

The making of South African school principals: An empirical perspective

Simeon Maile

Tshwane University of Technology

Abstract: The central thesis of this paper is that using the Peter Principle of promoting teachers into principalship while they have no skills required for incumbents to be able to function in the principalship position creates problems for effective management of schools.

Aim: The aim of this article is to investigate the route that principals undertake to reach the position of principalship.

Method: Data was collected through the use of interviews.

Findings: The findings reveal that in South Africa there is a move towards the development of standards for principalship, and that the Department of Education is introducing rigorous standards for the appointment of principals, as well as development and support programmes for principals. It seems in future a certification will be a major requirement for the principalship position.

Keywords: principalship, instructional leadership, discrimination, democracy, constitution, training, excellence, career

1. Historical Background

In South Africa principalship has evolved through many turbulent periods marked by deprivation, resistance and democracy. The turbulence emerged from an unstable political history. South African school principals emerge from the problems encountered by all educators who were not trained properly for their job. Sayed (2004:247) argues, with regard to this problem, that generally educators were not properly trained. Educator supply was conditioned by the need to meet racial and ethnic segregation.

Blacks were deliberately deprived of opportunities to become leaders in schools and to acquire higher education. Very few blacks completed basic schooling and not many of them completed secondary schooling. Their curriculum was limited to humanities such as Religious Education and History in secondary schools. They were inadequately prepared for the jobs that they pursued. Sono (1999:7) points out that those who became educators were not recognized and treated in a similar way as their white counterparts.

2. Peter Principle

In all the cases discussed above a common problem that emerged was that principalship was regarded as another job, which even though senior, could be executed by any educator who excelled in teaching (Van der Westhuizen, 1991:50-52; Maile, 2000:379; & Legotlo, 2001:103). These researchers argue that principalship is a special position which requires specialized training. Legotlo (2001:104) points out that the general pattern existing is that one must first become an educator, then be promoted to a departmental head or deputy principal and then later to the post of principal. It means that teaching experience is the criterion for appointment to principalship. This is tantamount to putting age as a requirement (Pashardis & Ribbins, 2003) for one to become a principal.

3. The New Democratic Dispensation

The new democratic dispensation set out to change the legacy of apartheid. The changes were initiated through the White Paper on Education and Training (Department of Education, 1995). The rationale for the change in principalship standards embraces the Constitutional principles outlined in the preamble of the Constitution of 1993.

4. Theoretical Considerations

After analyzing developments from the South African context, I will now turn to the theoretical considerations of the making of school principals. Researchers (Rayner & Ribbins, 1999; Gronn, 2003; and Pashiardis & Ribbins, 2003) suggest that the making of school principals takes different personality and contextual aspects, but is tied to common elements such as formation, accession, incumbency and moving on. This model takes into consideration the route that a person takes to become a manager.

With regard to formation Rayner and Ribbins (1999:10) suggest that prior to the assumption of leadership, there is a preparatory stage during which candidates shape themselves and are shaped for the principalship role. During the preparatory stage, leaders are socialized into societal and institutional norms and values. The socialization may be consistent or inconsistent with the leader's values, beliefs and morality. The socialization plays a significant role during the early years of the leader. Accession follows the formation. Pashiards and Ribbins (2003) point out that during the accession stage, leaders must determine their chosen career. Leaders then seek advancement, and in doing so finally engage in a period of preparation of promotion to principalship during which they develop, rehearse and test their capacity and readiness by comparison with current practicing principals and prospective rivals. Therefore, accession is a developmental period geared to the accomplishment of two crucial tasks, namely the preparation (formation) and the construction of oneself as a credible candidate for promotion and the acquisition of a persuasive performance routine to convince those controlling promotion opportunities. When leadership positions become available, at whatever level, candidates learn to present themselves and compete with others for preferment. In doing so, they come to rely on networks of peers, patrons and sponsors (Rayner & Ribbins, 1999:18).

Formation and accession develop leadership persona. Leadership is the main characteristic of incumbency (enacting leadership). Rayner and Ribbins (1999:30) argue that a candidate's persona remains intact by the time an individual faces his/her first leadership. When his/her persona blends with individual experience and professional interests, leaders produce special vision and asset of beliefs. Ultimately, his/her individual behaviour is shaped. The final stage is moving on (leaving principalship). The first route to leaving is perceived as retiring or changing careers for negative or natural causes such as ageing or ill-health. Typically, principals taking this route see themselves as exhausted by the job. The second route in the moving on stage is called re-invention. It is regarded as a new beginning. Principals taking this route often assume leadership in higher offices.

5. Research Strategy

The research strategy in this research was face-to-face contact with the respondents. I used qualitative approach which included an ethnographic research design. In this way I was able to discover the lived experiences of educators in their own context through observation and face-to-face interviews (De Vos, 2002:274). Purposive sampling was used. At the end of the process, five educators, four principals and four educator trainers were selected.

6. Findings

6.1. The making of four students

6.1.1 Reasons for choosing teaching

In general the students interviewed appear to have chosen teaching for a variety of reasons. Most students point out that they were given career guidance at school.

6.1.2 Influence to become educators

When I asked the learners what influenced them to become educators, the students revealed that different influences played a major part in persuading them to take up teaching. Those who planned to become educators have role models.

6.1.3 Expectation of the job

I asked the student what their expectations were of the job of teaching. Their answers reveal naivety and utopia as well as a lack of awareness.

6.2. The making of educators

6.2.1 Reasons for choosing teaching

In general the five educators interviewed pointed out that they were drawn to teaching by various reasons. Most pointed out that they become educators because in their time there was no career guidance.

6.2.2 Accession to teaching

Most educators attended training at local colleges doing certificates and diplomas as their qualifications. Others attended the local university. This was in line with the apartheid policy, which created homelands, and universities and colleges on the basis of ethnicity.

6.2.3 Career plans

It is assumed that once educators have entered and settled in their jobs, they will seek advancement, and in doing so finally engage in a period of preparation for promotion to principalship. During this period they develop, rehearse and test their capacity. Most educators' career plans took the path of self development, volunteering on tasks, attending courses and enrolling for higher qualification in universities as well as ultimately seeking for promotion.

6.3. Principals

Four principals were interviewed. I asked the principals how they became principals. The responses given indicate that principals take different routes ranging from promotion within one school to promotion from another school. The pattern is such that those teaching in primary schools get promoted in primary schools and very rarely in secondary schools. Those in secondary schools get promoted in either primary or secondary schools.

6.4. Re-Invention

6.4.1 (Un) satisfactory aspect of teaching and principalship

Most educators complain that teaching is no longer satisfactory to them because of class size and workload, low status, limited opportunities, overwhelming change, learner-related problems and lack of support. Similarly, school principal experience unsatisfactory aspects of their job. The list includes limited opportunities, conflicts with staff, overwhelming change, learner-related problems, lack of resources, scape-goating, and lack of support.

7. Conclusion

Research in this article reveals certain patterns which are followed on becoming a principal. Usually, educators will have to undergo training, thereafter become educators. When they are in the system they undergo development processes which are explained in career plans. Through development processes they attain competencies, which enable them to get promoted through the ranks until they become principals.

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