

# Exploring the support needs of newly appointed departmental heads: A South African perspective

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## Abstract

Numerous middle leadership researchers in education worldwide have conceded the value and the contribution of Departmental Heads (DHs) in enhancing the achievement of the learners. Yet researches generate insufficient insights on this topic work and on how middle leaders can be supported. Hence, this study deals with the exploration of support needs of newly appointed DHs in three South African secondary schools in District No. 10 (D10) in the province of Gauteng. There is a dearth in literature worldwide on the support needs of newly appointed DHs, more especially in the South African milieu. Lodged within Schlossberg's theory of transition, this phenomenological qualitative study intends to support newly appointed DHs as a point of focus to close the existing gap in knowledge of their support needs. A case study design was chosen where in-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with nine purposively selected DHs from three schools. Wellington's seven-stage thematic analysis data model was used to analyse data, with the support of Quirkos. The findings indicated that DHs need suitable support in a form of induction that incorporates orientation and mentoring to perform their role. For this, this study suggests that the ministry of basic education take all the newly appointed DHs thorough an induction programme before assuming their role to enable them to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes. The findings will reshape how the Department of Basic Education view the professional development of DHs.

**Keywords:** *support-needs, departmental heads, leadership, management, teachers, South Africa*

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## 1. Introduction

Numerous middle leadership researchers in education worldwide have conceded the value and the contribution of Departmental Heads (DHs) in enhancing the achievement of the learners. Some of the DHs key tasks include leading and managing teaching staff, and curriculum management. While researchers (Lipscombe et al., 2023; Lipscombe & Tindall-Ford, 2021; Bassett & Shaw, 2017) maintain that DHs play a significant role in the education sector, primarily as teachers and secondly as leaders, Bryant (2018) emphasizes the enormous prospective for DHs to contribute to their schools more than just subject administration, yet the research base generates insufficient insights on such work and on how middle leaders can be supported to accomplish it. Similarly, Harris and Jones (2017) argue that research attention focused on middle level leadership has faded a little because available literature covered mainly middle leadership roles and responsibilities. While this stance is aligned with, this study argues that there is still a dearth in literature worldwide on the support needs of the newly appointed DHs, more especially in the South African milieu.

Several scholars (Lipscombe & Tindall-Ford, 2021; Jaca, 2021; Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014) are in accord, and highlighted that further research is needed to explore the support needs of the DHs. In unison, Harris et al. (2019) call for more empirical work to be commenced to give rise to a critical perspective on middle leadership in schools. Leadership researchers (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Gurr, 2019; Ogina, 2017; Dinham, 2016) further sustain that the paucity in research may as well be attributed to the extensive attention accorded to the principals when it comes to investigating the school management team members. Hence, in expanding the knowledge-base of middle leadership, the current study aimed to delve on the exploration of the support needs of newly appointed DHs to help them overcome the challenges they may face when appointed on the new roles, to mainly capacitate them to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes. A recent study by Jaca (2021) revealed that DHs also struggled to balance their own teaching and management duties; failure to strike the balance may result in the non-completion of the syllabus, which in turn affect learners' progress and achievement.

According to Madonsela and Proches (2022), Malloy (2017) and Malinga (2016), there is lack of relevant expertise in the subject by the DHs, partially attributed to the nature of the South African system, which does not consider knowledge of all the subjects a teacher will

supervise once promoted to the DH position (Jaca, 2021). This has presented an area where newly appointed DHs may be supported, so that subject knowledge gaps are addressed before reflecting on learners' performance. On that account, the current study aimed to examine strategies DHs employ to cope with the responsibility of managing multiple subjects. Accordingly, Madonsela and Proches (2022) stress that DHs are confronted with diverse challenges such as absenteeism of teachers and lack of resources that render their job difficult. Ali and Botha (2006) suggest professional training according to their observed needs to make them more effective. Therefore, this study posits that support provided to the DHs should not be cascaded from different settings, but instead context-specific to address the uncovered individual challenges of the DHs. Middle leaders are best understood in context (Lipscombe et al., 2023) and school middle leadership is diverse, contextually driven, and important for advancing teaching and learning (Lipscombe et al., 2023).

According to De Nobile (2018) and De Nobile and Lipscombe (2024), contributing to a greater conceptual and theoretical understanding of this topic would seem both urgent and imperative. A view supported by Cranston (2006) and Dinham (2016) who established that the phenomenon under study is being under-researched and under-theorised compared to senior leadership. Furthermore, several researchers worldwide purport a scarcity of research on the support needs of the DHs (Bassett & Shaw, 2017; Bryant, 2018). Hence, this study aimed to address the lacuna by first establishing the nature and the extent of the training received by the DHs. Lodged within Schlossberg (1995) transition theory, this phenomenological qualitative study seeks to support the newly appointed DHs as a point of focus to close the existing gap in knowledge of their support needs. While South Africa is lagging when it comes to development of the knowledge base on middle leadership in schools, countries like the United Kingdom, Hong Kong and Singapore are in the lead (Harris et al., 2019), DHs play an important role in school improvement (Lipscombe & Tindall-Ford, 2021) and understanding their support needs remains imperative. Hence, this study explores support needs of newly appointed departmental heads to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes in three South African secondary schools in District No. 10 (D10) in the province of Gauteng. The DHs remain the fulcrum within which teaching, learning and management in schools revolve. It is a unique position within the school structure in that DHs act as 'translators' to connect the various elements to the school hierarchy (Nehez & Blossing, 2022). Therefore, failure to

address their support needs may jeopardise educational processes and outcomes. To effectively explore the support needs of newly appointed DHs, the current study was guided by the following research questions.

- 1) What is the nature and extent of the training received by departmental heads before assuming their roles?
- 2) What specific forms of support are identified as essential for departmental heads to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes?
- 3) How do departmental heads navigate the challenges associated with managing multiple subjects, and what strategies do they employ to cope with this responsibility?

## **2. Literature review**

Newly appointed DHs encompasses those who are still under probation, meaning that they have not completed a 12-month period in those positions as stipulated within the South African Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998 and the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM, 2016), as modified. Middle leadership is complex to explain (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Lipscombe et al., 2023), hence, the current study adopted the terms departmental head and middle leader to refer to the teachers leading other teachers, and the two terms are used interchangeably.

The vast amount of literature on middle leadership has mainly focused on the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders (Mthethwa, 2016; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Bassett, 2016; Buthelezi et al., 2020), and other studies have expanded on the expectations and challenges experienced by first-time middle leaders (Simpson et al., 2016; Mulaudzi, 2019; Kalane & Ramabuda, 2022). There is, however, a burgeoning number of studies that have dwelled on the support needs of DHs, though happening at leisurely pace, and with most emerging from the international front (e.g. Lipscombe & Tindall-Ford, 2021; Nobile & Lipscombe, 2024; Bryant & Walker, 2022; Lipscombe et al., 2023). Due to the limited literature on the subject, the current study also referred to reports that incorporated some elements of DHs support needs even though the current topic was not their focus (e.g. Lipscombe et al., 2023).

### ***2.1. A need for adequate training for new departmental heads***

In their seminal study on the development needs of middle leaders in the United Kingdom, Adey and Jones (1998) complained about the training needs of the DHs, indicating

that they are still not being addressed satisfactorily. However, the study expressed the viewpoints of the senior managers with the exclusion of DHs voices. The current study aimed to incorporate the voices of the DHs to unearth their lived experiences, because middle leadership is often the first promotion from teacher to leader (Alexeeff et al., 2024). Another study in the United Kingdom by Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) noted a lack of formal support, induction and mentoring to support DHs in their role, and called for an instant and suitable response by the individual, the school, and the system to provide for the needs of DHs. Similarly, Madonsela and Proches (2022), Gurr and Drysdale (2013), Murphy (2019) and Adey and Jones (1998) contend on induction course for DHs to become familiarised with the position they are in, as they may encounter challenges during the transition. This is aligned with the aim of the current study, to assuage the transition of newly appointed DHs to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes.

The study of Bryant (2018) delved on the conditions that support middle leaders work, using Hong Kong case studies of secondary schools, and confirmed that middle leaders are not adequately supported to achieve their desired goals. For this, Kavanagh et al. (2021), using exploratory sequential study, suggest the professional development needs of middle leaders in Irish, Education and Training Board (ETB) post primary schools. Similarly, scholars identified managing conflict as an area with the greatest need, followed by time management, self-management and working with other middle leaders. As these issues cannot be addressed by professional development, middle leaders require the support of senior leaders, skills development, and a supportive school culture. In the same vein, and to contribute to a greater theoretical understanding of middle leadership, De Nobile (2018) developed the first Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) model, to accomplish a better understanding of the role and to steer further research in this field. The overwhelming source of his literature was the United Kingdom, followed by Australia and the United States of America, from the period 1990 to 2017. The findings from the project further emphasise the organisational factors of principal support and school culture. A view advanced by Nobile and Lipscombe (2024) who called on the New South Wales Department of Education to proactively support the professional development of departmental heads across NSW public schools. Undesirably, an enquiry by Gurr (2019) corroborated that too often DHs did not receive sufficient support from senior leaders, and worked in school structures that hindered their work.

The findings from the literature provide empirical evidence on the need to close the gap on DHs support needs. According to Bush and Jackson (2002), summarising their findings from visiting education leadership centres worldwide in 2001, the Waikato centre in New Zealand regards middle and senior leaders as ‘key client groups’ but it is not clear how their needs are met, except through voluntary participation in the centre’s programmes. Hence, in a thematic review of research of middle leadership in Ireland from 2008-2018, Murphy (2019) contends a necessity to advance and develop the delivery of leadership preparation and development. For that reason, it remains significant to first identify DHs support needs before implementing any intervention and any suggested programme should be informed by DHs lived experiences.

### ***2.2. South African studies on the forms of support for departmental heads***

When dealing with a case of natural sciences’ DHs in the Gauteng Province of South Africa, Malinga (2016) established that DHs are under immense pressure because they receive inadequate support from subject advisors and principals. Correspondingly, Kalane and Ramabuda (2022), using a mixed-method approach on factors impacting DHs management of teaching and learning at primary schools in South Africa, concluded that DHs should also be trained in instructional supervision to support both learners and teachers in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Similarly, Buthelezi et al. (2020), highlighting the quantitative profile on management role of DHs at female-dominated primary schools in South Africa, recommended the need for capacity building programmes so that they could understand their management roles in schools. Buthelezi et al. (2020) suggested the DHs need to attend workshops, in-service training conferences and seminars as a way of keeping themselves abreast of new developments in their subject and teaching methodology.

According to Ogina (2017), the lack of standardised management training in South Africa has led DHs to use different leadership strategies, which is supported by other local studies (Tapala et al., 2020; Mthiyane et al., 2019). On the other hand, Jaca (2021) identified challenges related to the transitioning period from being a teacher to a DH. The strategy-factor of the model embraced for the current study aimed to address newly appointed DHs’ coping strategies when they undertake their new roles, to among others, how they navigate the challenges associated with managing multiple subjects.

### ***2.3. International studies on the forms of support for newly appointed departmental heads***

Bassett and Shaw (2017) conducted a study in New Zealand schools with the purpose of identifying the expectations and leadership development and support the first-time middle leaders in primary schools were provided with. The results suggest that further development and support of new middle leaders was vital. On a more positive outcome based on DHs support, Gurr (2019) described cases from Singapore, Chile and Australia and suggested that middle leaders are being better supported to adopt genuine leadership roles that impact teaching and learning. The study has brought to light the notion that when DHs are adequately supported to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes, this will translate to excellent academic accomplishment. However, Gurr (2019) also cautioned that improved outcomes cannot be achieved when principals provide unsatisfactory support to the DHs, since they (principals) have paramount role in backing this support. Therefore, the current study purports that for DHs to become effective and efficient managers, appropriate forms of support are vital from the entire basic education stakeholders, starting at the school level with the executive management team that comprise the principal and the deputy playing a leading role. This corresponds to Kavanagh et al. (2021) that appropriate support is essential to aid newly appointed DHs acquire and develop the skills necessary for the multi-faceted, imperative role.

When teachers are promoted to the DH role, their relationships with former colleagues are affected negatively (Fluckiger et al., 2015; Jaca, 2021; Leithwood, 2016) and they find it difficult to have conversations with their staff about performance (Cardno et al., 2019). While Fleming (2013) suggests that newly appointed DHs in schools need specific form of support and development to maximise their potential, the fact that changing from leading learners to having an official role in leading necessitates a dissimilar set of skills and competences (Kavanagh et al., 2021). As suggested by Fluckiger et al. (2015), middle leaders need to acquire personal strategies to enable them to build rapport with colleagues, to deal with resistance, uncertainty, and varying levels of expertise in colleagues. Similarly, these are addressed in the *strategy-factor* of Schlossberg's (1995) 4S model in providing support to newly appointed DHs on the flexibility of applying coping strategies while adapting to the new position.

### 2.4. Theoretical framework

Schlossberg's (1995) 4S model to assess transitions into new roles was the framework of the current study. The major sets of factors assessed in this model include; 1) situation, 2) self, 3) support, and 4) strategy (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The model is focused on adults in transition and the assessment of taking charge. Distinctively, the model was considered appropriate to delve into the support needs of newly appointed middle leaders since it provides sets of factors (in the form of 4 Ss) that influence a person's ability to cope in a new leadership environment. The four (4S) major sets of factors identified by Schlossberg are abridged in figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Touch Community Services: Coping with the new norm (2020)*



***Situation-factor.*** The first S, the situation-factor, refers to circumstances and factors surrounding a transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995), and factors to be assessed within this study include the ability of the newly appointed DHs to adapt and lead successfully, role change and appraisal. For instance, DHs new appointment may cause stress that may call for continuous



support from the senior leadership. Thus, Schlossberg et al. (1995) describe a transition as a continuous process of assimilation and appraisal with no endpoints. Musamali (2018) further asserts that the model is based on the assumptions that transitions are continually experienced and reactions to transitions depend on the type of transition, context, and impact. Therefore, newly appointed DHs have entered a new context, where the school culture may hinder their growth, hence this factor (situation) take context into consideration when investigating their support needs.

***Self-factor.*** The second S, the self-factor, assesses factors that include appraising an individual's personal and demographic characteristics as well as psychological resources. This includes among others, stage of life, ego development, commitment, and values (Schlossberg et al., 1995), the self-signified individual characteristics and resources one could access to cope with transitions to effectively and efficiently use available resources to support learners' learning outcomes. As a result of DHs being teachers before the promotion, it is expected of them to take an initiative in propelling their personal growth and development before the external ones. This will only be possible, when necessary, supportive resources, such as time, administrative resources, and human capital (in terms of adequate and suitable qualified teachers) are made available.

***Support-factor.*** Given the purpose of the study, the third S, support-factor, is viewed as the most significant factor of the model. Support refers to the assistance available in aiding an individual DH to cope with transition. According to Bussolari and Goodell (2009), transition processes are characterised by disruption and transition management is critical to ease efficacious adaptation to new situations. Transitioning from being a leader of learners to a leader of teachers must be well-managed by providing consistent and adequate support. This factor was employed to assure transition management by paying attention at institutional and organisational support.

***Strategy-factor.*** The fourth S, strategy-factor, includes assessing a newly appointed DH plan to modify or control the situation by taking direct, information seeking, or intrapsychic action (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Put simply, strategy refers to the DH plan of action to cope with a transition of being a leader, managing self and managing relationships. Effective leadership and management of teaching staff and educational processes within a department are essential for the academic success of the learners and the school at large. In

essence, the model through the *strategy-factor* seeks to assist newly appointed DHs to expand their leadership and management skills when they assume their supervisory roles, and ultimately take complete control of their respective departments.

### **3. Research Methods**

#### ***3.1. Methodology***

The current study utilised the phenomenological qualitative approach to effectively explore the support needs of newly appointed DHs. Phenomenology is suitable for exploring concepts associated with social and cultural meanings that cannot be easily quantified (Thwala, Ugwuanyi, Okeke & Gama, 2020). Based on phenomenological research approach, the lived encounters of the DHs about their support needs were described by the researchers “based on the participants responses” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A case study design was chosen because it enabled the researchers to develop an in-depth analysis of more DHs participating in a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It was further deemed suitable for the topic under study since it is a research design targeted at collecting detailed information from a smaller group of subjects (Ugwuanyi, 2023). In this regard, the DHs number in schools is far less than that of the teachers, making the choice of the design more appropriate. As a result, three secondary schools with expanding learners’ rolls from D10 were purposively selected as research sites. Due to the high number of learners in the three schools, numerous DHs vacancies were advertised in the Gauteng Provincial Department of Basic Education Vacancy Circular 04 of 2023. Consequently, numerous departmental heads were appointed in the three case study schools, becoming relevant research sites to fulfil the purpose of the study. Moreover, the three schools are near each other.

#### ***3.2. Selection of participants***

The rationale behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and answer the research question, (Creswell (2009). Subsequently, nine newly appointed departmental heads were purposefully chosen, three from each school. This type of sample does not include any type of random sampling and was based entirely on the judgement of the researchers, in that a sample is composed of elements that contain the most characteristic, representative, or typical attributes of the population that serve the purpose of the study best (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). A study

may have a small sample size, but the researchers continually returned to the same situation or the same informants, seeking confirmation as accentuated by McMillian and Schumacher (2014). The DHs were selected for inclusion because by the time the current study was conducted, they have not completed a 12-month period in those positions. Again, the newly appointed DHs were deemed relevant participants since they may have experienced challenges upon the transition and assumption of the new role as the carried-out review has suggested. The selected DHs were from various departments (STEM subjects, (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), Social Sciences, Languages, African Languages, and commercial subjects. This variety brought different perspectives on how the DHs navigate the challenges associated managing multiple subjects and the strategies they employ to cope with this responsibility.

### ***3.3. Data collection and ethical concerns***

The in-depth interviews questions were prepared guided by the topic under study and the research purpose. This was done prior meetings with the participants. To satisfy that, an interview schedule was created and applied to complete the data collection procedure (Creswell,2014). Although we obtained the gatekeeper permission from the Gauteng provincial Department of Basic Education to access the selected schools, we opted to engage the nine participants in one-on-one interviews at various locations away from their schools. That gave them a sense of protection where they felt comfortable to share their insights on the support needs, without the dangers of being traced or monitored on what they said, (Hlatshwayo & Majozi, 2024). An informed consent form that details the purpose of the study and the rights of the participants was signed before the interviews assume. The participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using the abbreviated name of the 'departmental head' followed by the number, (i.e., DH1 or DH2). With the participants permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers. This type of interviews were considered relevant bearing in mind that in-depth interviews are performed with distinctive individuals or a small number of persons (Creswell, 2014). The interviews were conducted in August and September of 2023, this is after the selected DHs received their official appointment letters. The interviews lasted for about 45-60 minutes given the shortcomings of a specific DH. The researchers used member checking to ascertain and confirm some of the participants' intended meanings after data analysis. Hence the participants

were given the opportunity to check, review, and respond to the written product to validate that the findings “were faithful” (Pyrzczak, 2013), and to highlight any mistakes made by the researchers. The participants corrected and approved the transcribed interviews.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

Wellington’s seven-stage thematic analysis data model was used to analyse data. Wellington (2015) proposed seven stages of thematic and analysis for qualitative data. We adopted the following stages: (1) immersion in the data; we familiarised ourselves with data, so that we formed a general impression of themes or ideas suggested by data, (2) reflecting; we identified the major themes that emanated from data, with the support of simple qualitative analysis software called Quirkos (3) analysing; through member checking we ensured that the identified themes and created categories resonate well with the data, (4) synthesising; generated data cannot make meaning if they stand alone, (Dube, Thulebona & Shawe, 2023), hence, themes were linked to quotations and notes, (5) locating the data; the themes were linked to various scholarly views guided by the model steering the current study, (6) reflecting; we developed a clear argument pertaining to the specific forms of support identified as essential for departmental heads to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes, and lastly, (7) presenting; we disseminated the findings aligned with the research questions and objectives of the study. Throughout, the analysis was guided by Schlossberg’s (1995) 4S model to assess transitions of DHs into new roles. Particularly emphasising the 4 major sets of factors identified by Schlossberg, situation, self, support, and strategies.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

This study explored the support needs of newly appointed DHs, by posing three research questions. Based on the one-on-one in-depth interviews with nine newly appointed departmental heads, three themes emerged from the verbatim replies of the participants. The themes are (1) *the lack of holistic and adequate training for newly appointed departmental heads*, (2) *identified forms of support for newly appointed departmental heads*, and (3) *departmental heads’ lack of strategies in managing multiple subjects*. The findings are presented and discussed based on the emergent themes and the categories that are aligned to the research questions.

#### ***4.1. The lack of holistic and adequate training for newly appointed departmental heads***

The theme entails one question from the interview schedule. The study used the first question to ascertain the nature and extent of the training received by departmental heads before assuming their roles. A largely qualitative collected data revealed that greatest number of the participants did not receive any training prior assuming their new roles. They were thrown into the deep end, starting new and demanding roles without being fully prepared and ready. In line with the framework underpinning the study, most DHs lacked the strategy to take control and cope with a transition of being new leaders. The following statements from the participants confirmed the lack of holistic and adequate training.

*“I did not receive any training, I just learnt through observation and helping the departmental head before me.” (DH6)*

*“I never received any training.” (DH2)*

*“I learnt on the job since I received no training, it was a trial and error. All this consequently makes being a DH an almost impossible job especially if you had no training because you tend not to even know how to react to resistance from your team members.” (DH3)*

*“I only got the training when I was already in the position, before training I was thrown into the deep the end, and I swam on my own. I would find myself seeking guidance from other experienced DHs.” (DH1)*

*“No training in whatever form, remember we were in a new school with no support and expected to excel. We were immediately forced to be leaders, my acting experience from the previous school helped me a lot. Such a situation made me learn about the leadership traits early.” (DH8).*

*“I have been in the position of DH for a few months now, and I have realised that when it comes to training the newly appointed DH, support from the DBE is quite minimal. I agree that developmental workshops for newly appointed DH is another form of support from DBE, however I believe it shouldn't end there.” (DH9).*

The findings are not surprising since appraised literature has revealed that the training needs of the newly appointed DHs had been ignored, with senior leadership prioritised. There are many studies reinforcing this finding, for example Shun-wing and Tsan-ming (2014) and

Ng and Chan (2014) observed that there were insufficient training opportunities for middle leaders. Contrary to the experiences of most participants, two participants appreciated the support from the principal and the district subject advisors and the nature of the training they received. They stated the following when probed about training:

*“The principal did the orientation and made sure I attended new DH trainings. I am also part of the DH support group around the district where we assist one another with challenges and share good practices.” (DH4)*

*“We had workshops offered by the district subject advisors, and they were very informative and helpful, we were trained about our roles and responsibilities”.*  
*(DH7)*

The nature of the training received by the few participants cannot be conclusively defined since it is not well-coordinated to cater for all the DHs, this is despite all the participants falling under one provincial district. This lack of uniformity is consistent with the findings from a South African study by Ogina (2017) that the lack of standardised management training in South Africa has led DHs to use different leadership strategies. Therefore, the extent of the training received by various DHs remains inadequate to non-existent.

#### ***4.2. Identified forms of support for newly appointed departmental heads***

Most participants hinted that they were unable to manage the teaching staff and educational processes effectively and need suitable support in a form of induction that incorporates orientation and mentoring to perform their role. Some of the interviewed DHs highlighted the inability to deal with disobliging team members, who unable them to effectively lead educational processes, a finding that is aligned with Kavanagh et al. (2021) on the identified managing conflict as the area where newly appointed DHs needed the greatest support. The theme generated from the findings is discussed along the categories that emerged.

***Induction, mentoring and orientation as forms of support for newly appointed departmental heads.*** The statements from the participants are aligned to Estrick’s (2018) definition of induction as ‘a formalised programme that often involves mentorship (but is not narrowed to mentoring) and includes a variety of activities for DHs such as orientation sessions, mentorship, collaborative and developmental workshops, and programmes designed

to support and help DHs transition into the leadership setting'. Participants echoed the following statements regarding the forms of support:

*"A school should have a suitable orientation model for newly appointed DHs."*  
(DH2)

*"A day or two long orientations, and maybe workshops on teachers' discipline may help."* (DH3)

*"Induction process or a detailed training for newly appointed DHs. Train the new DH on all aspects of their job, such as running departmental meetings and conducting pre and post moderation."* (DH5)

*"I think support should also come in a form of mentoring this newly appointed DH because that form of support will make it easier to adapt to the new position. Support should come to schools, where subject advisors from the district come to schools and mentor these newly appointed DHs on how to conduct or to perform duties in their position. Because in most cases you will find a newly appointed DH who doesn't even understand the tools that have been provided by DBE to use in monitoring their teachers."* (DH9)

The findings signify a need for a holistic approach in supporting the newly appointed DHs, where all the aspects that may bring efficiency in middle leadership are tackled. They believe a thorough induction that takes place before assuming their role and deals with all expectations of their position will enable them to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes. An outcry by the newly appointed DHs for a suitable induction is in line with the support-factor of Schlossberg model, since there was no formalised assistance available in aiding majority of the DHs to cope with transitions and ease successful adaptation to new situations. Furthermore, a need for induction for newly appointed DHs is consistent with vast literature assessed (Madonsela & Proches, 2022; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Murphy, 2019; Adey & Jones, 1998) where authors contend that DHs should ideally attend an induction course to be familiarised with the position they are in, as they may encounter challenges during the transition. Induction has a potential of preparing the newly appointed DHs for the expectations and challenges that lies ahead.

***In-school support for departmental heads to effectively lead and manage teaching staff.*** In South Africa, the school management teams are responsible for the provision of leadership development and management in schools. Most participants revealed the

significance of in-school support for them to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes. However, one participant complained about the lack of in-school support from the school management team. This is despite regarding them as an immediate structure to enhance their growth and development.

*“I need support from the principal and the deputy, its essential for my growth and development. United SMT will ensure that I will be able to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes.” (DH4)*

*“Deputy principals should offer support to HODs.” (DH7)*

*“The SMT should skill us on how to be professional and deal with teachers, but they are not doing that. They must afford us the due authority to lead so that we feel empowered and confident in doing our work.” (DH1)*

*“I need to be supported on how to manage people and the rules around here.” (DH6)*

In the view of the majority participants, and in line with the support-factor of Schlossberg’s model, in-school support precisely from the principal, deputy and experienced DHs is essential and may play a profound role in developing and capacitating newly appointed DHs. They view these senior leaders as a beacon of hope when it comes to the fulfilment of their support needs. The expression of the lone participant regarding the lack of in-school support resonates with Gurr’s (2019) investigation that found too often DHs did not receive sufficient support from senior leaders, and worked in school structures that hindered their work. In line with the self-factor, the institutions under scrutiny are compelled to assist the newly appointed DHs with the resources they could access to cope with transition. Support management team and supportive school culture are essential in the development of competences of newly appointed DHs. The lack of adequate in-school support does not only affect DHs growth and development, but also contribute negatively to learners’ academic achievement. This may further lead to DHs lack of confidence in executing their responsibilities.

***Support from the district and the subject advisors.*** The participants see the support from the district and subject advisors as essential, however, expressed different views on how the support is cascaded to respective schools. The participants divulged the following statements:



*“The district’s strategy of monitoring schools must be changed, they only focus on the curriculum, nothing about the well-being of the DHs. Holistic support is needed.” (DH8)*

*“The support from the district is far and between. Its erratic. They always make last minute demands of details and information. They force us to implement baseline tests, whose time is not allocated on the Annual Teaching Plan.” (DH2)*

*“Content related support yes, but leadership and administration no. I was expected to submit things I have never done in my whole life. It was challenging.” (DH3)*

*“I argue that the support the district is providing should be scrutinised because it is very minimal and sometimes not enough to support the newly appointed DHs.” (DH9).*

In contrast, **DH4** and **DH5** presented different views in relation to the provision of support by the district.

*“The support from the district subject advisors is adequate as they always monitor and give support where necessary.” (DH4)*

*“My subjects advisors are very helpful and approachable for assistance.” (DH5)*

The provision of support from the district is viewed as multi-pronged, since varying units within the district offer different services to schools, that include among others, units responsible for the development of the teaching staff and the curriculum and assessment respectively. The participants expressed different views in terms of the support provided by the district. Most participants highlighted the support as being inadequate particularly in supporting them on how to improve in leading their teams and executing some administrative functions. DHs need to be provided with support on how to lead and manage teaching staff so that they acquaint themselves with strategies for working together with colleagues. This is the essence of Schlossberg's Transition model through the strategy-factor that seeks to assist newly appointed DHs to expand their management skills when they assume their supervisory roles. In addition, several participants acknowledged the enormous support provided by the subject advisors in relation to curriculum development and how to manage assessment. This is contrary to what literature has revealed, where Malinga (2016) established that DHs were under immense pressure because they received inadequate support from subject advisors. This study deduced that the type of support given to the DHs is not well-coordinated and focused more

on the curriculum instead of providing an all-inclusive approach based on the needs of the position and mainly the needs of an individual DH. Striking a balance and uniformity may assist all the newly appointed DHs in the district to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes.

#### ***4.3. Departmental heads lack firm strategies in managing multiple subjects***

The DHs did not present firm strategies on managing multiple subjects, instead, majority of them navigated the challenge by handing over responsibilities to other departmental members. Indicative of lack of knowledge on all the subject they are heading, one DH navigated the challenge by capacitating themselves by reading the subject related materials. Some further raised concerns about the number of teachers they are leading since it has brought an extra responsibility. Their concerns may be aligned with the situation-factor of the model steering the current study that confirmed the inability of the newly appointed DHs to adapt and lead successfully after the role change. The following statements confirm the assertion:

*“I’m unable to deal with multiple subjects under my belt. But I have learnt how to navigate the challenges by attending subject workshops and reading any materials that has to do with the subject, so that I cope with that responsibility”*  
**(DH5)**

*“Yes, I am largely managing although I cannot fully be an expert on both subjects. The challenge is the roles that one must fulfil as a DH such as class visits and monitoring of learners’ books.”* **(DH3)**

*“I am not coping with the responsibility because I was appointed to lead two subjects, but now I’m leading three with 9 teachers.”* **(DH4)**

*“I am coping with the subjects I’m managing. The problem is the number of teachers in my department. Hence, I suggest that upon getting a DH post, the school should be allowed to reallocate posts to suit the pool of subject specialisation among different DHs. One DH is managing one teacher in geography, and I am managing eight teachers in mathematics.”* **(DH2)**

*“I am managing life sciences, natural sciences, and technology; hence I have delegated two of the subjects to senior teachers within the department to be responsible for their overall management and they can rotate per term. After all life sciences is my only major subject.”* **(DH7)**

*“I survived by delegating the work to various teachers who may be able to render such services, particularly the curriculum section.” (DH9)*

*“I appointed someone from my department who was teaching grade 12 to become English subject head. I was overseeing him without the principal’s knowledge, and where he was unable to set test question papers, I came in to assist. I also encouraged him to attend subject meetings on my behalf so that he understands the subject management side, whilst my focus was on Life Orientation.” (DH8)*

The findings confirmed that most DHs do not have the knowledge of all the subjects they are heading, hence they are unable to cope with the responsibility. This finding is consistent with Jaca (2021) and Malinga (2016). Some also raised concerns about the number of teachers they are leading, contending extra responsibility in terms of personnel management compared to their counterparts. Thus, they are finding it difficult to adapt, effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes, making the transition more challenging. DHs need support in all the subjects they are heading, starting with the self-development, followed by in-school support and district support to navigate the challenges. The reason being, in South Africa, DH posts and all promotional posts are accorded to schools based on the Post Distribution Model sanctioned by the DBE (PAM, 2016). The model is based on the principle that available posts are distributed among schools, proportionally to the number of weighted learners (DBE, 2002). Therefore, this study maintains that DHs will forever face the challenge associated with managing multiple subjects given how teaching posts are being distributed, including the provision of new DHs posts.

## **5. Conclusion**

The significance of exploring the support needs of newly appointed departmental heads has been demonstrated throughout the current study. The nature of the training received by few participants cannot be conclusively defined since it was not well-coordinated to cater for all the DHs, and this is despite all the participants falling under one provincial district. Therefore, the extent of the training received by various DHs remains inadequate to non-existent. For this, the current study suggests that the ministry of basic education provides newly appointed DHs with an induction programme before assuming their role so they can deal with all expectations of their position to effectively lead and manage teaching staff and educational processes. The school support from the principal, deputy and experienced DHs remains essential and may play a profound role in developing and capacitating newly appointed DHs. The lack of adequate in-

school support does not only affect DHs growth and their development, but also contribute negatively to learners' academic achievement. Therefore, support from the district should be equally distributed because the same subject advisors are serving the schools under investigation. Furthermore, the forms of support identified by the study must be well-planned to provide an all-inclusive approach based on the needs of the position and mainly the needs of an individual DH. The DHs did not present firm strategies on managing multiple subjects, instead, majority of them navigated the challenge by handing over responsibilities to other departmental members. Indicative of the lack of knowledge of all the subjects they are heading, DHs need support in all the subjects they are heading, starting with the self-development, followed by in school and district support to navigate the challenges. If not, the quality of education discharged by some secondary schools will remain compromised.

This study hopes that the findings will reshape how the DBE view the professional development of DHs. Moreover, they may inform the development of a suitable induction programme for DHs. Bearing in mind the conclusions illuminated, the current study concedes certain limitations. A limited sample size of nine participants, from three case secondary schools was utilised, and although the findings can be transferred to other districts within the Gauteng province, they cannot present the entire impression of the situation countrywide. Therefore, further research may include primary and special needs schools with a larger sample size to achieve a more precise depiction of the target population and enhance understanding across school locales. Furthermore, a mixed method study is suggested, to gather both in-depth and statistical representations of departmental heads support needs.

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