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Pertinent Leadership and Governance Challenges Facing Schools in South Africa

Abstract

This paper focuses on the challenges facing school principals in improving their leadership skills and those of school governing bodies. Mixed method was employed and the research was conducted with some school principals, School Governing Bodies (SGBs) members, and teachers in secondary schools in Gauteng Province of South Africa. The problem is that there are vague rules in those schools where the SGBs and the school principals compete against one another. Dysfunctionality of schools is the result of poor governance and poor management by both the school principals and the SGBs. Some school principals are a contributory factor to glitches in schools because of their incompetence.

Keywords: leadership, dysfunctionality, principal, school governing body, transparency, distributed leadership, governance

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand the difficulties that schools must overcome in order to improve school leadership, with a particular focus on the task of school principals and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in the context of distributed leadership rather than on the individual leader. An answer is sought to the following key question: To what extent do we know the leadership challenges facing school principals and school governing bodies in schools? An implication for practice is that focusing on distributed leadership practices can help to overcome conflict in schools.

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on enhancing the leadership and managerial competencies of school principals as the most influential figures in promoting reform, change, and innovation (Cruz et al., 2016). Having emerged from the apartheid era, South Africa now faces the challenge of changing a society destabilised by politics, misrule, mismanagement and corruption into a vibrant and successful democracy. Transformation encompasses every aspect of South African life (Department of Education, 1996). There has been evidence of a lack of morality and increased corruption at various levels of society. In fact, at present, society is paying the high price of a lack of ethics stemming from the absence of sound leadership and oriented management processes (Turriago-Hoyos et al., 2016). Confucian ethics considers the abuse of power in any relationship to be unethical. Schools must inculcate concepts such as freedom and equality, and respect for both the public and private spheres, the individual and society, the masses and the elites, unity and diversity, and the religious and the secular.

The importance of education in society can be reflected in controversies surrounding divergent ideological positions and the interests they represent

(Mahmood et al., 2016). The school is an integral part of the community, and parents as members of the SGBs are vital part of the school and therefore of the community. Changes in education ought to be in accordance with the values and principles of our Constitution (Gauteng Department of Education, 1997). Mahlangu (1998) is of the view that the management of schools must be a joint venture between principals and SGBs. From a legal perspective, school principals no longer occupy the role of primary decision-maker when it comes to school governance. Governance relates to the ability of the SGB to make and enforce rules and to deliver services, regardless of whether the SGB is democratic or not. That is, governance is about the performance of agents in carrying out the wishes of leaders, and not about the goals that they set (Fukuyama, 2013). The term ‘governance’ relates to who has the power in taking decisions, the role other players play in ensuring that their voices are heard, and the way accounting is done (Petrie et al., 2016).

Some principals feel threatened as a result of being required to change and follow the trend of democratic school governance. This is because the lawmakers are of the opinion that some parents are not well informed as to how to play a part in those activities affecting schools without interfering in the professional management and academic side of schooling (Squelch, 1998). The term “distributed leadership” was introduced as a means to shift the unit of analysis in the study of leadership from the individual leader to the “patterns” or “varieties” of leadership distributed across the organisation, including engagement in collaborative or concertive action. In terms of this approach, distributed leadership is an analytic lens for understanding leadership as a feature of organisations that recognise that leadership practice is the outcome of the collaborations between leaders, followers, and their situation (Kelley & Dikkers, 2016). Distributed leadership includes task distribution, and it goes beyond delegation to provide a holistic perspective on the enactment of leadership actions spread across multiple leaders in the same context (Howard, 2016). Stability would be sacrificed when incompetent citizens engage in political decision-making (Maxcy, 1995).

This relates in particular to the application of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) in secondary schools in Gauteng Province. Findings reported are based on a study conducted in Gauteng secondary schools.

Method

Data for the study was collected by means of a mixed method. Interviews and questionnaires were used as data collection tools. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section 1 dealt with biographical data, and section 2 elicited participants’ responses to statements regarding the management and governance of schools. After the data was collected, a factor and items analysis was done to determine the causes of problems in the relationship between school principals and SGBs.

Results

Virtually all the respondents (99.35%) considered it important to have a principal in a school; likewise, virtually all (98.69%) considered it important to have an SGB in a school. Of the respondents, 37.5% considered lack of knowledge of

SASA to be one of the weaknesses of SGBs. According to 47% of parents who participated in the study are of the opinion that management in schools is poor; 94% of principals who participated in the study, however, held an opposing view. 22.23% of the respondents were of the opinion that teachers play no role in the management of schools. The majority of the respondents (60.13%), however, believed that teachers do indeed play a significant role in school management, and 17.65% of the respondents were uncertain of the role of teachers in school management. According to the overwhelming majority of the respondents (80.27%), in cases where principals and SGBs are in opposition to each other, the rules are ambiguous. 64.66% of the respondents considered poor management by principals to be the cause of dysfunctional schools. According to 35.29% of the respondents, principals confuse their work with the work of the SGBs. 23.53% of the respondents were of the opinion that school principals treat parents badly. This view may be based on the fact of some school principals not attending to parents who come to schools or who treat them dismissively during parent meetings.

The importance of having school principals and school governing bodies in schools

Principals are expected to organise schedules, make strategic pedagogical decisions, and represent schools by communicating with the education department, SGBs, trade unions, and the parent community (Böhlmark et al., 2016). Kelley and Dikkers (2016) define leadership in the education context as: the identification, acquisition, allocation, coordination, and use of the social, material, and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of teaching and learning. Principals have the responsibility to organise and support the professional development of their teachers, and they play a key role in this domain by shaping a school environment that motivates and promotes the ongoing learning of school staff (Li et al., 2016).

Important traits for knowledge staff include prudence, effectiveness, excellence, integrity, truthfulness, practical wisdom, responsibility, cooperation, and courage. These features are required by modern human resources collectively in order to achieve the common good. The common good is simply a designation to live the intellectual virtue and moral character of effectiveness and responsibility, both inside organisations and in society, under the umbrella of the authority principle (Turriago-Hoyos et al., 2016). It is therefore vital that principals form an integral part of SGBs, as they may have the necessary education to help parents in the SGBs to carry out their functions. Teaching and learning activities are the responsibilities of principals. They are expected to act in good faith (stand in a position of trust) towards the school (as stated in section 16(2) of SASA). In terms of sections 19(1) and 19(2) of SASA, principals must build capacity within SGBs in order for them to perform their duties properly.

According to section 20(1)(e) of SASA, the SGB has a duty to support the school principal, teachers and other staff of the school in carrying out their professional obligations. Interdependency creates the potential for conflict because people's intentions, goals, means and ideologies vary. Rather than tending toward order, school systems are moving toward disorder and irregularity (Maxcy, 1995). According to 38.57% of the respondents management in schools is poor, although

54.90% of the respondents were of the opinion that schools are not characterised by poor management, and more than 40% were uncertain. According to 47% of the parents who participated in the study, some schools are poorly managed whereas 94% of the principals who participated in the study held the opposing view. Opposing views between parents and principals can lead to conflict and relationship problems, with school principals feeling the need to defend themselves in the face of criticism. Kelley and Dikkers (2016, pp. 392-422) identify the following as core leadership tasks related to school improvement, namely:

- developing and managing a school culture conducive to conversations about the core technology of instruction by building norms of trust, collaboration, and academic press among staff;
- supporting teacher growth and development, both individually and collectively;
- both summative and formative monitoring of instruction and innovation; and
- establishment of a school climate in which disciplinary issues do not dominate instructional issues.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (69.28%) were of the opinion that SGBs must help principals, teachers and other members to perform their functions. 14.38% of the respondents did not think that SGBs must help principals, teachers and other members to perform their functions. 22.23% of the respondents were of the opinion that teachers play no role in school management, but the majority of the respondents (60.13%) believed that teachers do indeed play a significant role in school management. 17.65% of the respondents were uncertain as to the role of teachers in school management.

Why are some schools dysfunctional?

According to 23.53% of the respondents, some Gauteng school principals treat parents badly. About 65.36% of the respondents, by contrast, felt that principals did not treat parents badly. 11.11% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. According to 31.3% of the parent respondents, principals treat parents badly in their schools, whereas 100% of the principals who participated in the study disagreed with them. About 64.70% of the respondents supported section 20(1)(e) of SASA, which states that SGBs must support the principal, teachers and other staff of the school in carrying out their professional functions. 22.22% of respondents disagreed with the above statement, and 13.07% were uncertain. SGBs can discuss the matter with principals and give them support and advice (Gauteng Department of Education, 1997, p. 8). According to the overwhelming majority (80.27%) of the respondents, in cases where the SGB and the principal oppose each other, the rules were found to be ambiguous. On occasion, SGBs dictate terms to principals. However, 65.35% of the respondents did not support the statement that SGBs must always dictate terms to principals. In terms of section 20(1)(e) of SASA, it is not up to SGBs to dictate terms to principals, but they must support them in the performance of their professional functions. 24.84% of respondents were of the view that SGBs must dictate terms to the principal. Generally, teachers were of the view that SGBs should always dictate terms to the principal. 57.52% of respondents stated that principals do not always dictate terms to SGBs, and 32.03% stated that

principals always dictate terms to the SGBs. Some teachers in schools are of the view that school principals always dictate terms to SGBs. 64.66% of the respondents were of the view that poor management by principals is the cause of dysfunctionality in Gauteng secondary schools. The struggle between the principals and the SGBs will ultimately lead to dysfunctional schools. Roughly 80% of the respondents were of the view that poor management by principals was the cause of dysfunctionality in schools.

82% of the respondents considered poor governance to be the cause of dysfunctionality of schools. Poor governance can easily lead to a situation where teaching and learning cannot take place. The SGB bears overall responsibility for the school because it has to make sure that all the provisions of SASA are adhered to and that school policies are properly drawn up (Gauteng Department of Education, 1997). Roughly 90% of the respondents viewed poor governance as the cause of a dysfunctional school. Poor management and poor governance are seen as causes of dysfunctional schools. However, 94.1% of these respondents viewed poor governance as a problem. On the other hand, 100% of parents who participated in the study viewed poor management as a cause of dysfunctional schools. Good governance should aim at promoting good substantive outcomes and public legitimacy to all school structures (Rose-Ackerman, 2016).

Participatory monitoring is an approach that can help bring about change, not only for women but also for men in and outside of leadership positions, and for gender relations, thus strengthening community governance as a whole (Flores et al., 2016). 35.29% of the respondents were of the opinion that school principals confuse their work with the work of SGBs, and 54.9% of the respondents held the opposing view, with 9.8% unwilling to commit to a firm opinion on the matter. According to sections 19(1) and 19(2)(a-b) of SASA, Heads of Department (HODs) are expected to establish a programme to provide both introductory and continuing training to SGBs.

Findings

School principals contribute to dysfunctionality in schools because they either refuse or fail to acknowledge their own incompetence. Opposing ideas and different expectations prevail in some schools. From a legal vantage point, school principals no longer occupy the role of chief decision-maker in schools. Poor governance and poor management give rise to dysfunctional schools. Some principals continue managing schools by not involving teachers fully in school management; treat parents badly; dictate terms to SGBs; contribute to dysfunctional schools and confuse their work with that of the SGBs. Parents are not given enough opportunity to participate in important matters and decisions affecting them in schools.

Conclusion

Some school principals exclude teachers in the management of schools, and they rely on unclear rules and prescribe to SGBs what must happen in those schools. Generally, some school principals cause dysfunctionality of schools. The paper suggests that school principals and SGBs should work together to circumvent conflict. Distributed leadership practices can help to overcome some of the

limitations on the use of feedback directed towards an individual leader, and teamwork is important.

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