills.

On this basis, the participants' discontentment reflected that management functions were bound to suffer because there is no one to look after the children, forcing senior management team members to rotate in taking care of classrooms until the last period of the day. Participants emphasised the need to foster teamwork among all educators so that even in the absence of the educator (who is also a departmental head), curriculum delivery remained intact (Ghazali et al., 2021). However, the management and leadership potential of the Departmental Head in the Foundation Phase gets tested especially when there are no educator assistants.

Curriculum Sustainability

Beyond traditional teaching, sustainable curriculum leadership is becoming more and more necessary in the changing educational context. Departmental Heads (DHs) in the Foundation Phase play a dual role: are they curriculum leaders in charge of determining the quality and relevance of education over the long term, or are they primarily educators focused on teaching and learning at the classroom level? According to Tapala et al. (2022), the sustainability of the curriculum is significantly reliant on the ability of Department Heads to evolve from senior educators to transformative curriculum leaders. This transition is crucial for schools to achieve national development objectives, promote inclusive education, and equip students for an unpredictable and evolving future.

Tapala et al. (2022), assert that curriculum sustainability encompasses both the continuity and relevance of material, as well as the capacity of leadership structures to adapt to pedagogical, social, and technological transformations. Departmental Heads must actively lead curriculum evaluations, ensure consistency with national standards, and advocate for equitable resource allocation. This designates them as advocates of

sustainability, rather than mere conveyors of mandated information. To achieve that, Tapala et al (2022) emphasize that developing and supporting DHs and perceiving their role in curriculum leadership as including developing and supporting teachers. They are expected to possess the latest knowledge and skills in education trends to share with their teachers for development and re-skilling, especially with new curriculum implementations.

Conclusion

The function of a Foundation Phase departmental head was deemed complex, demanding, and often heavy, as espoused by study participants. This article affirmed the need to explore avenues of reviewing the Personnel Administrative measures of 1999 (DoE, 1999) and the application of policies that encourage Departmental Heads' development of leadership and management duties. In addition, the participants revealed the need to engage in a multifaceted programme, requiring a comprehensive approach to address the various obstacles and threats to the management and leadership potential of a Foundation Phase departmental head. Such programmes should involve honing leadership and professional skills relevant to the departmental heads. By recognising the unique competencies and skills required for this role and by implementing strategic succession planning, scholarships, mentoring and leadership development initiatives, departmental heads can develop professionally.

Recommendations and Practical Implications

The study focused on the dichotomy that exists on Foundation Phase DHs' management and teaching responsibilities. The study was to discover some gaps in the daily work practices of the Foundation Phase Departmental Heads. These research cavities range from the compromise that is created on the management function of the Departmental Heads as they spend most of the time in the classroom rather than executing office work. Another critical element involves reviewing some sections of Personnel Administrative measures of 1999 (DoE, 1999), this should involve sections detailing the number of periods and notional hours per day. In addition, the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998 (DoE, 1998) also need attention especially on areas that address their working conditions. In general, the study managed to maintain its research integrity and its overall objectives.

References

- Akala, B.M., (2021). Revisiting education reform in Kenya: A case of competency-based curriculum (CBC). *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 3(1), 100107.
- Beam, A.P., Claxton, R.L. and Smith, S.J., (2016). Challenges for novice school leaders: Facing today's issues in school administration. *Educational Leadership and Administration*, 27, 145–162.
- Brown, M.J., (2019). *Teacher perceptions of factors influencing classroom management practices: A comparative case study of two public high schools in the Western Cape*. [Master's thesis. University of the Western Cape]. <https://etd.uwc.ac.za/handle/11394/6623>.
- Burns, M., Bally, J., Burles, M., Holtslander, L., & Peacock, S., (2022). Constructivist grounded theory or interpretive phenomenology? Methodological choices within

- specific study contexts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21,16094069221077758.
- Buthlezi, S. R. (2021). The role of principals in supporting effective teaching and learning in the uMkhanyakude Education District. [Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of KwaZulu-Natal]. <https://ukzn-dspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstreams/f41edfab-2de7-45d4-bad9-a29f672bf2e4/download>.
- Buthlezi, O.A., & Anjani, A.B., (2023). Transforming school management system using participative management approach in South Africa. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147-4478), 12(6), 307–317.
- Department of Education (1998). *The Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Department of Education (1999). *Personnel administrative measures*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Department of Education (2000). *The SACE Act 31 of 2000*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Ghazali, M.T., Rahman, S.A.A., & Ghani, M.A. (2021). A review on competency-based succession planning at higher education institutions in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(9),1634–1651.
- Hannes, K., Hendricks, L., Brgles, M., Dierckx, C., Gemignani, M., Huhnen, M., Vrebos, H., S, A & Van Goidsenhoven, L. (2022). The SAGE handbook of qualitative research design: Being creative with resources in qualitative research. 10.4135/9781529770278.n19.
- Heasly, B., Iliško, D., & Lindner, J. (2025). Editorial: Sustainable initiatives making significant impacts. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 16(1), 2025. 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.2478/dcse-2025-0001>
- Horverak, M.O., (2023). Strategies to succeed in inclusion in a diverse learning Environment. *IAFOR Journal of Educations studies in education*, 11(3), 9–28.
- Hotmire, J.A., (2018). *Principals' role perception and implementation of educational reform*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Bowling Green State University]. https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/leadership_diss/108/.
- Tapala, T. T., Fuller, M., & Mentz, K. (2022). Perceptions of departmental heads on their curriculum leadership roles: Voices from South Africa. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 21(4), 816-829.

All correspondence related to this paper should be addressed to Mmalefikane Sylvia Sepeng, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa, e mail:sepenms@unisa.ac.za