

Towards an Understanding of How School Administrative Clerk's Negotiate Their Work in Public Schools: A Social Worlds Perspective

Abdullah Bayat¹, Visvanathan Naicker^{2*} and Theodore Combrinck¹

¹University of the Western Cape, Modderdam Road, Bellville, Cape Town, South Africa, 7535

²University of South Africa, Cnr Janadela and Alexandra Avenues, Midrand, JHB, 1685 South Africa

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ABSTRACT There is a dearth of literature concerning the social worlds of school administrative staff. The aim of the present paper is to understand the complex (social) reality of their work. Hence, the researchers used the notion of social worlds as a theoretical lens. The theoretical lens challenged us as researchers to understand the administrative clerk not as individuals but as participants within the social world of public schools. A qualitative methodology and case studies with multiple levels of input from participants were used. The researchers argued that the agency of the school administrative clerk lies in reworking, reconstructing, and influencing the social world of the school. The researchers asserted that the social worlds of school administrative clerks are closely tied to their perspectives, that is, their subjective understanding of their social context. The researchers argued that school administrative clerks are an integral part of the school social world—much more than the current discourse gives them credit for. The researchers' findings suggested that the role of school administrative clerks needs to be re-imagined and re-conceptualized to recognize the existing commitments that they are dedicated to. Finally, using social world's theoretical lens clarifies the crucial role of administrative clerks for the successful running of their schools.

INTRODUCTION

Schools are social arenas in which teachers and principals act to teach the students of South Africa. The management, leadership and administration of schools have been identified as concepts and practices that need to be understood and improved so that students learning outcomes can be improved in South African schools. This paper makes the argument that traditional conception of management and leadership concentrates on principals and teachers but misses crucial strata of employees namely: *school administrative clerks*. The focus on school administrative clerks work and their social contexts has been precipitated by the range of alternative school leadership models that exists, as a result of schools embracing distributed or shared leadership models (Aldridge 2008).

Objective

The objective of the present research is to problematize the social worlds of school admin-

istrative clerks. It aims to inform the developers of qualifications for school administrative clerks and stakeholders who want to improve teaching and learning how these role-players are linked to the effective and efficient running of the school. The aim is to show the embedded nature of the activities of administrative clerks within the particular social context. Further, the researchers argued that their contribution is related to their individual agency within their school context.

Literature Review

Literature using the social worlds framework to explore the work of school administrative clerks in South Africa does not exist but there are a few studies that attempted to describe administrative clerks work practices (Van Der Linde 1998; Naicker et al. 2011). Studies of the activities and the roles of administrative clerks in schools (Casanova 1991; Van Der Linde 1998; Thomson et al. 2007; Conley et al. 2010; Naicker et al. 2011), higher education institutions (Szekeres 2004; Mcinnis 1998; Whitchurch and London 2004) and businesses (Fearfull 1996; Fearfull et al. 2008; Truss 1993) found that they are regarded as marginal and invisible even though their contributions are essential for the smooth

Address for correspondence:
Prof. Dr. Visvanathan Naicker
University of South Africa,
Cnr Janadela and Alexandra Avenues,
Midrand, JHB, 1685 South Africa
E-mail: naickv@unisa.ac.za

running of their workplaces. However, there have been studies highlighting the agency and spatial practices of school administrative clerks (Bayat 2012). In addition, in a study of the impact of school business managers' performance on incoming principals, Woods et al. (2012) found that school business managers were crucial in enabling these new principles to take on their positions of principalship.

School administrative job descriptions were conceived within a milieu where there was a distinction between line and staff (Kindig 1961). Organizations were then conceived as best run by the principles of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy can be defined by hierarchy and rule-bound behaviors. These two principles epitomize bureaucratic forms of organization (Kallinikos 2004). In the case of the school, teachers and principals are the 'line' and the administrative clerks are the staff. Staff was meant to follow rules and was lower on the hierarchy, which meant that they had little authority in decision-making. Line staff made all the decisions, they were less rule bound and were higher up in the hierarchy. School administrative clerks were thus considered and still are considered staff.

To explore administrative clerks' work the researchers turn to Strauss (1993). Strauss' (1993) foundational concept of social worlds is fundamental to the understanding of actions within organizations. The concept of social worlds as a way in which people are organized stems from symbolic interactionism (Strauss 1993). The authors propose that Strauss' notion of social worlds, gives us a lens to view the school as a setting of negotiations and interactions. "In Strauss', theory on organizations as social worlds he focuses upon action and interaction as a continuous process" (Elkejaer 2004: 428). More specifically, the researchers draw on the assumptions that:

- (1) Interactions take place in a structural context (the school as a hierarchical organization and the broader social context of the teachers and the students), the conditions here shape the possibilities for negotiation and interaction;
- (2) School administrative clerks, teachers and principals as work groups can be viewed as social worlds whose activities require site (context) and means; and
- (3) Material conditions and resources are part of the structural conditions for work.

Social worlds are "the fundamental building block(s) of collective action" (Clarke 1991: 131). A social world is an interactive unit that arises when a number of individuals strive to act in some collective way, often requiring the coordination of separate perspectives and the sharing of resources. It has "at least one primary activity (along with related activities), ... sites where activities occur ... [and] technology (inherited or innovative means of carrying out the social world's activities)" (Strauss 1978: 122; cited in Clarke 1991: 131). A social world is an interactive unit, a "universe of regularized mutual response, communication or discourse" (Shibutani 1955: 524).

Clarke (1991) noticed that, membership of a social world is constrained by the limits of effective communication rather than by geography or formal structure. However, (Fitzpatrick et al. 1995) hold the view that social worlds may be well defined, for example, an organizational hierarchy, or they may be loosely defined, for example, the community of World Wide Web users or the participants at a conference workshop. In addition, they may be short or long-lived, depending on the purpose for which they have come together. Their shared goal may not necessarily be well developed and completely knowable. Strauss (1978, 1993), states that workplaces are multiple arenas of social worlds made up by commitments to specific work practices. Accordingly, work is understood as coordinated collective actions and organizations are understood as intertwined and overlapping multiple social worlds (Clarke 1991; Strauss 1978, 1993).

Organisations are viewed as social arenas or multiple social worlds of negotiated orders. According to Elkjaer and Huysman (2008: 172) "The notion of organizations as arenas of social worlds resembles the understanding of organizations as communities of practices". Shibutani (1955) states that a social world is an interactive unit that may influence the meaning that people impute on events. Social worlds inform one what information is important. The use of social worlds informs us that studying work practices involves not only focusing on harmony but also on conflict and that, the focus is on participation. This enhances the perspective that the emotional elements of organizational life and work include tension and conflict which is reflected in the different commitments of organizational members to organizational activities (Huysman and Elkjaer 2006).

Work may be defined as coordinated and collective set of actions. Putting more simply, a workplace does not have causes that lead to activities because these are determined by participant's commitments to 'have to' and 'want to' take part in coordinated and collective action. Workers organise their workplaces through commitments to social worlds, which are defined as: "*Groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business*" (Clarke 1991: 131; cited in Strauss 1993: 212). Clarke (1991) hypothesises that the theory of workplaces as made up of social worlds is based on a perspective of organisational theory that seeks to understand and conceptualise the complexity of social organising rather than dismissing it. According to Strauss, most organisations can be viewed as "arenas wherein members of various sub worlds make differential claims, seek differential ends, engage in contest and make or break alliances in order to do the things they wish to do" (Strauss 1978:125). In brief, "Strauss postulates social worlds as the interactions between individual actors and collective groups of actors (represented by individuals) and how these can be understood in relation to their ability to negotiate, contest and align positions on issues of importance." Thus, we interpret the work practices of the school administrative clerks as originating not solely from within themselves but as situated outcomes of negotiations and interactions between the various participants in a given social world.

Key Aspects of Literature Reviewed

The practices of school administrative clerks were identified as essential practices broadly associated with the social worlds of school management and leadership.

The literature reviewed dwelt on social worlds and presented studies from which the theoretical perspective of social worlds was drawn from. Based on the above discussion, the following research questions were developed.

Research Questions

The research addressed by this study is as follows:

- ♦ What are the social worlds that administrative clerks negotiate in their day-to-day activities?
- ♦ What work do they do in these social worlds?
- ♦ What does this information tell us about administrative clerks' contribution to their schools?

Research Design

The researchers chose a case study design, which is a substantial tool for doing a modernist qualitative research study (Schurink 2003). Following from Bogdan and Biklen's (1998) exposition, the study was designed as (1) an observational case study (participant observation supplemented by interviews and documents focusing on leadership in the social world of the school administrative clerks), as well as (2) a multi-case study (five school administrative clerks were studied).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in four educational districts located in South Africa's Western Cape Province. It was argued that by focusing this inquiry on five administrative clerks who had substantive experience, rich material would be generated to explore and describe their social worlds. Careful consideration was given to who else should be approached to take part in the research. It was decided to involve the school community responsible for service delivery in the schools where the research was being conducted to gain the rich material that qualitative research demanded. Thus, principals, parents, teachers, district officials, and a local university were invited to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Qualitative researchers generally rely on four basic types of data sources: interviews, observations, documents, and audio-visual materials (see Creswell 1998). Eager to capture, describe and appreciate the characteristics of school clerks responsible for service delivery, and to find out how they address challenges and manage difficulties they experience in the execution of their day-to-day activities, the researchers employed all of these methods as well as theo-

retical concepts derived from the literature and policy documents.

Documents

The researchers scrutinized media reports and press statements as well as official reports and files (unsolicited documents). To be able to understand and interpret the experiences and viewpoints of the participants against their different backgrounds, the researchers used socio-demographic information gained from the participants. The researchers also kept a project diary outlining important decisions and dates.

Face-to-face Interviews

As Bogdan and Biklen (1998: 35) state, “qualitative researchers are interested in how people act and think in their own settings; they attempt to ‘blend into the woodwork’, or to act so the activities that occur in their presence do not differ significantly from those that occur in their absence”. The interviews were, therefore, conducted in the research setting at school where participants felt comfortable. The following warning of Bogdan and Biklen (1998: 35) was heeded: “If you treat people as ‘research subjects,’ they will act like research subjects, which are different from how they usually act.” The researchers took special caution not to treat the participants any different from their normal day-to-day interaction with them. Thus, the researchers went out of their way to treat them as administrative clerks in the school. From the outset, the researchers made it clear that, within the research context, they were interested in how the research participants thought about their lives, their experiences and particular situations (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). To capture and understand the vast experience of interactive work, daily activities, and work relationships in schools, three rounds of semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted. These interviews (discussing and audio-recording key aspects or themes) yielded valuable in-depth knowledge of the participants’ life world (Creswell 1998).

Participant Observation

Bogdan and Biklen (1998: 35) stated that “qualitative researchers try to interact with their subjects in a natural, unobtrusive, and non-

threatening manner”. As already indicated, while doing the research, the researchers, in their capacity as university researchers, interacted with the research participants on a regular basis.

Literature Study

Relevant scholarly works, textbooks and journal papers on school secretaries, distributed leadership and educational management were scrutinized for additional insight.

Audio-visual Material

Refer Creswell 1998; Denzin et al. 2005.

The study made use of photographs to illustrate the day-to-day activities of the administrative clerks at their schools.

Case Studies

The five case studies were purposively chosen. The main criteria for the choice were the diversity of the school contexts in which the administrative clerks operated.

Data Collection

Data was collected through interviews with the five school administrative clerks. In addition, the researchers engaged with the administrative clerks in focus groups sessions held at the university. In addition, the researchers were allowed to access to and examined the clerk’s learning portfolios. The portfolios had originally been an assessment component for a certificate in school business administration that the clerks had completed.

Data Analysis

When we speak of “data analysis” we mean the techniques you can use to make sense out of and to learn from the hundreds, or even thousands, of pages of recorded statements and behavior in your field notes. More specifically, “data analysis”

refers to a process which entails an effort to formally identify themes and to construct hypotheses (ideas) as they are suggested by data and an attempt to demonstrate support for those themes and hypotheses (Bogdan and Taylor 1975: 97).

Data analysis “is a systematic search for meaning” (Hatch 2002: 148). The researchers looked through the interview transcripts to uncover the meaning that administrative clerks were making as they told us about their experiences. From the data collected, we were able to piece together their activities and the unique social world that they worked within.

FINDINGS

Case Studies

The purpose of the case studies is to provide a picture of school business administration social world and the negotiated role of the school administrators within the context of real schools. The aim with the case studies was to select a range of schools according to type, using the dimensions of primary and high school, fee-paying and no fee-paying schools, section 20 and section 21. The quintiles are represented in brackets (see Table 1).

Table 1: Fee paying

School level	No fee-paying		Fee-paying	
	Section 20	Section 21	Section 20	Section 21
Primary	School D (2)	School C (2)	School A (5)	School B (5)
High		School E (2)		

Schools were selected that had a school administrative clerk enrolled on the CSBA program and data was gathered from their portfolios of evidence and from their participation in focus group interviews. Schools A, C, D and E all had a pool of poor students (all black and colored), whereas School B was a relatively wealthy public school that had been designated a white school under apartheid. The case studies depict an unstable and changing demographic population, particularly with schools A, C, D and E. Further, in all these schools, learner numbers fluctuated as families (many living in informal settlements) moved between different areas.

Primary School A

Primary School A was established in 1967 and by 1968 the number of students had dra-

matically increased to 1200. However, the number of students has dropped substantially and in 2008, they dropped to 510. The students ranged from the age of 5 (grade R) to 13 years old in grade 7. School A is a fee-paying section 21 school. However, it is located in a very poor area¹. Students attending the school come from various working class areas². Although, it is officially a fee-paying school, only 20% of the students actually pay school fees. FA, the informant to this study, described the socio-economic status of the parents in the following way. “Most of the parents are unemployed or the father’s in jail or the mother’s a single parent” (Focus Group 3/06/10) or they are ‘oupa’s and ouma’s grandpa’s and grandma’s] children’ (FA Portfolio). The fundraising events are crucial to supplement the inadequate income of the school. However, the income raised through fundraising is limited, because it relies on input from the family members of the students, many of whom are poor. FA was a key contributor to the schools fund raising efforts.

The teaching staff consists of the Principal, Deputy Principal, 12 permanent educators, 2 school governing body (SGB) educator posts and 4 teacher assistants. There are 2 permanent administrative staff and 3 support staff. F.A.’s formal job title is senior administrative clerk. FA views her two main job objectives as firstly, financial management and secondly, to assist and support the principal. As financial manager, she ensures effective control and ‘management of the budget’ (FA Portfolio 2008). She administers school funds and financial books. She administers the grade-R subsidy. She handles the procurement of goods and services and maintains the inventory. Her additional duties can be summarized into the following categories. She manages the day-to-day administrative activities and fulfills the role of principal’s secretary. She does information gathering and processing; she maintains a filing system, and she handles confidential documentation. She administers the feeding scheme.

F.A. has worked at the school for 10 years. During that time, she has taken on many extra responsibilities. From 2007, she undertook the data collection and capturing for the Centralized Educational Management Information System (CEMIS) as required by the local education authority. She has worked with the principal to develop a range of new policies and to update

existing policies. She has coordinated a number of large-scale fundraising events. She has taken on a number of duties in the sphere of human resources management, such as implementing a new leave management system, conducting the administrative aspects of recruitment of educators and has been involved in staff performance improvement systems. She has taken on the role of non-teaching representative on the SGB.

As her role has expanded, she has developed her skills extensively and has at times worked overtime and over school holidays as requested by the principal. Her gross salary is approximately R8000 and she receives a housing subsidy of R500.

From 2004 to 2007, the school was in financial difficulties, but there was overspending and mismanagement of funds, and the school was not able to succeed in organizing fundraising activities. Members of staff spent school money without consulting FA as financial manager. Because of financial constraints, an amount of only R10 000 had been budgeted for textbooks. While F.A. was away on sick leave for three months, textbooks were bought for R50 000. In 2007, a new principal was appointed, and he and the FA worked as a team to improve the financial management of the school. Within six months the deficit was cleared and the school was able to achieve a positive balance. However, she still feels that she is awarded a lower status than her contribution merits. Further, she is not remunerated in accordance with the extent of her contribution to the school. Although the principal fully supports her involvement on the school management team, some senior teachers question her competence to be on the SMT.

Interpreting the social world of school administrative clerks through the social worlds theoretical lens means that administrative clerks' activities show their unique perspective within their social space.

FA's area of commitments can be summarized as follows: financial control; secretarial function to the principal; picking up the slack for the principal; information processor; participation on the SGB and participation on the SMT. Her most important commitment is to see to the financial aspects of the school. From the data, we observe that there is conflict and contestation around this role at school. However, the social world is shaped by her commitment to the financial aspects of the school.

As Elkjaer and Huysman (2008) have indicated, "social worlds are grounded in agency" while at the same time FA find herself within arenas that are already negotiated. However, there is room for her agency since social worlds are negotiated social structures. They are negotiated on a day-to-day, event-by-event process as demonstrated in how she saw the school's financial difficulties as her ambit of work, above.

High School B

High School B is situated in the suburb of Bothasig. It is a section 21 fee-paying school in Quintile 5 in Metropole North. In 2008, there were 750 students in the school in Grade 8 to Grade 12. There were 33 educators of which 23 were local education authority funded and 10 were funded by the SGB. There was 12 support staff, including 5 administrators. The local education authority funded 5 of these posts and 7 by the SGB. In 2006, the school had a record number of students who achieved an A-aggregate in matric. The school has many sporting activities. There are three computer laboratories. HT, our informant, who is the bursar at the school, notes that getting all the staff and students e-literate a major challenge. HT is deeply involved in the running of the school with the principal. By 2008, she had worked at the school in this post for 15 years. Her local education authority job title was Senior Administrative Clerk at Grade 3. Her salary was approximately R9000 per month. In 2008, school fees made up 80.8% of the sources of income and local education authority allocations made up 4.8%. 9% of the income came from recouping of bad debt. HT is one of five administrative staff at the school. Her commitments within her social world included drafting the budget and serving on the finance committee.

HT attends meetings of the SGB and serves on the finance committee. HT is not the non-teaching representative, which is a role that is filled by one of the other administrative staff. HT's social world is reflected in her perspective and her commitments. Although, she does not make any decisions by herself regarding how money is spent she has a say regarding spending via her membership of the school governing body where the school's yearly budget is set. Her commitments include: financial control; information processing and participation on the SGB.

Primary School C

Primary School C is situated in the working class area of Philippi East and is located in Quintile 2. The students come formainly informal settlements. The school is a no fee-paying school, which was established in 2000. The high standard of financial accounting at the school resulted in a successful application for section 21 status at the beginning of 2008. In 2008, the school had 941 students, ranging in age from 6 to 14 years. It had 32 educators, including the principal. It had two administrative clerks and four support staff.

PQ, the research informant from this school, has worked in an administrative position in the school since 2002. The school has grown from 600 students and nine educators. An unstable period ensued during 2003 and 2004 concerning the principal. PQ's educational background is unusual for an administrative clerk in that he has a BA and Honors degree from a local university. In 2002, he answered the telephone and did typing; however, this has changed dramatically since then. In 2006, he was elected to the SGB representing the non-teaching staff and was appointed as a finance officer, which resulted in the financial accounting standard of the school being raised.

PQ is on the Finance Committee of the SGB, is the finance officer, and is involved in the budget development process. Various committees, such as Sport and Culture and the Music committees submit their budgets to the finance committee, which drafts a budget and submits it to the SGB for approval. The SGB presents the budget to a parents' meeting for discussion and adoption. When the parents have adopted the budget, it is signed and sent to the local educational District Office. Although the budget development process is done by the school, PQ felt the process was rushed and not enough time was given for analysis and redefining. PQ played a huge role in the budgeting process.

The school dumps the drawing up of the budget in PQ's lap. Although legislatively the SGB controls the school finances the responsibilities falls largely on PQ's shoulders. He does requisitions, for organizing student's transport in conjunction with the Finance Committee. He handles payments, financial recording, and prepares quarterly reports for the SGB and the district office and prepares the financial records for

auditing. The school's finance policy is lacking in terms of following financial guidelines set by the local educational authority. It does not include provision for managing the schools' and it does not up of computerized financial records. Further, PQ thinks that there is not enough segregation of duties among the finance committee, which should be stipulated in the finance policy. PQ is also responsible for record keeping. He is required to keep records of computer hardware and software and manage maintenance of the school's computer system. He assists educators where IT skills are lacking. He has is not directly involved with teaching and learning functions of the school but has assisted teachers when asked to. He has the responsibility of organizing school uniforms and assisting in the administration of the feeding scheme program. He says that administrative clerks have many responsibilities, many of which are not in their job descriptions. PQ also advises and works closely with the rest of the support staff such as the maintenance person and the cleaning staff but does not formally supervise them.

PQ is a member of the School Management Team (SMT). He has gained leadership experience in previous jobs and in community projects. Since completing the CSBA he thinks that he has become even more equipped to take on more of a leadership and management roles. His communication with the principal, who initially, did not support his becoming involved in the SMT, paid off when the principal eventually relented. PQ implied that the principal lacked capacity in management skills (this was a trend reported by a number of school administrative clerks). In spite of the principal's lack of capacity, or perhaps because of it, he allowed PQ to play a greater role in management and leadership.

PQ said:

"I find it difficult to influence decision-making, because you know that the way our schools are organized, it's a trickle-down approach in terms of decision-making. Because you as an administrative clerk, you are there at the bottom and the decisions are from the top to the bottom; from the SMT to the bottom. Then you are pregnant with the ideas you want to implement because you are fresh from the college, you know, you've made the research, you know what is it that is not going right in terms of the administration and the management of the school – you have that information. But it's dif-

ficult to actually implement that information because of the position that you are in."

PQ's primary work commitments are to financerelevant matters but at times also extend to doing the tasks that his principal delegates and abandons to him. This means that PQ social world has a wide ambit and that is why the IMG manager commented, "PQ was practically running the school".

Primary School D

Primary School D is situated in a poor township³. It is a no fee-paying Section 20 school. There are 1287 students, 33 teaching staff, including the principal, and 6 support staff. The school building was built in 2002. It has 28 classrooms for Grades 1 to 7. Literacy and numeracy levels are low in the foundation phase.

Two of the challenges identified by MN, the informant, are the level of crime in the area and teenage pregnancies. MN is one of two administrative staff at the school. She has a Grade 12 qualification, a Secretarial Diploma, and completed the CSBA program in 2009. She is responsible for financial and accounting duties, administrative and secretarial duties. Her financial and accounting duties include administration of the budget, income and expenditure, preparation of financial statements in compliance with local education authority accounting principles. She prepares monthly bank reconciliation statements using financial software. She monitors payments, accounts and does banking. She is expected to initiate fundraising activities, draft business plans and oversee financial ventures as well as the routine administrative and secretarial duties are correspondence, enquiries, photocopying and logistical arrangement for meetings and school functions.

She is the secretary of the SGB and is responsible for administrative support - which includes an administrative component of human resources management, keeping staff records, managing staff contracts, and administering staff remuneration. She participates in staff recruitment interviews. She supervises the support staff to ensure the safe maintenance and operation of buildings. Her role in relation to ICT is to keep records of computer hardware and software and manages the maintenance of the school's computer system. She oversees the feeding scheme. Her role in relation to teaching

and learning is restricted to keeping records of learning resources and equipment and maintaining learning resources. MN says, "everything about the smooth functioning of the school depends on [her and her fellow administrative clerk]". She is very concerned that the principal and the staff do not acknowledge the value of her role in the school. Nor are the skills that she has gained through doing the CSBA program acknowledged.

Although she plays a role on the SGB, she does not feel she is permitted to contribute to what is being discussed in meetings or contribute to decision-making because of how she is regarded by the other SGB members. This may be exacerbated by the fact that the school has section 20 status. If it were section 21, she would have the opportunity to perform more complex roles in the financial management of the school, which could raise her status in the eyes of the SGB members. However, her lack of opportunity to contribute to the school's direction limits her scope to apply her skills and make an impact.

MN notes that the acting principal has gaps and does not have the experience to do certain tasks, which MN has become skilled at through doing the CSBA program. Rather than openly asking MN to support her and acknowledging her role, she quietly asks her to do these tasks and takes the credit for them herself without acknowledgement.

Through doing the CSBA program, MN had gained awareness of some of the gaps and inadequacies in school policy and practice. However, she feels powerless in making an impact because of her low status in the school. One of the gaps, which she has noticed, is that there is no systematic approach to risk management at the school and no specific staff member responsible for it. While she had learned much about risk management on the CSBA program, she did not have the opportunity to apply what she had learned on the course. She said:

"... even now are schools are still at higher risk because we didn't have a chance to, at least to introduce even the parents or even the SGB. We have risk everywhere in our schools, but because we didn't have a chance to implement or even to just introduce to the school community of ours or the SGB."

She feels undermined by the lack of opportunities in applying her skills and by the lack of recognition that she experiences. Consequent-

ly, she is considering seeking employment in the private sector. Finance is not a big part in her perspective of her action within the school. Her commitments include the following: secretarial function to the principal; picking up the slack for the principal; Information processing and participation on the SGB. So her social world extends to almost all the tasks in running the school except that she does not have formal authority to influence the school.

High School E

High School E is situated in a lower economic working class community⁴ near Cape Town where many of the students live in the surrounding informal settlements. It is a no fee-paying section 21 school.

The school has 1104 students. There is 38 staff, including the principal, two deputies, two senior administrative staff and support staff. There are two administrative staff whom we will refer to them as LS and AMB. There is no bursar employed at the school. LS and AMB's responsibilities overlap substantially. LS, our main informant is in her fifties and has been at the school in the same post since 1988. She has a Grade 12 qualification. Her main areas of work are providing administrative support, record keeping of learner and staff information and human resources responsibilities.

She is not involved in financial administration, facilities management general management, teaching and learning SMT or the SGB.

LS emphasize her role as a receptionist, support for the principal and her interaction parents. Her role with regard to ICT is mainly data capturing and downloading information. Her work commitments involve supporting teachers (for example, accompanying students to music competitions), developing relationships with community, businesses to secure support for the school, and developing supportive relationships with parents.

Due to the expansion of technology, her volume of work has expanded. The administrative clerks sweep the floors of their own offices and make tea for visitors. Sometimes she works overtime unpaid to keep up with the work deadlines. She worked her way up and learned to expand her areas of capability.

AMS is responsible for the financial administration of the school. She is a full member of

the SMT, SGB and is involved in the SGB committees. They both agree that financial management control in the school is acceptable. It is a non-fee-paying school but does collect small amounts of money from students through fundraising activities.

Finance sub-committees include fundraising, requisition and entertainment. However, teachers are not committed enough and the school administrative clerks' end up carrying the bulk of the workload.

The two administrative clerks serve on the finance committee, but feel that they have not functioned as effectively as they would like because they were not "well equipped [educated and experienced] in finance", had too much work pressure, their roles were not clearly defined, and they were struggling with new technology. AMB sees herself as contributing to the functioning of the school's financial matters. Her commitments include secretarial function to the principal; picking up the slack for the principal; information processing, participation on the SGB and SMT.

In all five schools, the school administrative clerks' were involved with financial matters, and played roles in management and leadership. Their commitments to action demonstrated their concern for the functioning and running of the school that was not shaped by their job description or job requirements.

Rather their social worlds made them do what they could do to contribute to the running of the school. They were active in the school's SGB and where possible on the SMT's. However, their perspectives and commitments were shaped by the leeway that principals gave them.

DISCUSSION

The primary focus of analysis in the five cases is premised on the investigation of the social worlds of school administrative clerks, as opposed to only reporting or listing their duties in the conventional procedural way. In many situations, the school administrative clerks have constructed their working lives around their work place, and that they do not see their jobs as routine work or themselves as mere cogs in a wheel. Furthermore, the researchers believe that the theory of social worlds may provide a vehicle for better understanding explaining the process of social change and inertia within these

schools. The golden thread that seems to emanate from all the cases is the 'negotiation; and 'interactionism' that the administrative clerks engaged in. While the researchers saw some administrative clerks grow their own opportunities and add value thus having an expanded social world, the researchers saw other administrative clerks social world more restricted and their opportunities and activities limited and restricted.

The researchers observation of social worlds revealed some schools leadership and management staff as quite 'closed' in their boundaries to the activities of administrative clerks. The "social worlds" lens and perspective informed us that some administrative clerks work practices were constricted within their social world while some school administrative clerks work practices pointed to a more expanded social world. A further theme developed from the five cases is that social worlds of the school leadership and management crisscross and interact under a range of conditions with the social worlds of the administrative clerks as depicted in the cases. These conditions differ in terms of socio-economic environment of the school, for example, but what can be highlighted is the difference that administrative clerks' commitment, negotiation and interaction with their social world make.

In addition, the researchers learnt that the administrative clerks' careers are not merely occupational or 'nice-to-have' in character; most are pursued and have huge potential for successful management, leadership and administration. The case studies illustrate how administrative clerks' activities influence the development of social worlds within the school environment. The social worlds should not be seen as constant spaces but rather as negotiated social spaces. Thus according to (Elkjaer and Huysman 2008: 172) in "a social worlds perspective...the process of tension, competition, negotiation and exchange are stressed. These processes unfold within and between social worlds, creating arenas of social worlds in creative potential tension."

CONCLUSION

The case studies show that administrative clerks' commitment makes them participate in the running and functioning of their schools. They take on responsibilities, particularly in section

21 schools' management, procurement, information capturing, and management that are the ambit of the principal and senior teachers. School administrative clerks have developed their ICT skills in response to increased use of technology in local education authority and schools, and the centralized computer data capturing systems mandated by the local education authority. The centralized computer system has further expanded the social worlds of the clerks.

The case studies illustrate the important relationship between the administrative clerks and the principal is in contributing to effective and efficient school administration. The argument that administrative clerks can and, in many cases, do play a crucial role in the management and administration of the school is supported. It seemed that those had many years of experience, where they had some level of recognition for the role that they were playing, increased their social worlds substantially and became more empowered to channel the relationships, power and knowledge that they had gained back into the school. However, there are still limits on the recognition and the cooperation they received from management. Moreover, the administrative clerks in this study effort to expand their social worlds did not go uncontested. Thus they did not always enjoy a positive relationship with the senior teachers in management and were not always recognized by them. This was a contentious area within administrative clerks' social worlds.

The case studies point to the need for understanding the way in which administrative clerks negotiate and shape their social world footprint within their schools in conjunction with the principal, members of the SGBs and where relevant, members of the SMTs. It was evident from two of the case studies that a competent administrative clerk who had expanded her social world as finance officer as a fully involved in the SGB of a school played a key role in facilitating follow-through from school finance policy to planning, implementation, and accountability. Finally, the social worlds of administrative clerks vary from school to school, clerk to clerk and are dependent on a host of local factors. What can be said based on this research is that the social worlds of administrative clerks are variegated and heterogeneous. The present research has also informed that administrative clerks are integral to the school rather than mar-

ginal – contrary to what is suggested by the dominant educational management discourses.

NOTES

- 1 The respondent from School A indicated that Quintile 5 was a complete misrepresentation of the economic level of the students serviced by the school. It was based on a wealthier area close to the school.
- 2 Such as Bellville, Nyanga, Bishop Lavis, Matroosfontein, Nootgedaght and Ravensmead.
- 3 Khayelitsha
- 4 Nyanga East

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