

Pedagogical challenges and strategies employed by Grade 4 teachers for learners' transition from Grade 3

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Abstract

The transition from the Foundation Phase (FP) to the Intermediate Phase (IP) is a major educational change for learners. This involves language, pedagogy, curriculum demands, classroom organisation, relationships and expectations of learner independence. Teachers are key to guiding this transition, but learners' experiences are also shaped by the broader ecological contexts in which teaching and learning take place. In this qualitative study, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, we explored teachers' perceptions and experiences of learners transitioning from the FP to the IP in South African public primary schools. Twenty-four Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers were selected purposively. The schools were 3 quintile four public primary schools located in a township in the Tshwane district. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, field notes, and document analysis. These were analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding, systematic analysis of data from each school and across the 3 schools, following Creswell's (2009) qualitative data-analysis procedures. The results indicate that the transition from Grade 3 to 4 is threefold: an ecological transition from the FP to the IP, increased academic and pedagogical demands, and the transition from Sepedi to English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). These changes were compounded by learners' weak foundational literacy and numeracy skills, increased workload, language diversity, emotional and behavioural adjustment, overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms and teachers' administrative and instructional workload. Teachers used adaptive strategies to manage the transition in the Grade 4 classes. These included code-switching, simplified texts, cooperative learning, differentiated teaching approaches and improvisation of teaching and learning resources. Data analysed from the 3 schools suggested that transition problems were not confined to learners but arose from the interplay of classroom, family, school, curriculum and wider educational contexts. We conclude that the transition from Grade 3 to 4 should be understood as an ecological, relational and context-dependent process that calls for coordinated support among teachers, families, schools and education systems rather than placing responsibility for successful transition primarily on learners or individual teachers.

Keywords: ecological systems theory; Foundation Phase; Grade 4 transition; Intermediate Phase; teacher perspectives

Introduction

Transitions are an integral part of the educational process. Transitions are pivotal milestones as learners progress from one Phase of education to the next (Katz & Chard, 2020). Primary school learners aged between 6 and 12 years' experience many transitions that impact their personal development and educational experiences. These transitions may involve changes in grade level, learning environments, teaching methods, relationships, curriculum expectations, and social dynamics. Transitions are a natural and necessary part of educational development and can present significant academic, social, emotional, and pedagogical challenges for learners, and consequently for teachers who are charged with supporting learners through these periods of change (Miller, 2021). Therefore, transition should not be viewed as the physical movement from one grade to another but as a multidimensional process involving changes in relationships, expectations, pedagogical practices, language, learning environments and learner responsibilities.

One important aspect in the South African schooling context is the transition from Grade 3 (FP) to Grade 4 (IP). This transition involves changes in learners' educational experiences. These include increased curriculum demands, a greater number of subjects, changes in teaching practices, and, in many contexts, a change in the language of learning and teaching. These changes occur at a stage of development when learners are expected to become more autonomous and use basic literacy and numeracy skills to interact with more challenging academic material. Therefore, challenges in negotiating the transition from Grade 3 to 4 may have implications for learners' subsequent academic trajectories.

This change is reflected in the continued under-performance of South Africa in international assessments of reading literacy. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) has consistently demonstrated significant challenges in South African learners' reading achievement. In PIRLS 2021, South Africa recorded an average reading score of 288, considerably below the international centre point of 500. Only 19% of South African Grade 4 learners reached the minimum low international benchmark, indicating that the majority were unable to demonstrate basic reading comprehension at the expected level. These results highlight the significance of the learning difficulties experienced around the Grade 4 stage and the need to strengthen the understanding of the educational processes and conditions that shape learners' experiences during this transition.

Research continues to highlight language proficiency, reading comprehension, learner readiness and the quality of teaching as important factors influencing learners' adjustment to Grade 4 (Pretorius, 2014; Taylor, Van der Berg & Mabogoane, 2013). Teachers constitute a critical component of the educational ecology within

which transition occurs. Their pedagogical knowledge, expectations, attitudes, beliefs and relationships with learners influence the classroom environment and can either facilitate or constrain learners' adjustment to changing educational expectations (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2009; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015). Teachers' influence extends beyond the transmission of curriculum content to include the development of learners' attitudes, confidence, motivation and engagement with learning (Zou, Yao, Zhang & Huang, 2024). This role becomes particularly important during periods of educational transition, when learners are exposed to unfamiliar routines, relationships, expectations and learning demands (Martin, Collie, Stephan, Flesken, Halcrow & McCourt, 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on Grade 4 achievement, literacy development, and language transition in South Africa, important gaps remain in the scholarship on the transition from the FP to the IP. Existing research examine specific dimensions of transition – such as reading performance, language proficiency, learner readiness or academic achievement – in relative isolation. Therefore, less is known about how these dimensions interact with pedagogical, relational, emotional, organisational and structural factors to shape the transition experience. Limited research exists that brings teachers' perspectives to the centre of analysis and examines how teachers experience, interpret and mediate the transition within the everyday realities of township public schools.

Furthermore, existing literature has not sufficiently conceptualised the transition from Grade 3 to 4 as an ecological and relational process. Much of the scholarship implicitly locates transition difficulties within learners, particularly through notions of readiness, literacy deficits or inadequate adjustment. Such an approach risks overlooking the extent to which transition is also shaped by classroom conditions, teacher-learner relationships, parental involvement, school-level support, curriculum requirements, language policies, resource constraints and broader socio-economic conditions. An ecological perspective is, therefore, necessary to examine how these interconnected contexts influence teachers' experiences and pedagogical responses during the transition.

In this study we addressed this gap by examining teachers' perceptions and experiences of learners' transitioning from the FP to the IP in three public primary township schools in the Tshwane district. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, we conceptualised transition not merely as a change in grade or learner

achievement, but as a multidimensional process shaped by interaction among learners, teachers, families, classrooms, schools, educational policies and wider social contexts. By exploring teachers' perspectives and examining similarities and differences in the three school contexts, we aimed to contribute a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of how the transition from Grade 3 to 4 is experienced, negotiated and supported in South African public primary schools.

Literature Review

Perry and Allard (2003) describe transition as the mind's internal process through which learners adjust from what they know to the unknown and respond to cultural, social and cognitive challenges. Although this perspective usefully focusses the learner's psychological process of adjustment, research indicates that educational transition cannot be adequately understood as an individual process of adaptation. Instead, scholars conceptualise transition as a multidimensional and relational process in which learners' experiences are shaped through their interaction with changing educational, social and pedagogical environments. Beatson, Quach, Canterford, Farrow, Bagnall, Hockey, Phillips, Patton, Olsson, Ride, McKay Brown, Roy and Mundy (2023), in a systematic review of school-based transition interventions, found that primary-secondary transitions involved simultaneous changes in learners' physical, organisational, social and pedagogical environments, with successful adjustment influenced by the support and relationships available within these environments. Rose, Kurz, Bruns and Wolgast (2026), in recent systematic review synthesising research published between 2020 and 2024, found that learners' transition is associated with changes in peer dynamics, teacher-learner relationships, identity formation, motivation and psychological needs. Their findings reinforce the argument that transition is not simply an internal adjustment undertaken by the learner but is shaped by changes in the learner's social and educational environment.

This relational perspective is further supported by Lorijn, Zwier, Laninga-Wijnen, Huisman and Veenstra (2024), who followed 649 learners in the transition from primary to secondary school and found that changes in peer relationships and learners' experiences of loneliness were closely connected to the transition experience. Learners who transitioned alongside more of their existing peers experienced greater reduction in loneliness. This finding demonstrates that learners' adjustment is partly dependent on the continuity and quality of their social relationships, rather than solely on their individual capacity to cope with change. Likewise, Roca, Fernández, Troya and Flecha (2024) found that educational actions designed to strengthen

relationships across the educational community, school connectedness and academic support networks contributed to more positive transition experiences. Their findings provide further evidence that the educational environment can actively shape how learners experience and negotiate transition.

Recent literature represents an important conceptual development beyond the earlier psychological interpretation of transition. Rather than positioning the learner as solely responsible for adapting to a new educational context, transition can be understood as a relational process produced through the interaction between learners and the environments in which they learn. Donaldson, Moore and Hawkins (2023), for example, demonstrate through a systematic review that school transition interventions may influence children's mental health and well-being outcomes, further indicating that schools and educational contexts are not merely settings in which transition occurs but are potentially active contributors to transition outcomes. Accordingly, learners do not simply adapt to transition; their experiences are mediated by teacher-learner relationships, peer networks, pedagogical practices, school structures, expectations and opportunities for belonging. This perspective shifts the analytical focus away from interpreting unsuccessful transition as a deficit within the learner and towards examining the interaction between learner characteristics and the social, pedagogical and institutional conditions within which transition takes place.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. The ecological perspective assumes that different contexts in a person's surroundings overlap and directly influence their life experiences and perceptions. According to the model, development is a function of several forces (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Their interrelationships within multiple settings and relationships create the teachers' environment and establish structures for developing their perceptions of transition within the context of these systems. The environment consists of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The central principle of the ecological systems approach is the ecological transition, which "occurs whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as a result of a change in role, setting, or both" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:26). This transition is significant for children as it can alter their microsystems and affect their behaviour, actions, accomplishments and thoughts. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do teachers perceive the grade transition from Foundation Phase to the Intermediate Phase in public schools?

- 2) What pedagogical challenges do teachers experience with the transition of learners from the Foundation Phase to the Intermediate Phase?
- 3) What strategies do teachers apply to facilitate the transition of learners from the Foundation Phase to the Intermediate Phase?

Methodology

This study was situated within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which assumes that educational realities are socially constructed, contextually situated and shaped through individuals' experiences, interaction and interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Rather than assuming a single, objective reality of the transition from Grade 3 to 4, we recognise that teachers may construct and interpret transition differently according to their professional experiences, beliefs, relationships, institutional contexts and broader social circumstances. Transition is, therefore, understood not simply as an observable movement between grades but as a phenomenon whose meaning is constructed through participants' experiences of changing relationships, pedagogical expectations, language practices, curriculum demands and institutional conditions.

The constructivist position informed our understanding of reality and knowledge, recognising that participants' accounts represent situated constructions of their experiences. The interpretivist position, in turn, provides the basis for understanding and interpreting the meanings that participants attach to those experiences. Knowledge is, therefore, not treated as something objectively discovered by a detached researcher; rather, it is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants and subsequently interpreted within the social and educational contexts in which participants are situated (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This philosophical position was appropriate for the study as we aimed to understand teachers' perceptions and experiences of learner transition rather than to measure transition as an objectively quantifiable phenomenon. Teachers are not external observers of transition; they are active participants within the ecological environments in which learners experience change. Their perceptions are shaped by their interaction with learners, colleagues, parents, school management and education authorities, as well as by language, curriculum, resources and socio-economic conditions.

The interpretivist-constructivist paradigm is closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner's theory provides the theoretical lens for understanding the interconnected systems within which transition occurs, while the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm provides the philosophical basis for

understanding how participants construct and interpret their experiences within those systems. The ecological framework addresses the contexts and relationships that shape transition, while the paradigm addresses how knowledge about those experiences is understood and constructed.

We do not claim to have produced a single, general explanation of the transition from Grade 3 to 4. Our study contributes an interpretation of how teachers understand and experience transition within township public schools. This philosophical position supports the broader argument that transition is an ecological, relational and context-dependent process, shaped through the interaction of learners, teachers, families, schools and wider educational structures.

Ontologically, we assumed that multiple, contextually situated realities of transition are socially constructed; epistemologically, it adopted an interpretivist position in which knowledge was co-constructed through researcher-participant interaction; and theoretically, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was used to interpret how these meanings were shaped through interconnected environmental systems.

Data Analysis

We followed a systematic qualitative data-analysis process informed by Creswell (2009). This involved data preparation, coding, categorisation, theme development, interpretation and presentation. Data were generated primarily through semi-structured interviews with 24 Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers in three purposively selected quintile-four public primary schools in a township in the Tshwane district. The interviews were audio-recorded and we transcribed the responses verbatim to preserve participants' accounts and facilitate repeated engagement with the data. Field notes and relevant school documents, including annual teaching plans, the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) year planner, staff minutes and timetables were used to contextualise and triangulate the interview data.

The first stage involved analysing data from each school independently. The interview transcripts, field notes and relevant documents for School A, School B and School C were initially kept separate to preserve the contextual integrity of each case. We read each transcript repeatedly to develop familiarity with participants' accounts and recorded initial observations and field notes. Meaningful segments of data were identified and assigned descriptive codes which reflected participants' perceptions, experiences and practices.

Both deductive and inductive coding were employed. Deductive codes were informed by the research questions and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. These included, for

example, micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystem. Theoretically informed codes related to language transition, learner readiness, pedagogy, teacher support, parental involvement and curriculum demands were also identified. Inductive or emergent codes were developed directly from participants' accounts in instances where issues arose that were not adequately captured by the predetermined categories. These included overcrowded classrooms, learners' emotional dependence, teacher workload, multiple exercise books, progressed learners and teachers' improvisation of teaching resources.

The ecological framework provided an organising lens, while inductive coding allowed meanings and patterns to emerge from the participants' accounts. Where a segment of data appeared relevant to more than one ecological system, it was considered in relation to the interaction between those.

Following initial coding, related codes were grouped into broader categories. These included codes related to language proficiency, comprehension difficulties, code-switching, and simplified texts, which were clustered around the broader category of language and learning. Codes relating to class size, inadequate resources, classroom management and limited individual attention were grouped under classroom conditions and pedagogical challenges. These categories were then examined for recurring patterns, similarities, differences and relationships within each school.

We developed themes that represented the individual meanings that emerged from each school. The themes were repeatedly compared with the original transcripts to ensure that they remained grounded in participants' accounts. Inconsistent views were retained since differences between participants were considered analytically noteworthy.

After data were analysed from each school, we then analysed across Schools A, B and C. The purpose of this stage was to determine which patterns were common across the three schools, which were context-specific, and where participants' experiences differed. This involved comparing the codes and categories generated within each school using themes that were identified earlier. This enabled us to place the major themes identified in each school alongside one another and examine their recurrence, variation and contextual significance. We compared how teachers at each school described

- the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4;
- the change in language of learning and teaching;
- learner readiness and foundational literacy and numeracy;
- increased workload and number of subjects;
- learner behaviour and emotional adjustment;
- overcrowding and availability of resources;

- teacher workload and professional support;
- parental involvement;
- collaboration between Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers; and
- strategies used to facilitate transition.

We observed convergence, deviation and variation. Where similar experiences occurred across the three schools, these were treated as cross-case patterns.

This process resulted in three levels of interpretation: (1) individual participant accounts, (2) school-level case interpretations, and (3) cross-school themes. The final findings, therefore, represent both the uniqueness of each school and the broader patterns that emerged across the three cases.

The analysis of the data from the three schools was also informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. We examined how similar transition experiences were produced or intensified through different ecological levels. For example, difficulties with learner literacy and language were considered at the microsystem level, while teacher collaboration and parental involvement were examined at the mesosystem. Curriculum expectations and Annual teaching plans were interpreted at the exosystem level, broader educational policies and cultural expectations at the macrosystem level, and changes in educational policy and teachers' experiences over time at the chronosystem level. This enabled the analysis to move beyond simply identifying challenges and to examine how factors across ecological systems interacted to shape the transition experience.

Credibility, Dependability and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to enhance the credibility, dependability and trustworthiness of the study. Firstly, data were obtained from multiple participants across three schools. This allowed us to examine whether interpretations were supported in different school contexts. Secondly, triangulation was achieved through semi-structured interviews, field notes and document analysis. Although interviews constituted the primary source of data, field notes and documents provided contextual information against which participants' accounts could be considered.

Thirdly, the use of audio recordings and verbatim transcription provided an accurate record of participants' responses and enabled us to repeatedly return to the original data during coding and theme development. In the fourth instance, we maintained an audit trail of the analytical process, including transcripts, initial codes, category development, analytical notes, theme refinement and the relationship between raw data and final interpretations. This provided a transparent record of how interpretations were developed.

In the fifth place, we engaged in reflexivity throughout the analytical process, recognising that interpretation is influenced by our theoretical orientation, prior assumptions and interaction with participants. Reflexive notes were used to distinguish participants' accounts from our developing interpretations and to question assumptions that emerged during analysis.

Finally, credibility was strengthened by deliberately attending to negative cases, divergent views and contradictions within and across the three schools. Rather than only selecting data that confirmed the emerging interpretation, contrasting accounts were examined to determine whether they required modification or refinement of the themes. This was particularly important in the cross-case analysis because differences between schools provided insight into how contextual conditions shaped teachers' experiences of learner transition.

We established trustworthiness in the study through the convergence of multiple data sources, systematic analysis of data in each school and across the three schools, transparent documentation of analytical decisions, reflexive engagement, attention to divergent cases and thick contextual description. These procedures provided us with a credible and dependable basis to understand the teachers' experiences and perceptions of learners' transition from the FP to the IP.

Findings

The findings of this study establish that the transition from the FP to the IP is a multidimensional ecological process. This is shaped by the interaction of learner, pedagogical, relational, institutional and structural factors. Although teachers frequently described Grade 4 learners as "not ready" for the demands of the IP, closer analysis of the findings suggests that learner readiness cannot be understood as an individual characteristic alone. Rather, readiness is relational and context-dependent, emerging from the interaction between learners' existing competencies and the demands and support structures of the new educational environment.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding this phenomenon. The findings establish that no single factor adequately explains learners' transition experiences. Challenges located within the microsystem, such as language proficiency, learner behaviour, emotional adjustment, classroom overcrowding and inadequate resources, interacted with mesosystem factors such as teacher collaboration, parental involvement and professional support. These were further shaped by exosystem influences, including curriculum requirements and administrative expectations, and by broader macrosystem and chronosystem conditions associated with

educational policy, socio-economic inequality and historical changes in South African education. The transition to Grade 4 should, therefore, be understood as an interaction between multiple ecological systems rather than as a problem located within each learner.

Transition as a Discontinuity Between Educational Phases

One of the most significant findings is the pedagogical and organisational discontinuity between Grades 3 and 4. Teachers described Grade 4 as a substantial shift from the relatively supported and integrated learning environment of the FP towards an environment characterised by increased learner independence, more subjects, multiple teachers, greater academic workload and more complex organisational demands. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that educational transitions involve changes in relationships, pedagogical practices, learning environments and expectations rather than merely movement between grades (Fabian & Dunlop, 2020; Galton, Morrison & Pell, 2000; Jindal-Snape, Symonds, Hannah & Barlow, 2021).

The findings extend this literature by demonstrating that such discontinuity can occur within the primary school phase itself. International transition research focuses on the primary-to-secondary transition; our study demonstrates that the transition from Grade 3 to 4 can also show a significant ecological change. The transition from one teacher to multiple subject teachers, the increase in subjects and workload, and the expectation that learners become more independent represent significant changes in the organisation and culture of learning.

As a result, the transition from Grade 3 to 4 should not be regarded as a minor alteration. It represents a change in the learner's educational ecology. The learner enters a new microsystem with different relationships, routines, expectations and pedagogical practices. Where continuity between Grades 3 and 4 is limited, learners may experience the transition as a rupture rather than a progression.

Language as a Central Mechanism of Transition

The second major finding is the central role of language in mediating the transition. Participants consistently identified the shift from Sepedi to English as a significant barrier to successful adjustment. Although learners are introduced to English during the FP, teachers reported that many Grade 4 learners continued to experience difficulties with oral communication, reading and comprehension while proficiency in English was increasingly important for accessing the curriculum.

The finding of this study extends beyond language proficiency itself. Language operates as a mechanism through which learners gain access to teaching, assessment, classroom participation and the curriculum. Consequently, language discontinuity intersects with other transition demands. As learners encounter more subjects, increased content and greater expectations of independent reading, weaknesses in English proficiency become increasingly significant.

The findings, therefore, support the argument that the transition from Grade 3 to 4 involves not only a pedagogical transition but also a linguistic transition. This is particularly important in multilingual township contexts, where learners may speak different home languages and where the language used for teaching may differ from the language most familiar to the learners. Teachers' use of code-switching and simplified language illustrates their attempts to mediate this discontinuity.

The implication is that language support should not be treated as an additional intervention after transition difficulties emerge. It should be embedded within transition planning itself. Continuity in language practices between Grade 3 and Grade 4 may, therefore, be critical in reducing the cognitive and emotional demands placed on learners.

Reframing Learner Readiness

A third significant finding concerns the concept of learner readiness. Teachers frequently perceived Grade 4 learners as insufficiently prepared, particularly in relation to literacy, numeracy, independence, organisation, behaviour and emotional maturity. However, the ecological analysis suggests that these characteristics should not automatically be interpreted as learner deficiencies.

Readiness is produced through the relationship between the learner and the educational environment. A learner may be considered to be not ready when the expectations of the new educational context exceed the learner's current skills or when adequate support and continuity are absent. Conversely, the same learner may demonstrate competence when provided with appropriate scaffolding, language support, relational continuity and differentiated instruction.

This interpretation challenges deficit-oriented explanations of transition and is consistent with contemporary research that conceptualises educational transition as relational and contextual rather than solely individual. The findings, therefore, suggest a shift from asking whether learners are ready for Grade 4 to asking whether Grade 4 is sufficiently prepared to receive, support and respond to learners with diverse levels of readiness.

This represents an important conceptual contribution of our study. We relocate some responsibility for successful transition from the individual learner to the educational system and the relationships within.

Structural Conditions and the Unequal Experience of Transition

The fourth major finding is that structural conditions significantly mediate the transition experience. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching and learning resources, teacher workload, socio-economic disadvantage and limited parental involvement all constrained teachers' capacity to respond to learners' needs.

The significance of these findings is that transition difficulties cannot be separated from the broader inequalities within which schooling takes place. A learner entering Grade 4 in a well-resourced classroom with manageable class sizes, strong parental support and access to specialist assistance may experience transition very differently from a learner entering an overcrowded and under-resourced classroom.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework makes this relationship particularly visible. Conditions that appear external to the learner's immediate experience – such as curriculum policy, school resources, socio-economic circumstances and departmental support – ultimately enter the learner's microsystem through their effects on classroom practice.

The findings, therefore, demonstrate that the experience of transition is unequally distributed. Learners do not encounter the same Grade 4 transition, because the ecological resources available to support them differ substantially. This is particularly significant in township public schools where teachers are required to mediate transition within conditions characterised by large classes, linguistic diversity and limited resources.

Teachers as Mediators of Ecological Transition

The fifth major finding is the central role of teachers as mediators of transition. Teachers did not simply implement curriculum requirements; they continuously adapted their practices to respond to learners' needs. Their strategies included cooperative learning, simplified texts and language, code-switching, differentiated approaches, multiple teaching modalities and the improvisation of teaching resources.

These practices demonstrate considerable teacher agency. Teachers acted as a bridge between the FP and IP, attempting to create continuity where structural conditions and curriculum organisation produced discontinuity.

However, the findings also reveal a tension between teacher agency and structural constraint. Teachers may be willing and capable of adapting

their pedagogy, but large classes, inadequate resources, administrative workload and curriculum pacing limit the extent to which such adaptation can occur. Teacher agency should, therefore, not be romanticised as a substitute for systemic support. Teachers can mediate transition, but they cannot independently resolve structural conditions that contribute to transition difficulties.

This finding is particularly important for newly-qualified Grade 4 teachers. Their own transition – from university student to professional teacher – occurred simultaneously with their responsibility for facilitating learners' transition into Grade 4. We, therefore, reveal parallel ecological transitions: learners were adjusting to a new educational environment while some teachers were simultaneously adjusting to their new professional identities and responsibilities.

The Role of Relationships and Continuity

Across the ecological systems, one theme cuts across the findings: continuity of relationships is central to successful transition. Collaboration between Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers was identified as an important source of support, while limited parental involvement and insufficient professional mentorship created discontinuity.

The findings suggest that successful transition requires stronger connections across the learners' ecological environments. Grade 3 teachers possess knowledge of learners' prior competencies and needs; Grade 4 teachers require access to this knowledge; parents possess important information about learners' home circumstances; and school management structures can facilitate coordination between these groups.

Transition should, therefore, be conceptualised not only as a movement of learners between grades but also as a process of transferring knowledge, relationships, expectations and support between educational contexts. Where this relational continuity is weak, learners may be required to reconstruct their educational identities and support networks with limited assistance.

An Ecological Model of the Transition from Grade 3 to 4

The findings support an ecological model in which the transition from Grade 3 to 4 is produced through the interaction of five interconnected dimensions: learner readiness, pedagogical discontinuity, language transition, relational continuity and structural conditions.

The microsystem directly shapes learners' daily experiences through classroom relationships, pedagogy, language, behaviour and learning conditions. The mesosystem determines the extent to which these immediate environments are connected through teacher collaboration, parental involvement and professional support. The

exosystem influences transition through curriculum policies, administrative demands and departmental structures that indirectly shape classroom practice. The macrosystem reflects broader educational values, language practices, policies and socio-economic inequalities. Finally, the chronosystem demonstrates that transition occurs within a changing historical and policy environment.

The systems do not operate independently: they rather interact dynamically. For example, a learner's limited English proficiency at the microsystem level becomes more problematic when curriculum demands increase at the exosystem level, when there is limited parental support at the mesosystem level, and when broader multilingual inequalities characterise the macrosystem. Similarly, overcrowding may reduce a teacher's ability to provide language support, individual scaffolding and emotional assistance, thereby intensifying the learner's transition difficulties.

Contribution of the Study

The main contribution of this study is the reconceptualization of the transition from Grade 3 to 4 as an ecological and relational process rather than a problem of learner readiness. While previous research has identified academic, linguistic, behavioural and pedagogical challenges associated with transition, our study demonstrates how these challenges interact across ecological levels within township public schools.

The study makes three particularly significant contributions. Firstly, it extends transition research beyond the dominant focus on primary-to-secondary transition by demonstrating the significance of an intra-primary transition. Secondly, it challenges deficit-oriented understanding of learner readiness by showing that readiness is relational and dependent on the fit between learners and their educational environments. Thirdly, it highlights teachers as critical mediators of transition while demonstrating that teacher agency is constrained by structural and institutional conditions.

The findings suggest that improving the transition from Grade 3 to 4 requires more than preparing learners academically. It requires the creation of continuity across the educational ecology. This includes stronger collaboration between Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers, structured transition programmes, sustained language and literacy support, differentiated pedagogy, appropriate curriculum pacing, targeted mentorship for Grade 4 teachers, stronger school-family partnerships and improved access to teaching and learning resources.

The study demonstrates that successful transition is a shared ecological responsibility.

Learners should not be expected to simply adapt to the demands of Grade 4; teachers, schools, families, education departments and policymakers should rather play a role in creating conditions in which learners can successfully negotiate the transition. The transition from Grade 3 to 4 is, therefore, best understood as a relational process of continuity, adaptation and change occurring across interconnected educational systems.

Recommendations

The recommendations arising from this study are informed by the finding that the transition from the FP to the IP is an ecological and relational process rather than a challenge located solely within learners. Interventions should operate across the different ecological systems identified in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework. The recommendations are directed towards the Department of Basic Education (DBE), provincial and district education authorities, school management teams (SMTs), teachers and parents.

Develop a structured programme for the transition from Grade 3 to 4

Schools should develop a formal and structured programme for the transition from Grade 3 to 4 rather than treating promotion to Grade 4 as an administrative process. The programme should begin during Grade 3 and continue throughout the first term of Grade 4.

The programme should include orientation activities, opportunities for Grade 3 learners to visit Grade 4 classrooms, introduction to Grade 4 teachers and routines, familiarisation with the increased number of subjects and books, and activities designed to develop learner independence and organisational skills. Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers should jointly identify learners who may require additional academic, linguistic, emotional or social support.

The purpose should be to create continuity between the two phases and reduce the abruptness of the transition. This is particularly important because we found that learners experienced simultaneous changes in teachers, subjects, workload, language and classroom expectations.

Establish systematic collaboration between Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers

Schools should institutionalise collaboration among Grade 3 and 4 teachers through scheduled transition meetings before and during the transition period. Grade 3 teachers should provide Grade 4 teachers with information about learners' literacy and numeracy levels, language needs, learning strengths, barriers, behavioural patterns and support requirements.

This information should not be transferred merely through informal conversations. Schools should develop a structured transition profile that

provides Grade 4 teachers with relevant information about each learner.

Such collaboration would strengthen the mesosystem by creating continuity between the learners' Grade 3 and Grade 4 environments. It would also prevent Grade 4 teachers from having to rediscover learners' needs after the transition has already occurred.

Introduce a gradual and supported language transition

We identified the transition from Sepedi to English as the most significant barrier to successful transition from Grade 3 to 4. Schools should, therefore, implement a more gradual and supported approach to the transition in the LoLT.

Grade 4 teachers should receive training in multilingual pedagogies, translanguaging and strategic code-switching. Learners should be permitted to use their home language strategically to develop understanding before expressing knowledge in English. Key vocabulary should be explicitly introduced before new content is taught, and teachers should use visual resources, bilingual terminology, simplified texts and structured comprehension activities.

This recommendation is strongly supported by recent South African research identifying the abrupt transition to English as a major source of difficulty for Grade 4 learners and recommending structured dual-language scaffolding and targeted teacher development. Research on multilingual literacy similarly argues for recognising learners' home languages as resources for learning rather than treating them as barriers.

Language support should, therefore, be embedded across the curriculum rather than being confined to the language classroom.

Strengthen Grade 3 literacy and Grade 4 comprehension continuity

We found that many Grade 4 learners entered the IP without sufficiently developed literacy and numeracy skills. Schools should, therefore, establish a Grade 3 to 4 literacy bridging programme that explicitly connects foundational literacy instruction in Grade 3 with the comprehension demands of Grade 4.

Grade 3 teachers should focus on ensuring that learners acquire strong foundational reading, vocabulary and comprehension skills, while Grade 4 teachers should continue rather than assume these skills have already been mastered.

Diagnostic assessment at the beginning of Grade 4 should be used to identify specific gaps in reading fluency, comprehension, vocabulary and numeracy. Learners requiring additional support should receive targeted intervention during the first term.

This approach aligns with current DBE efforts to strengthen reading outcomes through reading

benchmarks, diagnostic assessment and programmes such as the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme.

Reconsider the concept "Grade 4 readiness"

The findings suggest that learner readiness should not be conceptualised exclusively as a set of characteristics that learners must possess before entering Grade 4. Readiness should be understood as a shared responsibility between learners and the educational environment.

Schools should, therefore, move from only asking whether learners are ready for Grade 4? to also asking whether the Grade 4 environment is ready to support learners with different levels of readiness.

This requires teachers to anticipate variation in literacy, numeracy, language proficiency, independence, emotional maturity and learning pace. Early diagnostic assessment should inform differentiated teaching rather than simply identify learners as deficient.

Provide targeted professional development for Grade 4 teachers

We found that many Grade 4 teachers, particularly newly qualified teachers, experience significant pedagogical challenges. Professional development should, therefore, focus specifically on the transition from Grade 3 to 4 rather than relying exclusively on generic teacher-development programmes.

Training should include:

- multilingual and language-responsive pedagogy;
- teaching reading comprehension across the curriculum;
- differentiated instruction;
- classroom management in large classes;
- cooperative learning;
- supporting learner independence;
- social-emotional support;
- transition pedagogy;
- formative assessment and diagnostic assessment; and
- strategies for supporting learners with foundational literacy and numeracy gaps.

Recent research on comprehension in Grade 3 and 4 similarly identifies insufficient targeted teacher development and institutional support as significant weaknesses.

Establish mentorship for newly qualified Grade 4 teachers

We found that younger and less experienced Grade 4 teachers experienced specific challenges. Schools should, therefore, establish a formal mentorship system in which experienced teachers support newly-qualified Grade 4 teachers.

Mentorship should extend beyond classroom discipline. It should include lesson planning, curriculum pacing, assessment, differentiation,

language support, classroom organisation and strategies for supporting learners during the transition.

Where possible, experienced Grade 3 teachers should also participate in this mentoring process because they possess valuable knowledge about the learners' prior learning experiences and developmental needs.

Review curriculum pacing and workload during the first term

The findings indicate a tension between the prescribed curriculum pace and learners' actual readiness. Teachers reported having to choose between progressing through the annual teaching plan and revisiting Grade 3 content to address foundational gaps.

The first term of Grade 4 should, therefore, include protected time for transition, diagnostic assessment and consolidation of foundational knowledge. Curriculum planning should allow teachers sufficient flexibility to address identified learning gaps without feeling that they are failing to meet curriculum coverage requirements.

This recommendation is particularly important because the transition already involves an increase in subjects and learning demands. South African policy documentation has previously recognised the transition from Grade 3 to 4 and IP overload as linked concerns.

Strengthen classroom-based support for large and diverse classes

Given that participants reported classes of approximately 40 to 60 learners, schools should strengthen classroom-based support wherever possible. Education assistants, teaching assistants and other support personnel could be prioritised for Grade 4 classes during the first term, particularly in schools with high learner-teacher ratios.

Their role should include supporting reading groups, assisting learners who require additional explanation, helping with classroom organisation and providing individual support under the direction of the teacher.

The aim should not be to replace the teacher but to increase the teacher's capacity to differentiate instruction and identify learners requiring additional support.

Strengthen school-family partnerships

The findings indicate that parental involvement is affected by socio-economic circumstances, parents' working conditions, educational backgrounds and communication barriers. Schools should, therefore, avoid interpreting limited parental involvement simply as parental disinterest.

Schools should develop accessible and context-sensitive forms of parent engagement, including short workshops on how parents can support reading, homework and language

development without requiring advanced educational knowledge.

Reduce unnecessary administrative demands on teachers

We found that teacher workload extends beyond teaching to extensive administrative responsibilities and extracurricular activities. These demands reduce the time available for lesson preparation, learner support and transition planning.

SMTs and district officials should, therefore, review teachers' administrative responsibilities and eliminate or consolidate unnecessary paperwork, particularly during the critical first term of Grade 4. This would enable teachers to devote greater attention to teaching, assessment, learner support and collaboration with Grade 3 teachers.

Improve access to teaching and learning resources

We found that teachers frequently improvised because of inadequate resources. Although teacher creativity is valuable, improvisation should not become a substitute for adequate systemic provision.

Schools and education departments should prioritise Grade 4 classrooms for appropriate literacy materials, multilingual resources, reading books, visual materials, manipulatives and digital resources where infrastructure permits.

The resources should be aligned with the specific demands of the transition from Grade 3 to 4 and should support multilingual teaching, comprehension and differentiated instruction.

Strengthen district-level support

The findings indicate that teachers did not always experience district-level support as responsive to their specific classroom needs. District officials and subject advisors should, therefore, provide context-specific rather than generic support.

District transition support could include:

- guidelines for the transition from Grade 3 to 4;
- teacher-development workshops;
- classroom demonstrations;
- language and literacy support;
- mentoring programmes;
- diagnostic assessment guidance; and
- monitoring of transition outcomes during the first term.

Develop a school-based policy or guideline on the transition from Grade 3 to 4

Each school should develop a guideline on the transition from Grade 3 to 4 outlining the roles and responsibilities for Grade 3 teachers, Grade 4 teachers, SMT members, parents and learners.

The guideline should specify

- 1) what information should be transferred between teachers;
- 2) when transition meetings should occur;
- 3) how learner readiness should be assessed;

- 4) how language needs should be identified;
- 5) how learners requiring additional support should be referred;
- 6) how parents should be involved; and
- 7) how transition progress should be monitored during the first term.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

At the policy level, we recommend that the DBE and provincial education departments recognise the transition for Grade 3 to 4 transition as a distinct educational transition requiring targeted support. Current DBE initiatives already recognise Grades 3 and 4 as important transition points, including interventions addressing literacy and language. The findings of this study suggest that such initiatives should be extended to include the broader ecological dimensions of transition, including pedagogy, teacher collaboration, learner well-being, parental engagement and curriculum continuity.

Attention should be given to language. Recent DBE policy developments have begun strengthening mother-tongue-based bilingual education in Grade 4, recognising the difficulties associated with the traditional language transition. The findings of this study support such efforts but suggest that language reform should be accompanied by teacher development, appropriate resources and classroom-level implementation support.

Conclusion

The main recommendation emerging from this study is that the transition from Grade 3 to 4 should be a planned, collaborative and adequately resourced process rather than an assumed consequence of learner promotion. The responsibility for successful transition should be distributed across learners, teachers, families, schools, districts and policymakers.

We, therefore, recommend an ecological transition model based on five interconnected priorities:

- 1) continuity – strengthen links between Grade 3 and Grade 4;
- 2) language – provide sustained multilingual and English literacy support;
- 3) pedagogy – prepare teachers and learners for changing teaching and learning expectations;
- 4) relationships – strengthen teacher collaboration, mentorship and family engagement; and
- 5) systemic support – address curriculum, resource, workload and structural constraints.

Such an approach recognises that learners cannot be expected to bridge the gap alone. The educational system must also build the bridge between the Foundation and Intermediate Phases.

Authors' Contributions

EM conducted the research, collected the data, analysed the data, compiled the findings and wrote the manuscript. NS supervised the research.

Notes

- i. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- ii. DATES: Received: 13 May 2024; Revised: 4 March 2026; Accepted: 25 August 2026; Published: 31 August 2026.

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