

The Implementation of Stress Management Strategies in Schools

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ABSTRACT The focus of this paper is to investigate the possibility of creating an action plan for the implementation of stress management strategies in schools. The specific objectives are to describe the essence and nature of stress management in schools and to outline the features of an action plan for strategic management in schools. The authors used an evaluative and integrative literature review to investigate information that pertains to related concepts such as strategy formulation in education, the elements of strategies in education and imperatives of stress management in education. This paper's findings point towards the necessity of introducing stress management strategies in schools. It is recommended that the Department and its officials accept responsibility for managing strategic issues proactively and reactively. At the same time a framework of structures and processes through which individuals can be engaged in conversations and dialogues about the strategic direction of the school, must be generated.

INTRODUCTION

Stress form an integral part of the lives of teachers sector (Pelser and Van Wyk 2015; Hamid et al. 2015; Mushoriwa and Dlamini 2015). The phenomenon is even regarded by some teachers as unavoidable and unmanageable (Naidoo et al. 2013; Botha and Triegaardt 2016). It is seen as being closely linked to environmental and psychological factors with a compelling effect on teacher's happiness and health and consequently on their performance in schools (Alexandrache 2014; Gamede 2016; Thenga et al. 2015). Further research has, however, indicated that stress can and must be managed (Van Wyk and Moeng 2014; Thenga et al. 2015). School principals and other managerial staff have a key role in this regard. They have to organise, plan and implement new policies in such a way that teachers are not subjected to unnecessary stress (Pelser and Van Wyk 2015). At the same time, managers must provide instructional guidance and communicate the school's vision and aims clearly too all teachers.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are linked to the building of understanding for the major strategic issues in schools. It is aimed to provide a possible framework of structures and processes

through which individuals can be engaged in conversations and dialogues about the strategic direction of the school. More specifically, the objectives are, (a) to describe the essence and nature of stress management in schools and, (b) to outline the features of an action plan for strategic management in schools. Within the above context, an evaluative and integrative literature investigation was conducted to create a framework for the determination of a strategy for the implementation of stress management in schools.

Conceptual-Theoretical Framework

Strategy Formulation in Education

The process of strategy formulation in education can be explained from different perspectives (Davies 2010; Tseng 2010; Dell 1998). In the following explanation, an attempt is made to provide a comprehensive depiction that is broadly based on the work of Nickols (2011) and Davies (2010). In Figure 1, the following sub and interdependent sections of strategic thinking are indicated strategic management, strategy formulation, strategic planning and strategic deployment (action planning).

Sub and Interdependent Sections of Strategic Thinking

Strategic management can be defined as the management of an organization's resources in

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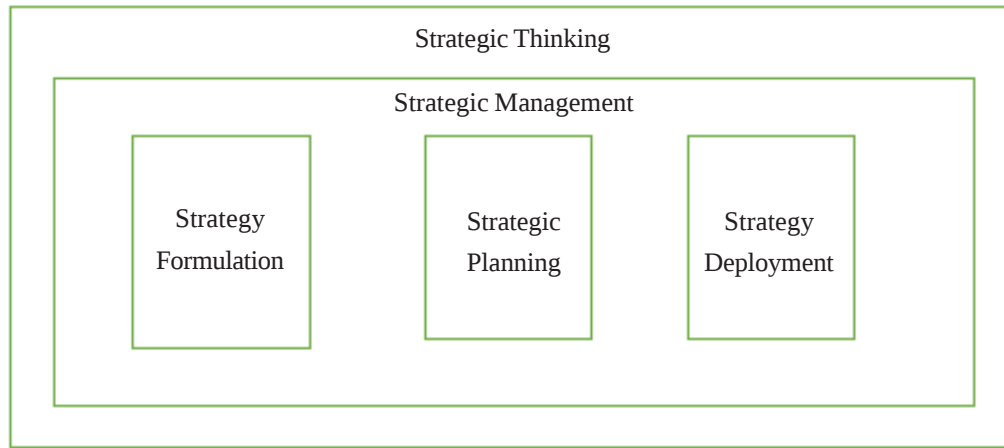


Fig. 1. Sub and interdependent sections of strategic thinking

order to achieve its goals and objectives. Strategic management involves setting objectives, analysing the competitive environment, analysing the internal organization, evaluating strategies, and making sure that the strategies are rolled out across the organization. Steen (2010) postulated that strategic management constitutes a collection of management actions that enable company managers to keep it aligned with its environment and on the correct path of development, succeeding in its objectives and its mission. Tseng (2010) paraphrased strategic management by viewing it as actions directed towards the overall organization objectives, including multiple stakeholders in decision-making, requiring the incorporation of short and long term perspectives and, involving the recognition of trade-offs between effectiveness and efficiency. In this sense, strategic management entails a broad concept that includes the critical aspects of strategic thinking such as policy formulation and strategy formulation and the design of an action plan. Bell (1998) viewed these as ongoing activities and processes that organisations use to systematically coordinate and align resources and actions with mission, vision and strategy throughout an organization. Strategic management activities transform the strategic plan into a system that provides strategic performance feedback to decision making and enables the plan to evolve and grow as requirements and other circumstances change.

Dell (1998) explained the whole process of strategy formulation in terms of the original meaning of the concept *strategy*, which “evolved to encompass a coherent set of actions, usually concealed from the enemy, intended to achieve the military objective. The strategy was to be implemented by using a series of tactics, immediate measures conducted in the presence of the opposition”. Mintzberg (1994) further saw a strategy not as a physical entity but as an abstract concept that exists in the mind of people. For Eacott (2010) “it is a sophisticated conceptualisation of practice and not the objectified lists of behaviours or traits that can be measured for frequency and compared to distinguish effective from less effective practice”. Eacott (2010) emphasised that a strategy is temporal and should always be seen as work in progress that is situated in a particular context. As part of its military origins a strategy is further linked with mechanistic structures of the strategic planning approach (Davies 2010; Hamid et al. 2016). It can thus be connected with the notions of conducting business in a planned, organised and systematic way. In this way, it is used as a problem-solving tool for managers (Eacott 2010).

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is, according to Mintzberg (1994) a formal process, which was designed to create strategies. Strategic planning covers a

wide field of study and is usually conducted in the educational sector at a high level. It usually covers a period of three years (Van der Westhuizen et al. 2010). Strategic planning ordinarily involves long-term changes and affects schools significantly. The aim of strategic planning is to guide activities in a particular direction and to create a new direction (Van Niekerk and Van Niekerk 2006). According to Naidoo et al. (2013) strategic planning usually culminates into the compilation of an action plan. Strategic planning is an organizational management activity that is used to set priorities, focus energy and resources, strengthen operations, ensure that employees and other stakeholders are working toward common goals, establish agreement around intended outcomes/results, and assess and adjust the organization's direction in response to a changing environment. It is a disciplined effort that produces fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, who it serves, what it does, and why it does it, with a focus on the future. Effective strategic planning articulates not only where an organization is going and the actions needed to make progress, but also how it will know if it is successful.

Strategy Deployment

In an educational context the functioning and deployment of a strategy has to do with the building and understanding of the major strategic development framework in the school and at the same time to create structures and processes, which engage individuals within the school in dialogues and conversations about the strategic direction (Davies 2010). A strategy also comes into play when educationists talk about 'managing strategically' or 'managing in terms of a strategy'. Strategic processes are further viewed therefore as phases or components of school development planning that should lead to the definition of specific strategies to realise certain goals (Van der Vyfer 2011). From the above it is clear that a strategy is seen in the schools as part of a strategic plan but it is obviously not equivalent to the whole strategic plan. It is partial in the sense that it focusses on specific aspects of the whole development/strategic plan. With the design of a strategy in a school, an attempt is usually made to establish particular actions that have to be executed to obtain spe-

cific objectives. Strategy thus has to do with an action plan that is used to spell out the behaviours (actions) of different role players in one or more areas in the school (Van Wyk and Moeng 2014).

Literature Review

The study is further based on the strength of evidence explored about different views on specific elements of strategies in a literature review. The identification of elements or characteristics of strategies is closely linked to aspects that were already discussed in the previous section on strategy formulation in education. For Van Niekerk and Van Niekerk (2006) the main elements of a strategy are envisioning, value management, communication, training and development, and empowerment. Van der Vyfer (2011) indicated the existence and involvement of aims, action steps, stakeholders and evaluation criteria as elements that should form part of a strategy. Another important aspect that can be stressed is that strategy must always be conceptualised as leadership because it puts social practice back into educational leadership (Eacott 2010). Davies (2010) discussed in this regard the ways in which different individuals in the school should engage with each other to enhance strategic capability. He said that this engagement could be seen to consist of elements such as strategic conversation, strategic participation, and strategic motivation. In this exposition the main elements of a strategy is further outlined as a shared vision, strategic participation, staff motivation, capacity development and shared values.

Shared vision as discussed by Costa and Kallick (2015) means that competent leaders know how to cause creative organisational tension and how to bind the energy and intellectual stimulation it yields. These leaders are the creators for themselves and facilitators for others regarding the process of developing visions of what could be, images of desired conditions, valued objectives, and circumstances of more suitable expectations. Costa and Kallick (2015) further note that educational leaders are the convenors of stakeholders- community, staff, and students- to form visions of what a desirable education and school organisation could be. Leaders are supposed to start a process to assess the alignment with and progress toward

achieving that vision. They install the value of assessment- an assessment frame of mind- that pervades all levels of the organisation (Costa and Kallick 2015). The vision will be shared and valued only when a process of assessment is in place to provide feedback about the degree to which the vision is being achieved.

For a vision to be shared in the true sense of the word, there should be a deliberate relationship between the parts and whole of the entire organisation. In this sense, congruence is reached in the organisation any one part of the organisation provides a lens into the whole organisation. Plata (2011) stated the proverbial quotation in this regard, “without a vision, people will perish”. Plata (2011) further explained that a vision defines basic goals, strategies for improvement in areas of weakness, the mission of the school, and the overall purpose of the work of the school. A shared vision cause that staff members are aware of the expectations for the school and their individual roles are clearly defined (Wilkening 2015).

Of the essence is that the vision of the school should be communicated clearly, frequently and put to practice daily.

Strategic participation relates to the identification of long-term or overall aims and interests and the means of achieving them (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 2012). Strategic participation indicates joint consultation with all the stakeholder in decision making, goal setting, profit sharing, teamwork and other such measures through which an organisation attempts to foster or increase its employees’ commitment to collective objectives (Chance 2010). It is a consensus-building approach that helps a community come together in explaining how they would like their community or organisation to develop over the next few years (Allison and Kaye 2005). If strategic participation is correctly applied, it can assist in building a spirit of ownership and commitment in a group and in reaching consensus about critical matters (Lerner 2015). Strategic participation can also be used to enhance decisions as well as establishing a clear idea of where participants want an organisation to go as well as establishing commitment for team-activities (Rowley et al. 1997).

Staff motivation can be paraphrased as “an encouragement, energy or an inspiration” that drives an individual or staff member to respond or act and it is also viewed as: “the psycholog-

ical feature that arouses an organism to action;” as well as “the reason for the action.” Therefore, motivation has a bearing on the psychological processes that “persuade, urge, convince, or stimulate,” individuals to act the way they do (Anon 2015).

According to Shunk et al. (2014), motivation is the process whereby goal-directed activity leads to increased performance. It is in this connection important to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of staff. Intrinsic motivation is where desires, needs and wishes are of the essence and extrinsic motivation where compensation, bolstering and acknowledgment are of the essence (Ryan and Deci 2011). Hemminger (2015) made the following specific suggestions on staff motivation; build professional commitment, enhance team building, provide communication avenues, demonstrate appreciation, provide support, and provide clear expectations and guidelines (Cherry 2015). Teachers can also be rejuvenated academically by presenting new challenges, inviting outsiders to join school teams and creating creativity-induced spaces.

Capacity development is the process through which individuals, organisations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve development objectives. Capacity development can be viewed from three perspectives (Schuller 2015). Firstly, from an individual perspective where skills and knowledge is vested in individuals, communities and groups, secondly from an organisational perspective where internal policies, systems and strategies are used which enable an organisation to operate and to achieve its goals and thirdly from an enabling environment, which entails the wider society within which individuals and organisations function (Schuller 2015). Bates et al. (2014) stated that the approach for conducting effective capacity strengthening, although it is locally driven, involves the whole society and does not start with a needs assessment and capacity-strengthening plan alone. Rather it begins by working with stakeholders to make explicit the programme components needed to develop the optimal capacity required in keeping with the agreed upon goal for each programme. This approach is critical to overall human development, and is evident of how capacity emerges, how the organisation develop and evaluate it, and most importantly how organisations sustain it (Ubels et al. 2015).

According to Grimsley (2015) *shared values* form part of organisational values that are usually developed by an organisation's leadership and then adopted by the other members. As such, these values are shared and followed by all members of the organisation when acting on behalf of the organisation. They may also be referred to as core values, provide guidance for organisational decision-making and serving as a kind of ethical compass for action. These values help to define what an organisation is, what an organisation does and what it aspires to be. Shared values are paraphrased in a mission statement and provide overall guidance for decision-making. The so-called 'new South Africa' brought with it several new shared values in education that are enshrined in different sections of the South African Constitution (RSA1996). Values that are of particular importance for staff in schools are the emphasis on democratic values namely, human dignity, equality and freedom. Adherence to these values is not negotiable and have to be attended to for provisioning of productive values education in schools as there are several challenges and unresolved issues between the expectations set forth for values education in the Constitution and the lived reality of values education in the context of South Africa's schools.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the following discussion the objectives of the study namely, to describe the essence and nature of stress management in schools and to outline the features of an action plan for strategic management in schools are discussed in relation to the observations in the literature.

Correlation with Theoretical Suppositions

The practice of stress management is related to different theoretical suppositions. These theories cover a wide range of ideas stretching from participative to managerial.

Managerial theories are part of those suppositions where the emphasis is placed on the official and structural elements of organisations. Schools are thus treated as systems where the sub-units are systemically related to each other (Bush 1986). The official structures are portrayed in a hierarchical way stressing chains of command between those who occupy different

positions (Bush 2007). In these theories, those in senior positions such as principals are officially tasked to manage all staff matters, which include conflict and stress amongst staff. There seems to be a situation where most staff expect and accept that principals are responsible for all day-to-day managerial issues, which would include stress management. Principals are expected to deal with stress related issues on a preventative and corrective basis.

Transformational theories deal with the introduction and acceptance of change in education. By implication, principals and other senior staff play a key role in planning and introducing important changes in the school (Tranter 2006). In principle, all staff could be expected to accept ownership of changes and be involved in particular in its implementation in instructional management (Bush 2007). Staff who are not convinced of the new system and not familiar with its contents could easily experience stress and become part of a group that protest against the changes.

The tenets of distributed leadership theories can be found in the fact that it fosters participation in decision-making (Bush 2007). When applied to a school situation Wadesango (2011) explains that teachers are the direct custodians of the curriculum implementation process. Teachers are regarded as specialists in the field of teaching and in managing and organising their classrooms. The main implications of teacher's involvement in these key areas in schools are that they integrate part of the very stressful teaching-learning situation and have to deal with disciplinary problems and the improvement of school outcomes on a regular basis.

Relatedness with Work-stressors

Some teachers suffer from physical and mental health conditions that obviously influence their capacity to perform their daily tasks optimally (Lussier 2008). The term stress management is thus sometimes used in relation to ways in which individual teachers is supposed to cope or handle these personal stressors. In this paper, the emphasis is however, placed on work related stressors or so-called organisational stressors as imperatives or key elements of the phenomenon stress management, and not on the management of stress regarding health and emotional problems that individual teachers experience.

Stress management is mainly seen as assisting teachers who experience change at work by having to introduce new teaching or assessment methods (Kreitner and Kinicki 2007). In addition, Ngidi and Sibaya (2002) identified a range of issues such as time pressures, poor working conditions, educational changes, administrative problems and pupil misbehaviour that South African teachers experience on a daily basis. It is clear that the stress that individual teachers suffer from because of work related issues can and should be managed at school by taking definite measures. These measures or management actions should minimise stress levels at school (Robbins et al. 2013). Evidently school related stress should be managed in schools by people with managerial responsibilities such as principals (Bennett 1997).

Interaction as Essential Element

In essence, stress management does not consist of the application of management formulas to recurring stressful situations. It is not measurable as a single factor and does not exist in a single definable situation but should be viewed as a result of a transaction between an individual and his or her superiors, which encompasses the application of a number of cognitive, affective and coping factors. The managing of stress in schools is based on the notion that body and mind interact with stressful stimuli in the environment and also with the consequences of the interaction (Martin et al. 2011). Key to this interaction is the fact that a teacher who experiences stress should enter into a negotiated relationship with someone like a principal who can assist in confronting his or her perception of the stressful situation. By communicating and clarifying the nature of stressors in this way a teacher who suffers from stress and a school principal investigates the significance of possible remedies for stressors. Good communication between teachers and their superiors can thus be seen as an important element in the stress management process. Werner (2011) confirmed that this interaction process by which information is exchanged and understood by two or more people in a school, usually with the intent to motivate or influence behaviour, is of critical importance in stress relieve and management.

Integrated Nature

Stress-management interventions can either be undertaken as loose standing activities or integrated into a training course or programme on motivation, communication, time management, conflict resolution and shared decision-making (Steyn and Van Niekerk 2012). The integrated nature of stress management is also evident from the fact that it manifests itself as being both pro-active and re-active. Pro-active stress management in a school is conducted with the idea to “increase the level of awareness of the negative consequences of stress and help educators to identify the symptoms of stress” (Steyn and van Niekerk 2012). Specific proactive steps can be taken by introducing programmes that are aimed at stress-prevention such as team teaching, regular feedback and workload division and by just being aware of stress indicators such as teacher absenteeism, missing deadlines and making careless mistakes (Naidoo 2012). Re-active stress has to do with corrective measures or the application of traditional management actions such as the provision of good leadership where the existence of stress levels are very high. Re-active stress deals with the application of sound organisational and supervisory principles in stressful relationships between learners-and-staff and staff-and-staff. It could be that teachers have a need for personal assistance or additional physical facilities.

Action Plan for the Implementation of Stress Management Strategies in Schools

A stress management strategy form part of and should be linked to the strategic plan of school. The actions spelled out in terms of the plan are directed towards the overall organisational objectives and usually culminates into the compilation of an action plan.

In general terms an action plan has to do with the creation of a design that indicates the putting into practice of a particular aspect of organisational life. Particular actions have to be performed to obtain specific objectives (Cooper 2015). In practice three major characteristics are present as specific tasks namely, what will be done and by whom, time horizon – when will it be done, and resource allocation – what specific funds are available for specific activities (Cummings 2014).

CONCLUSION

The focus in this paper is to create an action plan for the implementation of stress management strategies in schools. An evaluative and integrative literature review was conducted to investigate information that relate to critical aspects of action planning in schools. Aspects such as strategy formulation in education, the elements of strategies in education and imperatives of stress management in education were discussed. An action plan in which the roles of school-stakeholders were highlighted, concluded the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In order to put the elements as discussed in the previous section into practice, the following recommendations are made. The Education Department must prioritize stress management as one of its important functions. This can only be achieved if sound strategies on the management of stress are put in place. Such strategies should be clear on how to identify stress amongst teachers and how to address it. This strategy on stress management will however have no effect if it is not introduced simultaneously with school policies and strategies that can assist in preventing stress such as capacity building for teachers, building effective and efficient leadership in schools, motivation of staff, maximising school discipline and using mentoring and induction.
- The Education Department should further implement its stress management strategies effectively. This means that programmes for stress management must be introduced in practice. Communication with regard to the contents of these courses have to be made available to schools on a regular basis. This information must be accessible to all teachers, especially those who are on stress-leave.
- Departmental officials are in the final instance responsible for the introduction of stress management courses. Specific officials should be identified who can deal with cases of stress amongst teachers. These officials should obviously be dedicated to handle stress and be empowered to take and implement decisions that can alleviate and manage the stress of these individuals.
- The SMT is responsible at school level for the formulation and implementation of local school policies and strategies. The SMT usually accepts the leadership role of the Department in this regard and adopt generic strategies made available by the Department. A wide range of policies and strategies that are potentially stress related such as the management of overcrowded classrooms, capacity development of staff, the filling of vacant posts and staff discipline are amongst the ones that could be formulated by the SMT. It is also essential that the SMT formulate a policy and specific strategies on stress management. These strategies should address key issues such as a shared vision, strategic participation, staff motivation, capacity development and the importance of shared values in the school. A good stress management strategy should also provide a clear indication of implementation issues such as the roles of different stakeholders in stress management and time frames for application.
- The school principal carries important responsibilities on the implementation of stress management strategies. As school leader and manager the principal has to organise, plan and implement new policies in such a way that teachers are not subjected to unnecessary stress. The principal is also accountable for the implementation of all SMT strategies-including a stress management strategy. In practice the school principal must perform his/her normal duties like administrative functions, disciplining learners and providing instructional guidance whilst at the same time ensuring that stress management strategies are applied. The application of these strategies as part of the principal's day-to-day functioning adds to his/her very important and key role in the school.

The principal should in effect show critical understanding of the school's strategic plan by linking different strategies that appear in the school's strategic plan. These strategies are according to the fundamental building blocks of a strategic plan. As such they prioritise a school's activities and co-determine the vision and mission and strategic objectives.

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