Leadership development: Learning from school principals' and mentors' experiences from KwaZulu-Natal

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Introduction & background

- This presentation reports on a study that sought to understand leadership development from the experiences of some South African school principals and their mentors.

- Developing leaders is a crucial but very complex process (McGuire 2011b).

- Since the democratisation of education in South Africa around 1994, the duties and responsibilities of the school principal have transformed quite considerably and demand that he/she has specialised knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in order to successfully lead and manage schools in a changing context (Republic of South Africa 1998).

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Introduction & background

- The school principal's job is quite demanding. It requires passion, energy, drive and many personal qualities and attributes on the part of the incumbent.

- The expectations of this job have broadened and deepened from demands of mere management and control to those of an educational leader who can spearhead staff development, parental involvement, community support, and learner growth, somebody who can succeed with major changes in legislation and policies.

- As argued by Cardno (2007, p.33) '….standards-based reforms all round the world have increased the degree of accountability for principals'.

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Introduction & background

- Research on school principalship around the world (Day 2005; Elmore 2002; Reppa and Lazaridou, 2008) has shown that the quality of leadership provided in a school has an influence on learner performance and teacher effectiveness.

- In many parts of the world, a qualification in school leadership and management has become a prerequisite for the job of school principal (Business Report, 2007).

- To illustrate, in the United States of America, more than 90% of the States require a prospective school principals to complete a state approved preparation programme that leads to a certificate as a school leader (Roberts, 2009).

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Introduction & background

- In England, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) is mandatory for prospective school principals (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children Services n.d.; Olsen 2007).

- In South Africa, the Gauteng provincial Department of Basic Education's Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG) was established to develop leadership and governance competences in education.

- The explanation for this trend seems to lie in what scholars widely agree upon that sound leadership makes a significant difference to student learning and that such leadership capacity can and should be developed among those tasked with leading educational institutions. However, the 'jury is still out' regarding what type of preparation is required to develop appropriate leadership behaviours (Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi 2011).

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The case for mentoring

- While there is general agreement that leadership does make a difference in school effectiveness, "there is ongoing debate about what preparation is required to develop appropriate leadership behaviours" (Bush, 2009, p. 375).

- This has entailed developing leaders through support mechanisms, often through individualisation, that is support tailor-made to the specific needs of individual leaders.

- Mentoring is one such personalised or individualised learning.

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The case for mentoring

- Bush (2009) refers to mentoring as a process where one person provides individual support and challenge to another professional.

- He further observes that the mentor may be a more experienced leader or a peer. According to Thomson, (1993), quoted by Lumby, Middlewood and Kaabwe (2003, p.89):

- There is a sense in which the mentoring relationship is similar to that of the 'master-pupil' relationship in medieval times; the pupil is learning from the mentor's experience and the mentor's role is to encourage and nurture his protégé. Mentors can pass on practical insight derived from experience and can pick up on new ideas and attitudes.

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The case for mentoring

- Similarly, National College for School Leadership (NCSL) (2003, p. ii) views mentoring as "more generally used to refer to a process whereby a more experienced individual seeks to assist someone less experienced".

- Following an increased use of mentoring in the business world, there is a growth in its use in education in relation to the training of both teachers and educational leaders (NCSL, 2003).

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The case for mentoring

- NCSL (2003) reports on influential theories of professional learning that point to the learning potential that may arise from mentoring as follows:

    ❖ First, drawing from the field of cognitive skill psychology, Sloboda (1986) argued that people usually learn real life skills with the aid of some form of coaching. This author suggests that for skill acquisition to occur, appropriate feedback on practice is essential.

    ❖ Second, support for the learning potential of mentoring comes from constructivist theory and related work on learning styles. NCSL quotes Thody (1993) who notes that left to themselves many principals have in the past sought informal mentors or buddies.

    ❖ In a study on Welsh primary heads, Dunning (1996) (quoted in NCSL, 2003) supports this view through a finding that showed that when experiencing difficult situations, new heads sought support and advice from more experienced colleagues.

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Methodology

➢ Methodologically, this is a qualitative study. Qualitative research refers to the collection of data that reflects the quality or nature of a particular phenomenon in the form of description (Uys, 2003). Qualitative researchers are, according to Merriam (1988), interested in meaning, that is, how people make sense of their lives, what they experience, how they interpret these experiences and how they structure their social world. We were interested in making meaning of how the mentors experience and understand their role as mentors in the process of developing leaders, and whether mentoring adds value to this leadership development process. Thus the qualitative approach suited our study.

➢ The data in this study were generated using individual face-to-face interviews.

Mentors understanding of the aims of the ACE: SL and their role as mentors:

- The mentor's understanding of what the ACE: SL intends to achieve was, by and large, congruent to the aims of the programme as set out by the Department of Education.

- Mr Tesla remarked that 'schools require strong leadership and this programme [the ACE: SL] is designed to specifically do that.'

- Mr Kelvin pointed out that it is 'some form of empowerment of principals… to make them efficient and effective school managers'.

Findings & discussion

Mentors understanding of the aims of the ACE: SL and their role as mentors:

- Mr Pascal added that he understood the programme as serving to equip principals 'with some leadership skills for better job performance.'

- These understandings of the aim of ACE: SL tie in with the aim of the programme of strengthening the professional role of the principal (SAIDE, 2007).

- Further, Mr Joule alluded to the transformational aspects of the programme by stating that it 'exposes the principals to the new changes that are taking place [in education]'. Dr Lux extended on the transformational aspect of ACE: SL by stating that 'principals needed to be upgraded because the whole education system changed but principals did not change'.

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Preparation of mentors

- As we reported in the literature, the training of mentors is increasingly being fore grounded as a prerequisite for successful mentoring.

- All the participants indicated that they were trained for their role as mentors. A study conducted by Bolam et. al. (1993 cited in NCSL, 2003) found that mentors who have undertaken training both value it and are more satisfied with the experience of mentoring than those who have not. Some of the mentors indicated that the training extended over two to three days involving two sites, Pietermaritzburg and Edgewood and was of a good standard. According to Ms Candela they were 'trained for three days' and that in terms of quality 'it was very good… they [the trainers] showed us what we must do at schools'.

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The impact of time as a resource on mentoring relationship

- The reactions of the mentors to the issue of having sufficient time for face-to-face interactions with the mentees drew mixed reactions.

- Three of the six mentors indicated that time was a constraint in the mentoring relationship. Some of the mentors used creative ways to ensure that they spent sufficient time with the mentees. Where challenges were common among mentees some of the mentors met with their mentees in groups so as to maximise time as a resource.

- Mr Tesla found group mentoring to be more effective. He maintains that when they are in groups 'principals learn more from their own colleagues… if colleague A is given a question and he has to answer, principal B is leaning from that as well.' In some instances, mentors met with the principals over the weekends owing to the fact that this was least disruptive to the school principals work schedule.

The impact of time as a resource on mentoring relationship

- Mr Tesla pointed out that 'the principal in a day is not yours… the principal has enormous responsibilities at school and when you come there [to the school] you are interfering.' Owing to the dispersed geographical location of schools in some Districts, the distance and the terrain impacted on the time available to spend with mentees

Matching mentor and mentee

- All the participants considered the issue of matching of the mentor and mentee as crucial to the success of the mentoring process.

- This notwithstanding, some participants pointed out that in the ACE: SL no consideration was given to the matching of mentors and mentees. Mentors were simply appointed to a group by the programme co-ordinators.

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Matching mentor and mentee

- Mr Kelvin remarked that 'we are simply told this is your group of students... there is no sort of growing relationship between mentor and mentee.'

- The mentee must view the mentor as someone who is approachable (Bush and Middlewood, 2005).

- Hall (2008) emphasises that a poor mentor–mentee match stifles the learning for both parties.