Continuing professional development for principals: a South African perspective

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We explore the rationale for school managers in South Africa to enrol for a new practice-based qualification and determine the perceptions of principals on how the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) course influences their leadership style. The task of being a principal is demanding, requiring energy, drive, and many personal qualities and attributes. Principals, involved in the day-to-day management of their schools, need to take time to reflect on their personal growth as leaders and managers. The expectations of principals have moved from demands of management and control to the demands for an educational leader who can foster staff development, parent involvement, community support, and learner growth, and succeed with major changes and expectations. Developing principals and providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills, values and attitudes becomes increasingly important as the dynamic and changing educational culture becomes increasingly difficult. Using a qualitative paradigm, we investigated the perceptions of principals on how the ACE course influenced their leadership style. The ACE course was conceived as a form of continuing professional development which has the purpose of equipping principals for the positions they occupy, or enabling teachers to move into an education leadership and management career path.

Keywords: *certification; continuing professional development; professionalisation*

Introduction and background

The provisions of the Department of Education's White Paper 1 (Department of Education, 1995) and White Paper 2 (Department of Education, 1996), the Report of the Review Committee on School Organisation, Governance and Funding (Department of Education, 2004), new legislation including the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996), and provincial legislation and policy directions point South Africa firmly towards democratisation and the decentralisation of a school-based system of education management and governance, with substantial decision-making authority in schools. However, the policy framework attempts to transform education. The legacy of the past education system was characterised by fragmentation, inequity in provisions, a crisis of legitimacy in many schools, and the demise of a culture of learning and teaching. There was resistance to change creating serious managerial problems at schools that in turn led to deterioration in the standards of education (Gallie & Sayed, 1997:461). According to Ramphele (1997:25) attempts by the government to transform the grossly inequitable and inadequate school system are characterised by failure to translate good policies into sound practice.

The South African Council of Educators' (SACE) Chief Executive Officer, Brijraj (Naidu, 1998:17), stated that the factors that could be responsible for poor matriculation results included a breakdown of professionalism by principals and teachers, lack of resources at schools, and apathy towards education by learners and their communities. In an article "*Top principals make top schools*", Matseke (1998:1) focused on the crucial role of the principal in the learning and teaching process. People in leadership positions have to think about what they should do to improve their lot. Naidu (1998:17) reports that there is a dire need to train and develop both the existing and also the newly appointed principals to effectively manage organisational structures and other facets of education management development, so that improvements in the quality of learning takes place.

Bush and Odura (2006) explain that there is rarely any formal leadership training and principals are appointed on the basis of their teaching record rather than their leadership potential. Induction and support are usually limited and principals have to adopt a pragmatic approach. Principals, involved in the day-to-day management of their schools need to take time to reflect on their personal growth as leaders and managers. Perhaps one of the major changes in the principalship has been the range of expectations placed on the position (Sybouts & Wendel, 1994:2; Tucker & Codding, 2002:1; Evetts, 1994:5). The expectations have moved from demands of management and control to the demands for an educational leader who can foster staff development, parent involvement, community support, and student growth, and succeed with major changes and expectations. The lack of stringent criteria and the absence of a qualification for the appointment of principals have resulted in many principals under-performing in their leadership and management roles (Bush, 2004). In South Africa, there is no overarching principal preparation or certification programme. Rather, each provincial department determines its own approach and content (mostly in-service programmes) but none has a prerequisite programme or licensure arrangement. However, some provincial departments do not have the capacity to implement the in-service programmes they design. Providing principals with the necessary knowledge, skills, values and attitudes becomes increasingly important in relation to the difficulties faced by a dynamic and changing educational culture. Therefore, the professionalisation of principalship can be considered as the strategically most important process to transform education successfully.

The National Department of Education has embarked on an intensive continuous professional development programme for appointed school principals and those aspiring to becoming one (Department of Education, 2006). To ensure that suitable candidates are appointed as principals, a new entry requirement to qualify as school principal in South Africa is soon to be imposed, giving recognition to those who obtain the National Professional Qualification for Principals. Many other countries, such as Singapore, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), have national qualification structures in place (Quong, 2006; Walker & Qian, 2006). In the US, for example,

a teacher is only eligible to apply for the principal's post once he/she has completed the Master of Educational Administration degree (Tucker & Codding, 2002:12; Jacobson, Logsdon & Wiegman, 1973:46). In the UK, teachers who wish to continue up the career ladder first become senior teachers or deputy heads and work with the principal as a member of the senior management team. With an average of about five years' experience as a deputy they can apply for headship posts (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006).

The University of Johannesburg through its Faculty of Education and a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Matthew Goniwe School of Governance and Leadership has initiated a new professional development programme, the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) in Educational Management, to address the growing concerns of professional development for principals in South African schools. This programme aims to address questions as to what exactly comprises the typical and minimum content in educational leadership and management, and seeks to find ways in which these parameters can be used to delineate a course in educational leadership and management.

In this article we focus on the ACE course as part of the principals' continuing professional development. We explore the rationale for a new practice-based qualification and determine the perceptions of principals on how the course influences the principals' leadership and management style.

Research problems and aims of the research
The move towards decentralisation has been sporadic, fragmented, incoherent and without the necessary visionary framework to keep it going (Bezzina, 2001). Furthermore, decentralisation practices are creating more demands on schools which are now of a more intrusive quality, as school boundaries become more permeable and transparent (Fullan, 1996). This implies that people view, study, and interpret managerial issues and events in a way different from that undertaken previously, resulting in new knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that will lead to a change in the practice of education management (Van der Linde, 2002:511). Principals are now faced with situations in which effective school management requires new and improved skills, knowledge, and attitudes to cope with the wide range of demands and challenges (Mestry, 1999), such as: coping with multicultural school populations; managing change and conflict; and coping with limited resources. The principal must have authority that is commensurate with his/her responsibility and accountability (Tucker & Codding, 2002:6; Crow, 2006).

The following encapsulates the role of the educational leader in a new millennium (Senge, 1996:45):

> We are becoming to believe that leaders are those people who 'walk ahead', people who are genuinely committed to deep change in themselves and in their organisations. They lead through developing new skills, capabilities, and understandings. And they come from many places in the organisation.

Considering the above background the research problem was encapsulated

by means of the following question:

> *How does the ACE, as an aspect of the continuing professional development, contribute to principals managing their schools effectively?*

The general aim of our research was to determine how the ACE, as aspect of continuing professional development, contributes to principals managing their schools effectively. In order to attain the general aim of the research, the following specific objectives were to

- determine the nature of the ACE qualification;
- determine the perceptions of principals on how the ACE qualification will contribute to their professional development and help them manage their schools effectively; and
- provide recommendations which will improve the delivery of the ACE programme in tertiary institutions.

Methodology

The research was focused within the interpretive paradigm and aimed to give a descriptive analysis of the ACE qualification for principals (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). The research design employed included a literature review on continuing professional development for principals, followed by a qualitative perception survey involving individual and focus group interviews. Other data collection instruments included documents and field notes compiled by the Centre for Education and Policy Development (CEPD), to evaluate the design and delivery of the ACE programme.

Both individual and focus group interviews were characterised by open-ended questions based on the topical areas to be covered. The aim was to acquire a clear understanding of how the professional development programme impacted on the principals' management and leadership role in their schools. The interviews included two sections: the first probed how the ACE programme contributed to the principals' continuing professional development, and the second considered the ACE programme itself, and its perceived impact on the principal.

A purposive sample was drawn for the interview phase. According to Henning *et al.* (2004) and Merriam (1998), purposive sampling involves selecting people who fit the criteria of desirable participants based on their experience or knowledge. The total target population was 94 principals in the Gauteng Province who completed the ACE programme. The sample consisted of four principals chosen because of the type of schools they managed, their performance in identified school projects, and the fact that CEPD selected these principals to evaluate the design and delivery of the ACE programme in their schools. The schools were plagued by numerous financial constraints, social and political problems, and were initially ineffectively managed. Principal A was a principal of a previously ex-Model C that now caters for learners with special needs. Principal B managed a combined school situated in the residential area of Diepsloot. Principal C was head of an ex-Model C primary school located in Florida Park, Roodepoort, and Principal D was principal of

a primary school situated in a rural area in Randfontein, about 50 kilometres west of Johannesburg.

The constant comparative method was used for the analysis of the qualitative data collected because it searches for categories and patterns of meaning. The researchers analysed the data in order to be able to form appropriate categories.

The qualitative nature of the study limited generalization of the results but the sampling methods ensured that the results were applicable to the specific population of school principals. The qualitative methods and sampling procedure therefore supported external validity within the specific population. Field-notes compiled by CEPD included the assessors' observations at these schools and interviews with staff members. The literature review, the information obtained through in-depth interviews, and pilot testing of the interview schedule helped to ensure relevancy and clarity (Frick & Kapp, 2006: 86). The research design and methodology aimed at making the study replicable and therefore reliable.

The structure of the ACE course

According to Bush and Jackson (2002); Bush and Oduro (2006); Evetts (1994) and Cardno and Fitzgerald (2005), training in many countries is not a requirement for appointment as a principal and there is still an assumption that good teachers can become effective managers and leaders without specific preparation for their leadership and management roles. Many of these serving principals lack basic leadership and management training prior to and after their entry into principalship:

In many instances … headteachers 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 managers now, including headteachers, that acquiring expertise can no longer be left to common sense and character alone; management development support is needed (Tsukudu & Taylor in Bush & Oduro, 2006).

Local and international developments in school management are demanding a great deal of technical and intuitive skills and leadership from principals. There is therefore an urgent need to provide principals with in-service education. Everard and Morris (1996:ix) make a critical point when they state that development of principals must lead to greater understanding and competence. Therefore, while it may be appropriate for a programme to include the acquisition of techniques or skills, or the learning of data, it must lead to a higher level of intellectual and creative performance. The process of development is primarily concerned with helping principals to acquire and improve the competencies necessary to manage schools effectively (Mestry & Grobler, 2004; Bradley, 1991; Craft, 2000; Gerber, Nel & Van Dyk,1997; Fidler & Atton, 2004; Bezzina, 2001).

In 2004, the University of Johannesburg and the Matthew Goniwe School

of Governance and Leadership initiated an ACE course in Educational Leadership and Management for principals and for those aspiring to the post of principal. The course aimed to acquaint participants with theories and research in the behavioural sciences that are related to the studies of the organisation. Within the framework of current developments in education theory and practice, it also aims to provide participants with opportunities to analyse situations and formulate strategies for tackling leadership and management problems in education.

The ACE, a practice-based two-year part-time course, is aimed at providing management and leadership support through a variety of interactive programmes that improve the students' practice, professional growth, and ethos of leadership. School leaders and managers are made aware of what is expected of them through the Norms and Standards of Educators, competencies and the expectations of the Department of Education (Naidu & Conley, 2005:1). It covers five key areas of management, namely, Understanding School Management in the South African Context, Managing Teaching and Learning, Managing Finances and Physical Resources, Managing People and Leadership, and Managing Education Law and Policy (Matthew Goniwe School for Leadership and Governance, 2004).

The programme is designed to provide participants with the knowledge base and rigorous intellectual analysis experience that will equip them to harness the human and other resources necessary to ensure educational institutions are highly effective. Principals should have insight into aspects dealing with school improvement, such as: assessing school needs; strategic direction and development of the school; teaching and learning; legislation and policy issues relating to schools; and empowering staff and allowing them to be involved in the development of the school.

Everard and Marsden (in Poster, 1999:15) concur with the premise that there is a need to alter the traditional approach — that of taught courses with a strong bent towards academic learning — to one that is more practice-based.

Findings and discussion
Reports prepared by the CEPD (2004; 2005; 2006) and data obtained from interviews reveal that students have benefited significantly from studying this course. From the data analysis the following themes emerged:

Shared leadership style based on collegiality
The principals who were interviewed confirmed that their previous style of leadership was authoritarian and created numerous problems and tensions. The establishment of school management teams (SMTs) represents a shift away from an authoritarian structure of school management that characterised *apartheid* education, to a more dynamic, inclusive, and participatory management system. The principals were forced to change their style to one of democracy. As one respondent (Principal B) remarked: "... *I learnt to adopt*

a shared management (style) and not to be authoritarian and an autocrat".

The style of leadership plays a crucial role in cementing lasting relations with all role-players. Collegial leadership, for example, emphasises that power and decision-making be shared among some or all the members of the institution (Bush, 2003:75). Because policy is determined within the participative framework, the principal is expected to adopt strategies which acknowledge that issues may emerge from different parts of the school and be resolved in a complex interactive process. The overall impression is that as a consequence of the ACE course, principals have re-evaluated the balance between individual authority and a more democratic dimension of leadership. The participants agreed that it was necessary to adopt a shared leadership style based on collegiality: "*I am a very consultative person ... Very democratic but at the same time I believe I am also autocratic in a sense that I don't allow for things to run without structure*" (Principal C).

The participants were happy to report on their enhanced management skills, a more rational approach when dealing with serious issues, the confidence to approach problems and conflicts, and the ability to maintain a disciplined and co-operative spirit in the school. They claimed competence in dealing with complex issues, and said that they now had the ability to deal with matters on a much more personal basis than before. Principal B explained:

"*Truly speaking it was like groping (something) in the dark. You knew things had to be done but you didn't know how to do them. You knew that structures had to be put in place but you didn't know which structure ...*"

Later she described how the ACE course had improved her competence and confidence: "*I feel capacitated. I feel rejuvenated. I feel like somebody who has been brought back to life*".

Opportunities for personal and professional growth
The challenge for initiatives such as the ACE course is the extent to which it put principals and SMTs on a development path towards greater professionalisation. The majority of principals without specific qualifications in management have limited opportunities for leadership development. Most attend short in-service events, lasting from one to two days, organised by the provincial departments of education. It is highly recommended that management development and training should take place prior to appointment (Bush & Heystek in Bush & Oduro, 2006).

Principal induction is non-existent and principals are filled with considerable anxiety, frustration and professional isolation over the fact that they do not understand the nature of their leadership responsibilities before they get to "the hot seat" (Walker & Qian, 2006). All the principals interviewed confirmed that the ACE course had effectively promoted their professional growth and given them a better understanding of their role in the school.

The quality which underpins the sense of development in principals is a greater confidence, a stronger sense of assurance, and the expert knowledge to undertake important tasks. They are able to interpret government regu-

lations and policies, critically questioning the contents thereof without merely obeying them, while some indicated that they activated and used effectively the existing school policies and structures within schools. Teachers are now given clear guidance and direction.

The respondents also indicated that the module on financial management was particularly helpful in enabling them to manage school finances. All schools have functional finance committees and all financial matters are managed in a transparent and honest manner. The rigorous requirements of the provincial Department of Education on finances tend to keep principals cautious about managing school funds.

Improved relationships with relevant stakeholders

Democratic engagement fosters healthy professional relationships amongst the staff and parents. The principals reported that their changed style of leadership had improved relationships with all role-players in the school. After embarking on the course, they reported having a more constructive relation-ship with the staff and co-operative relations with members of the community. The invitational principal sees possibilities in every person and focuses on what the person is capable of becoming. In one school the principal indicated that a group of teachers were not particularly in favour of her appointment and she was of the opinion that it was a racial issue rather than her ability to lead and manage the school. Most of the teachers were white and she was a coloured. However, there were some who supported her in her endeavours. This course had taught her to persevere, and she said that over time she would gain the confidence of all her staff members:

> "*I forged not only a very strong working relationship but also they've be-come more than colleagues … Many of the schools had to do their elections over and over again. I had three hundred people at (our SGB) elections ... I believe I got the community's support*". (Principal C)

Greater flexibility in personal interactions requires that the principal refrain from partiality and favouritism. The principal was aware that the unions were powerful and that strained relations with union members were a recipe for failure. It was for this reason that most of the principals indicated that while they had cordial relations with union members they were also assertive. Tea-chers who took leave for union work were required to produce evidence that permission had been granted by the district (CEPD, 2005).

Delivery of the ACE curriculum

Sometimes, programmes offered by universities or other service providers have little or no coherence. Tucker and Codding (2002:13) assert that, in too many cases, very little is expected of the students in these programmes by way of performance that would shed some light on their suitability as school administrators (principals). Categories of skills or knowledge are specified, means for achieving them must be documented, procedures for fieldwork must be specified and be audited, and periodic programme reviews under-taken. There is typically very little connection between the curriculum as

taught and the actual demands, conditions, and problems of everyday practice.

However, most of the modules developed for this course were based on the needs of principals to manage their schools effectively. For example, the module on Teaching and Learning has assisted principals in creating or sustaining a positive culture of teaching and learning. Principals have developed monitoring and control mechanisms to supervise the work of teachers and learners. One of the respondents (Principal B) clearly acknowledged that what she learnt in the ACE programme made a difference to her:

> "*You see in the media principals are taken to court for embezzling funds. And it was quite scary. And I remember that I came with very little knowledge. Here the government is entrusting me with money to run a school. How do I run it with integrity? And through the finance module it taught me different forms of budgets*".

Participants gave positive ratings to several aspects of their modules, notably the management of teaching and learning, managing people, and law and policy. The management of financial and physical resources was particularly significant, as the post-apartheid government had decentralised many responsibilities to the school level, including budgeting, school fee setting, and fundraising. Some of the participants argued that, although the programme adopted a practice-based model, there should be some theory. However, there were others who perceived the mode of delivery as appropriate in that it enabled them to solve problems collectively, as compared to the 'traditional management courses' they had attended in the past, which focused on individual studies and the writing of examinations. These participants perceived the contact sessions and cohort sessions as being invaluable to their becoming effective principals. The principals were subjected to higher order thinking when completing assignments in each module. There were many principals who consulted books in the University's library. In each module, lecturers included theory in study guides that were given to students.

Efforts to improve the certificate programme over the past two years had been based on the feedback sought and received on the different modules from the participants, assessors, and the CPED. Most of the principals were happy with the ACE programme, especially its practical aspects. Materials prepared by the University were being used as resources to which principals made reference in their day-to-day management and leadership practice.

Participants unanimously agreed that there were not enough contact sessions and that those offered were limited to school holidays. Although students were encouraged to set up appointments with lecturers at any time during the academic year, most of them did not make use of this opportunity.

The importance of cohort meetings

The principals indicated the discussions with colleagues during the cohort sessions had given them new insights into dealing with the staff and parents. The principals felt strongly about the cohort sessions they attended, where they had the opportunity to meet and discuss with colleagues issues affecting

them as school managers. The sessions helped them see problems from a different perspective, as it often came up during discussions that their colleagues had had to deal with similar situations. In these sessions, principals shared their experiences, challenges, struggles, frustrations, opinions, perspectives, and practical ways in which they overcame their challenges and struggles. These interactions had been of great importance to the principals. Principal A spoke about the merit of cohort meetings:

> "*I think that this was one of the highlights of the course. It was there that we were able to interact with our colleagues; we shared difficulties that we were facing. In fact, we developed lasting relationships as well*".

The benefits of continuous assessments

One of the requirements of the ACE course was to undertake a major project based on the needs of the school. Each principal was required to develop a project plan in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders and compile a portfolio of evidence. The portfolio influenced the principals' ability to reflect on situations and account for activities taking place in their schools. The success of the project would depend on the active involvement of all role-players. A project plan had to be approved by these role-players and the project undertaken by all of them. From the projects received and assessed by both internal and external site-based assessors, it would appear that co-operation amongst role-players existed. However, respondents unanimously agreed that the external assessors should have begun assessing during the course of the project to "*guide and direct us*", instead of coming only at the end of the project. Principal D aptly stated:

> "*I think it would be helpful if they came thrice during the project so that we could also have seen where we were going wrong and what we could have improved in the portfolio*".

In place of examinations, students were given assignments in each module. The participants were critical of the University's continuous assessment programme. In the first year they had to complete three assignments for each module, which amounted to 15 assignments and 12 in the second year. There were instances where students had to complete three assignments within a two-week period, and this caused undue stress. In some modules no assessment criteria or feedback on assignments were given and this placed students at a disadvantage in their summative assessment.

Recommendations

The following recommendations arose from the findings:

Delivery of the ACE programme

More contact sessions at the University should be provided in both years of study. The time-lapse between two contact sessions (April-to-June or June-to-September) impacts negatively on a principal's commitment to and interest in the course.

Facilitators should refrain from discussing a specific school's problem or

generic trivial educational issues during the contact sessions. They should make use of cases, simulations, and role play the school has developed to base its programme on situations that mirror the kinds of problems that practising school principals face every day (Tucker & Codding, 2002:12).

Scheduling continuous assessments

Scheduling of assignments and other continuous assessment tasks should be carefully planned. Each module has three assignments and in the first year a project plan must be completed by the candidates. In the second year, in addition to the assignments, the student must submit a portfolio of evidence. The university should revise their assessment methods, by either reducing the number of assignments or scheduling them in such a way that students are given sufficient time for submission. Furthermore, it should be standard practice that a rubric is provided on the assessment of assignments. All assignments should be thoroughly assessed according to set criteria, and feedback must be given to improve students' understanding of knowledge and skills in the different modules.

Facilitators should give guidance and direction on a more regular basis to participants during the developing phase of the project plan and the compilation of the portfolio of evidence. The site-based assessors should visit the school at least once a term and be readily available whenever schools require their services.

Conclusion

The appointment of principals with poor leadership and management skills has created an array of problem issues, criticisms, and expectations, thus making schools more difficult to lead. Recurring budget shortfalls, the complex needs of learners and the cry for higher standards and achievement are only a few daily realities that principals face.

The ACE course can give effect to a coherent and sustainable approach to building leadership and management capacity throughout the educational system. As in-service education, it must become an essential and mandatory part of the principals' continuing professional development in school management, rather than a remedial appendage for ineffective performance. In-service training aims at promoting the professional growth of principals so that they may manage schools more effectively and also be exposed and respond to educational change and innovation.

Acknowledgements

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