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Leadership Development: Learning from South African School Principals' and Mentors' Experiences

Vitallis Chikoko*, Inbanathan Naicker and Siphiwe Mthiyane#**

University of KwaZulu-Natal, P Bag X03 Ashwood, 3605, Durban, South Africa
Telephone: *<+27 31 260 2639>, **<+27 31 260 3461>, #<+27 31 260 1870>
Fax: *<+27 31 260 7003>, **<+27 31 260 1598>, #<+27 31 260 1598>
E-mail: *<chikokov@ukzn.ac.za>, **<naickeri1@ukzn.ac.za>, #<Mthiyanes@ukzn.ac.za>

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on a study in which the researchers sought to understand leadership development for practising school principals. The study investigated experiences of: (1) selected school principal graduates of an Advanced Certificate in Education in School Leadership (ACE: SL); and (2) selected mentors in that programme. Results show evidence of both asset-based (trainee's current knowledge, skills, capacities, etc. as basis for development) and deficit (trainee's deficiencies as basis for development) thinking and practice in the way the stakeholders had experienced the ACE. The researchers conclude that the asset-based approach is likely to yield better leadership development dividends than the deficit model.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper reports on a study to understand leadership development from the experiences of some South African school principals and their mentors. Developing leaders is a crucial but very complex process (McGuire 2011b; Naicker et al. 2014). Since the democratization of education in South Africa around 1994, the duties and responsibilities of the school principal have transformed quite considerably and demand that he/she has specialized knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in order to successfully lead and manage schools in a changing context (Republic of South Africa 1998; Kalenga and Chikoko 2014). The school principal's job is quite demanding (Pillay 2014). It requires passion, energy, drive and many personal qualities and attributes on the part of the incumbent. The expectations of this job have broadened and deepened from demands of mere management and control to those of an educational leader who can spearhead staff development, parental involvement, community support, and learner growth, somebody who can succeed with major changes in legislation and policies. As argued by Cardno (2007: 33) '….standards-based reforms all round the world have increased the degree of accountability for principals'.

As early as 1990, Van der Westhuizen noted that although South African principals are qualified educators, many of them have not received adequate training to cope with the new challenges that they are faced with. Further, the qualification requirement for school principalship is currently extremely minimal, with the minimum requirement being a three year post matriculation qualification inclusive of a professional teaching qualification (KZN Department of Education 2008). In terms of experience, a candidate requires a mere minimum of seven years in education (KZN Department of Education 2008). Consequently, an educator who has never occupied a formal leadership and management position at a school is eligible to apply for the post of school principal and be appointed. Given these low requirements, Mathibe (2007) asserts that this places school administration, management, leadership and governance in the hands of 'technically' unqualified personnel.

Research on school principalship around the world (Day 2005; Elmore 2002; Reppa and Lazaridou 2008; Forde 2010; Pillay 2014) has informed that the quality of leadership provided in a school has an influence on learner performance and teacher effectiveness. In many parts of the world,

Address for correspondence:
Dr. Vitallis Chikoko
University of KwaZulu-Natal
P. Bag X03 Ashwood, 3605
Durban, South Africa
Telephone: +27 31 260 2639
Fax: +27 31 260 7003
E-mail: chikokov@ukzn.ac.za

a qualification in school leadership and management has become a prerequisite for the job of school principal (Business Report 2007; Naicker et al. 2014). To illustrate, in the United States of America (USA), more than 90% of the States require a prospective school principal to complete a state approved preparation program that leads to a certificate as a school leader (Roberts 2009). In England, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) is mandatory for prospective school principals (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children Services n.d.; Olsen 2007). In South Africa, the Gauteng provincial Department of Basic Education's Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG) was established to develop leadership and governance competences in education. The explanation for this trend seems to lie in what scholars widely agree upon that sound leadership makes a significant difference to student learning and that such leadership capacity can and should be developed among those tasked with leading educational institutions. However, the 'jury is still out' regarding what type of preparation is required to develop appropriate leadership behaviours (Patterson and West-Burnham 2005; Bush et al. 2011; Naicker et al. 2014). Olivares et al. (2007) quoted by McGuire (2011b: 157) advocate a holistic perspective to leadership development as follows:

Leadership development, as a type of human development, takes place over time; it is incremental in nature, it is accretive; and it is the result of complex reciprocal interactions between the leader, others, and the social environment. Hence, effective leadership development realizes that leaders develop and function within a social context; and, although individual-based leader development is necessary for leadership, it is not sufficient. Leadership requires that individual development is integrated and understood in the context of others, social systems, and organizational strategies, missions, and goals.

Consistent with this thinking, the then South African Department of Education, now the Department of Basic Education (DBE), in conjunction with universities in the country, developed and offered an Advanced Certificate in Education qualification in School Leadership (ACE: SL) for serving school principals and has more recently, included deputy principals. The programme which is still on trial stage is offered regardless of current academic and professional qualifications of the candidates. The former Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor spelt out the vision of this qualification as follows: 'we regard this as a critical contribution to building a new pool of capable education leaders for our schools' (Republic of South Africa 2007: 11).

The ACE: SL comprises of lectures, the development of a portfolio on one's professional practice, and mentoring by seasoned educationists such as retired school principals and education officers. Literature reveals a number of benefits associated with well-organized mentoring processes. Groves (2007) reports of psycho-social benefits such as integration, motivation, affiliation and acceptance, as well as career facilitation benefits such as exposure and opportunities to face challenges. Mentoring is also reported to facilitate higher career satisfaction and expedited career progress (Higgins 2000; Naicker et al. 2014). There is also a shift from sponsorship mentoring (the mentor as senior to the mentee and performing an advocacy role) to developmental mentoring (emphasis on mentor-mentee mutuality and mentee self-direction) (Clutterbuck 2008; McGuire 2011a; Naicker et al. 2014). However, there is still debate regarding how models or forms of learning produce effective leaders. McGuire (2011b) reports that as early as 2000, Lyham observed that there is scholarly knowledge about leadership development. A review of literature revealed that the majority of research has focused on the 'what' rather than the 'how' of leadership development. There also seems to be a dearth of South African empirical evidence regarding how the already serving school principal responds to this new requirement for formal leadership development. Equally there seems to be need for more knowledge about the role of mentorship in leadership development. In this connection, the study reported in this paper focused on how selected ACE: SL graduates (student-principals) experienced the programme and how mentors experienced their role therein. The authors believe that such knowledge is useful in informing future leadership development endeavours.

Objectives

The study sought to:

- Determine how practising school principals experienced formal leadership development

- Establish how mentors understood and experienced their role
- Draw lessons for future leadership development for school principals

The study reported in this paper pursued the following critical questions:

- How do practising principals experience undergoing a formal leadership development programme?
- How do mentors understand and experience their mentorship role?
- What can be learnt from this project regarding the future of leadership development for South African school principals?

The Asset-Based Approach

Developed by Kretzmann and MacKnight (1993), the asset-based approach is a model for mobilizing resources (assets) from within a community as the ideal starting point for the development thereof. At the centre of the asset-based approach is the conviction that every person, group of people, or community has some knowledge, capacities, abilities and skills (assets) that can be tapped to achieve intended goals or address problems. Thus this approach advocates the development of communities starting from within. In contrast, the deficiency or needs-based approach foregrounds deficiencies and problems of individuals, groups or community (Ebersohn and Eloff 2006), thereby rendering such people totally dependent on external intervention. The needs-based model inevitably creates a mental map of individuals or communities who denigrate their own capabilities. The asset model is thus an internally focused way of community development (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Ebersohn and Eloff 2006).

Similarly, the ACE: SL sought to mobilize school principals' assets towards becoming better leaders and managers. As expressed by one of the mentor participants, the role of the mentor was to 'walk the journey with and not for the school principal'. Thus the study reported in this paper utilised the asset-based theory as a lens through which to understand how both the school principals and mentors experienced the ACE: SL programme. School principals made up the target community for development. As individuals and as a collective, their current assets (knowledge, experiences, attitudes, skills, resources, capabilities) needed to be tapped.

METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative, located within the interpretive research paradigm. Qualitative research emphasises the lived experiences of the participants (Cohen et al. 2001). That orientation enabled the researchers ontologically to enter the school principal and mentor's lifeworlds and understand and make meaning of how they experienced the ACE: SL as a tool for leadership development. The researchers adopted the interpretive paradigm, informed by its reliance on first-hand accounts (Terre Blanche and Durrheim 1999) who in this case were those of the mentors and school principals. Additionally, this paradigm is also suitable in researching peoples' behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions (Terre Blanche and Durrheim 1999) which is what the study set out to achieve.

To generate data from school principals the researchers used focus group interviews, a technique that produces data through group interaction on a topic determined by the investigators (Morgan and Krueger 1998). This data generation method provides the opportunity to capturing of multiple viewpoints from participants (Krueger and Casey 2000). Further, data generated through group social interaction is often more substantial than those obtained from one-to-one interviews. The researchers settled for three focus groups constructed along the lines of the school context: urban, rural and township. It was felt this would allow principals in each group to articulate better the leadership and management challenges and possibilities they faced.

Drawing on Krueger's view as cited by Struwig and Stead (2004) that focus groups generally comprise four to eight research participants, the researchers settled for a group size of four to five participants. Thereafter, they did purposive sampling to access 'knowledgeable people' - those who would have in-depth knowledge about issues relating to the ACE: SL (Cohen et al. 2007: 114).

Focus Group One comprised four school principals serving township schools. hese are schools in towns and cities located in high population density areas where the majority of black people stay. All the participants were male heading primary schools. All of them held post-graduate degrees. Experience as principals ranged from 8 to 15 years.

Focus Group Two comprised five (four women and one man) school principals serving 'urban' schools. These are schools in affluent areas of towns and cities formerly for white people only during the apartheid era. Two were at secondary schools, two at primary schools and one at a special needs school. Three of these five participants held post-graduate degrees and the rest had first degrees. Experience as principals ranged from 3 to 12 years.

Focus Group Three comprised four principals (two men and two women) serving rural schools. Two were at secondary and the other two at primary schools respectively. Their qualifications ranged from higher diplomas and certificates to undergraduate degrees. Experience as principal ranged from 9 to 14 years.

Regarding mentors, the researchers conducted individual face-to-face interviews with each of the four. This was informed by their having worked with specific groups of principals in particular geographical set ups, unlike the principals who had undergone a common leadership development program. The interviews took place at agreed upon venues convenient to the participant. Each interview lasted for about 90 minutes.

Data analysis involved converting 'raw' data into patterns of meaning (Henning 2004). Informed by this thinking, all interviews were audio-recorded and then subjected to verbatim transcription. McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 355) contend that audio recording the interview '…ensures completeness of the verbal interaction and provides material for reliability checks'. The transcripts were then rigorously content analyzed and emerging themes arrived at.

Observing ethical practices in research is of paramount importance in order to protect people from the harmful effects of research (Mertens 1998). Thus the researchers explained the aim and purpose of the study to all participants before the commencement of each interview. They assured participants that: participation was voluntary; they could withdraw from the study at any time if they saw felt; and all the information they shared would be treated in strict confidence including the use of *nom de plumes* as a way of insuring confidentiality.

FINDINGS

In this section data are presented under two umbrella themes: (1) responses from mentors and (2) responses from principals. The researchers saw it fit to present these two separately because of differences in the areas of focus for each. The issues emerging out of these two sections are then converged in the discussion section. The mentors' responses sub-section is guided by the study's second critical question namely: How do mentors understand and experience their mentorship role? The school principals' responses section is guided by the first critical question: How do practising principals experience undergoing a formal leadership development programme? The third critical question about what can be learnt regarding the future of leadership development for South African school principals is over-arching and therefore appropriately addressed in the discussion section.

Mentors' Understanding and Experiences of Their Mentorship Role

Mentors' (Mark, Sue, Wendy and Lok) responses are categorised into six sub-themes as follows:

- Understanding of the aims of the ACE:SL
- The role of the mentor
- Time
- Relationships
- Challenges
- Suggestions

Understanding the Aims of the ACE: SL

The researchers asked mentors what they understood to be the aim of the ACE: SL. Sue said:

Schools require strong leadership and this program is designed to specifically do that. As an educator and especially as a head teacher of a school, you need not only worry about the day- to -day running of the school but you also need to have broad leadership. A weak principal, clearly, is not what a school requires. It requires a principal who knows what is happening, one who is widely read, and has a good personal library on leadership matters.

Mark responded:

I feel that the ACE course intends to broaden the principal's knowledge of running the school and to expose and empower them on the new changes taking place.

Lok answered:

Well my understanding from day one was that principals needed to be upgraded. That the student [principal] would go to the university and learn and the mentor would assist the student about what he was taught academically.

Wendy said:

In my view it was a mistake to take into this programme, principals who are near retirement. Now you put them into an exam situation. We should be saying to the new teachers: you can only reach a management position if you have an ACE (SL). Those are the future principals. In This qualification should become compulsory.

Thus mentors viewed the program as targeted at equipping the school principal for change. Schools needed strong leadership. These perspectives are in keeping with both what leadership development is about and the aims of the ACE: SL.

Role of the Mentor

What did they see as their role? Mark reported as follows:

You are not going there as an inspector. Teachers at school must not think: we have an inspector at school. It is a leadership programme for an individual. So a lot of interaction should take place with the individual not necessarily at the school.

But according to Lok, some inspection seemed necessary.

To influence him in some way so that he in turn can do the same in his/her school. So, mine was to check the extent to which … eer...the student had applied the principles learnt from theory.

To Sue, the mentor was the principal's shoulder to cry on:

They need a shoulder to cry on. And when I go back to my days as a school principal, I had my colleagues around and we cried on each other's shoulders. You must also remember- the principal's job is sometimes the loneliest job in the school. I think it's the loneliness of the principal that makes mentorship important.

To Wendy, mentorship was about walking with and not for somebody.

As a mentor I could help them develop through the stages. But a mentor never walks the road for somebody; he/she walks the road with somebody. But a mentor is a supporter who is sometimes cornered to play the lecturer role. The mentor is not there to do the assignments; is not there to lecture but rather to help untie knots.

'Walking with' and not 'for' the principal, providing 'a shoulder to cry on', and 'untying the knots' emerged as some of the features the mentors saw as their role. To a very large extent therefore, the mentors' understanding of their role was consistent with what was expected of them in the ACE: SL.

Time

Did the mentors feel they had adequate mentorship time? Mark said:

Well… an inhibiting factor here was distance ….. and of course trying to find the schools was an ordeal. I thank God for the cell phone. But then when you eventually got to the school, you only had about an hour or so before the school day ended. You then ask the principal to stay after school but he has his own issues.The other thing that helped was that we had contact sessions with them at the university.

Lok resorted to group mentoring.

I think here mentors need to meet groups of principals more. Principals learn more from their own colleagues. But if you do it one-to-one, that aspect is lost. I found that to be very vital. So I didn't have enough time, without doubt.

Sue and Wendy felt they had reasonable amounts of time but would have liked more. Sue said:

I think the time was okay. I could go to the school as often as I wanted to. Or they could phone me. I would have liked to have four semesters with them, and not three.

Responses suggest that shortage of mentoring time was indeed a constraint. The shortage seemed to have triggered varied responses by mentors. At the end of the day, the mentoring approaches became quite varied with perhaps equally varied results.

Relationships

What did it mean for mentors to build relationships with mentees? To Sue the issue of authority mattered.

The fact that I was a retired principal helped a lot with authority… authority not in the sense

that I called the shots… no, no, no, but the confidence I have in me. I was asked a few questions which I was able to answer because in most cases I had had that experience.

To Mark, trust was very important.

For the mentee to listen to you he must trust you. They must feel relaxed because at the end you only succeed if they tell the truth… Once they keep back some of the things you can't succeed in solving the problems.

Mark added:

You must be a person who will understand the mentee. They must not feel that you are above them but part of them; otherwise they keep away from you.

Matching mentor and mentee seemed to be a complex matter involving age, race, language and culture. Lok said:

Matching the mentee with the mentor is tricky. Some will look for age… is he old enough to be my father? I will probably get very good experience from this person and guidance and that type of thing. Another person will say I don't want this type of person, I prefer someone who is closer to me in age…. Overseas they actually make a choice…. In South Africa we are simply told this is your group of students. So too they are told this is going to be your mentor.

Wendy reported:

What helped me was my grey hair. But then the younger principal seemingly asked: what can she tell me? But one was able to balance that. Generally speaking the principals were very receptive, cooperative and appreciative.

Sue reported on race:

…..*But race might be a factor. I think that I was able to get on with the mentees because I am able to speak Zulu and 90 something odd percent were Zulu speaking principals. Some male principals found it a little difficult to accept me as a woman mentor.*

The researchers asked if they experienced any mentee over-dependence? Sue responded:

Yes… especially in the rural areas. I ask them, you got a problem that needs addressing, what have you done about it? The person must have confidence in him or herself So... we are aware of this type of thing... dependence.

Lok also experienced some.

The over-dependence came in when they wanted me to interpret the assignment questions for them. There is that tendency. You are there to guide them –not to walk the walk for them.

Wendy felt it was difficult to prevent over-dependence.

It's difficult... if he or she wants me to help I must give him help. You must explain the procedure. Sometimes I can invite them to a workshop and assist them as a group.

From these responses it seems that the issue of mentor-mentee relationships was complex. The mentor's previous experience, age, language and sex influenced such relationship but in ways that varied from mentee to mentee.

Challenges

What did the mentors experience as some of the mentorship challenges?

Mark reported the challenge of principals' work overload.

You visit a school and the principal has five thousand other things to do. The principal's day is not yours. The principal has enormous responsibilities at school and when you go there, in some way you are interfering.

Wendy felt that some principals were seemingly unreliable, and perhaps unprepared for mentorship.

I would arrange to meet this principal at his school at a pre-determined date and time at his office. Then I would drive all the distance only to find that he is not there.

Lok reported that some principals expected the mentor to pay some of their costs. Others expected the mentor to 'fight their battles'.

…..… We are taken to the auditorium. We get through with whatever we are doing there. Then at the end of the day, I am issued with an invoice.

They thought may be, I would be the 'go-between', not all of them but certainly most of them- between them and the Department. But may I immediately say I ran myself into that (laughing). They wanted me to do things for them and I said no.

The mentorship role was therefore fraught with varied challenges. Most of the challenges seem to relate not only to the multi-faceted nature of the principal's job but also to apparent poor management abilities.

Suggestions

What mentorship suggestions did the mentors have?

Sue said:

The quality of mentors is absolutely crucial. That is why you have to carefully select them. You don't just look for a retired principal.

Mark said:

Also, circumstances have changed immensely. Don't take someone who was out of the school before year 2000. Take someone who is recent.

Lok reported the need for mentor-mentee matching.

At the end of the day you can only lead people who are willing to be led. Therefore the matching of the mentor and mentee is very crucial.

Mentor selection came out strongly as an important pre-requisite to successful mentorship. However, the ideal selection criteria seem very complex.

How School Principals Experienced the ACE: SL

Data from all the three focus group interviews were integrated into four common themes identified below.

- Feelings of being selected onto the programme
- Organisation of learning in the programme
- Teaching and learning
- The value of the programme

Focus Group One is identified as FG 1; Focus Group Two: FG 2; and Focus Group Three: FG 3.

Feelings on Being Selected Onto the Programme

The majority of participant principals across all three focus groups were excited and happy about enrolling into the programme. A participant from FG1 said:

I felt very honoured to be chosen. This is the only programme where you are empowered to take on the duties of a principal.

From FG2 one replied:

I was very excited to be accepted... I am a new principal so this was such a good opportunity to learn. (FG 2)

A response from FG3:

I was enthused. Since I became principal no one has come to me to say this is what you need to know to be a successful principal.

But to a few participants it was about a salary increase. One said: *'If I get the qualification I am going to get an extra [salary] notch'.*

Contrary to the researchers' original uncertainty most principals felt honored and excited to be on this program. This was a very positive starting point on their part.

Organisation of Learning in the Programme

How did these principals experience the way learning was organized in the program? Some felt the 'one size fits all' was unsuitable. One from (FG 2) said:

People come in from different school contexts and therefore have different needs.

Another (FG 1) added:

It is like placing an infant side-by-side with an adult...Some need more help than others.

But others felt that grouping principals in terms of school context would have been a negative step. They believed the heterogeneous set up practiced was right.

Overall, there were divergent views within each group. The divergence regarding the composition of learning groups seem to again galvanize the need for leadership development for the school principal.

Teaching and Learning

How did the principals experience teaching and learning on the program. One issue related to poor lecturing. Here are some responses:

We had one lecturer who was a head of department (in a school). We found her wanting... She was not sure... she was short on experience...

The lecturers that presented the stuff... some were not very competent... even not having the right attitude. Some sessions I thought were a total waste of time.

The lecturers were adequately prepared. In terms of content they did a lot of preparation... but in terms of practical experience they were lacking to some extent.

However, the participant principals viewed favorably those lecturers that were recruited from practice (practicing principals) or the 'have been to'.

A second issue was that participants expressed both positive and negative comments about being mentored. The following comments were from rural based principals (FG 3).

We had the best mentor... it was a breath of fresh air. We really enjoyed that.

She came and she shadowed us for many hours... In the last hour she had a conversation with us about our day and how we handled it.

In contrast, the experiences of the focus group participants from urban and township schools were largely negative. One commented:

He was a very wonderful person... but I do not feel that I gained at all from him because he did not have a good look at my work... he did not say that is wrong and that's right. Another said: *'He was a fantastic guy but he didn't help me in the way that I expected. He did not give me enough of support'.*

Another participant from an urban context reported:

My school is an ex-model C school [affluent school]. My mentor was not from that background. The mentor needs to be somebody from the same type of school...

Thirdly, most principals reported that the portfolio was a valuable learning tool. One participant commented:

The portfolio taught us to be organized in what we do and in the records we keep.

Another participant said:

My entire management team had a hand in my portfolio. Let us be honest, it was the school in a way being assessed not the principal…

Across all three focus groups participants commented on how valuable the reflective journals in the portfolios were to their practice. They commented:

Reflection has lots of benefits. It gave us an opportunity to think about our own practice.

You know reflection sharpens your practice. Reflection allows you to ponder and come back and correct yourself...

The reflective journal was part of my thinking process as a principal... I reflected on where I was, where I am at present and where I want to be.

Fourthly, at the learning centers the school principals were clustered into groups of twenty to thirty. For many of the participants this was a learning community from which they gained much knowledge on leadership and management. One participant commented:

It is the combined knowledge of looking at issues and seeking solutions that was a great opportunity.

Another participant (FG 1) spoke of how initially in their cohort only some individuals contributed to discussions. However, as time went by things changed:

In the lecture rooms we should lead the discussion. I used to feel bad sometimes because we were hogging the discussions. But at the end of the two years other colleagues from disadvantaged schools were contributing just as much.

Fifth, all three focus groups commented on the very formal way in which assessment was done was 'not on' for a practice-based qualification. One participant commented:

We did not expect it to be so rigid and formal but ongoing, informal and practice-oriented, making you a better principal.

A major downside of the programme for many of the participants in all three focus groups was the lack of feedback on assessment tasks, more so in their first year of study. One said:

There was no feedback whatsoever in the first year. We did not get the assignments back. In the second year it did improve and some people gave us excellent feedback.

Sixth, almost all the participants commented on how the ACE: SL led to the formation of learning networks:

One of the big advantages is that you build relationships with people in the same boat as you. I trust my colleagues who were on the course with me much more than I trust any other colleagues.

The networking for me in this course was most valuable...I would happily phone [person's name] and ask, how would you do this and that. In networking you learn how others do things (FG 2).

Overall, some participants felt they benefited from mentorship while others reported otherwise. Some disliked formal teaching and learning. Some felt principals should have been grouped according to their type of schools while others supported heterogeneity.

Value of the ACE: SL

How did the principals value the ACE: SL? What came through almost unanimously from all the groups was the confidence that the ACE: SL instilled in them in enacting their roles as school leaders. Some of their comments were:

Confidence... Before, you are a practising principal without any [specialized] qualifica-

tions. Now you got a qualification and practice. So that increases your confidence. ....

Confidence... you can't empower others if you are not empowered. I feel so much more confident.

For some the ACE: SL was a renaissance in that it helped reawaken latent knowledge and skills in them. One commented:

We had the knowledge but it was reawakened. It was like a renaissance in us... It gave us a wake-up call in terms of sharpening our skills.

For yet some school principals the programme helped them reposition themselves in terms of their discourse as principals. In this regard one stated:

It gave you new language tools to use which is brilliant...

In all three groups there was agreement that the ACE: SL should continue. The following comment sums up such feelings:

I feel it should be mandatory for every principal. Even if you got your Masters you must go through the ACE Leadership… In any profession… a doctor needs to have a specialised knowledge of practice… a principal must also be specialized.

DISCUSSION

Responses from both mentors and school principals in the study show that the ACE: SL was accepted as an asset (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Naicker et al. 2014) towards re-awakening and re-energising the principal. Participants indicated that South African schools needed strong leadership and the ACE programme was an ideal route towards achieving this goal. On the researchers' part, their initial fear that the already practising and 'qualified' school principal may not readily accept having to undergo a mandatory formal principalship qualification was proved wrong. Statements such as 'Now I have an opportunity to really learn how to be a principal' suggest a readiness to learn but also an apparent lack of preparedness for the job on many a South African school principal prior to the advent of the ACE: SL. This notwithstanding, the findings indicate that the practising principal remains a very sensitive candidate for formal leadership development. He/she may be sensitive about the nature of leadership development offered. He/she may easily mistake leadership development efforts for inspection leading to imminent resentment thereof. He/she may not always be available for development sessions due to pressure of work. He/she is likely to have little respect for those without prior principalship hands-on experience as mentors or lecturers. The latter misgiving may be just a stereotype, and it seems the practising principals had such, but if ignored, it can derail the entire leadership development project. This seems to underscore the importance of approaching leadership development from a holistic perspective (Olivares et al. 2007; Naicker et al. 2014).

Findings show evidence of both asset-based and deficit thinking and practice (Ebersohn and Eloff 2006; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). For example, while many mentors sought to help the principal 'walk the journey', the researchers found no evidence of the principals initiating mentor-mentee meetings. Granted, the notion of the mentor being a shoulder on which to cry is useful to among other purposes, kill the loneliness the school principal sometimes suffers, but it can serve as fertile ground for deficit thinking. The ACE: SL does not seem to have successfully empowered the school principals to shift from deficit to asset-based thinking and practice. This suggests that asset-based thinking is not usually easy to achieve.

South African school principals are not a homogeneous group particularly because of the racially segregated education system of the apartheid era. Some principals operate in at-risk, dysfunctional school set ups while others work in the comfort of fortified (Teese and Polsel 2003; Pillay 2014) environments. These principals will have different development needs. '…effective leadership development realizes that leaders develop and function within a social context…' (Olivares et al. 2007: 79). Evidence from this study suggests that the ACE: SL in its current state did not seem to adequately address this heterogeneity among the school principals. This may explain the apparent dissatisfaction about mentorship by school principals in urban schools. But deficit thinking (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993) where those from disadvantaged settings could only benefit from those from affluent schools is quite evident in the findings. The researchers contend that all school principals can learn from one another regardless of where they work. However, it seems that the comparative status of a school has an influence on the principal's receptiveness or lack thereof to mentorship.

The findings bring to the fore one of South Africa's leadership development dilemmas namely whether priority should be on the practising principals some of whom are near retirement or on tomorrow's leaders? The authors of this paper are persuaded to argue that the answer is 'both' because as a young democracy, there are immediate development needs that remained unattended to during the apartheid era but also there is an urgent call to prepare for the future. Perhaps the multiplier effect, where those trained can be harnessed to train others may be the way forward. However, this can only be successful if the lack of commitment displayed by some principals and mentors as well as the shortfalls of the current ACE programme, are addressed.

Consistent with evidence from other studies (for example, Higgins 2000; Groves 2007; Naicker et al. 2014) mentoring as part of the multi-approach to the delivering of the ACE programme was reported to be crucial to successful leadership development. But for successful mentorship, an intricate mentor selection process is necessary. While 'grey hair', experience as a former school principal, race and language were reported to be important in matching mentor and mentee, these factors are responded to differently by different mentees. For example, while the retired former principal may have 'walked this path' before, there are issues relating to new developments in the education system for which they may not be adequately familiar. Also, the practice used in the ACE: SL to impose mentors on mentees was problematic. The ideal situation is to involve mentees in deciding on those to mentor them.

The significance of thorough mentor training cannot be over-emphasised. Findings show that some mentors were not very successful in addressing the apparent dependency syndrome among the principals. Some mentors did not display the 'depth' expected of them by the mentees. Others converted the development process into exclusively a group affair thereby sacrificing the seemingly equally important individual focus.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the practising school principals were quite receptive to the formal leadership development initiative but were quite sensitive to the processes. Mentors largely saw their mentorship role as that of help the principal to 'walk the path', but there were tendencies to 'walk the path' for the principal. The asset-based approach is a useful model on which to base leadership development. This approach seems to be far more useful in leadership development than the deficit model. Leadership development occurs in context. South African school principals, like the society from which they are drawn, are a very heterogeneous group. Further research into how leadership development can be sustained in the context of heterogeneity is necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The huge diversity of schools and school principals in South Africa requires a formal leadership development programme for all school principals old and new. School principals must be involved in the crafting of their leadership development programmes including the selection of mentors. The latter must be thoroughly trained for this job.

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