

THE AMPHIBIOUS LIFE OF SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS DEPARTMENTAL HEADS: A STRADDLE BETWEEN LEADING AND TEACHING

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Abstract

Departmental heads are teachers of subjects and specialists who in turn are leaders of such specialized fields called subjects. They lead departments and carry a workload they must execute in their classes and being part of the school management. These cohort of teachers are part of the middle management of schools. They are the bridges between what is decided in the school management teams and what should happen in the classrooms and are expected to enforce policy implementation in their departments and school-wide too. Basically, they are channels of communication between teachers and the school management teams and vice versa. Their existence is “amphibious” as they straddle between leadership and teaching, responsibilities that are regulated and must be carried out satisfactorily. The departmental head position in South Africa is a recognized, formal one as it is constituted in the Personnel Administrative Measures on what and how they should carry out their responsibilities. The document also indicates the workload of all teacher categories with teaching load ranging from 85%-90% for primary school departmental head and up to 85% for secondary school departmental heads as stipulated by the Education Labour Relations Council Resolution No. 7 of 1998. Therein, the departmental head is appointed as a post level two teacher who is responsible for teaching, extra and co-curricular activities, personnel, general or administrative and communication responsibilities. As leaders, they are expected to have basic knowledge of policy pertaining for their subject specialization area, lead a team of educators, motivate their teachers, manage resources and facilities in their departments, advice the principal on teacher placement and assist in the recruitment of new members of staff particularly those serving in their subject department. The other demand placed on the departmental head are that they are subject teachers. They are not ordinary teachers as they must be specialists in those subjects. This is because they should advice their teams on the best practices of teaching the subject. They must have specialized skills in the assessment and moderation of such subjects. As a result, departmental heads spend most of their time teaching than leading and managing. The latter was supposed to be their primary occupation, but this is to the contrary. Due to the contradictions, the DH is forced to live an “amphibious” life which needs to be managed well and for which they require to be well informed and supported in.

Keywords: *Departmental head, middle management, amphibious, school management team, teaching and leading.*

1. Introduction

This conference proceeding is conceptual in nature and a precursor to the up-coming project of the same name to be undertaken in two provinces of the Republic of South Africa in 2023. Once completed, the project will determine how departmental heads perceive their dual roles of being teachers or instructors and leaders.

Who are the departmental heads (DHs)? They are part of the middle leadership of schools that function between the school management teams (SMT) at the top and teachers at the bottom. Middle leaders are just that, leading from the middle, literally as it would be apparent as this paper unfolds (Grootenboer, 2018). DHs are teachers involved in leadership roles in the school and still teach a subject or subjects in a grade or phase. It is not easy to define their roles as they straddle various roles and positions based on size of the school, stipulations by the education department and policy expectations (Grootenboer, 2018). Their roles are amphibious, having a dual life meaning on one hand they are both teachers teaching a subject in a classroom, and on the other are expected to lead, manage and administrate

processes and systems both for the subject/s they lead and for the school. In South Africa, schools may have one to four DHs depending on the size of the school and the subject choice offered at such a school if it is a secondary school as stipulated the Performance Administrative Measures (RSA, 2016). As Leithwood (2016) puts it, DHs are very important in schools as they are the leaders and administrators of their departments. Furthermore, it is important to note that they advise the principal and SMT on placement of teachers and most importantly, they are not just teachers, but also specialists in the subjects they head. Therefore, they are resource teachers and important for policy dissemination across the school.

2. The DH as teacher and instructor

DHs are not just administrators and the link between management and teachers in the lower ranks. In South Africa they are formally appointed due to their experience and/or subject expertise. They teach the subjects they head and guide others on the best methods, techniques and pedagogical approaches best suited to the subjects. The DHs are expert teachers who epitomize the subject they teach and head. They must perform classroom demonstrations to the novice and inexperienced teachers. They are custodians of the subjects but should be abreast with the latest development in such subjects and policy changes that occur constantly. Although they are expected to teach and be exemplary to others in the ways of teaching, they are also expected to be administrators in their departments and school (RSA, 2016).

3. The DH as leader and administrator

The work of the DH is not only limited to teaching, but also dedicated to supervising the teachers in their departments. As if that is not enough, the DH is expected to mentor these teachers. Monitoring of teachers' curriculum implementation is also crucial to their daily activities (Harris, Jones, Ismail & Nguyen, 2019). DHs monitor the attendance of both teachers and learners and make sure that the timetable is followed as drawn and allocated. Furthermore, the DH is responsible for responsible for sourcing resources for their departments, allocate the resources and manage them in such a way that they last longer (Leithwood, 2016). The quality of work done by the learners and teachers is also the responsibility of the DH (Nurulita, Prestiadi & Imron., 2021). They must moderate the work to make sure that the right quantity and acceptable level of quality is given to learners. As if that is not a lot already, DHs must make sure that curriculum policies both from external and internal are implemented or followed as intended. Although curriculum policy implementation in schools may be seen as the purview of school principals, the DH is the responsible person to make sure that these policies are implemented by the teachers in the classrooms. A lot of administrative work for the DH is spent in the management of efficiency in teaching and leadership of promoting excellence in learner academic performance, supervision of staff both personally and academically, and staff development which are a huge demand for the DH while they are expected to teach too.

4. Challenges of the dual life of DH

The DH spends most time communicating and relaying information from the higher management echelons to the teachers below (Leithwood, 2016). In contrast, the DH does not have much time in their hands to do all necessary and required communication. They are always straddled and stretched between teaching and administration which takes much of their time. Their roles are ambiguous and fraught with barriers limiting them to carry out their duties to their optimum best. In addition, the DH is overburdened by trying to satisfy the need to be a teacher, an administrator, a manager of resources and personnel and lead a team of teachers in their subject group. This may hinder their personal growth and at times get stuck without progressing in their professional development. It is with this notion in mind that the upcoming project seeks to determine how departmental heads manage their dual roles as leaders and teachers, to investigate what interventions strategies exist to support departmental heads in executing their leadership and teaching roles and to determine what intervention strategies can be employed to assist departmental heads to manage their dual roles as leaders and teachers. Not are they expected to liaise with internal stakeholders, but DHs are expected to interact with a range of external participants in education like parents, curriculum specialists from the department of education and a host other who needs their attention related to learner performance. Again, these requires the DHs attention, taking more of their time and adding more workload to them. As if this is not burden enough, the DH must contend with the everchanging curriculum and have current knowledge of the latest teaching and learning techniques that they must share with their team of subject teachers.

5. Theoretical framework

Schools functioning does not happen in isolation but occurs as part of an intricate and varied system. It is thus appropriate that the complexity theory is employed for this study to explain the challenges encountered by employees especially the DHs in executing the complex responsibilities of leadership and teaching, and how they make success of it. As Mason (2011) puts it, complexity theory is an interdisciplinary theory that can aid in analyzing educational reform. It is concerned with entire systems and the interactions between the various system components. Teachers, students, parents, community leaders, the government, its respective educational departments (national, provincial and district) and policies, and economic systems are some of the aspects that make up schools. Foss and Saebi (2017) supported by Foss and Saebi (2018) Lanzolla and Markides (2021) purport that the complexity theory is appropriate in understanding complex nature of the DHs work. The application of complexity approach in this study stems from its capacity to clearly explain the different aspects of something complex like the dual responsibilities of DHs in terms of its components, hierarchies, interdependencies, non-linear relations, and boundaries, thus aiding a better understanding of how such systems ultimately work (Lanzolla and Markides, 2021) and explain the non-linear dynamic systems. Although this theory is most applicable in the business management world, it is appropriate here too. The complexity of how DHs are expected to deliver quality education with the goal of moving from one level of behaviour to another is increased by the interaction between all the role players with the various contextual backgrounds and levels of competence.

6. Methodology

The study will follow the interpretivist paradigm, as interpretivism foregrounds the meaning that individuals assign to their experience (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). Intersubjective meanings are crucial to achieving understanding and meaning (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The paradigm will permit the researchers not only to describe the social context, conventions, norms and standards of the DHs, but also to reflect on critical elements in assessing and understanding the behaviour of the participants under study (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As this study aims to explore the complex roles of departmental heads a qualitative approach will be most appropriate to understand the complex phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). How participants perform their daily duties will be scrutinised (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). As revealed by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), qualitative research assists in understanding experiences, feelings, social circumstances or phenomena as they happen in the participants' actual world, and thus easy to observe these in their ordinary or natural setting. A phenomenological mode of inquiry will be employed as it aims as it assists in the understanding of the lived experiences of individuals like DHs, principals and teachers on the responsibilities of DHs (Ogina, 2017; Seobi & Wood, 2016). The researcher took an exploratory and descriptive stance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research will use purposive sampling to gain more insight into the DHs dual responsibilities of leading and teaching as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The sample will be carefully considered and selected as follows. The research will be conducted in two provinces. Initially, six schools with a total of 30 participants will be sampled. The sample will comprise of six principals, six deputy principals, 12 departmental heads and six teachers to participate in the study. Face-to-face interviews will be used to generate and gather data from 30 participants in six schools (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Open-ended questions with follow ups will be posed to elicit the views and opinions of the participants. Thematic analysis to uncover prominent themes will enable the researcher to describe the participants' perceptions of the DH dual responsibilities. Permission to conduct the research and ethical clearance will be done via all the necessary routs. Ethical clearance shall be obtained by applying to the North-West University ethics body and permission to conduct the research in schools will be obtained from concerned provincial departments and school authorities.

7. Inclusion and future exploration

Although the sample of this research is initially a small one, it will form the basis of conducting a much more extensive study on the dual responsibilities of DHs both nationally and internationally. It will open doors for collaboration between this researcher and others globally. This may lead to extensive collaboration among researchers and institutions to influence policy on how DHs are trained and deployed in schools, and what their roles should be and how they should be carried out without burdening them.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the funding I received from my institution and the research entity I serve for making it possible for this paper to be presented at this conference, and further to carry out the much-anticipated project on the dual responsibilities of DHs in schools.

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