



Dilemma of Transitioning from an Educator to Departmental Head in the Foundation Phase, South Africa

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Abstract

Departmental heads in the Foundation Phase in the South African primary schools are appointed from the ranks of educators and their operation and job descriptions are governed in line with the Personnel Administrative Measures. Bridges' transition theory accentuates the importance of understanding the contexts in which these middle managers operate and provide possible coping mechanisms in the new responsibilities. This article explores the theory as it pertains to Foundation Phase departmental heads who are classroom-based and also have to perform management duties. In conjunction with relevant legislation governing Foundation Phase departmental heads, the study seeks to weigh in on the strengths and weaknesses of the theory along with related literature. This study adopted a qualitative and interpretive approach and involved 18 participants in four categories. These participants were primary school principals, deputy-principals, Foundation Phase departmental heads and their curriculum advisors. Through interviews using purposively sampled schools and officials in Mopani East District in South Africa, the study collected empirical evidence. One remarkable finding was that most of the participants argued that transition and change refer to two different processes. The former involves multiple stages that need precise attention while the latter can be a once-off thing. Bridges' theory fails to outline step-by-step measures that departmental heads can use in order to manage their work environment effectively. The study emphasised the need to introduce scholarships and bursaries for promotion enthusiasts so that they get ready for the new responsibilities in time and execute them with aplomb. Doing so can facilitate effective transition and effectiveness in their work. The importance of collaboration among all stakeholders was also a focal point so that regular monitoring and support programmes in schools can be carried out. The study recommended that the Circuits and the Districts need to champion all management development programmes and initiatives for Foundation Phase departmental heads to bolster their efficiency.

Keywords: Foundation Phase; Departmental Head; Transition, Management

Introduction

The main focus of this article is to examine Bridges' (1991) transition theory in line with how departmental heads in the Foundation Phase carry out their management duties within the contexts of the wider South Africa and the entire world. According to Du Plessis and Eberlein (2018), departmental heads are expected to play an intermediary role between the educators and the senior management team (SMT) in ensuring the delivery of quality teaching and learning through their principals. In the midst of this instructional leadership process, there are subordinates who are departmental heads' former peers in terms of responsibility. We also have principals and deputy-principals who also are meant to bolster and support them in carrying out their professional duties effectively.

When assuming new responsibilities as departmental heads, they leave their peers at the lower level and are bound to monitor and support their work programmes. It was on this basis that the study focused on the transition process as outlined by Bridges (1991). According to the Department of Basic Education's Annual Performance Plan APP (2022) report, the Foundation Phase has been largely affected because they could not return to full learner

attendance in time like the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. The attention fell squarely on departmental heads as their curriculum leaders to turn the situation around. The Foundation Phase was affected on the achievement of Department of Basic Education's Annual priority which embraced commitments aligned to medium-term strategic framework.

The commitments ranged from:

- Improvement of school readiness of children.
- Ensuring that 10-year-old learners in public schools can read for meaning.

Reviews on Bridges' transition theory by the likes of Kumatongo and Muzata (2021), Tapala (2019), Bohanon and Francoeur (2018) and Ogina (2017) posit that the theory emphasises the fact that humans can act like robots. However, these authors underplayed factors that challenge the efficiency of foundation phase departmental heads challenges within and outside the school milieu. According to Kumatongo and Muzata (2021), educators are professionals and as such their personal wellbeing and human relations are central for effective teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase rather than their egos. Regrettably, departmental heads' work is on the line when there are traces of underperformance in the phase and for particular subjects. It was on this basis that this study sought to investigate how these lower-level curriculum leaders in South Africa function, the nature of their working environment and barriers they encounter in their day-to-day teaching activities. In addition, the study investigated Foundation Phase departmental heads' work effectiveness in Africa and compared them with the international world. Studies by Christie et al. (2007) emphasised the importance that collegial working relations between the principals, their departmental heads and educators played in promoting positive school culture. Notwithstanding the uniqueness of rural and urban schools and their relatively high learner enrolments, Christie et al. (2007) indicated that in rural schools (in particular), teaching and learning environment needed improvement.

Literature Review

Defining Bridges' Transition Theory.

Transitioning involves going through stages that need careful and effective management. According to Aggrey-Finn (2019), assuming leadership comes with challenges, which are alleged to have an impact on the realisation of the school's vision. Transition as a process cannot be automated but entails a plethora of features ranging from engagement, duration, experience, awareness and events, among others. For a foundation phase departmental head in South Africa, Cockley (2011) cited in Aggrey-Finn (2019) posits that for their new roles as departmental heads to be effective, their accompanying actions and decisions are often determined by belief systems which are more extrinsic than intrinsic in nature. They argue that positive decisions often contribute to effective, successful, creative and vision-oriented work environment. Hence, transition is not a new phenomenon for the departmental head.

According to Cunningham (2000), effective transition and change is often possible when all stakeholders are involved in the decision-making processes. Educators new in management roles should be provided with sufficient support. Essentially, all educators who assume new responsibilities can perform effectively if they pick up from where their fore bearers left off. A legacy of either a high standard or substandard set by the fore bearers can help shape or maintain positive culture for the new departmental head (Bagi, 2015). Within the foundation phase, senior leaders like deputy-principal, curriculum advisors, parents and the principal can assist in socialising the new departmental head in the new responsibilities.

Application of Bridges' Transition Theory by Foundation Phase Departmental Heads.

For a Foundation Phase departmental head, transition might manifest when an educator is granted the opportunity to lead and manage fellow educators before their actual appointment and execute the delegated tasks effectively (Leybourne, 2016). During the execution of these tasks, such an educator might encounter traces of separation phase as alluded by Blokker et al.'s (2023) phases of transition. Such instances can be prevalent especially when the delegated educator is confronted with resistance and lack of cooperation from fellow educators. Aggrey-Finn (2019) advises that the senior management team members' assistance and intervention can provide much needed stability and impetus in such cases. These seniors should not hurry the delegated educator and must assist them in dealing with conflict and handling insubordination when it occurs. As Blokker et al. (2023) lament, like any employees, educators can be hugely affected by transitioning when they cannot cope with changes that come along with it. The rate, frequency and impetus brought about by these changes can influence the capacity of employees to embrace the changes and other factors associated with it. If the recently appointed departmental head feels uncertain about their work environment and competencies their overall work performance is tantamount to decline as a result (Horverak, 2023; Hotmire, 2018).

Effects of Negative Transition for the Foundation Phase.

Foundation Phase departmental heads often come across a variety of factors that can put strain on their overall effectiveness. Leybourne (2016) argues that schools, like most organisations need transition and change management strategies, otherwise they will encounter negative consequences. If improperly managed, transitioning from a level one educator to a departmental head (across all phases) can pose a serious threat to the entire school and its intended vision.

Aggrey-Finn (2019) highlights some practical handicaps that can accompany negative transitioning from a lower-level position to a position of leadership. The social and emotional emotions can be hugely affected if an educator is not properly socialised into new leadership responsibilities. An effective departmental head should be a problem-solver and should have the capacity to engage all stakeholders meaningfully. An unsocialised departmental head can often encounter social distance with their fellow departmental and subordinates (Blokker et al., 2016).

Importance of Theoretical Framework

According to Babbie and Mouton (2011), it is important to provide a theoretical framework for a research study because it offers an instrument for selecting and prioritising concepts to be investigated. For Foundation Phase departmental heads' to be effective, it is critical to understand the different relevant theories and concepts. The study was underpinned by three theories:

- Fayol's management theory (1949): This theory emphasises the need for managers to possess planning, organising, leading and controlling (popularly known as POLC) qualities in order to render their functions effective (Fayol, 1949, as cited in Botha (2013) and Meehan (2017).
- Curriculum management theories like Skinner's operant conditioning theory emphasize that learners' behaviours operate through stimulus-response (SR) pattern.
- Bridges' transition theory (1991): This theory highlights the changes that occur when, for example, level one educator assumes new responsibilities as a departmental head in the form of three stages namely, ending, losing and letting go. Hence, it became a spotlight in this article. The theory is based on the premise that when educators are promoted to departmental heads' ranks there can be factors that render their work environment inefficient emanating from their past relationship with their peers when they were still level one educators.

Significance of the Study

The departmental head's position in the Foundation Phase is a demanding position and has raised concerns as a result of the Foundation Phase learners' inability to read for meaning as outlined in the Department of Education (PAM 1999) and it has gradually been threatened by a number of factors. It has become evident when educators are elevated into the departmental heads' position in the Foundation Phase, they seem to encounter threats that challenge their effectiveness and overall performance. Research by Mweli (2021) was undertaken to evaluate the system and to identify and address educator development needs in numeracy/ mathematics and literacy/English First Additional Language for all phases. Mweli (2021) highlights subject-based and issue-based professional learning communities that must be encouraged to assist newly appointed departmental heads in the Foundation Phase. This qualitative study considers the existing nature of Foundation Phase educator as they transition to departmental head, possible complexities and threats in schools found in South Africa with the aim of understanding the phenomenon in detail and suggesting propositions that may assist in minimising the threats around their effectiveness.

Among other things, Mweli (2021) reveals that poor change management strategies, lack of effective, compromised Foundation-Phase teacher provisioning and questionable capacity of teacher education institutions in developing newly appointed departmental heads can contribute to inefficiency of the Foundation Phase departmental head bred by poor transitioning process.

Conceptualisation

Transitioning as a Concept

According to Leybourne (2016), "transitioning" relates to an individual's ways and strategies to manage and cope with change when executing their duties as an individual. Leybourne (2016) affirms Folkman (1984) who emphasised the effects of both external and internal factors that can threaten a person's competency especially in instances where the organisation's resources might be deficient.

From the literature it was suggested that there should be effective strategies that can assist persons undergoing transition to cope with change and enable them to be productive in their work environments (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Robison & Griffiths, 2005).

Foundation Phase

The Department of Basic Education in Buthelezi and Anjani (2023) defines “Foundation Phase” as the initial phase of learning that starts from Grade R to Grade 3 which involves early childhood development (ECD) where learners are nurtured and taught basic learning skills Mopani District Municipality (2022). It covers children ranging from five-and-a-half years to nine years.

Departmental head

According to Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (1999) “departmental head” is a level two educator who serves as an educational leader, middle manager and liaison between the senior management team and members of their department or a phase. Their main task is to oversee the effective curriculum management of their phase or department, render administrative functions, monitor and support educators, promote professionalism within the phase or department, liaise with parents and other stakeholders, among others (Mancosa, 2022).

Management

In the context of the school, management is defined by Sandhlani (2021) as a process where managers take part in a plethora of roles that advance the professional, effective and efficient running of the school. Such roles encompass planning activities and functions, organising resources and line of function, leading team members as well as controlling and monitoring the overall functioning of the school. The management functions are conducted to ensure the realisation of quality education in schools (Aggrey-Fynn, 2019; Sandhlani, 2021).

Summary of the Literature

Studies by Buthelezi and Ajani (2023), and Sandhlani (2021) were instrumental in allaying frustrations that accompany foundation phase departmental heads’ assumption to these ranks. From the aforementioned studies, it is obvious, therefore, that Foundation Phase departmental heads face the dilemma of ineffective skills set other external factors that involve stakeholders’ involvement in the schools, This is allegedly compounded by lack of experience of the new departmental heads caused by the Department of Basic Education’s Annual irregular and staggered development initiatives (Mancosa, 2022; Sandhlani, 2021). The literature reiterates the need to introduce effective programmes that cover all the skills and modules required the departmental heads’ efficiency. Such programmes should be on-going, all-inclusive and monitored regularly.

The study acknowledges that Foundation Phase departmental heads are threatened by many factors when transitioning from a level-one educator post as revealed in this study. The major challenge that was found in the study was the issue of the Department of Basic Education and schools in particular) not providing sufficient support and development initiatives that can improve departmental heads’ efficiency. The Department of Basic Education allegedly fails to provide bursaries and scholarships for departmental heads and provides workshops that have meagre impact on the departmental heads. The lack of proper monitoring on the part of schools was mentioned as a serious challenge by some of the participants.

In addition, participants complained about ineffective senior management team that fail to support newly employed departmental heads. Departmental heads themselves also showed reluctance to provide instructional skills, and some feel left out and are still operating at the same level as their level-one peers. They showed elements of reluctance to impose authority to lead and manage effectively. Good leadership and management skills would assist greatly in managing the tensions and problems that departmental heads might be directly facing in the Foundation Phase and the school.

Foundation Phase curriculum advisors and deputy principals in the primary schools were vehement that the Department of Basic Education needs to enhance their programmes that assist newly appointed departmental heads. The two groups of participants believed that the Foundation Phase departmental heads were sometimes left without any help from their seniors on curricular, management and leadership issues. They often complained about heavy workload especially because it strains their management capacity.

The principals believed that Foundation Phase departmental heads are sometimes reluctant to initiate their own development programmes, set strategic mission and vision for their departments and phases and ended up looking up to their principals while they have to manage the phase on their own. Principals are always there for support and mentoring. The Department of Basic Education support needs to be elevated as Foundation Phase departmental heads complained that they sometimes had to fend for themselves, contributing to inefficiency in executing their professional duties especially in management while a lot of focus lies on teaching responsibilities as they are classroom-based. Their transition is greatly affected as a result. Principals and deputy principals need to establish monitoring and support programmes for their schools to bolster efforts made by the curriculum

advisors who cannot visit all schools. Serious networking among local Foundation Phase departments can also offer great assistance. Best management and leadership practices will be shared in these networking initiatives. Indeed, participants in this qualitative study affirmed Yin (2011) and Watson (2013) who emphasised the importance of collaboration and interactive support mechanisms between all school stakeholders to ensure flawless transition and address transition threats.

Research Design and Methods

The study was conducted in Mopani East District, an education district that covers schools in the Greater Giyani, Ba-Phalaborwa, and Greater Letaba local municipalities. The district embraces villages and towns situated about 250 km north-east of Polokwane in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The research study followed a qualitative approach to explore participants' experiences regarding the dilemma encountered when educators in the foundation phase transition to the rank of departmental head. All interviews to collect data were captured, and recorded observations were provided as case studies. However, only transcribed interviews formed part of the data as Maree et al. (2017) suggested. The advantage of qualitative research revolves around its capacity to deliver difficult textual representation of data on how participants view a particular research spectacle. Individual participants' viewpoints are expressed comprehensively without any deviation. In addition, differing individual emotions, feeling and attitudes as well as relations that exists were also indicated in line with Neumann's (2000) assertions.

This qualitative study was conducted with 18 participants using one-on-one interview sessions, with eight foundation phase departmental heads, six primary school principals, three deputy principals and three Foundation Phase curriculum advisors separately. In this research, a sample of the population was selected for the study. The researcher's objectives and the characteristics of the study population (like size and variety) were instrumental in determining which participants were selected and their number. The study followed purposive sampling method. From 15 primary schools, eight foundation phase departmental heads, teachers, three deputy principals, six school principals volunteered to take part in the study.

Three curriculum advisors at the district offices were also selected and interviewed. The Foundation Phase departmental heads, deputy principals and principals from the sampled schools were specifically selected to provide discerning perspectives on transition dilemma Foundation Phase departmental heads encounter. There were male and female participants from the 15 primary schools and all curriculum advisors from the district were women.

All participants mentioned were interviewed because of their suitability for the study and availability. The participants were interviewed in their natural environment. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with all participants (Foundation Phase departmental heads, principals, deputy principals and Foundation Phase curriculum advisors). They were interviewed individually. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, and the details of the interviews were captured verbatim for future reference. In the main, these interviews provided a descriptive mirror and foundation for data interpretation and analysis. An interview schedule was used in the study to ascertain the quality of the interview. In addition, the setup of the interview and the gestures of the respondents were also taken into consideration to affirm quality. During the interviews, the researcher made sure that all questions were answered fully in order to understand the alleged transition dilemma to the benefit of the research project. The research questions focused on transition dilemma and threats for the Foundation Phase departmental heads and possible remedies to avert the dilemma were proposed.

As Creswell (2012) states, qualitative data collected should come from the participants' backgrounds and at the exact contexts where they encountered it. Hence, the identified participants' perceptions on the transition dilemma facing Foundation Phase departmental heads, involved primary school principals, their deputy principals, curriculum advisors, members and the departmental heads themselves were investigated. All the identified participants revealed the nature of the dilemma that the Foundation Phase department encounters and proposed potential solutions to render the departmental heads effective.

Ethical Considerations

As per the University's Ethics guidelines, an approved consent letter was sent to the 15 primary schools that were sampled to partake in the research after it was obtained from the District and Provincial Office of the Limpopo Department of Education. In addition, consent letters were directed to the 15 principals of the schools and the three district officials for their approval to conduct the study. Before recording all the proceedings, consent was also sought. Anonymity was also ascertained before commencing with the interview.

Before the beginning of the interview, there was an introductory session where the participants were informed about the entire interview session. This was to notify the participants that they were free to pull out and that there would be no negative consequences if they chose to do so. Interestingly, they all wished to participate. The research purpose was clearly outlined to all participants. The respondents were also advised about data retention plans, availability of research findings to fellow researchers, and the importance of confidentiality until the end of the interview process.

All the interviews were conducted in the afternoons after the close of the school for the day to avoid class instabilities. For the principals and foundation phase each departmental interview averaged between 20 minutes and 30 minutes, while deputy principals and Foundation Phase curriculum advisors took not more than 20 minutes.

Findings

The previous section on the literature review clearly outlined the different procedures and frameworks that could be employed to manage transition effectively as in the Bridge (1991) and Kubler-Ross (1969) grief cycle. The discussion below illuminated the practical manifestation of transitioning through the provision of empirical evidence in this qualitative study. It is incumbent upon senior management team members to support and assist newly appointed departmental heads in the phase of managing threats that render their work ineffective and ensure maximum efficiency.

The findings collected from the interviews conducted with all participants showed that most participants were satisfied with how level-one educators' transition to departmental heads, the challenges they face and how some of these challenges could be averted. To note, departmental heads complained about insufficient support from their seniors and lacklustre support from parents.

Discussion of Findings

The study acknowledged that departmental heads were challenged by threats in their transition in some schools as revealed in this study. The major challenge that was found in the study was the issue of the Department of Basic Education not providing them with support like regular workshops, bursaries and, in some instances, seniors not offering effective support for newly appointed departmental heads in the phase.

The PAM as outlined by the Department of Basic Education, was mentioned as another challenge by some of the participants. They emphasised the amount of work that they encountered on daily basis. In the Foundation Phase, all departmental heads complained that they were classroom-based and had no one to look after their classes when they were carrying out their management functions. In addition, participants complained about the lack of school-initiated development programmes that could best address leadership deficiencies that departmental heads encountered. Collective leadership should be shown by the school principals to bridge the gap that exists between themselves and the departmental heads, especially in the Foundation Phase.

The departmental heads and curriculum advisors (who work directly with them) believed that there is a need to develop these departmental heads on both subject content and didactic matters. If all principals and deputy principals were willing to assist departmental heads, there would be a smooth transition to new responsibilities. The Department of Basic Education and principals' support (at school level) seem ineffective as most departmental heads realised that they had to battle with the teaching and support responsibilities on their own, sometimes contributing to inefficiencies in executing their management and leadership duties. However, it is worth noting that the departmental heads strongly appreciated the services rendered by the education assistants in schools. These teaching assistants provided much-needed support for the Foundation Phase departmental heads. They could control the class and assist with the administration of tasks in the absence of the departmental heads.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Central to this study was to gauge the effectiveness of Foundation Phase departmental heads in Mopani East District through the lens of a literature study and empirical data collected. Foundation Phase teaching and learning activities (in particular) were found to be strained as a result of ineffectiveness of Foundation Phase departmental heads. Ineffective training and development workshops by the Department of Basic Education and lack of effective skills by incumbent departmental heads were identified as contributing factors to their ineffectiveness in the delivery of curriculum activities. In addition, this research confirmed that in some schools, there were traces of insubordination by educators which jeopardised curriculum implementation endeavours by departmental heads. Other principals provided inefficient assistance and support to the departmental heads.

The study revealed that some departmental heads assumed their responsibilities much earlier than they anticipated and are sometimes unprepared, affirming Bridges' (1999) transition model stage of "ending and

losing.” This participant appealed to the Department of Basic Education to introduce scholarships and bursaries for promotional post incumbents. Although the study was able to identify key challenges emanating from departmental heads work practices and activities, it further proposes collegial interaction between the schools’ external stakeholders like parents, education official, social workers and nurses. The study further urges the Department of Basic Education to pay as much attention to in the Foundation Phase as they do to the FET Band.

Furthermore, the study confirmed that poor transition can greatly affect the careers of departmental heads. The participants argued that new departmental heads should be given proper mentoring and induction by the school leaders. Their assistance in this regard is crucial. It is of great significance to facilitate school-initiated development programmes for departmental heads and the entire senior management team cohort that will best deal with all management- and leadership-related matters. Districts need to take responsibility developing and monitoring departmental heads’ work. They should ensure that all programmes are regularly monitored and that schools introduce support programmes that can address their unique professional needs. However, there should be monitoring and support by the Circuits and Districts to ensure their efficiency. All threats related to the departmental heads’ transition should be attended to in full. Departmental heads within local schools can nominate one or two to coordinate development activities. All these could be resolved if all stakeholders rendered their roles fully and showed support for one another.

Future research

This was a qualitative study on foundation phase departmental heads in Mopani east District, in Limpopo Province of the Republic of South Africa. The study findings were collected only from principals, deputy principals, Foundation Phase departmental heads and Foundation Phase curriculum advisors in primary schools only. No information was sought from secondary school principals, departmental heads in other phases or the General Education and Training (GET) band, circuit managers or other district officials on the subject. Future research could focus on other areas. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews using the aforementioned participants

Recommendations and Practical Implications

The following recommendations are made:

- The Department of Basic Education should introduce school-based (initiated) programmes for the development of departmental heads.
- The departmental head’s job description and responsibilities should be reviewed in the PAM of 1999 to improve quality management in education.
- Schools should be encouraged to introduce their development endeavours which cater for their specific needs rather than rely solely on government initiatives.
- More emphasis should be placed on classroom practices, didactics and subject mastery (content).
- Programmes for departmental heads should also be geared towards improving their efficacy in stakeholder relations.
- School-based development programmes should be strictly monitored.

This qualitative study concluded that departmental heads, especially newly appointed ones, need formal development workshops to address their leadership deficiencies. The study revealed that most of the departmental heads lacked basic leadership qualities. The researcher recommended that school principals and the Department of Basic Education should jointly carry out leadership development workshops for departmental heads. The workshop should concentrate on classroom management practices. Such workshops would empower departmental heads to efficiently deal with challenges faced by their educators and external stakeholders.

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