The challenges faced by South African foundation phase heads of departments regarding their roles and responsibilities

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Abstract

Even athletes need to train before a race in order to win, yet HoDs in South Africa are appointed and left to manage the departments on their own with no mentorship. It is no wonder that SA scores the lowest in literacy and numeracy [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS and Annual National Assessment (ANA) results]. The aim of this research was to investigate the challenges faced by foundation phase HODs regarding their roles and responsibilities. A quantitative research approach was used to assess the perceptions of 274 foundation phase HoDs in Mpumalanga and the SPSS 20 Statistical package was used to analyze the data. The findings show that HoDs perceive that they are overworked, whereas in reality, the amount of time they spend in school is not as expected in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document. It emerged that most educators leave school earlier than normal and thus experience a lack of time for supervision and administration, which then becomes a stress factor in the completion of their roles and responsibilities.

Twenty two percent of the respondents indicated that they are not familiar with the HoD duties as outlined in the PAM document. Furthermore, the study uncovered issues such as a lack of support and training for HoDs, the role of
parents as motivators in terms of learner achievement, and the importance of evaluating and developing teachers to provide quality education in the 21st century.

Keywords: Instructional leadership; foundation phase heads of departments; roles and responsibilities; time management; South Africa

Introduction
This paper utilises instructional leadership as a conceptual framework and maps out the roles and responsibilities of the HoD as outlined in the PAM document. Due to the low Annual National Assessment (ANA) results in literacy and numeracy, the research focuses on the challenges that HoDs in the foundation phase face in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities in ensuring that they offer quality education.

According to the statistics released by the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2011), the average mark for Grade 3 learners was 35% for literacy and 28% for numeracy. In Mpumalanga, Grade 3 learners scored 27% in literacy and only 19% for numeracy. These statistics reveal the extent of the problem of the low levels of literacy and numeracy, particularly in Mpumalanga.

If learners can’t read, write, spell and calculate at Grade 3 level, surely there is something wrong. Where are the foundation phase managers and how do they spend their time? Internationally, teachers responsible for supervising Grade R to Grade 3 are called ‘middle managers’. In South Africa, middle managers are called ‘heads of departments’ (HoDs). Insufficient support for educators and learners by HoDs may be the cause of the learners’ poor performance in literacy and numeracy.

Background
The role of HoDs in schools is not widely understood (Blandford, 2000). As a consequence, the literature relating to their role and functions is sparse. What is apparent, however, is the dual role that HoDs play, namely an administrative role within the school, as well as having teaching...
responsibilities. A great deal of the work in managing the teaching and learning process in schools lies with HoDs. However, management development often occurs only at the senior management level, and HoDs remain the forgotten tier in schools.

HoDs co-ordinate all educational activities between the top management of the school and the educators within the school. Goldring, Preston and Huff (2010:1) describe the role of HoDs as the most exciting and probably the most influential position in a well-organised school. Given the dual roles of HoDs, it is evident that they face a dilemma in executing duties carrying competing demands, namely managing a department and being a class teacher at the same time (Blandford, 1997:13).

Depending on the type of school in which the HoD is working, e.g. private school, former model C school, township or rural school (which normally fall under quintile 1-3), or farm school, this dual role can become a challenge, particularly in the foundation phase. It is challenging, especially in township and farm schools, to manage teaching, supervise educators, ensure learners co-operate positively in a class and to be responsible for all the classes in a phase, including the HoD’s own class. Educators are experiencing overcrowding in their classrooms and schools are under staffed. A thorough study needed to be conducted to ensure that HoDs in the foundation phase are operating as effectively as those in the intermediate, senior and FET phases. It is critical to formulate strategies to ensure that learners progress positively in the foundation phase, especially in terms of literacy and numeracy. HoDs must be able to perform their roles and responsibilities efficiently to ensure that learners can read and write at Grade 3 level. The PAM document clearly spells out the roles and responsibilities of the HoD; however when an HoD has 85% of their time allocated to teaching, one wonders if it is fair to expect them to carry out their administrative role in the remaining 15% of their time.
Educators are expected to spend a minimum of 1720 hours per annum on activities in schools, which translates into an 8.6 hour working day, and a Monday to Friday working week of 43 hours. Policy (EEA) also states that the formal day for educators is expected to be 7 hours and the formal school week should be 35 hours long. This implies that educators are expected to spend an extra 8 hours per week excluding formal school hours on their activities (www.hsrcpress.ac.za). The expectation is thus the ideal figure of a 43-hour working week. This study set out to obtain the perceptions of educators regarding the time they spend on their various activities.

Problem statement
HoDs are faced with the dual role of managing their departments and being class teachers (Blandford, 2000:13). The authors of this study found that HoDs spend most of their time teaching, especially in the foundation phase. Ali and Botha (2006:17) suggest that if teaching and learning are to improve significantly, “HoDs will have to spend much more time in supervising the teaching and learning activities that occur daily in their subject or learning area”. Four subjects are taught in the foundation phase, namely: Mathematics, two languages (home language and one additional language) and Life Skills. In most primary schools, foundation phase HoDs are full time teachers, teaching all four subjects, and at the same time supervising all other teachers and monitoring other duties as outlined in the PAM document. This dual role requires balancing teaching and management without compromising either role. This study therefore sought to investigate the perceptions of foundation phase HoDs in primary schools regarding their dual role.

The obvious questions to ask are: Where are the leaders of the foundation phase and why are they not performing? Do they have the time to perform their role adequately and be accountable according to their responsibilities? Why are the results of Grade 3 learners, at the end of the foundation phase, so poor? The perceptions of HoDs in the foundation phase regarding their roles and responsibilities were investigated to answer these questions. The
study focused on the Mpumalanga Province and involved all four districts and some circuits selected from the districts. The poor performance of learners in ANA may be the result of HoDs’ perceptions regarding their roles and responsibilities, in the light of the limited support they are able to offer learners and teachers.

The main research question of this paper is “What are the perceptions of foundation phase HoDs regarding their roles and responsibilities?” The sub-questions relate to the challenges experienced by foundation phase HoDs and their perceptions with regards to in-service training in leadership and management skills.

**Conceptual framework**

This study is based on the conceptual frameworks of Hallinger and Heck (1996) and Weber (1996) which highlight the five main functions of the instructional leadership role, namely: defining and communicating school goals; managing the curriculum and instruction; promoting a positive learning climate; observing and giving feedback to teachers; and assessing the instructional programme. These functions were adopted and adapted by the researcher in line with the roles and responsibilities outlined in the PAM document.

In terms of the Employment of Educators Act (EEA) 76 of 1998, the aims of the PAM document are to ensure that education management is able to draw on the professional competencies of educators, to build a sense of unity of purpose. Education authorities need to delegate authority and responsibility so as to ensure the building of human resource capacity as and when it is needed (EEA 76 of 1998, Section 4). Section 4 of the EEA also emphasises that a school principal can allocate additional duties commensurate with the management and supervision role of HoDs within the corporate identity of the school (EEA 76 of 1998, Section 4).
Table 1: Conceptual framework for the roles and responsibilities of foundation phase HoDs (Adapted from the PAM document, EEA, 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS</th>
<th>PAM DOCUMENT ROLES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defining and communicating the school mission</td>
<td>Heads of Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To advise the principal on how to ensure equity in the distribution of work among staff and ensure that professional practices are put in place for the purpose of improving teaching, learning and management. To work with educators in other schools to foster development and conduct extra-curricular activities. To meet with parents regularly to discuss the progress of their children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing curriculum and instruction</td>
<td>To teach the necessary workload, perform the duties of a class teacher, and assess and keep a record of the learners taught.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting a positive learning climate</td>
<td>To take charge of the subject being taught and to assess, coordinate and evaluate all the activities that relate to the learning climate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing and giving feedback to teachers</td>
<td>To ensure that learners and educators perform their duties as necessary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessing the instructional programme</td>
<td>To ensure that colleagues maintain the expected teaching standards, ensure progress among learners and promote efficiency within the school.</td>
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The roles and responsibilities of HoDs according to the PAM document

The core roles and responsibilities of an HoD, as listed by the PAM document (EEA: 1998), are teaching, extra- and co-curricular activities (relating mostly to the monitoring of a subject, particular learning area or phase which involves co-ordination, guidance and control of educators and learners), sharing the duties of organising and conducting extra- and co-curricular activities, managing personnel (dividing work and actively participating in educator appraisal processes), general administrative work (keeping text books and equipment in good condition, budget planning and subject work schemes) and communication. With the exception of teaching (for which an HoD is expected
to dedicate a minimum of 85% of their time), no indication of the time that should be allocated to any of these activities is provided.

The PAM document states that the formal school day may not be less than seven hours and that the following core duties must be performed:

- There must be specified teaching time;
- Relief teaching should be ensured;
- Extra- and co-curricular activities must be performed;
- Pastoral duties like ground duty, detention, scholar patrol etc. should be conducted;
- There must be an administration;
- Supervisory and management functions should be in place;
- Professional duties such as meetings, workshops, seminars and conferences should take place; and
- Planning, preparation and evaluation should occur.

Certain work needs to be done outside the formal school day, including:

- Planning, preparation and evaluation of learning programmes;
- Extra- and co-curricular duties for staff and students;
- Ensuring professional duties take place (meetings, workshops, seminars, conferences etc.); and
- Ensuring professional development occurs (80 hours per year).

As an HoD is expected to teach for a minimum of 85% of a 35 hour week (i.e. 30 hours per week or six hours per day), this leaves them with five hours per week, or one hour per day, for administration, pastoral duties and supervisory and management functions. A formal school day is from 07:30 to either 14:30 (a seven-hour day) or 15:30 (an eight-hour a day). This demonstrates that it is difficult to determine the expectations of working hours for HoDs. It seems that it can vary from seven to eight hours per day. Furthermore, this may not necessarily be their expectation, but that of their employer, namely the Department of Education.
As an instructional leader, the HoD must ensure that there is alignment between the curriculum and the instruction and assessment of a standard to ensure learner achievement. In order to realise this aim, Phillips (2009:2) argues that the HoD must be a practising teacher. He further contends that instructional leaders need to know what is going on in the classroom; thus presenting an opportunity to ‘walk the factory floor’.

Once the HoD is in touch with what happens in the classroom, he or she will be able to appreciate some of the problems teachers and learners encounter, address instructional issues from a ‘hands on’ perspective, establish a base from which to address and make curriculum decisions and strengthen the belief that “the sole purpose of the school is to serve the educational needs of students” (Harden, 1988:88).

**Methodology**

According to Van der Merwe (1996), quantitative research is a research approach that aims to test theories, determine facts, demonstrate relationships between variables, and formulate predictions. Quantitative research uses methods from the natural sciences which are designed to ensure objectivity, generalisability and reliability (Weinreich, 2009). Quantitative research is a systematic process of using numerical data which is obtained from a selected sub-group of a population in order to generalise the findings to the population that is being studied (Maree, 2007:145).

The questionnaire consisted of Section A, which was made up of five questions on biographical data, and Section B, which was made up of 15 questions about the demographics of the school and the tasks performed by foundation phase HoDs. The following categories were included in Section B of the questionnaire:
• Type and location of the school;
• Background of the learners;
• School management or leadership workshops attended;
• Time spent by HoDs hourly on different activities, as outlined by the PAM document;
• Familiarity with the PAM document;
• Class teaching and supervision;
• Time spent weekly performing HoD duties; and
• Additional tasks they perceive they perform beyond HoD duties.

Distribution and collection of the questionnaires
The questionnaire was used to investigate and document the perceptions and expectations of foundation phase HoDs regarding their roles and responsibilities. The authors intended to involve all the HoDs in Mpumalanga, but due to the size of the province, the research was limited to 550 primary schools. A total of 274 foundation phase HoDs completed the questionnaire.

The following methods were used to distribute and collect the questionnaires:
• Circuit managers and district directors were given ‘request for research’ letters and telephonically informed by the researcher about the completion of the questionnaires.
• The foundation phase co-ordinators in four districts were requested to administer the questionnaires at four different central venues after a foundation phase information session.
• The researcher explained the questionnaire during the session and clarified her role as a researcher.
• The ethical clearance certificate, together with a letter requesting permission from the participants, was included on the questionnaires.

Analysis of the questionnaires
During the analysis of the quantitative data, respondents’ written words were converted into figures and symbols that were counted and added, and entered into tables to allow the authors to draw conclusions (Basit, 2012:169).
The statistical package SPSS 20 was used to analyse the data (Arbuckle, 2007; Field, 2009). The statistics discussed in the findings provide clarity as to the nature and representativeness of the sample.

**Discussion of Findings**
Some of the demographic findings will be briefly described. The responses to the questions directly related to the aim of the study will be discussed more comprehensively.

**Gender**
The ratio of female to male respondents was nine females for every one male. The Department of Basic Education (DoBE, 2012:15) indicates a ratio of 1.5:1, although that figure includes educators at secondary schools. However, more females prefer the task of teaching foundation phase learners.

**Age of respondents**
The mean age was 48.8 years, with a minimum age of 27 and maximum age of 64. The median value was 49 years of age. If one assumes that most educators start their teaching career at around 23 or 24 years of age, then this sample could be said to consist of experienced educators, as one would expect for HoDs.

**Highest qualification attained**
Only 29.6% of the sample do not have at least a bachelor's degree, while 50% have an honours degree or higher qualification. As the respondents were HoDs, one would expect them to be well qualified.

**Number of years served as post level 1 educator**
The mean number of years was 13 and the median was 11. The minimum value was two and the maximum was 31 years. The mode was 10 years, which is the extent of experience most educators would be expected to have before becoming an HoD.
Number of years served as HoD

The mean number of years as HoD was 9.4 and the median was eight. The mode was five years, while the minimum value was one year and the maximum was 28 years. The sample can thus be said to consist of educators who were mostly experienced as HoDs.

Type of primary school

Respondents from public primary schools made up the majority of the sample, while 31.4% indicated they were from public higher, public combined and public multi-grade schools.

School location

The vast majority of schools indicated that they are located in rural areas, while only 18.6% indicated urban, township, informal or farm situations. According to Statistics South Africa, in 2001 89.3% of the population of Mpumalanga lived in non-urban areas (SSA, 2001). The sample is thus fairly representative of the rural versus other area divide in Mpumalanga, if one considers that in 2012 the population is likely to be more urbanised. Out of the 274 respondents, 210 HoDs teach learners who come from economically disadvantaged homes and 64 HoDs teach learners from affluent areas. This correlates with the rural setting of the majority of the schools.

In summation, the demographic profile could be said to consist of mostly female educators with an average age of 49 years, many of whom were married, well qualified, with approximately nine years of experience as an HoD. Majority were from primary schools situated in rural, economically disadvantaged areas.

Access to management and leadership training

The majority (67.2%) of the participants have no qualification or in-service training in terms of management or leadership capacity. As HoDs are expected to take the lead in the management of their departments, one would expect that many more of them should have some form of leadership and
management training. The inference that can be drawn from this information is that with such a large number of HoDs without management or leadership training, the leadership and management in primary schools in Mpumalanga, and the resulting learner performance, can be expected to be poor.

**Extent that the leadership/management course provided benefits**

From the 90 HoDs who responded to this question, 62.2% felt that their management and leadership course benefitted them greatly in enhancing their management or leadership capacity, while 37.8% indicated that these qualifications only partially enhanced their capacity. These statistics show that the beliefs, values and actions of HoDs are contradictory, since the low performance of learners in ANA may be evidence of a lack of leadership by HoDs in the foundation phase in Mpumalanga.

**Total management time in the foundation phase in a typical day (in hours)**

The questionnaire asked the respondents to provide their answer in hours and minutes but was recorded to provide just minutes. The management time comes to 3.53 hours per day, which seems to be an excessive perception of the time spent on management duties if one considers that the maximum expectation for all duties is 8.64 hours per day. This leaves only 5.11 hours per day for teaching and performing other activities. It is likely that the respondents interpreted ‘management’ in its widest sense and included other activities such as planning, organising and controlling. In addition, the mean provides for a wide range which varies from one hour to 12 hours per day. The 12 hours is probably an outlier as it is an unrealistic value.

If one makes the assumption that HoDs teach 30 hours per week, then the mode is the only distribution that falls within the maximum of 43.2 hours that educators should spend on their activities per week. This would mean that only 22.3% of HoDs teach for 30 hours per week (85% of 35 hours). In addition, the number of hours spent per week exceeds the 8.6 hours per week allowed for other activities. It thus appears that the respondents in this sample
have the *perception* that they are spending too much time on management, with the result that their teaching time is likely to be compromised.

Item 13 in the questionnaire asked the respondents to provide the percentage of their time that they spend per week on certain HoD activities. The expectation is for HoDs to spend 85% of their available time on teaching activities. The mean value in Table 15 indicates a perception of 37.81% of time spent on teaching activities. If 85% is equivalent to 30 hours per week, then the 37.81% translates to 13.34 hours per week or 2.67 hours per day, which is much less than is expected of them. If the expected six hours per day is used for teaching, then there are 2.64 hours per day (in an 8.64 hour day) for all other activities, including activities outside the formal school day. Findings indicate that educators have the perception that they are spending about 72.6% of time on other activities. It appears that HoDs in the sample have the perception that they are involved with administrative duties, management duties, supervision, public relations and extra-mural activities to a much greater extent than expected.

**The average number of learners per teacher and the number of educators supervised and monitored**

The expected number of primary school learners per class is 40. The questionnaire asked for the average number of learners per teacher. The data indicates that some classes exceed the suggested number. The high average number of learners (51.61) per class may be the cause of poor performance in ANA in Mpumalanga.
Of the 274 participants who responded, 78.5% indicated that they are familiar with the roles and responsibilities of HoDs as outlined in the PAM document. The remaining 21.5% appear to rely to a great extent on the management in the school regarding their duties and the appropriate allocation of time to these duties.

Teaching a class as well as being a supervisor

Of the 274 responses, 98.9% have a class to teach as well as supervision duties, while only 1.1% indicated that they don’t have a class to teach. The PAM document clearly states that it depends on the size of the school as to whether or not the HoD is required to teach a class.

Time spent on average per week performing duties during formal school time

Item 20 in the questionnaire asked respondents to estimate the time spent per week (in hours) on certain duties that fall within the formal school day (35 hours per week). As HoDs are required to spend 85% of their week in actual teaching duties (30 hours), this leaves them with 5 hours per week to perform their formal HoDs duties.

Adding together the mean scores for all the sub-questions in item 20 results in a mean of 6.05 hours per week. One may assume that item 20.6 does not involve the HoDs’ scheduled teaching time or timetable allocation of time, and was time spent observing teachers in their department (ELRC Report, 2004:7). The 6.05 hours per week (perceived time) is greater than the 5 hours per week (expected time) for formal HoD duties as required by the PAM document (PAM, 1999). The average reported here, however, masks the actual differences between the 274 respondents, as some work less than the reported 6.05 hours per week while others indicated that they work more. The mode of 4.50 hours, which is the time that most of the sampled educators spend per week on the activities listed in item 20 in the questionnaire, is less
than the expected number of hours per week. It is thus assumed that the respondents interpreted this question in terms of their HoD duties outside of the formal school day, and that the estimated times do not include their teaching time.

Item 21 in the questionnaire asked respondents to identify the additional tasks, outside of their HoD duties, that take up their time.

The additional tasks were interpreted as those activities which are outside the formal school day, such as planning, preparation, extra and co-curricular duties, professional duties and development (HSRC, 2004). According to that document, educators must spend 8.64 hours per week outside of formal activities, which translates to a working week of 43.2 hours in total.

We assume that educators work 20 days per month. Accordingly, the mean hours spent on the additional tasks comes to 1.72 hours per day, or 8.6 hours per week. Adding this 1.72 hours of additional duties to the 6.05 hours identified in item 20 (formal duties) gives a total of 7.77 hours per day (perceived time), which is still less than the 8.64 hours per day (expected time) required by national policy (NEPA, 1999). A gap is thus present between the expected time and the perceived time (8.64 - 7.77 = 0.87 hours per day). Taking 199 working days as the maximum number of working days per year (HSRC, 2004), the gap is 173.13 hours or 14.43 days of a 7 hour work day. However, if one assumes that the educators have an expectation of a 35 hour working week (or 7 hours per day), then they have the perception that they work 0.77 hours per day more than expected of them (7 - 7.77). This translates to 153.23 hours or 12.8 days. Thus whether the perceived time spent by HoDs on their work per day is more or less than expected depends on which measure of the working day one uses.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Heads of departments (HoDs) in foundation phase are exposed to a dilemma in executing duties carrying competing demands namely managing a
department and being a class teacher at the same time. The theoretical framework of instructional leadership (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985) was juxtaposed with the legal framework (PAM) to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the HODs in South Africa. It is clear that the HODs are the instructional leaders in a school. The aim of this paper was to investigate the challenges faced by foundation phase heads of departments (HoDs) in performing their roles and responsibilities. A quantitative research approach was used to assess the perceptions of the foundation phase HoDs. Questionnaires were distributed to 274 foundation phase HoDs in Mpumalanga and SPSS 20 statistical package was used to analyse the data.

Mpumalanga Province was used to collect data as they had scored the lowest in Numeracy and Literacy in the Grade 3 Annual National Assessment (ANA) results as revealed in February 2011 (DBE Report 40). In Mpumalanga, Grade 3 learners scored 27% in literacy and 19% in numeracy. Statistics from the PIRLS and TIMMS study also confirm that South African learners are at the bottom of the barrel when it comes to numeracy and literacy scores.

According to the Personnel Administrative Measures (EEA:1998) an HoD is expected to teach for a minimum of 85% of a 35-hour week. This leaves an HoD with 5 hours per week or 1 hour per day for administration, pastoral duties and supervisory and management functions. The HoD as an instructional leader must be a practising teacher as this presents him with an opportunity to “walk the factory floor”.

The demographic profile consisted of mostly female educators with an average age of 49 years, many of whom were married, well qualified and had about 9 years of experience. They were from primary schools situated in rural, economically disadvantaged areas. The major findings showed that HoDs perceived that they are overworked, whereas in reality, the amount of time they spend in school is not as expected in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document. It emerged that most educators leave school earlier than normal and thus experience a lack of time for supervision and
administration, which then becomes a stress factor in the completion of their roles and responsibilities.

Twenty-two percent of the respondents indicated that they are not familiar with the HoD duties as outlined in the PAM document. Furthermore, the study uncovered issues such as a lack of support and training for HoDs, the role of parents as motivators in terms of learner achievement, and the importance of evaluating and developing teachers to provide quality education in the 21st century.

It is recommended that the Department of Education (DoE) consider reviewing and specifying the exact amount of time that HoDs spend on executing their different tasks. Training and induction of the newly appointed HoDs will also assist them in being prepared to carry out their responsibilities effectively. The finding indicate a serious contradiction of the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) resolution where the DoE laid down the roles of HODs but do not put capacity building programmes in place. In South Africa, there are no special training programmes to capacitate HoDs with management and leadership skills (Mkhize, 2007:77). Even athletes need to train before a race in order to win, yet HoDs in South Africa are appointed and left to manage the departments on their own with no mentorship, induction or guidance. It also seems as if the policies regarding teaching and supervision time is confusing and requires reviewing. It is no wonder that SA scores the lowest in Numeracy and Literacy. If the foundation and supervision of these gateway subjects is not properly laid during the formative years of a learner's education, the learners will never be able to catch up. Departments of Education need to show a sense of urgency regarding the management and leadership of Early Childhood Education if they want to survive the educational crisis

References


