

The Causes of School Decline: Voices of School Principals and Circuit Managers in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT This paper reports the findings of a qualitative research that attempted to understand school decline in previously Black South African schools that were known for academic learner performance but have since declined. This small scale qualitative study was conducted in Umlazi and Pinetown education districts in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews with four secondary school principals whose schools have declined, and two Circuit Managers who were heading the education circuits under which the school principals were serving. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings suggest that school decline is triggered by several complex factors which include, but are not restricted to, the quality of school leadership; the dedication and commitment of school teachers and learners; socio-economic factors; inadequate support from the Department of Education and the interference of some teacher unions.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the results of a small scale qualitative study that was conducted in Umlazi and Pinetown education districts in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study explored school decline in selected previously Black South African secondary schools that were known for academic and sporting excellence. These schools were located in South African townships and rural areas. However, these schools have declined in terms of learner academic and sporting performance, especially after 1994. In an attempt to understand school decline among these schools, this paper was constructed around two questions:

(i) What are the causes of school decline in the selected secondary schools?

(ii) What is the relationship between leadership and management approaches used in the schools and the decline in learner academic performance?

The researchers of this paper felt that understanding the relationship between leadership and management and school decline and the causes thereof might deepen their insights into this phenomenon. Such insights could assist poli-

cy-makers in preventing schools from ever developing into chronically low-performing schools (Hochbein 2011, 2012). Decline in schools and in other organisations can be characterised as a strange and interesting phenomenon in that, while little is known about it, few people seem to want to know about it (Duke 2008; Hawk 2008; Carmeli and Sheaffer 2009; Hochbein 2011). Literature on organisational decline has not produced any commonly agreed upon definition of this phenomenon (Duke 2008; Duke and Hochbein 2008). Notwithstanding, Duke (2008: 47) highlights three characteristics of decline, namely: (a) it is "the last stage of the organisation's life cycle before collapse" (b) it signifies change in a negative direction (c) it is a "process by which an organisation's ability to accomplish its primary mission diminishes over time". Implied here is that decline is not a sudden event but a long process concerned with failure to accomplish the organisation's primary mission. Borrowing from Duke's (2008: 49) expression, school decline can thus be described as "...the process of continuing failure to achieve the main goal of the school which is learner achievement over time". Gorard, et al. (2002) put a different dimension to school decline when they describe it as a condition in which a school loses learner numbers and increases the proportion of socio-economic disadvantage in its intake. It is also noteworthy that school decline occurs in those schools that were once characterised by adequate or even

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good academic performance but have begun to slip. Therefore, schools that have always been low-performing cannot be said to experience decline, because they have never performed well before in the first place. Further, the decline in learner academic performance tends to negatively affect learner enrolments (Duke 2008; Hochbein and Duke 2011; Hochbein 2012).

The following are some of the factors that are associated with school decline: school's ability to accomplish its learner achievement goals are compromised over time; the absence of a clear school vision and mission statement and specific teaching and learning priorities; a lack of instructional leadership which emphasises quality teaching and learning; ineffective and inefficient leadership at all school levels; teachers who are unwilling or not committed to providing learners with a foundation for later life; poor curriculum alignment and focus; absence of discipline among school stakeholders especially teachers and learners; failure of the teachers to hold learners to high expectations and budget reductions that may be associated with socio-economic conditions of the school; loss or reduction of stakeholder support; migration of people from rural to urban areas or even abroad to find jobs (Duke 2008; Duke and Hochbein 2008; Hochbein 2011; Sahakyan 2014). In addition, Kanter (2006) posits that in organisations that decline, a kind of helplessness sets in. Secrecy, blame, isolation, avoidance, passivity and feelings of helplessness combine to perpetuate poor academic performance. This "death spiral" typically starts when an organisation begins to neglect the fundamentals of why it exists (Kanter 2006: 97). In the context of South Africa, a good school has for decades been associated with high levels of learner achievement, particularly in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination results.

In keeping with the focus on learner academic outcomes, there has been a tradition in South Africa of publishing the (NSC) examination results nationwide. Consequently, if the school consistently shows a decline in academic learner performance, other learners in the lower grades (Grades 8-11) tend to leave to find alternative schools (Gorard et al. 2002; Maile 2004; Msila 2011). The declining schools lose both numbers and presumably more of the relatively socially-advantaged families in their potential feeder area, since the latter are deemed more likely to

be the 'alert clients' using their power of 'exit' (Gorard et al. 2002: 368). This leads to even poorer NSC table results since there is a clear relationship at an aggregate level between socio-economic status and poor learner academic outcomes. Hence, the school enrolls fewer learners which results in smaller budget allocations and so the vicious cycle of decline continues (Gorard et al. 2002). In the past decade or so, teacher unionism has emerged as one of the prominent factors that contribute to school decline in South Africa. For example, a study conducted by Zengele (2013), has found that the growth of teacher unions has contributed to the problem.

It should be highlighted that literature on school decline in South Africa is sparse and most tend to focus on dysfunctional schools and how they can improve their academic learner performance (Christie et al. 2007; Prew 2007; Kamper 2008) rather than understanding school decline. School academic performance is generally attributed to effective leadership (Brundrett and Crawford 2008; Murphy 2008; Barber et al. 2010). Furthermore, effective leadership ensures high standards of teaching and learning activities in schools (Christie 2007; Prew 2007). From the discussion thus far, the researchers became aware that decline is not triggered by one factor, but by a conglomeration of factors both inside and outside the school.

Underpinning Frameworks

The concepts of instructional leadership and Weitzel and Jonsson's (1989) organisational decline theory provide a helpful framework to understand school decline. This arises mainly because a school improvement framework advocates that schools must have internal processes that control how they work and determine the way targets are achieved (Thurlow et al. 2003).

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership can be understood as an approach by school principals wherein they stress the direction of the influence process (Bush and Glover 2002). Instructional leadership focuses on teaching and learning and on the behaviour of teachers in working with learners. In other words, the leaders' influence is targeted at student learning through teachers. Expressed differently, Mitchell and Castle (2005)

posit that instructional leadership entails principals' actions which target improved learner outcomes. Such actions are more meaningful and fruitful if the principal understands how to align his or her actions in ways that build structures to support leadership in others and influence instruction in ways that will result in increased student achievement (Mitchell and Castle 2005). Arguing differently, Robinson et al. (2008) maintain that instructional leadership offers the greatest leverage for understanding the contributions that leadership makes to learning compared to other constructions of leadership.

Weitzel and Jonsson's Organisational Decline Model

There are few, if any well-developed theories on school decline. One of the reasons for the dearth of school decline theory could be due to a persistent view that the discourse in this area has always been pre-occupied with organisational growth and the perceived consequences thereof (Hochbein and Duke 2011; Hochbein 2011). To understand school decline, the researchers found Weitzel and Jonsson's (1989) organisational decline model beneficial in understanding organisational decline process: the organisation is blind to the early stages of decline; it recognises the need for change but takes no action; it takes action, but the action is inappropriate; it then reaches a point of crisis and is forced to dissolve.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study located within an interpretive research paradigm due to its emphasis on researching reality from the perspectives of the researched (Nieuwenhuis 2007). Qualitative approaches are preferable where the goal is to seek an understanding of a process or phenomenon (Babbie and Mouton 2009; Creswell 2009). The sample was purposive and comprised four school principals of secondary schools that had declined over the past 15 years and two Circuit Managers under whom these schools fell. These schools had previously consistently been obtaining above 80% National Senior Certificate pass rates but the results have since declined. Over the past 15 years the participating schools have been obtaining less than 50% pass rate, one even to below 30% in 2006.

Purposive selection entails researchers "...hand-picking cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought" (Cohen et al. 2011: 114). A common feature with all these schools was that they had all declined; all were headed by Black school principals; and all still had learners and staff who were also Black South Africans.

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with the participants. Prior permission was obtained from the participants to voice-record the interviews which were thereafter transcribed and coded. The transcripts were subjected to content analysis utilising the De Vos (2010) model adapted from Marshall and Rossman (1999) and Creswell (1998). All ethical issues such as obtaining permission from the Research Office of the KwaZulu-Natal Department as well as the research participants were observed in order to protect the participants from harmful effects of research (Cohen et al. 2011).

Profiling Research Participants

All the participants were extensively experienced in educational leadership and management field. Participants' names (not their real names) and their brief profiles are provided below.

Mr Thabethe from School-A

Mr Thabethe has 20 years teaching experience and has been a principal of his school from the 1990s to date. Previously, he served as a Head of Department (HOD) for six years before being appointed to the position of Deputy Principal, which he held for three years before being appointed as principal. Academically, he holds a Secondary Teachers Diploma, a Further Diploma in Education and a Bachelor of Education Degree.

Mrs Maseko from School-B

Mrs Maseko is a 54 year old school principal with about 30 years experience in teaching. She holds two diplomas (a Secondary Teachers Diploma and a Further Diploma in Education) and two university degrees (Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Education). Like most teachers of her generation, she rose up the ranks to the po-

sition of deputy principal where she served for many years before being appointed to her current position as school principal which she has occupied for fifteen years.

Mr Shabalala from School-C

Mr Shabalala is a 59 old principal with 33 years experience in teaching. He was promoted into the position of Head of Department in 1989 which he held for seven years; then to a Deputy Principal's post which he held for six years. He has been a principal since 2002. Academically, he holds a Secondary Teachers Diploma and a Bachelor of Education Degree.

Mrs Madlanduna from School-D

Mrs Madlanduna is a 62 old principal with 37 years experience in teaching. She was promoted into the position of Head of Department in 1981 which she held for five years; then to a post as Deputy Principal which she held for more than ten years before being appointed as principal in 1997. Academically, she holds a Secondary Teachers Diploma and an Advanced Certificate in Education (School Leadership).

Mr Majavu from Umlazi Education District

Mr Majavu is a 59 year old Circuit Manager with close to 35 years experience in teaching and supervision of principals' work. He holds a teaching diploma and Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education (Hons.) and Master of Education degrees. Like many teachers of his generation, he rose up to the rank of Circuit Manager after serving as teacher, HOD, Deputy Principal and Principal. He has served as Circuit Manager for seventeen years.

Mr Mvelase from Pinetown Education District

Mr Mvelase is a 55 year old Circuit Manager with close to 30 years' experience in teaching and management. He holds a teaching diploma, a Further Diploma in Education, a Bachelor of Education (Hons.) and Master of Education. Similarly, he rose up to the rank of Circuit Manager after serving as Teacher, HOD, Deputy Principal and Principal. He has served as Circuit Manager for eleven years.

RESULTS

The results are presented through eight major themes that emerged from the data as major causes of school decline. These are (a) School leadership and management (b) Problems surrounding recruitment of principals (c) Interference of teacher unions (d) Lack of commitment by some teachers (e) Education policies on learner rights (f) Failure by the Provincial Education Department to implement learner disciplinary procedures timeously (g) Recurrent curriculum changes and poor coordination by the Department of Education officials (h) Transformation and educational change.

DISCUSSION

Causes of School Decline

School Leadership and Management

The findings suggest that strong leadership or lack of it determines the direction that the school takes. The results highlight the lack of effective leadership as the main cause of school decline. Bush et al. (2011) regard leadership as synonymous with influence, focus, vision and direction. Successful schools are characterised by effective and efficient instructional leaders. Lack of democratic approaches to leadership was viewed by some participants as forming part of a lack of effective leadership. For instance, Mr Shabalala, a principal of School-A, viewed school decline as "*The lack of competent and committed leadership with proper work ethics is also a problem in some schools.*" Mrs Maseko, a principal of School-B, maintained that "*If a leader and school manager is not sufficiently enough; has no leadership skills to lead a school; in the long run the school is bound to decline*". Similarly, Mr Mvelase, Circuit Manager from Pinetown Education District said:

In most declining schools, you will find that there are incompetent leadership and management teams which are failing to deal with issues of democratic leadership which takes into account that you don't lead alone but with others, transformation, transparency, balance between teacher and learner rights and responsibilities as envisaged by the new political environment.

In addition, Mr Majavu, Circuit Manager from Umlazi Education District echoed a similar sentiment about school leadership and management. This is what he said:

By and large, it is the strength of the School Management Team (SMT). If they have the vision of the school at heart and the principal is a transformational leader who has good communication skills with his/her SMT, that SMT would rally around and support that school principal. If the SMT is united, they in turn, would positively influence other staff members.

Views expressed by the participants were congruent with ideas advanced by various scholars. For instance, Bush et al. (2011) describe declining schools as being characterised by inadequate leadership especially by the school principal; these schools lack courageous leaders to give sufficient, strong and visionary leadership. Such school principals lack leadership and management skills to cope with change and to confront the daily challenges that their schools face (Hochbein 2011).

Problems Surrounding the Recruitment Process

Closely linked with incompetent leadership was a lack of adequate development programmes for both school leadership and teachers especially after the recruitment and selection processes. Currently, all teachers and School Management Team members (SMT) are appointed by the Head of the Provincial Department of Education after the recommendation of the School Governing Body in the school/s where there were vacancies. Almost all participants stressed that there was little or no induction, mentoring, coaching and support programmes for teachers and for those in school leadership positions once appointed and this negatively affected learner performance. The participants indicated that in some schools, dubious processes of appointing school leaders and managers resulted in defiance or resistance to the new leadership that was not preferred by certain sections of the school community. In some cases, schools have had to close temporarily because of infighting over management posts. Manipulation of the recruitment processes by both the school governing bodies and teacher unions has had detrimental results for schools (Mahlangu and Pitsoe 2011; Pattillo 2012; Zen-

gele 2013). Incompetence among SGB members (Mncube et al. 2010) combined with interference by teacher unions has compromised the efficiency of the recruitment processes. In certain instances, some people have even lost their lives (Harper 2014). In this regard, Mrs Maseko had this to say:

We know that deployment is practised politically but when it happens in education, it is disturbing. The proper way of recruiting the best candidate is subverted where one is not recruited because of one's qualifications, knowledge and skills but because of political or Teacher Union affiliation.

Similar statements were also uttered by Mr Majavu in relation to improper selection and appointment processes. This is what he had to say:

In my experience as Circuit manager, I have found that divisions are caused largely by how people were promoted to the SMT. If there is a slight suspicion that someone bribed his way up, that person is bound to experience problems of legitimacy because he has no moral authority to run the school. No matter how good that person is, if he/she was promoted in a questionable way, he will never earn the respect of the staff.

Associated with the participation of teacher unions in principals' recruitment and thus the politics which has dominated recruitment processes, Mr Mvelase also said:

If their (a particular teacher union) candidate has not been successful, they will lodge a grievance and if they are not successful with the grievance they will lodge a dispute and prolong the appointment of an SMT member and sometimes it takes a year or two before a rightful owner of that particular post is appointed. That destabilises the school. In some cases, some of the parents who are ignorant about the procedures of selections, you find that the teacher union takes advantage of that, intimidating parents if they don't score in a way that advantages their preferred candidate.

In addition, officials of the Education Department were also accused of allowing the politicisation of the recruitment process to the detriment of education as a whole. Mrs Maseko said for instance, that people affiliated to a particular teacher union got posts 'irrespective of the qualifications or potential' and this was 'a trend.' Closely linked to the challenges of re-

cruitment was the lack of efficient profiling of the candidates during the recruitment process. Declining schools did not seem to have a clear profile of a potential principal that they wanted who could maintain high academic expectations and standards. In this regard, Mr Thabethe said:

The SGBs should have some kind of a profile of a person they want to lead the school. The profile should be crafted by all the stakeholders in the school. So when the former incumbent leaves/ or is promoted, the school should be able to say they are looking for what kind of a person to fill the vacant post. Issues of continuity, values and the school culture, the qualities the person have, proven leadership and management skills should all be seriously looked at.

The discussion presented in this section is in line with views expressed by Bush (2011) that change in school leadership, lack of succession planning and the politics that usually accompanies this was problematic in most declining schools.

Interference of Teacher Unions

The results are consistent with recent research done in this field in South Africa and show that the introduction of teacher unions has brought about fear, chaos and paralysis to some schools (Mahlangu and Pitsoe 2011; Pattillo 2012; Zengele 2013). Conversely, it must be mentioned that the teacher unions have a legitimate right to participate in the recruitment processes as observers. However, practice indicates that their observer status has gone beyond that. All the participants lamented the negative role played by some teacher unions and its impact on the schools and in education in general. Some teachers were alleged to hide behind teacher unions to conceal their incompetence. Mr Majavu commented:

The introduction of teacher unionism (in education) has intimidated a lot of school principals. They are no longer performing their duties as expected. Teacher unions will defend a particular educator even when there is no need to get involved. So, the fear of being victimised by a Teacher Union compels many principals to withdraw into their shells... they don't want to be firm and stand their ground for what they believe in...they are paralysed with fear.

Lack of understanding about democracy and its implications for efficient functioning of schools is at the core of these challenges. In that regard, Mr Mvelase uttered the following comment about teacher unions:

Democracy is sometimes confusing to other people. Teacher unionism is part and parcel of the modern management environment. It cannot be wished away, however, it is confusing and intimidating to other principals. That confusion leads to chaos which in turn affects teaching and learning in the school. Then decline sets in.

Lack of effective leadership is evident in the manner in which some principals were not making the effort to understand new education policies, consequently teacher unions were capitalising on this. Raising the concerns about the state of affairs, Mrs Maseko said:

Lack of understanding of policies by some school principals is also a problem as they are easily manipulated by teacher union officials. This results in a principal failing to discipline educators because his/her understanding of policies governing teacher unions is weak or is just simply afraid to face them. Once this weakness has been identified by teachers, they take advantage of that. In short, a lot of our school principals are not coping when dealing with teacher unions as they are not trained to deal with them.

Other challenges associated with school-based teacher union officials were that of regular absences because of union-related work outside the school, such as attending teacher union meetings during teaching time and sometimes observing interview processes (Mahlangu and Pitsoe 2011; Pattillo 2012; Zengele 2013). While away, learners were often left unattended and this had a disruptive effect on teaching and learning. Interference of teacher unions was not limited to the schools only but occurred at district level as well. To illustrate this point, Mr Mvelase said:

You can run a programme as a Circuit manager or a Subject advisor but if the teacher unions don't like it, they will ensure it fails.

According to this Circuit manager, senior officials of the Department of Education in the province have not been left unaffected by this phenomenon. To illustrate the teacher union interference at a higher level, Mr Mvelase highlighted an incident in 2012 in which members of

a certain teacher union disrupted a meeting in which a political head of education in the province, known as Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for education and the administrative head of Department of Education were part of. Mr Mvelase said:

A few weeks ago, we were having a meeting with the MEC for Education and the Head of Department of Education and a particular Teacher Union was picketing inside the venue. We ended up abandoning the meeting. That is just an indication of how powerful they are. If they are able to disturb very senior meetings of the Department of Education, who are we to face them at school level?

The above extracts indicate the extent of fear and paralysis that exist at all levels of the education system in the province. Learners' academic performance is negatively affected by this situation. This could also mean that when principals are unclear about the direction that their schools are taking and have unclear understanding of policy, teacher unions can and do interfere with school management and governance processes.

Lack of Commitment by Some Teachers

Competence and commitment by teachers were viewed as important factors in effective schooling. However, the data suggests that some of the teachers were incompetent and lacked commitment to school work. These teachers did not see teaching as 'a calling'. Mr Shabalala said: *"For some teachers, teaching is a 'fall-back' career choice when all has failed and this leads to poor quality teaching and results."* Similarly, Mr Thabethe also complained about high teacher qualifications which were not matched by performance and commitment. He said:

Look at teachers in the past. In fact, some were not qualified at all but they worked with their conscience and because of them, teaching was a calling as opposed to now where teaching is just taken as a job that anyone can take or do.

Highlighting the disjuncture between qualifications and commitment, Mr Thabethe had this to say:

Some of our educators are now highly qualified but they are not committed. They are failing to balance between qualifications and commitment. For example, you go to a farm school and you find a teacher with a NSC qualifica-

tion but because of commitment, he can produce very good results. Then you come to our schools in the urban areas where educators are highly qualified but because of lack of commitment, results are poor.

Linked to the lack of commitment were teachers who were not willing to go an extra mile to provide learners with good teaching which would offer them a solid foundation for later life. Emphasising the importance of commitment, Mr Thabethe had the following to say: *"If I talk of commitment, I am referring to educators who will give their whole self to the teaching profession and do their best"*. However, the attitude of some teachers towards teaching, maintaining learner discipline and clean classroom environment was questionable. On these issues, Mr Majavu painted a very gory picture about some schools which he argued, have turned into what he called *"pigsties"* in appearance. Research has shown that some classrooms are in a major crisis with educator absence, ineffective teaching methods, and weak subject knowledge (Fleisch 2008 cited in Bush et al. 2010).

Education Policies on Learner Rights

The participants expressed scepticism about democratic policies introduced in education since 1994. They viewed them as too liberal, giving learners too many rights without equally emphasising their responsibilities as well. Mr Majavu also lamented some of the education policies that have been introduced on learner rights. He said:

The policies that have been introduced by our democratic government are too liberal, emphasising the rights of the learners and less on the responsibilities of the learners. These policies are appropriate for the first world countries. To be honest with you, the situation is bordering on chaos. This somehow intimidates those responsible for discipline in the schools. Not that we don't want rights but when the emphasis is mainly on rights rather than responsibilities, we are courting disaster.

Linked to learner ill-discipline was the high rate of pregnancies among learners. The participants complained that pregnant learners were not in a position to concentrate on their studies and this contributes to high failure rate, especially in the NSC examination, and thus exacerbating school decline. Mr Thabethe commented about pregnant learners in his school:

In the Grade 12 class alone, I have eleven pregnant learners. I know the school won't get a good pass rate this year. Some are expected to deliver during the exam time. Experience has taught us that those who deliver during exam time fail to concentrate on their school work because of the new babies.

A study conducted in South Africa by Bush et al. (2010) also noted the damaging effects of teenage pregnancies on secondary school girls.

Failure by the Provincial Education Department to Implement Learner Disciplinary Procedures Timeously

All the participants also expressed frustration at the delay caused by the Department of Education especially in dealing with serious offences by learners which warrant expulsion of learners. All participants strongly complained about the turn-around time when an SGB lodges a complaint with the Provincial Department of Education about learner behaviour and wishes to expel such a learner. Mrs Madlanduna said:

The Department of Education takes a long time to respond and this exacerbates the discipline problems in the schools. If you need to discipline a child, you have to follow lengthy procedures via the district office and sometimes the Head Office. It may take 3-6 months before you receive a response from the Education Department.

To illustrate this point, Mr Shabalala narrated a story of three Grade 12 boys who gang-raped a girl in the school's toilets. The matter was reported to the local police station and the boys were suspended by the SGB. The SGB then wrote to the Education Department recommending the expulsion of the perpetrators. It took close to a year before the school received a response from the Provincial Department of Basic Education. By then the perpetrators had long since left the school. The delay caused by the Department of Education seems to be sending a wrong message to learners that they can do as they please and there will be no consequences.

Recurring Curriculum Changes and Poor Coordination by the Department of Education Officials

The regular changes in the curriculum were viewed as having detrimental effects on the

schools and thus causing some to decline. Mr Shabalala had this to say:

The chopping and changing of the curriculum (OBE, NCS, RNCS and currently, CAPS) is problematic. The Department of Education does all of this but fails to capacitate teachers with intensive training programmes to be able to cope with the new curriculum changes. Coupled with this is the Rationalisation and Redeployment policy which causes uncertainty, instability and eventually, poor results in a school.

Mr Shabalala further complained that:

Some of the redeployed teachers come up with problems. They lack commitment, are always absent or bunk classes. They have poor work ethics; general laziness and lack of commitment and dedication; and some are falling sick on a regular basis.

Some participants were of the view that solutions or interventions suggested by Education Department officials were neither empirically-based nor pedagogically sound. This naturally led to non-implementation of those suggested solutions. This lack of confidence, in some cases, was linked to the dubious appointments already discussed in this paper.

Mr Mvelase also said:

It is unfortunate our department is very much reactive and not pro-active. There is a problem of poor or no planning. There is no co-ordination of activities - the Department of Education has a number of sub-directorates but which are not talking to each other. The left does not know what the right is doing. As a Circuit Manager, I belong to the circuit management which forms part of the service delivery management branch. I'm supposed to be managing and monitoring the schools but you would find that subject advisors, whose role is to support curriculum delivery to schools, will visit schools without informing me what it is they are going to do there. I should be informed so that I can help in monitoring their interventions. That is a big problem.

Transformation and Educational Change

Participants indicated that some principals have poor or no skills to manage educational change which has come about because of the introduction of new education laws, policies and regulations since 1994. Policies are either not

known or not correctly implemented which leads to unnecessary, endless conflicts. In this regard Mr Majavu:

Some school principals don't worry themselves about increasing their knowledge of policies. They forget that a person is always a learner and their lack of knowledge of policies results in poor management of schools because they manage schools to the whims, not according to the known policies. You would find a teacher has been absent for a number of days and the principal doesn't know how to deal with that particular educator. Now it demoralises those teachers who are always present, doing their work but knowing that someone is out there and nobody cares and there is no action being taken.

At a school level, there are other school-specific policies that are formulated by all the stakeholders, but because of poor succession planning, when a new, inexperienced principal comes in, he/she is unaware of those policies and introduces new ones, sometimes without thorough consultation. Lack of understanding of the school culture and its politics also causes teachers to defy the new principal. This also happens quite often when there are suspicions of questionable promotions in the school. Conflicts that result eventually cause the school to decline. Closely linked to the challenges of transformation and educational change is the disjuncture between policy planning and policy implementation at a school. Some principals fear to implement policies for a number of reasons. Mrs Madlanduna said:

The policies are there but the fear of implementation is a problem. For example, principals have complained that it takes a long time to charge a teacher even after following all the procedures laid down. Other principals ignore Departmental policies and run their schools along the 'Ubuntu' (human kindness) principles and this becomes problematic in the long run when teachers accuse such principals of inconsistency and nepotism. Some principals do this in order to secure friendships and support from colleagues.

It is evident that lack of effective leadership is central to all the challenges mentioned in the sections above. Failure to implement appropriate policies or to hold teacher unions to account for their actions or inability to lead teaching staff in a consistent manner, are all signs of poor leadership which culminate in school decline.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the causes of school decline and the relationship between leadership approaches utilised by school leaders in declining schools. The results clearly show that school decline is caused by complex and sometimes conflicting factors. While participants mentioned a number of factors as causes of school decline, ineffective instructional school leadership was prominent among these factors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If South Africa is to gradually improve the quality of its education provisioning and arrest the decline in some schools, policy-makers and practitioners need to have a deeper understanding of what causes school decline in the first place. This has the potential to enable them to better identify and offer insights into declining schools; assist in understanding the critical processes responsible for the phenomenon and prevent schools from ever developing into chronically low-performing schools rather than attempting costly and unreliable school turnaround strategies. Researchers also found it strange that participants whose schools have declined made sensible proposals about what needs to be done to fix the problems yet, they were not implementing those ideas in their schools.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This was a small scale study of four school principals and two circuit managers and therefore the results cannot be generalisable. However, a more representative large scale study is recommended to comprehensively understand the phenomenon of school decline. Further, more research has to be conducted to understand decline in previously White, Coloured and Indian schools as well.

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