
Rural school principals' quest for effectiveness: lessons from the field

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Abstract

Rural schools were always experiencing operational challenges under the apartheid dispensation. In the past there were always concerns that South Africa's rural areas were marginalised and under-resourced (ANC, 1995). These schools were believed to be of low quality and that the majority of them did not have the necessary resources, both human and physical. There are still people who contend that a number of rural schools today witness the remnants of some of the past challenges.

This study was conducted in 10 rural schools that shared similar challenges among these; non-involvement of communities in education, few or no physical resources. The participants (principals) from these schools were registered in the new Advanced Certificate in Education, School Management and Leadership (ACE-SML). Using experience from the ACE-SML programme, the participants claimed to have adopted transformational leadership qualities and were already looking at how they could turn their schools around as they avert some of the daily challenges they face.

Introduction and problem postulation

The South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 stipulates that the school principal has delegated powers to organise and control effective teaching and learning at the school effectively (Potgieter, Visser, Van der Bank, Mothata and Squelch, 1997). Educational changes in South Africa have had an impact on managers and leaders in schools in various ways. Principals have been expected to lead aspects such as curriculum as well as organisational change. However, research shows that many South African principals are in such an unenviable position where they lacked preparation programmes for their leadership and management positions (Bush, 2004; Mestry and Singh, 2007 and Bush, Duku, Glover, Kiggundu, Kola, Msila and Moorosi, 2007). Bush (2004) argues that in South Africa there is no principal qualification and that the lack of criteria for principals' appointments has resulted in the underperformance of principals in their leadership and management roles. Yet, in the recent education changes, the principals have a mammoth task of leading change because as people in the helm, they need to guide their

followers as they minimise the fear and resistance to change. Kotter (1999) points out that among others, leaders need to alleviate the fear of change.

The introduction of educational changes has shown pronounced differences not only between various principals but also between schools. Some schools found the educational changes more challenging than others. Schools that were cited to have been exposed to gross challenges in the implementation and sustenance of change are the rural schools in South Africa. Rural schools for example, are confronted with poor school conditions, high levels of illiteracy, lack of parental participation in school governing bodies (SGBs), poor transportation and non-attendance and shortage of teachers (Human Rights Watch, 2007). According to Jansen (1999) the introduction of the new curriculum exposes the inadequacies of rural schools. Usually with minimal physical resources and minimal professional expertise principals in rural schools have had to deal with more challenges in the face of educational changes.

The main question posed in this study is:

What solutions do rural principals see redeeming their schools from leadership and management incompetency and ineffectiveness?

Sub-questions asked were:

How can formal training programmes assist in the enhancement of the principals management and leadership skills?

Can rural school principals lead successful schools despite certain obstacles?

It is very early days to judge the impact of the ACE-SML and the study wanted to explore whether in the long run the ACE has the likelihood of changing the current school leadership and management scenario. All the participants in the study were registered in the ACE-SML programme during the time when the research was conducted. The ACE-SML is a practice-based part-time programme of study that is aimed at providing management and leadership support through a variety of interactive programmes that improve the students' practice, professional growth and ethos of leadership (Mestry and Singh, 2007). Furthermore, Mestry and Singh contend that the ACE programme was conceived as a form of continuing professional development, which has the purpose of equipping principals or enabling teachers to move into an education leadership and management career path.

Rural schools: a brief historical background

This research explores what the rural principals envisage as practical solutions to their plight and workplace challenges. Regarding this though, one needs to be careful, as some writers have proclaimed that there are no panaceas to educational policy (Chubb and Moe, 1990). Yet the premise of this article is what the principals see as changing their current positions for the better. Caputo-Pearl, Al-Alim and Martin (2007) argue that teachers have a specific role within an unequal and unjust educational system. Furthermore, these writers contend that if teachers do not understand the structure of the system, they will help in the reproduction of the structure through the implementation of curricula that deaden rather than enliven working-class learners and the political agency of poor communities. In this section the focus is on the brief history of rural schools and education and displays what needs to be improved in these schools.

The definition of the term rural can be slippery as one moves from one country to another. Criteria to refer to a place as a rural area depend upon a number of aspects. The numbers of inhabitants in a locality distance from the city centre, demographic and geographic factors are some of the factors that could assist in distinguishing rural areas from others (Halsall, 1973). There are however, some common aspects among rural areas across the world. According to Halsall (1973) rural children tend to be at an educational disadvantage almost everywhere and he traces these disadvantages to economic as well as cultural reasons. Fleisch (2008) relates rural teachers testimonies that provide powerful evidence that links poverty to under-achievement. According to Graaf (1995) rural schools are “poor quality schools where the basic necessities were lacking”. He also contends that there are no facilities and that these are schools where many teachers are not qualified to teach their subjects and some are not even interested in being qualified teachers. When Outcomes-based Education (OBE) was about to be implemented, some sceptics pointed out that OBE would be a huge challenge to the present rural areas due to the lack of resources that still persisted. Usually rural communities lack the financial capital and have to survive with minimal resources. Graaf (1995) pointed out that rural schools are inferior because they are the products of communities without political power.

Bot, Wilson and Dove (2001) concur with the above by stating that many rural schools make use of water and sanitation that is unhygienic, giving rise to health concerns for both learners and educators. They also argue that the

availability of electricity and telephones at schools have a significant impact on the quality of education. In the late 1990s almost half of all schools in South Africa did not have electricity and the majority of these were in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo (Bot *et al.*, 2001).

South Africa has a number of rural schools situated in various provinces around the country. As a general rule, many teachers working in urban areas would not prefer to work in some of these schools because of their inaccessibility. Some writers have argued that even the central education authorities are sometimes not concerned with the quality of education (Brunswic and Valerien, 2004). Brunswic and Valerien also point out that the provision of quality education in poor areas requires not only motivated staff but also administrative management and supervision of teaching practices. They also suggest a number of issues that need to be addressed relating to teachers management in rural areas (2004, p.61):

Experience shows that the procedures concerned with teacher management should be adapted to education in a rural environment; special recruitment and appointment criteria to avoid giving young inexperienced teachers a first appointment in an overly difficult posting; appointment of couples to two-person postings in order to facilitate their integration into the rural environment and avoid excessive turnover rate; in small schools, appointment of a teacher who speaks the children's mother tongue, etc.

Research methodology

The study was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape through the use of focus group interviews as well as observations in ten schools. Three secondary schools and two primary schools were selected in the Eastern Cape. In KwaZulu-Natal two high schools and three primary schools were selected. All these schools are historically black and situated in rural areas. Previously, all the Eastern Cape schools in the study were under the Transkei Department of Education and the KwaZulu-Natal schools fell under the Department of Education and Culture (former KwaZulu Government). The researcher visited four centres where ACE candidates attended contact sessions: two in KZN and two in the EC. He then used purposive sampling to obtain a sample of rural principals from a population of 66 candidates. Purposive sampling includes the use of previous knowledge of a population. Investigators use personal judgment to select a sample (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000). Brink (2000) describes purposive sampling as a method based on the judgment of a researcher regarding participants or objects that are typical or representative of the phenomenon being studied.

All ten participants were candidates in the ACE-SML programme which was being piloted by the National Department of Education. The selected schools shared common features such as poverty, lack of physical resources, absence or non-involvement of parents in school matters and low morale among educators. The research mainly focused on the management of improvement in face of the obstacles. The participants were observed over a period of six months. During this time they were individually interviewed three times, using semi-structured interviews. These individual interviews were spread throughout the duration of the study; the first one at the beginning of the study, the second one at the end of the third month and the last at the end of the sixth month. These individual interviews were preceded by school observations. The researcher was a passive observer who observed the management style of the principals and their typical days of duty. Observations in the study took two forms; observations of ACE-SML classes (three contact sessions) and observations of the participants in the first month after they had started and then in the sixth month when the study was finalised. During observation times the researcher's observations included the following:

In contact sessions

- Forms of delivery and their effectiveness
- Interaction with the material
- Peer learning
- Application of relevant theory

In schools

- Daily operation of the schools
- The ACE-SML impact (effectiveness or absence thereof)
- Leadership styles

In addition to individual participant interviews there were two focus group interviews. The focus group interviews were crucial because this was where the participants shared various 'solutions' as to how they could remedy the ills endemic in their schools. Focus group interviews use the group interaction to generate data. In this regard Struwig and Stead (2004) cite Krueger who points out that focus groups generally comprise four to eight research participants. In each of these interview sessions, there were five participants. Brink (2000) points out that apart from the obvious practical advantages of interviewing

several people simultaneously, it is also useful to allow participants to share their thoughts with one another. However, he also states that the disadvantage is that some participants may be uncomfortable with the idea of sharing their viewpoints in groups. The latter challenge was however, triangulated by the use of the individual interviews. Questions posed proceeded from the general to the specific. The latter is crucial for according to Kingry, Tiedje and Friedman (1990), the participants must feel that their contributions are worthwhile and that they are free to disagree with one another.

The schools

Table 1: The schools in the study

School	Staff numbers	Learner numbers
1. Manzini Secondary School (EC)	<30	<600
2. Orchards Secondary School (EC)	>30	<600
3. Lesedi Secondary School (EC)	>30	>600
4. Mso Primary School (EC)	<30	<600
5. Langa Primary School (EC)	>30	>600
6. Apple Secondary School (KZN)	<30	<600
7. Plum Secondary School (KZN)	<30	<600
8. Litha Secondary School (KZN)	>30	>600
9. Cocoa Secondary School (KZN)	>30	>600
10. Lily Primary School (KZN)	<30	<600

All the schools in Table 1 are situated quite a distance from the city, the nearest being 150 kilometres and the furthest 400 kilometres. Some schools such as Manzini, Lesedi, Mso, Apple, Plum and Lily have dominant traditional authority involvement and the *indunas* or the area chief councillors play significant roles in the schools governance.

The findings

There were many commonalities in the participants responses. Among the most significant was the notion that the participants have learnt to be transformational leaders in their schools. For many, this was a new concept which they explained (among others) as meaning 'to have and sustain a vision', 'being able to lead change', commitment to share leadership with others'. The majority of the participants displayed significant management and leadership practices during the researcher's last visits to their schools. These changes were also evident in the contact sessions as the participants engaged in their case study work. During the third visit in the contact sessions, they were more assertive and better prepared for the challenges they face in their schools. The Langa Primary school participant was a sceptic when it came to delegation of duties because she did not feel that her teachers were ready for shared leadership. However, it was evident in the last visit that there was much delegation in the school. The participants attributed improvement to the ACE-SML programme.

They also stated that the idea of mentors was a new concept to them and while it was not as effective as it should have been, they saw the potential of this aspect of leadership. In fact, many saw their change in being transformational leaders as an aspect that could be enhanced by effective mentors. However, some candidates stated that in future the mentors might be valuable although they discovered that their mentors were sometimes tentative and not sure as to what they were supposed to do. Some mentors even told them that they are learning a model 'that should have been there for many years'. One mentor in one of the contact sessions said that in future, mentors would be more skilled as they would have received more training than the current crop of mentors. The participants maintained that rural teachers face a myriad of challenges and should not work without the mentoring aspect.

Many concurred that the mentorship programme should be the cornerstone of the ACE programme. With no induction of principals apparent, 'mentorship can be the best remedy for the beginning principals in particular'. They said that the rural principal in particular, usually faces problems alone 'with no other people to bounce ideas on'. This need was supported in one contact session observed; where the mentor facilitated a session in which the participants discussed various problems in their schools. To the principals amazement, some of their problems were 'solved' by their peers. The mentor also had one-to-one sessions as the participants shared some unique challenges

in their schools. Three of the participants stated that they did not have effective mentors, however, they pointed out that the idea of having someone to guide one is a good one in itself. The participants reiterated that the rural principals 'operate in seclusion'. Another participant said that they sometimes find that some district officials do not understand the unique nature of rural schools and that mentors could help in this regard.

The mentors, as well as the study material, emphasised the involvement of various stakeholders in school management as well as governance. The participants generally concurred about the non-cooperation of parents and the community. As a result, a number of participants were conducting many programmes alone, without the assistance of other stakeholders. However, from the stories of the peers and through discussions the participants learnt about the importance of involving every stakeholder in the school. One participant in the Eastern Cape explained how the involvement of the *indunas* helped in curbing criminal acts of vandalism in the school. He said that whilst the *indunas* could not engage in activities that demanded literacy, they played a crucial role in saving their school. In KwaZulu-Natal, one principal related a story of how the learners in his school, half of whom are orphans heading families; they were assisted by a local community based organisation that supplied them with victuals daily. Without these meals the learning would have been virtually impossible. Therefore, forging links with various stakeholders was highlighted as an important strategy for struggling rural schools. The participants concurred that irrespective of literacy levels, the community and parents will always have a role to play in salvaging the schools.

The facilitators in the programme agreed that formal networks were not as they should have been. They felt that the principals should have been grouped in networks and each network should have had a leader who was to coordinate the programme of each network. However, what happened was that the participants grouped themselves and 'networking' when they were to submit assignments. The principals learnt from one another when they were discussing these assignments together. The assignments are mainly case based and when trying to solve these cases principals talked about their experiences in their own schools. As a result, there was much peer learning occurring. Therefore, although the participants stated that there were 'no proper networks' they learnt many things from one another. The contact sessions had broken the isolation and they said that they now found it easy to phone a colleague to ask when they were experiencing any managerial challenges in their schools. According to the principals, the latter was one of the strongest

aspects. During the focus group interviews, the participants highlighted how because of their programme involvement, they were able to overcome a number of obstacles in their schools. Linked to this was the useful links that could be forged with universities. The participants pointed out that through the programme they were able to use the expertise of the facilitators from the universities.

The participants also underscored the need for practical solutions when dealing with management issues and challenges in schools. All stated that their School Governing Bodies (SGBs) are ineffective because 'the parents are hardly present in the school meetings'. In the interviews others praised some of the solutions including one in which one principal explained how he ensures that parents come to meetings. One said that parent meetings are always coupled with something else such as someone who will talk about farming. The other shared that what they normally do in their school is to 'take the meetings to the parents'. The principal explained that they usually go to a central point where the parents live and then they use churches to convene meetings. The parents also need to be genuinely involved, one principal said. He said that they should not be relegated to the background in meetings, because this symbolically informs them that their ideas are also unnecessary. Yet all principals agreed that it was very challenging to lead schools with a strong SGB. The Plum and Manzini principals highlighted how the making of decisions poses problems when the SGB is not entirely in control.

These are problems of both human as well as the physical resources challenges. It is a critical commonplace that many rural schools do not perform well because of the lack of physical resources. Five of the schools in the sample (three of these in the Eastern Cape) are situated in deep rural areas, with adverse conditions such as the absence of running water. Orchard Secondary for example, had a tank to receive rain water. However, these taps attached on these tanks are frequently stolen by vandals each time after they are installed. This meant that the school would not have running water for the learners and teachers. The principal would find himself moving up and down trying to see how the staff and learners would get running water. This took a lot of time and diverted the principal's attention to do chores that she is not supposed to concentrate on, thus finding herself having to neglect some necessary management duties. In Plum the principal has similar problems but also highlights the problem of an old bus that transports the learners. He says that they are frequently late because the bus is old and the roads can be treacherous especially when it rains. Teachers have to sometimes wait until 9 o'clock for learners who are supposed to be in school at eight. The

compounding factor to these problems is the aloofness of district officials. The Manzini principal praises 'some district involvement' although she maintains that they need more physical presence of the district team in the school. She believes that if people such as the subject advisors and Educational Development Officers ('inspectors') were visible, 'many schools can do well even though situated in the rural areas'.

A number of principals discussed the need to curb problems that arise from the resources aspects. The Plum Secondary School principal for example explained how his school partnered with a relatively close former Model C school where his learners are usually bussed and teachers frequently observe classes. The participants also stated how they learnt from the experiences of the ex-Model C school. Litha Secondary School and Lily Primary School are neighbouring schools and the participants from these schools shared how working with business stakeholders and donors help their schools. They assert that the tendency of many principals is not to seek for possible assistance. They have also found that the ACE-course material emphasises the need for this; to work with external stakeholders all the time where possible.

The above was also linked to the lack of induction of principals into their positions. As one secondary school participant (Apple) in KwaZulu-Natal stated:

I was appointed in this position about two years ago. I was never inducted and yet people expected me to act like a principal, make decisions like a principal and steer my school to success like any seasoned effective principal. It was tough though for rural school present many challenges and many-a-times one has no one to rely for support. In rural areas we need more support from experts than urban schools.

It was also during the course of this study that the participants furnished what they thought were 'solutions' to the challenges they are up against.

The analysis of results

Discussion of the findings

The rural principals from the two provinces shared similar experiences. Primary as well as secondary schools reflected fewer differences in a number of aspects including infrastructure, resources and the general environment. Yet the principals in the ACE-SML programme displayed some optimism and hope. The majority of the participants said that it was the first time they had

seen and used certain terms such as *change management*, differences between a *leader and manager*, the *importance of vision and mission* in a school. They also appeared to agree that it was more crucial to be 'a people's person when heading a school especially one with no resources'. The principals concurred with the need to address the teacher perceptions and attitudes in such schools because, 'when these are negative they can destroy the school effectiveness'. Creighton (2005) refers to this as being able to understand leading from below the surface; looking at the objective and subjective sides involved.

Creighton (2005, p.7) points out:

- We generally overemphasize the objective aspect of leadership: facts, data and test scores. At the same time, leadership is subjective, in that it involves feelings, beliefs, and values of others. The objective components of *on the surface* are, as stated earlier, visible and tangible.
- Leading from *below the surface* requires a principal to address the subjective components of leadership: the more invisible and intangible things such as teacher attitudes and beliefs, community member's feelings and state and country's educators.

The response to change has elicited various responses from participants. They learnt to cope with a number of issues in their schools and they had begun seeking potential 'solutions' to problems. They have also learnt that resources are crucial for effectiveness 'but cannot always be scapegoats for failure'. The participants in the study were 'opening their eyes' and beginning to see and use various strategies to improve their schools. As they begin to be conscientious, the principals take the initiative to change their schools. In his book, *Turnaround Leadership* Fullan (2006) writes how leaders can even transform the worst situations into opportunities to enhance productivity in their schools. Finding solutions for educational and societal problems is not easy especially addressing inequalities that still persist. Fullan (2006) points out that 'we have, then, many reasons for addressing inequalities in schools. The goal is to raise the bar and close the gap. Closing the gap is crucial in the context of overall improvement of the system as a whole'.

Whilst the ACE-SML programme is still in its infancy, it has already brought about opportunities and possibilities for struggling schools as implied by some of the findings above. Brundrett and Crawford (2008) aptly state that the dramatic rise of leadership programmes has presented opportunities for some and challenges for others. Common opportunities and possibilities discovered from observations and interviews are discussed under the following themes:

- The value of peer learning and networking
- Mentoring
- Support from HEIs
- Leading and caring
- The value of peer learning and networking

The value of peer learning and networking

Managers of dysfunctional schools are reticent to acquire ‘recipes of success’ from colleagues of effective schools. However, this article summarises the findings of investigating peer learning among principals and school managers. One of the important opportunities in the ACE SML programme was the opportunity for school managers to network and learn through the peers from similar or different schools from their own. It was as a result of meeting colleagues in contact sessions that the managers saw the need for peer learning and networking. A number of participants involved in the programme from the Eastern Cape concurred that one of the potential empowering experiences in the programme was the networking and peer learning that emerged during the course of the module facilitation. During discussions, ‘the participants listened to people who shared similar experiences and expressed themselves in language they all understood’. Their peers did not trivialise their questions as they understood entirely where they came from. Even principals from schools that were better resourced and better managed were able to learn from their less fortunate counterparts.

While the networks failed to be formalised, the participants continued to network in their own way. When they did assignments they grouped themselves as principals coming from the same district or vicinity and this amounted to some form of network. Kochan and Pascarelli (2003) point out that the farthest extreme in the continuum of mentoring for change leads to the creation of new cultures. One culture that appears to have been learned through the ACE-SML experience is networking for the participants learnt more from one another through the use of networks. The networks, like peer learning, made problems that seemed insurmountable to be trivial. Individual schools, especially rural ones, experience tensions and challenges, more so if acting in isolation. Networks provide a forum where they are shunned and sometimes resolved. Effective principals will, while transforming their own schools, also transform the society around them. Gurr and Drysdale (2007)

identify eight goals that illustrate how a principal could work with and influence the context around the school. They point out that a principal took over under challenging circumstances and not only did he turn his school around, but the local neighbourhood was improved as well.

The majority of the participants in the study maintained that their district officials appeared to be distant instead of helping the schools. All over the world it appears that challenges confront schools and districts and there is usually a myriad of solutions that do not work (Fullan and Miles, 1992). Yet, district offices need to work closely with their schools. Many participants contend that the district office has never really prepared them for the principalship positions that they were holding. Ongoing professional development is necessary to sustain the professionalism of the principals and on the basis of the participants viewpoints in this study, the district officials are hardly assisting the rural schools. District officials could do much to coordinate development programmes for school principals in disadvantaged areas. Craig, Kraft and Du Plessis (1998, p.xii) point out:

There also needs to be linkages with other teachers and supervisors to help them solve problems and support each other through discussion, modelling and coaching, and involvement with other aspects of school and educational change. Isolation and lack of communication between all players needs to be reduced. **Ministries of education and regional education staff** have a responsibility to provide adequate facilities, and ongoing support for the issues that teachers face.

District officials need to realise the special needs of rural teachers generally and rural principals specifically. Craig *et al.* (1998) aver that teachers in rural areas face special problems that may require more in-service programmes in the in-service programmes dealing with isolation and working within the local community values. District officials have to spearhead ongoing programmes that would enhance the skills of rural principals and their teachers to ensure adequate training and support.

Mentoring

The participants in the study stated that one of the lessons learnt in the programme was the value of mentoring of principals. All 10 participants said that they were never inducted into their positions, yet they now perceive mentoring as a vital part of the programme. Barkol (2008) posits that the complexity of the school principalship makes entry into the position difficult and anxiety-ridden. Furthermore, the principals' isolation makes it even more

difficult for them to adapt to their new roles. The latter is more of a reality for rural principals in their study. Sixty per cent of the participants found very helpful mentors who were able to help them in various situations. The rest had ineffective mentors but they still maintained that there was a need for mentors. The ineffective mentors were due to a lack of capacity. There is a need to train qualified people to serve as mentors. In Israel, experienced principals who are selected by the Minister of Education are well trained and this is considered a further step in their career for they gain recognition and status (Darkel, 2008). There is a need to train more mentors in South Africa.

In schools where mentoring worked, principals provided interesting accounts of their experience. Mentoring supported them, emotionally and helped them to deal with real everyday issues in their schools. The issues of resources, impact of the AIDS pandemic, teacher morale and absenteeism, the absence of district officials in guiding schools are some of the major aspects that the participants said the mentors were frequently needed for. The participants say that they are usually isolated and mentors provide ears and advice to their problems. One participant stated how a mentor changed the climate of his school by talking to teachers. The other explained how the parent numbers in school meetings increased due to suggestions and support from her mentor. Another participant who had been a mentor for two years said that for the first time in two years, she received proper induction into her principalship.

The participants maintained that they are isolated by virtue of being in rural schools and it is sometimes not easy to find people who could provide advice. Zellner and Erlandson (2002) point out that rural principals often feel like isolated links in the chain of command, caught somewhere between the learners, teachers, parents and district officials. They also point out that although they have all the people around them and even overwhelmed, they often feel lonely. According to the principals one is sometimes alone as the communities think that one is responsible for denying children opportunities to develop. The mentors provide that necessary professional support where needed. The mentors who were benefitted the most understood the climate and unique nature of rural schools.

Support from HEIs

Principals benefitted by working with the higher education institutions. The participants agreed that working with people with the expertise of university

lecturers as facilitators in their programme helped them to identify the challenges they are facing in their work environment. The participants said they gained by the on-site visits by the university staff to their schools as apart from their mentors; they received another view as to how to face the challenges in their schools. While all participants agreed that the visits were not adequate, they concurred that they helped immensely. From this experience, it shows that higher education institutions need to work closely with schools to enhance the leadership skills of the principals and their educators.

The recent restructuring of higher education institutions in South Africa appear to augur well for the development of teachers and schools. It is however, a critical commonplace that there is a huge schism between schools and universities. Cross and Schoole (1997) pointed out that higher education institutions needed to strengthen horizontal links between themselves and other institutions. Furthermore, they conceded that higher education institutions should form vertical links with schools and non-governmental organisations while bridging the vocational academic gap. The vertical and horizontal links would play a major role in minimising wastage and the underutilisation of resources, duplication of programmes and unhealthy competition among institutions (Cross and Schoole, 1997). All governments need quality education in their schools because this has serious implications for the development of the economy. Bagwande (1995) contended that a course of education will only be as good as the quality and calibre of teachers contributing to it. Furthermore, he added that this contribution would in turn be influenced by values of the school in which the school is contextualised. Poor schools need as much support as possible as they strive towards effectiveness and empowerment. The universities could also play a significant role in coordinating networks among schools.

Leading and caring

Whilst one must be wary of self reporting in studies such as this one, through the researcher's observations in the ACE-SML classes change was evident in the participants as many began to talk of alternative leadership styles that would build the school. Among other aspects that participants discussed and experimented with in their school was caring for their staff. Clarke (2008) points out that principals of small schools tend to be more immediately important to the running of the schools than their counterparts in larger schools. However, these principals have to face various challenges that make

leadership in the small; rural schools distinctive (Clarke, 2008). These schools are isolated and are also served by conservative communities that compound the difficulties of initiating school improvement (Clarke, 2008). A new principal in a rural area might encounter people who are following rules based on habits and cultures developed over time. The participants in the study identified the need to form teams and to make teamwork more meaningful.

Servais and Sanders (2006) argue that the purpose of teams is to meet the organisational mission, vision and goals. They also posit that teaming is the process by which the organisation can lead and grow. The participants in the study highlighted that if principals do not show any caring for the employees, they might not achieve the required results; that of steering the school to effectiveness. One of the crucial aspects highlighted by the participants in the study was the need to motivate the staff who have to continuously work under appalling conditions. The challenges teachers face in rural schools demand managers and leaders who would be able to constantly boost their morale. All employees would like to work with leaders who care and this is even more so in rural schools. Plum Secondary School's participant achieved fairly good results in grade 12 for the past five years and he attributes this to caring for his teachers. Many principals hardly have solutions to the challenges that plague their schools. This however, does not stop them from being reflective as they work with their colleagues. Pellicer (2008) avers that human experiences in organisations are transitory; it is not the responsibility of the leader to provide the right answers but rather to 'work faithfully with others in the organisation to identify the right questions'. When a leader is able to do this, it means they care for their colleagues. Effective leaders work with teams and they strive to make the teachers work worthwhile.

Pellicer (2008) points out that leaders are responsible for establishing conditions that make organisations great places to work for. As portrayed in the findings above, the conditions in many rural schools are uninviting for both the learners and their teachers. Effective leaders would want to change this around by engaging their staff members and make them feel valued. When leaders fail to make work rewarding and enjoyable for employees, they will try to overcome challenges with as little effort as possible (Pellicer, 2008). Furthermore, Pellicer cites Hogan, Curphy and Hogan who pointed out that leadership involves persuading other people to set aside their individual concerns (for a period of time) and pursue a common goal that is important for the responsibilities and welfare of a group. Building a team to get work done is crucial for the schools and leaders who care would strive to create cultural leadership.

Cultural leadership is the opportunity to guide, develop and sustain the culture of an organisation. If the leader and followers in an organisation are not on the same path, there is little chance that the organisation will achieve its ultimate purpose. Principals of struggling schools would aim to instil this cultural leadership associated with caring. Ramsey (2008) states that caring is infectious and interactive. If the staff believes that the principal cares about what happens in the school and about them, they will care and show it. Nothing feels better than knowing that your leader believes you are a good employee. It is a lifelong spirit booster (Ramsey, 2008). The participants in the study recommend these for struggling schools such as theirs. Their teachers need leaders who are focused and who will be able to help the employees focus through caring and cultural leadership.

Good principals will try to be effective despite the challenges that might appear insurmountable. The participants in the study showed initiatives and they attributed many of these to their involvement in the ACE-SML programme. Principals in today's schools have to be visionaries who will be able to change the schools for the better. It is not adequate to raise concerns about minimal physical resources. The caring conscientious leader can be a missing link between an effective and a failing school. The participants in the study showed signs of being transformational leaders in the face of adversity for effective principals would want to challenge the status quo for the benefit of the learners and the community.

Conclusion

Plank and Boyd (1994) support Chubb and Moe cited earlier when they aver that democratic governance is not a panacea for the problems of an educational system. It is not sufficient to say that aspects such as shared leadership could turn schools around. One of the objectives of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) curriculum in South Africa is to develop teachers who are lifelong learners and educators who are critical. The ACE-SML displays the potential of making educators creative and critical thinkers who can change their schools for the better. Effective teacher education should lead to committed and conscientious practitioners.

The ACE-SML programme enhanced critical thinking in the participants hence they began to perceive alternative strategies that they could employ in running their schools. From the participants' own admission, rural principals

who take initiatives can run successful schools as they minimise the challenges they constantly face.

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