EMPOWERING PRINCIPALS TO LEAD AND MANAGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS EFFECTIVELY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Raj Mestry, & Pierre du Plessis
Department of Education Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg (South Africa)

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"
(Nelson Mandela, 1994)

Abstract

Globally, education systems have been affected by radical social, political and economic changes. Although school principals play a pivotal role in improving student learning and attaining educational outcomes, they work under strenuous conditions to deal with multifaceted transformational issues. Principals experience great difficulty in coping with numerous changes, partly because they are inadequately prepared for their leadership position, or simply lack the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes to lead and manage schools effectively and efficiently. Fundamentally, principals should be empowered to effectively deal with challenges facing them in the 21st century. Using qualitative research, this study explored the importance of promoting a culture of professional development that will prepare principals to confront education challenges and obstacles facing them. Fifteen principals were selected to determine their perceptions and experiences of how they were prepared and professionally developed to lead and manage schools. Findings revealed that in South Africa, there is no formal preparation for aspiring or practicing principals taking on leadership and management positions, and very few in-service professional development programmes are available. There is a dire need for education authorities to introduce compulsory training and development programmes for aspiring and practicing school leaders to lead and manage their schools successfully.

Keywords: *Change management, continuing professional development, curriculum leadership, instruction, principalship, professionalization, qualifications, training.*

1. Introduction

In many emerging economies in developing countries, substantial investments have been made in education, with the hope of generating a highly skilled labour force and high proportion of employment. Despite these investments, there is growing concern globally that many public schools are not functioning at their optimum, and that learner performance is generally of a low standard. However, many nations around the world have undertaken wide-ranging reforms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, with the intention of better preparing principals for the educational demands of life and work in the 21st century (Bush, 2005; Russell & Cranston, 2012). The rapid rate at which changes have taken place, and are still taking place, together with the increased volume of administrative work, has placed principals under enormous pressure (Kinney, 2009). Managing change is complex, and usually an elusive process. Perhaps one of the major changes in the principalship has been the range of expectations placed on them and these expectations have been moved from the demands for management and control to the demand for an educational leader who can foster professional development among staff (Mestry & Grobler, 2004; Steyn, 2002). Bottery (2016:98) argues that principals find themselves working extra hours, "not just on weekday evenings but also at weekends and during school holidays, […] where the job becomes unsustainable if they do not".

Many practicing principals lack basic leadership and management training prior to and after their entry into principalship (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Heystek, 2016). Tsukudu and Taylor, (1995, cited in Bush & Oduro, 2006:362) assert that "head teachers come to headship without having been prepared for their new role. As a result, they often have to rely on experience and common sense". However, such are the demands being made upon leaders and managers now, including head teachers, that acquiring expertise

can no longer be left to common sense and character alone; leadership and management development support is needed (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Mestry & Singh, 2007).

Principals, head teachers and deputy principals are normally held accountable for students' academic performance. Goslin (2009) argues that principals tend to overlook their responsibilities of curriculum or instructional leadership, because they are not fully aware of their primary task, or they are too busy attending to their administrative duties, and either resolving conflicts among role players or maintaining student discipline. There is thus a dire need for principals to be empowered and professionally prepared for their roles as heads of schools, and to continually enhance their skills, attributes and competencies through structured continuing professional development (CPD) programmes.

2. Aim and objectives of the study

The primary aim of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of practicing principals of their professional development, and how this enhanced their leadership roles. This aim was encapsulated by the following objectives, namely to:
• advance a clear understanding of continuing professional development and its importance for principals; and
• empower principals to become effective leaders as a result of gaining access to and participating in formal CPD programmes.

3. Research design and methodology

An interpretivist qualitative research methodology brought to the forefront the varied experiences and perceptions of principals of their preparation for leadership positions and participation in professional development programmes. Standardised open-ended qualitative questionnaires followed by individual interviews were the main data-gathering tools used to explore the unique nature of principals' experiences and perceptions of CPD. The standardised open-ended interviews were structured in terms of the wording of the questions that allowed the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desired (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003; Kvale, 2007). The individual interviews allowed the researcher to clarify participants' responses and to delve deeper in order to gather data-rich feedback from the sampled principals (Creswell, 2007). The interviews allowed principals to communicate areas of concern about their professional development and provided the researcher with opportunities to request clarification. Purposive sampling methods were used to select fifteen principals of public primary and secondary schools in three education districts in the Gauteng Province of South Africa: Gauteng West, Gauteng East and Johannesburg Central. The sampled participants included males and females who had served as principals for more than three years at these schools. These principals headed schools that were situated in inner cities, townships and affluent suburbs.

Data were analysed for content, broadly using Tesch's method of open coding (Creswell, 2014) to identify themes or categories. Tesch's method provided a systematic approach to the analysis of the qualitative data. The data was reviewed to establish value, depth and richness. Data was analysed by reading the transcriptions, giving attention to patterns and commonalities, while validity was established. The data was then linked with the research aims and objectives, to establish whether these had been achieved. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) norms of trustworthiness, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004) were considered relevant for this study. Prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks and peer debriefing were used to promote confidence that the researcher had accurately recorded the phenomena under investigation (credibility). Transferability was addressed through purposive sampling and through the provision of rich descriptions, which allowed the researchers to gain a proper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Regular checks were done with the participants to ensure the accuracy of data collection (member checks), that is, transcription of interviews was given to each participant to verify (Shenton, 2004).

4. Discussion of findings

The findings indicate that leadership preparation and training are central to school effectiveness and school improvement. The participants unanimously agreed that they were appointed as principals without having any professional training or formal preparation for their principalship position. In South Africa, there are no rigorous criteria for educators to be appointed as school principals (Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2011; Townsend & MacBeath, 2011). Currently, South Africa is one of the few countries that do not require a compulsory and specific qualification for principalship (Van der Westhuizen & Van

Vuuren, 2007), unlike countries such as the UK and US, that have national qualification structures in place (Quong, 2006; Walker & Qian, 2006. This implies that a post level one teacher may be appointed as principal on the recommendation of the school governing body (SGB), without having any leadership and management qualifications or experience (e.g. passing through the ranks of head of department or deputy principal).

The Ministry of Education has made numerous attempts to raise the professional standards and competencies of school principals by formulating the South African National Professional Qualification for Principalship (DoE, 2004). This draft policy identifies several key principles that ought to inform a national professional qualification for existing and aspiring principals. More recently, the South African Standards for Principalship (SASP) (Department of Basic Education (DBE), Republic of South Africa, 2014) has been sent out for public comments with the hope of making the Standards for Principalship, legislation. Government should, in collaboration with various education stakeholders, enforce the SASP as policy. The DoE recognises the current lack of a co-ordinated system to meet these identified needs and is therefore seeking to develop and implement a system of career pathing for education leaders and managers, and a framework of leadership and management development processes and programmes. It is envisaged that these will be built upon agreed understanding of the core purposes of the leadership roles, the key functions within these, the values which underpin them, and the personal and professional attributes required to carry out the role. The key functions in line with the core duties and responsibilities of the principals are clearly described in the IQMS policy document.

From responses of the participants, it is evident that the education districts attach very little importance to the CPD of principals. Most of the workshops facilitated by education districts deal with disseminating policy matters relating to curriculum changes and administrative matters instead of focusing on the needs of principals. Principals therefore seek other agencies (e.g. universities and NGOs) to access relevant professional development programmes to enhance their skills and knowledge to effectively lead and manage schools. The Ministry of Education consider CPD for educators to be crucial and has subsequently entrusted SACE with the management of CPD in public and independent schools (SACE, 2013). SACE emphasises that like all professionals, teachers and SMTs (including principals) require deep knowledge, which is continuously updated and widened, and which involves complex skills that need to be continually adapted to new circumstances. As part of a process, each educator will have a personal Professional Development Portfolio (PDP) developed according to SACE guidelines.

The third theme dealt with self-evaluation. The participants explained the purpose of a self-evaluation, namely, to inform them of their personal goals and the need for professional development. Piggot-Irvine (2010) asserts that although the complexity of the principal's role provides challenges for such principal development, there is an increasing awareness of approaches worthy of consideration. For example, the principal's self-evaluation on instructional leadership determines whether the principal satisfactorily develops and implements a school improvement plan that results in increased learner achievement; working with teams to develop realistic and attainable goals regarding learner achievement; implementing a system for monitoring learner progress and staff performance on an ongoing basis; providing feedback to staff for continuous improvement and growth; and selecting instructional programmes that meet specific school needs. If deficiencies in any of these attributes are noted, then professional development in these specific areas are required. It is evident that progressive principals take the initiative of arranging their own professional development programmes, based on needs, instead of relying on the Department's 'one size fits all' professional development programme.

5. Conclusion

From this study it can be established that principals can make significant contribution to schools' achieving the educational goals and improving learner performance, if they are adequately prepared for their leadership role. This can be achieved by ensuring that aspiring and practicing principals are exposed to structured CPD programmes, based on needs analysis. For principals to cope with the demands of the 21st century, innovative leadership development programmes help prepare school leaders to apply creative approaches that address the broader roles and responsibilities of leaders and the purpose of schooling, and to use core technologies to achieve intended outcomes. Participating in structured CPD programmes will enable principals to make autonomous decisions, adapt teaching programmes to local needs, promoting teamwork among teachers, and engaging in teacher monitoring, evaluation and professional development. CPD programmes empower them to set strategic direction and develop school plans and goals, and to monitor progress by using data to improve practice.

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