

Approaches Used by Primary School Principals in Developing their Excellence in Leadership

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ABSTRACT School principals are expected to drive quality school improvement efforts. Their role in this ongoing process cannot be ignored. Principals cannot work as individuals. School improvement is an important element of educational reform. They need other role players like government, educators, parents and other community organisations to support them. They have to be capacitated to perform this important function. School improvement does not happen by default, it needs planning. Principals have an indirect impact on learner performance due to the quality of their leadership roles. Two provinces in South Africa were selected for the study. Interviews with principals and questionnaires were used to collect data; the primary focus is on the principals' interview responses. Findings strengthen the argument on the link between quality leadership based on the application of Yin Cheong Cheng and Wai Ming Tam's multi-models and quality in education (The goal specification model, Organizational learning model, Resource-input model, Process model, Satisfaction model, Legitimacy model, Absence of problems model). School principals are expected to reflect on their school needs and how to translate them into improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The work of a school principal is becoming more and more complex. There is more focus on what principals do now than ever before. Twenty first century schooling cannot be content with mediocrity, it must work towards success. “The principal is the nerve centre of school improvement” (Fullan, 2006: 1). The essence of this saying lies in the fact that leaders have to be given sufficient attention so as to play their leadership role efficiently. Whereas actual learner performance is the responsibility of educators, leaders themselves must be of quality in order for a school to improve (Fullan, 2006). Principals are also expected to serve as “leaders for student learning” (Usdan, McCloud & Podmostko, 2000). School improvement is often linked with school effectiveness and performance (Dimmock, 2012).

Questions are raised about how schools can be improved. Emphasis is placed on quality leadership. School leaders are expected to identify the obstacles that continue to hinder their schools’ progress. This understanding depends on the context in which school leaders find themselves.

METHOD

This is a qualitative research study. Qualitative researchers place emphasis on the nature of reality wherein social aspects are observed and analysed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This research relates to delving into human relations issues relating to the principal’s role of leading and transforming the school. In this study, an interview with the principal was “an exciting and enriching experience.” (Kvale, 1996: 124) It was important that the researcher understands meaning from the point of view of the interviewee, in this instance, the principal. Communication in the form of words, feelings and “tone of voice, expressions and gestures” are all important in creating the meaning of his/her life world as sought after by the interviewer (Kvale, 1996: 125). There were instances where the principal as the interviewee was able to breathe a sigh of relief once the tape recorder was switched off. At that point, field notes were taken to assist the meanings of transcribed texts (Kvale 1996). In this article 15 primary schools were purposively sampled. Principals were interviewed and questionnaires were answered by staff members.

This purposive sample (Wallen & Fraenkel, 1991) was selected to determine the extent of transformation and school development after school reforms in South Africa. Tape recorded, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals due to their flexibility (Wiersma, 1991). Clear, concise questionnaires (Wierma, 1991) were completed by staff members, documents were collected, and principals were shadowed. This analysis is a triangulation of the above-mentioned data collection tools.

This research utilized different interpretive practices that are interconnected. The aim was to get a better understanding of the subject being researched. The researchers used multiple methods to ensure that an in-depth understanding of the school leadership phenomenon is clearly understood. School leaders shaped our inquiry. Most questions focused on how they understand their role as key figures at the centre of an organization, and how they made sense of the relationships they established.

A major finding explains that different perceptions on school improvement are precipitated by the school's needs and challenges.

Schools need to improve on a continuous basis. Aspects on school improvement are based on the school's context. It is difficult to identify commonalities on how school principals aim to improve their schools. South Africa is faced with different challenges as compared to other countries, where in the past; schools were allocated resources according to racial classifications. Black schools have inherited inequalities that were entrenched by the previous apartheid education system of segregation. This resulted in Black schools being denied any form of meaningful development. Twenty years after the democratic government, some schools in the townships and rural areas are still struggling with resources. It would, therefore, be difficult to distance school improvement in the South African context from the country's educational reforms (Chisholm, 2011). Schools individually link school improvement with challenges they are faced with. This project focuses on schools in the rural, semi-rural and farm settlements which are associated with transformational leadership. Transformational leaders will improve their schools. Most of these schools are on a path to turning around their dysfunctionality. There are various aspects which are explored in this research such as school culture, professional development, career pathways, learner performance and school improvement. This paper focuses mainly on school improvement.

Questions on school improvement explored the following:

- Where do you think you can improve as a school principal?
- Which aspects of the school need improvement?
- How do you think you can help improve on these aspects?

One of the aims is to determine whether school principals understand what needs to be done to implement quality improvements, and whether they think they can play an important role in such an improvement. Their responses were varied, but these responses were based on their needs. One common need is based on improving the school's physical resources: “ *we need buildings, infrastructure*”. Schools also need parental support. They also want to develop educators, particularly in Mathematics and Physical Science skills. Emphasis should not only be placed on their needs, but also on the quality of those needs. Fuller (1986) provides level descriptors of school quality as those related to learner achievement or those characteristics in the school that are not related to school improvement. Fuller (1986:5) defines school quality “as government investment strategies” that “should focus on (a) school characteristics which influence student achievement, and (b) efforts which encourage more efficient management of material inputs by local school staff.” The new South African government has initiated plans to provide schools with financial resources (resource allocation) with the aim at helping them maintain their physical resources.

An argument in this research is based on the perspective of the international initiative of Education For All which was developed in Thailand in 1990. Its aim was to ensure that by the year 2015, education reaches all citizens in all societies worldwide. UNESCO and the World Bank initiated six goals, some of which relate to quality education; namely goal 2, stating that girls should have “access to complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.” Goal six refers to the improvement of every aspect of the quality education.” (Education: Human Development Network).

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Leadership is about “influencing” persons with the aim of pursuing organizational goals (Smit & Cronje, 1992:333; Parker & Middlewood, 2013)). Some form of authority is needed with execution of such duties, (Parker, et.al 2013). The quality of school leadership has an indirect influence on learning, and thus school improvement (Fullan, 2006). School leaders have to

ensure that educators are developed and empowered with the relevant skills so as to increase learner achievement. Fullan (2006) explains that school leaders influence learning by, amongst other things, focusing on the culture of the school. Fullan (2006) supports Hopkins, West, Ainscow, Harris and Beresford (1997) in emphasising the importance of school culture and development of a classroom environment. By so doing, school capacity is enhanced by harnessing individual skills and their learning relationships among educators and learners. That includes managing instructional programs and mobilizing resources.

Most school leaders were teachers before they took up their leadership posts. This is usually normal progression (see Table 2). Of the principals interviewed in this sample, more than 50% of them have an average of 14 years' experience as teachers. A limited number of them were Deputy Principals before (mean of 1.08), and a mean of 5.92 refers to those that served as Head of Departments. Currently, says Parker, et. al. (2013:17), "it is very rare for anyone to become the leader of a school without previously having had a career, however long or short, in teaching."

Fullan, (2006) mentions two major roles of school leaders. The first one is the creation of a successful school where conditions of continuous improvement are established. The school leader has an enormous influence in that environment. The second role, which is equally important, relates to the principal's role in their involvement with "system-wide" reform (Fullan, 2006: 7). The author says principals must form clusters with the aim of networking and influencing their colleagues. Together they will be guided by national and provincial policies.

South Africa has experienced its challenges regarding schooling. Some of these relate to the quality of education which manifests itself in learners' literacy and numeracy skills (Chisholm, 2011). Schools sampled in Limpopo and Mpumalanga mention numerous challenges experienced in their schools. Some of the challenges are systemic. They mention learner performance in ANA (Annual National Assessment) as one of the aspects that need improvement. This is not the only challenge they are experiencing. There is also a need to improve physical resources. Principals in the sample also face challenges with regard to parental involvement. Fullan (2006) regards such blaming to be limiting action, because leaders often seek solutions from government. They blame the system. What role do they play in improving learning in their schools?

When principals were asked how many learners drop out of school per year, and what reasons are provided for that decline in school attendance they mention lack of care and support from parents as the key factor. According to van Deventer and Kruger (2005), parental involvement in education has a positive influence on the quality of education of the child. Some of the advantages of parents being involved in education are associated with improvement in learners performing well, as well as the reduction of dropout rates and improved school attendance.

Learners need to have access to education of a high quality in order for them to benefit the most for being in school. This is often an indication of the presence of strong school leadership. This paper states a hypothesis that the core of school improvement lies in good, quality transformational leadership. The essence of transformational leadership is difficult to establish if a school lacks resources and the staff “lacks the necessary skills and information.” (Eres, 2011).

There is a link between school improvement and change. For a school to improve there must be commitment by all concerned to focus on the school’s ability to cope with change. This strengthens its ability to manage improvement initiatives. These conditions have an impact on the school culture and the overall manner in which the school works towards improvement. The above-mentioned approach has an impact on learner improvement.

In the process of improving the school, the overarching importance of quality leadership cannot be ignored. The principal’s ability to make quality decisions, to handle pressure and growing workload, to play an essential role in promoting change, to improve relations with co-workers, all point towards the importance of school improvement (Fullan, 2001). Principals must lead school improvement. School principals are “key factors” in school improvement initiatives (Fullan, 2001: 141)

School leaders are expected to draw up School Development Plans. This process should be an all-encompassing and participative. This document is aimed at creating critical thinking behind the school’s plans based on their needs. It is at this stage that schools are bound to begin to think of various ways of improving themselves. The intention of allowing a fully participative process is to guarantee ownership and quality. This process sometimes creates a dilemma emanating from demands from external forces, including the community, departmental officials, and unions, against aspirations of an internal nature within an organization.

Davies & Ellison (1997) confirm that a link between leadership has to be outstanding in order for schools to improve. High priority must be given to the development of potential in leaders in

order for quality in education to be enhanced. School leaders must have the knowledge and skills to move the school forward. This will require of them to have an ability to identify those aspects of school work that have a direct bearing on improving the quality of the standards of achievement. Schools in this sample displayed similar characteristics of wanting to identify school improvement by means of what they need. Principals believe that once they satisfy those needs, general school improvement will be experienced.

School improvement has many benefits. One way of benefitting out of school improvement is by way of changing the principal's mindset. School principals must be able to deal with the change. They must be able to make efforts to "fix what is broken" (Davidovich, et al. 2010). This creates an opportunity for them to improve their schools. They need to set their minds to be problem solvers. There is often pressure to improve learner test scores, so that they could be competitive enough to face the future. One of the most important approaches is to develop principals to be quality leaders.

The need for quality school improvement is so immense that leadership can no longer adopt a status quo approach. The idea of school improvement is located in the fact that there is some form of change. Something is being approached differently. There is a definite need for change. All changes must be planned. The planning is ongoing. Ubben, Hughes and Norris (2011: 55) refer to "the development of an action plan for school improvement". School improvement is thus an important task to be performed by all role players.

There is no place for dysfunctionality in schools. Schools as organisations must be accountable (Davies & Ellison 1997). From a quality perspective, policy changes have laid good foundations for improvements and direction the country needs to follow. This is now time for action, time for implementation. Individual schools/ organisations must reinforce their resources to develop their schools towards quality school improvement.

The extent to which schools manage their roles and structures to satisfy its customers has a lot to do with the quality of its "fitness for purpose" (Davies, et. a. 1997). It is important for schools to be relevant to its core values. Schools must deliver on quality teaching and learning. For that to be achieved, leaders must be change agents. Teachers have to be developed to help the school achieve its aims. There are variables like unemployment, changing economic climate, political challenges, that are outside the school's control. But schools have to manage those areas they are

able to influence and improve on. One of those areas is quality teaching and learning, with special emphasis on visible leadership and improvement on resource planning and development.

A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH SITES

Entry into the school sites was generally arranged by the district manager, although researchers made their own final arrangements. All fifteen schools are at the primary level. They are classified as rural, semi-rural and farm schools. Two of the schools are former Model C schools. Three schools are in the mining area, which means the schools serve migrant workers. Each school was subjected to observation. The following key aspects relate to what was generally observed in the sampled schools:

- Cultural traditions and rituals
- Collegiality and collaboration
- Learning and teaching environment in the classrooms and library
- Working environment, including physical appearance

Researchers requested to shadow the principal or any senior teacher. This entails moving around making observations on how the school leader communicates with other people. It also involves ascertaining the claims made by the principal during the interview process. In general, schools in the two provinces have common features and, or challenges summarised as follows:

- Schools are experiencing challenges with regard to maintaining physical facilities. They lack office and classroom space. Their schools are generally clean, even though some rural schools struggle with water and sanitation.
- Indigenous language usage is common in most sampled schools. Depending on the area, English is commonly used outside the classrooms. In some sampled schools, Afrikaans used the mother tongue. There are schools that have learners speaking two languages, Sepedi and Isindebele. Sometimes the ratio is 50:50. They are required to satisfy both groups. Multigrade teaching is also practiced in some schools.
- Sporting facilities are lacking. Some schools share facilities with the communities, which raises a question on maintenance and repairs. Where possible, schools have sporting facilities of their own, with palisade fencing to protect this facility. Usually, not all schools can afford facilities of their own. If available, schools find it difficult to maintain them.

- In Limpopo province schools were labeled as LA; LB; LC; LD; LE; LF and LG. In Mpumalanga province the schools were labeled as MA; MB; MC; MD; ME; MF; and MG (See Tables below).

THE MULTI-MODES OF QUALITY IN EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The following seven multi-models of quality education are important in providing a framework for the understanding of the complex nature in which schools have to function in order to enhance performance. Education is a huge investment to its citizens. Cheng & Tam (1997), explain the multi-models as follows:

Goal and specification model

In this model, a school is expected to clarify its goals based on standards agreed upon. There must be programs of action in place, where aspects such as learner attendance and drop- out rates are taken care of.

Resource-input model

This model focuses on the quality of resources needed by a school, where facilities and financial support are important.

Process model

This model places high regard on the social interactions between learners and educators in the classroom. School climate determines various learning activities and their outcomes in the classrooms. Communication and participative decision making processes are good examples in this model.

Satisfaction model

The significance of this model lies in the involvement of the School Governing Bodies and the manner in which the school relates with the parents, community and learners.

Legitimacy model

This is a model that considers the school's public image, integrity and reputation based on accountability. Schools are accountable to their customers, who in broad education terms refer to learners, parents and the community.

Absence of problems model

Schools are expected to manage conflict to an extent that teaching and learning are not unnecessarily interrupted. There is no need for schools to be declared dysfunctional. Learners are the main beneficiaries of quality leadership in schools.

Organizational learning model

Whatever barriers a school experiences, ongoing monitoring and staff development are the cornerstone of school improvement.

The argument on quality school improvement in this paper is based on some of the above-mentioned models of quality education in schools.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The following themes emerge:

- Career pathways to school leadership
- Professionalism and staff development
- School climate and culture
- Learner performance and achievement
- School improvement

Focus of this paper is located in school improvement. Principal interview questions in this discussion are mainly based on school improvement.

School principals generally experience lack of “understanding of the complex nature of education quality” (Cheong Cheng & Ming Tam, 1997). In comparison with the huge amounts of money spent on education in South Africa, it is important to prepare and train principals to be accountable. The multi-models of quality in education will assist them to understand their roles in improving their schools.

Discussions on quality issues are difficult to comprehend. The multi-models of quality in education relate to an understanding of conceptions formulated by various constituencies involved with education. The multi-models of quality by Cheong Cheng Y, & Ming Tam (1997) will help analyse these findings. For these models to be well understood, aspects of it must be unpacked in totality.

The essence of the message from the principals’ interview responses is quoted verbatim as follows: (see Table 3)

- **The goal specification model**

This model does not seem to be a critical element of school improvement. Often, the number of learners dropping out of school per annum is very minimal.

- **The resource-input model**

The schools need physical resources like classrooms” to *accommodate an influx of learners*” (MB). Administration blocks are also a necessity. Some researchers in the team have observed a common practice of principals and other staff members sharing an office which was originally a classroom currently converted into an office. Mathematics teachers are also needed. This country is experiencing a dire shortage of Maths and Science teachers, particularly due to the imbalance of demand and supply of teachers (“*we need permanent Maths teachers*” MF).

The South African state president has declared infrastructure programs a priority in an effort to enhance quality school improvement by 2025. This is an attempt from the side of government to improve schools to international level of practice (National Department of basic Education). School Governing Bodies must work hard to ensure availability of funds to maintain their schools.

- **The process model**

(“*I thought that one of my strong points was communication. I think that it is also one of my weakest points.*LC). This statement is a cry for help. Communication forms a threshold of success in any organization. People must communicate and reach consensus in decision making, amongst others. Foundations of communication in schools lie in encouraging participative decision making.

- **The satisfaction model**

An acknowledgement is made that parental involvement (LB, MC) is a cornerstone of school improvement. In order for learners to perform optimally, schools have to form partnerships with parents for support, advice, motivation and assistance in many forms. Parental involvement in schools is a pillar of strength. Parents have left the job of improving their children’s performance in the hands of the professionals (English, 2005). Parents or caregivers must help educators to eliminate behavioural problems.

Schools cannot improve unless parents “care,” “support” and look after their children. Parents have to ensure their children benefit the most out of education. During general conversations with principals, there is an outcry that young parents leave their own children with grandparents to go and stay elsewhere. Sometimes it happens due to valid reasons of seeking employment. In that regard, grandparents are found to be too old to be engaged in issues affecting education. In this era of knowledge economy, it is always beneficial for children to take school seriously, so as to fit in well within the global economy. When learning takes place in this kind of environment, schools improve. Parents can form partnerships with the school by helping them create an environment conducive to teaching and learning (van Deventer, et.al.2003). Schools, on the other hand, must find new ways in which they communicate with the parents. Often, an element of *Ubuntu* is found wanting, and then parents are discouraged to be involved.

- **Legitimacy model**

Principals are accountable to parents and government for quality learner performance. Learners must perform optimally and educators must deliver the highest standards of teaching. The essence is that the core mission of the school must be accomplished. It can only happen if principals are accountable to stakeholders. In this regard, distributive leadership will prevail. Principals must explore various ways of making sure educators are also accountable for creating an atmosphere that is conducive to teaching and learning (Usdan, et al, 2000). The reputation and image of a school is maintained by all stakeholders through word and deed.

- **Absence of problems model**

There is an indication in this sample that principals are confident of their problem-solving techniques. It is not an indicator of quality school improvement, according to the analysis.

- **Organizational learning model**

It means the level of awareness of the school community with regard to their school needs, planning and development of its staff (Cheong Cheng, et. al, 1997). School principals in the sampled schools are eager to engage continuously on efforts to improve their schools. The multi-level models of quality in education create awareness of different facets of school improvement

and the role principals play in ensuring quality prevails at all times . The principals play an important role in school improvement.

The first question related to school improvement is reflective. School principals are expected to reflect on their school needs and how to translate them into improvement. Other than mentioning what the aspects are, principals are required to act. Principals are implored to do something about improving their schools by being asked how they think they can improve on these aspects.

Table 1: sampled schools

Sampled school	Province
MA, MB, MC, MD, ME,ME, MF, MG	Mpumalanga
LA, LB,LC,LD,LE, LF, LG	Limpopo

Table 2: Principal's pathway to leadership

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Number of years as principal	14	3	24	12.57	7.240
Number of years as a teacher	13	3	34	14.69	10.950
Number of years as HOD	13	0	20	5.92	6.116
Number of years as Deputy Principal	13	0	12	1.08	3.303
Number of years in "Other" Position	13	0	19	1.77	5.231

Table 3: Responses to questions on school improvement

• Where do you think you can improve as	• In your opinion, which aspects of the	• How do you think you can improve on these
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a school principal?	school need improvement?	aspects?
Our classrooms were falling apart... I have requested for more donations from other companies..(LA)	Curriculum coverage, we need to improve our curriculum. Learners should not fail in ANA,	I think that the monitoring tools will help me
I need to develop my computer skills. I need to teach so I should have a class to teach. (LB)	Late coming and parental involvement	I will address that through writing a letter if there is no response, we will involve SGB or a social worker.
I thought that one of my strong points was communication; I think that is also one of my weakest points (LC)	Regard yourself as a parent before you do anything, ask yourself, how would I discipline my child?	
what I need is a workshop on leadership of management (LD)	Playing fields are not there. Provision of water. We do not have water on Mondays and Fridays.	Playing fields are not there. Provision of water. We do not have water on Mondays and Fridays.
I would like the government to help the poverty state of the learners by giving the parents a living wage (LE)	I would like the government to help the poverty state of the learners by giving the parents a living wage	Merging is the solution
If I got more time, then I could do...My planning of time (LF)	the new CAPS...um...although we started already, the teachers didn't have any training, so we only got the material and we go on	staff development plays an important role there...self-discipline
I must be more patient (LG)	Computer technology	when one talks about

	some of our classes we do have interactive boards learning disabilities, to accommodate these learners in an effective way	computers, you talk about financial challenges
I just want to improve in the performance of learners. I am encouraging my staff to work hard towards achieving our goal which is 100% achievement by (MA)	We need improvement in the building accommodation; we lack accommodation for educators and also for learners. Some of the classes are overcrowded our learners	Maybe if we can go for donations. I once applied to lottery but unfortunately we did not succeed, but we only succeeded in 2010 we got a donation of developing our sport facility, we received R500 000 , we built learners' tennis court
I need to learn to communicate effectively to staff members, such that they understand their roles and responsibilities, and that I would be able to guide them to do the right thing. We need to work together. (MB)	Infrastructure. Our infrastructure is unable to accommodate the influx of learners. We need more classes. We need admin block	We have been requesting assistance from the department for quite a long time. We are looking for sponsorship from companies
management is key, also i want to improve I want people when I command , I want people to respond positively, also I want to change people's attitude if	Firstly we need the parents, we need parental involvement and the community involvement, also err the school structure needs improvement	I think we need to come together and sit as teachers-parents to regular meetings; and also in doing fund-raising and getting donations from donors, and

possible, attitude towards work ; also delegation skills, I don't have delegation skills.(MC)		also the community volunteering. Our community does not believe in volunteering
I am not sure. As a person you think you have everything correct, unless someone comes to tell you that you are doing wrong somewhere (MD)	We are affected by the outside factors most of the time. As I am saying that when its raining, learners don't come to school. Sometimes during exams most learners are absent. We have been complaining to the municipality and nothing has been done.	I have tried, but I have failed. We tried to write letters to people who are responsible for fixing roads. But nothing has been done. We even spoke to some of the counselors here, but
Human resource, curriculum-wise (ME)	Curriculum. Teacher development.	By hiring the relevant teachers according to curriculum needs. Encourage them to enroll for teacher development programmes.
I have to improve my academic qualifications. That is my priority (MF)	We need to get permanent Math educators for this school. We also need to have effective and reliable transport for learners	another thing that we can improve is we need two additional classes to cater for the Sepedi language
to manage and also to improve also in leading, leading people. And also in curriculum (MG)	Number 1 is the building. The results need to improve. (MG)	By offering Saturday classes. Also individual attention and also to improve reading and writing skills

maybe I need improvement is conflict management (MH)	The building. The safety part. the roof sheets, they are loose and some of the fisher boards. This building is an old building; it is very strong.	
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CONCLUSION

Role clarification of school principals may not be easy, but it is essential to contextualize their needs in order for them to work towards a continuous improvement of their schools. These participants' needs are different. The needs are defined by the environment in which the school finds itself. When a principal (MD) says: " *I have tried, but I have failed*" it gets disconcerting. These needs are legitimate. They must be based on good standards.

There may also be a shortage of qualified principal candidates in the education system. In that regard, training and being proactive in the way pipeline candidates are prepared professionally to equip them with the skills for leadership positions is essential, if not urgent. It is important to have programmes that are aimed at recruiting and retaining future principals. A suggestion is made that mentoring programs for future principals should be formalised as one of the ways in which school leadership is assured of quality. It has to be an ongoing exercise.

Quality improvement in schools must be prioritised. Aspiring school leaders must be determined to include social responsibilities as a way of trying to understand their work environment. Schools population in South Africa is diverse. It encompasses people of different socio-economic backgrounds, religion and race. All these people require recognition and an understanding of how to conduct this "orchestra."

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