

Leadership Role of School Principals in Democratic Schools in South Africa: Case Studies of Two Schools

Renuka Naidoo¹, Vusi Mncube² and Onoriode Collins Potokri^{2*}

¹*University of KwaZulu-Natal, Faculty of Education*

²*University of South Africa, Department of Educational Leadership and Management, South Africa*

Telephone: ²<012 4292139>, ^{2*}<+27842671740>, ²Fax: 0214294919

E-mail: ¹<ren@primarymath.net>, ²<Mncubvs@unisa.ac.za>,

^{2*}<cnuvie@gmail.com, potokc@unisa.ac.za>

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on a qualitative case study located within interpretative paradigm. This study aimed at understanding the role of school principals in leading and managing democratic schools. Towards that, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from research participants. The findings of the study reveal that leadership is a major role of principals in democratic schools, as it also extended to others in the school community; and as such, flattens traditional leadership hierarchies. Further, it contradicts predominate findings of previous researches on authoritarian leadership behavior. At both sampled schools, the principals seem to move away from assumed stereotypical authoritarian style to a shared decision-making style, that is, democratic leadership style. Based on the findings it is recommended that more can be done through the inclusion of stakeholders in major decision-making processes.

INTRODUCTION

There is an emerging body of literature with regards to democratic schools in South Africa and around the world. Davies et al. (2006), Singh (2006), Mncube (2009), note school governance, democratic principles and shared leadership as the pillars of democratic schools. Studies on democratic schools reveal that parents' participation in school governing bodies is critical just as that of principals, yet most of the parents are not usually on board (Mncube 2009), especially black ones (Botha 2010). Mncube's (2009) explanation for this is linked to lack of the necessary skills required for parents' governors to execute duties that they are assigned. In addition, in a different study on school governing bodies, Bush and Heystek (2003), and Mncube, Harber and du Plessis (2011) indicate similar findings. The former underpins power relations within this structure as the reason for some parents' exclusion, while the latter emphasizes the absence or neglect of role or function fulfilling of School Governing Body (SGB); rather, SGB rely on principals to perform their roles and functions. In other words, they depend on teachers and principals for leadership and guidance in decision-making (Van Wyk 2007).

In light of the above, Botha (2010) contends that the school principal should be seen as a fundamental agent of transformation, creating

space for deliberation and dialogue so that all stakeholders are actively involved in SGB. As a means of minimizing the burden in terms of the role expectations of SGB by principals, Bush and Heystek (2003) recommend training or capacity building for the stakeholder representatives on the SGB, parents inclusive. Despite this recommendation, the problem is far from being resolved as the SGB does not have much say over curriculum matters, because they have very little knowledge on such matters; and as such are reluctant to contribute in that direction (that is, curriculum issues). On account of this, the notion of shared school governance - an aspect of democratic schools, is questionable because shared school governance requires a combination of leaders who are able to develop decision-making structures and processes, which stimulate meaningful participation and collaboration (Singh 2006). For Singh, sharing, openness, trust and respect for others are the cores of shared school governance. The possession of these attributes among others, by principals is what Singh refer to as the "ideal democratic leader emerging" (Singh 2006: 156).

Democratic Schools and Democratic Principles

Tse (2009) underscores that under the umbrella term democratic school(ing), there are related notions. Some of these include democratic

education, equal educational opportunities and democratic or human rights schools. Tse further argues that these terms point to or emphasize different aspects of democratic schooling. Various scholars (Dewey 1916; Mncube 2005; Morrison 2008; Mncube 2009; Hess and Johnson 2010) refer to the centrality of schooling to democratic education. Although Goodlad et al. (2004) argue that democratic schooling does not guarantee a democratic society, they however add that a nation cannot uphold for long without some form of democratic schooling. The researchers concur that democratic schools that promote a democratic way of life will assist learners in participating in a democratic society, which in turn assists in sustaining democracy. Until we can find institutions or other avenues of providing our learners with opportunities to practice democratic principles and values, we need to explore the relationship between democracy and schooling, as democracy may be viewed as the embodiment of principles (Adams and Waghid 2005; Mncube et al. 2011). As such, democratic schools are founded on as well as reflect democratic principles (Kelly 1995; Kensler 2010). Thus, towards creating democratic schools, it is necessary to implement and reinforce the principles of democracy, as they guide a democratic way of life.

Kelly (1995) refers to the basic principles of education, which are of significance to democratic society. These basic principles include: human rights, equality to entitlement, openness in the face of knowledge, individual autonomy and empowerment. Besides, Kensler (2010) refers to ten democratic principles within schools and these are: purpose and vision, dialogue and listening, integrity accountability, choice, individual and collective bargaining, decentralization, transparency, fairness and dignity. Expanding on the works of other scholars on democratic principles and schools, Gore (2002) included inclusive consultation and collaboration, equality of opportunity in representation, freedom for critical reflection and a focus on the common good as important concerns. However, like Beane and Apple (1999), Kelly (1995) echoes the idea pertaining to the need for faith in individuals. He points out that, "faith in the potentiality of humankind" underpins all the principles of education (Kelly 1995: 104-105). Drawing from Kelly's (1995) and Beane and Apple's (1999) assertions, the researchers believe that having faith in the

potential of each individual will assist in a school, giving rise to more democratic leaders. In this regard, Noddings (2011) note that there is a need to create schools that will serve as incubators of democracy.

Democratic Leadership

Rothwell (2010: 102) posits that democratic leadership style is usually referred to more neutrally "as the participative leadership style." In advancing democratic leadership, Woods (2005) highlights instrumental reasons, intrinsic arguments, as well as the need for internal alignment. The intrinsic arguments perceive democratic practices as fundamental to a good society and focus on the educational aims of creativity, inclusion and reintegration of human capacities. The instrumental arguments focus on its influence on learner achievement, self-esteem, school effectiveness and "ability to cope more effectively with complexity and work intensification" (Woods 2005: xxii). Finally the leadership style in a school should not be in conflict with the style of teaching and learning in the school. Begley and Zaretsky (2004) also argue that democratic leadership processes are desirable for leading schools effectively in the increasingly culturally diverse communities perhaps the fundamental reason for advocating democratic leadership is its focus on democratic principles and practices. This idea is resonated by Woods (2005) who posits that democratic leadership involves being committed to fundamental ideas and values that form the bedrock of democracy.

O'Hair et al. (2000) assert that differing assumptions about the nature of reality influence the democratic conceptions of leadership. However, they refer to four assumptions of a democratic conception of leadership. The first assumption acknowledges that in an organization, there are individuals with expertise that can contribute to the effective functioning of the organization. This will imply that individuals can actively contribute to the functioning of an organization and that leadership in democratic schools belongs to all members of the organization, instead of it being solely the principal's responsibility. Woods (2005) maintains that democratic leadership is not exclusively for one or selected individuals at the upper-most part of the organizational hierarchy. With regard to the second assumption, any situation lends itself to

varied courses of action that may still be appropriate. In other words, there are multiple realities or views which should be given due attention. The third assumption involves individuals constructing varied interpretations of what they believe to be suitable means to accomplish those ends (O' Hair et al. 2000). The fourth assumption focuses on all members in the organization engaging in dialogue and reflecting on appropriate ways of doing things in the organization. From the above it is evident that a democratic leadership style offers opportunities for good human relations (Prinsloo 2003), shared leadership, communication and involvement of all individuals (stakeholders) in the school community.

Gastil (1994) posits that democratic leadership accentuates empowerment of individuals in the organization. Basically, democratic leadership values the knowledge and potential of the individuals in the school. Moreover, democratic leadership is rooted in the belief that all individuals "can contribute to, and enhance the work of the school" (Reitzug and O' Hair 2002:122). Scott and Jaffe (1991) maintain that teacher empowerment cannot be separated from democratic leadership. In addition to the characteristics outlined above, Prinsloo's (2003:144-145) findings support the above viewpoints when he found that "democratic leadership style accentuates teamwork, two-way communication, delegation of tasks, as well as a healthy balance between a people-oriented and a task-oriented management style."

The democratic leadership style creates an atmosphere in which, both the teachers and learners, can develop to their full potential (Prinsloo 2003). In addition, Weller and Weller (2002) argue that democratic leadership fosters participative governance. Essentially, democratic leadership has aptly been described "as a participatory, consultative, negotiating and inclusive style of leadership" (Davidoff and Lazarus 2002:171). Although democratic leadership advances collaboration and the voices of the stakeholders, it has been criticized for the loss of time due to the process of consultation.

Michael Apple and James Beane's 1999 work entitled: "Democratic Schools: Lessons From The Chalk Face" was the inspirational source of this study. Their work captures the stories of four schools and the attempts by teachers to bring democracy to life in their institutions and classrooms. It also emphasizes that democratic

schools play a pivotal role in the democratization of schools and societies. Also, inspirational is the preamble of the South African Schools Act 84, 1996 (Republic of South Africa 1996c) which states that, the new national system of education should advance the democratic transformation of society. Dewey (cited by Wood 2005) suggests the link between schools and democracy for the manifestation of democratic transformation of societies. Dewey (1939) viewed democracy in association with faith in the potential of human nature. The above depicts that schools have much to offer with regards to getting all stakeholders involved, encouraging shared value systems, involving the community and promoting the principles of democracy.

Although reviewed literatures refer often to the school principal, teachers, parents and learners as stakeholders, but as researchers and persons that cherish democracy we (researchers) see ourselves equally as stakeholders, because we are obliged to contribute to democracy and democratic schools. Drawing on literature, it is therefore our belief that hopes and aspirations to build a truly democratic South African society rest on commitment from stakeholders to create democratic schools (Naidoo 2012), particularly the principal who is the chief financial officer, head teacher and administrator of a school.

Why This Study?

This study is of significance internationally and nationally, as South Africa attempts to 'solidify' democracy in her educational institutions. At this point, it must be noted that the case for democratic schools and their role in a democratic society has been emphasized many times over, particularly in the past century, but can never be over-emphasized as, "public institutions and spaces are devalued, and case after case of political corruption surfaces in the media" (Apple and Beane 2007:38). Therefore, this study attempts to add to the existing and growing body of knowledge by investigating democratic schools through the leadership role of principals in secondary school governance. By so doing, the researchers presume that this study could make a modest contribution in offering new empirically grounded knowledge—both descriptive and conceptual, about democratic schools from the stance of leadership role of school principals.

Research Problem

Authoritarian as opposed to democracy in organizations is evident in most schools. Internationally, Maitles and Deuchar (2007) point to Scotland and many parts of European schools as examples of authoritarian schools. Davies (2002) notes that authoritarian education is portrayed by negatives, these include little or no participation, discussion and critical enquiry in school leadership. Karlsson and Mbokazi (2005:11) in a case study of the ethos in two schools, refer to leadership of school management at one of the sampled schools in KwaZulu-Natal as one, which is “characterized by formality and authoritarianism”. Similarly, Grant’s (2006) research reveals continued existence of a hierarchical school organization controlled by autocratic principals at some schools. The predominantly authoritarian nature of schooling evident in South African schools is attributed to the system of apartheid (Naidoo 2012). This may be the reason November, Alexander and Wyk (2010) reminisce that principals are traditionally being locked into the paradigm of power which make them authoritative, hence anti-democratic. However, Soudien et al. (2004) note that South Africa is a transitional society attempting to progress from authoritarianism to democracy. To attain this, democratic schools—schools that uphold democratic principles, are needed, because when discussing democracy in schools, the power and authority of the school principal inevitably come to the fore. Without the support, attempts and deliberate contributions of principals, schools are unlikely to become democratic institutions. It follows that democratic schools do not happen by chance (Beane and Apple 1999). On account of this, and knowing that principals are chief financial officers and administrators of schools, the researchers deem it necessary to investigate their leadership role towards promoting democratic schools.

Research Question

This study is aimed at understanding the leadership role of principals in democratic schools. To attempt this question, the following research question was specifically asked:

How can the leadership role of principals towards the promotion of a democratic school be understood?

Theoretical Framework

The focus of this study is democratic schools and for this reason, it was located within a democratic theory of education. According to Gutmann (1987:14), democratic theory refers to “conscious social reproduction—the ways in which citizens are or should be empowered to influence the education that in turn shapes the political values, attitudes and modes of behavior of future citizens”. O’Hair et al. (2000) opine that two concepts among many describe democratic education best. These concepts are schooling for democracy and schools as democracies. The former involves preparing learners for living in a democratic society while the latter is concerned with creating schools that are organized, governed and practiced as democracies. In short, the logic of democracy begins with public education (Barber 1993). Kelly (1995) looks at the principles of education in a democratic society and states that principles that are of significance in democracy education include human rights, equality to entitlement, openness in the face of knowledge, individual autonomy and empowerment. Further to this, he points out that faith in the potential of individuals should underpin the aforementioned principles.

Given the aim of this study and the research question that this study seeks to address, it was deemed necessary to include in the theory or framework servant leadership, participative leadership or democratic leadership, as well as the distributed perspective to leadership. Reasons for this are firstly, because democratic school leadership is consistent with the democratic way of life, empathy and listening (Antonio 2008; Spear 2010). Secondly, distributed like participatory leadership according to Woods and O’Hair (2009: 428), “appears to resonate with democracy” because it centers on shared decision-making. Thirdly, all these approaches to leadership shift the attention from individuals at the top of the organizational hierarchy or move away from the notion of the heroic leader and external leadership to others in the organization (see, Gronn 2003). Also, at the heart of democratic schools, as illuminated in *South African Schools Acts* (see SASA Act 84 1996), is shared decision-making, which is also linked to school governance and leadership.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a qualitative research located within an interpretive paradigm. The choice for an interpretive paradigm is tied to our attempt to understand the leadership role of principals in democratic schools. Within the qualitative research frame, a case study approach, multiple-site case study was settled for, was hence used because it allows for an in-depth study of the phenomena (Marshall and Rossman 1999). Two secondary schools- Dry secondary school and Wet Secondary School (pseudonyms), whose principals were willing to participate, easily accessible and had some characteristics of democratic schools, as outlined in the reviewed literature, were considered. Purposive sampling was used to meet the purpose of this study. In sum, eight participants were selected for the study. This implies the selection of one participant from each category from each school. By category the researchers refer to principals, learners' representative, teachers' representative and parents' representative. Together with the principals, the head of each representative in both schools as mentioned, formed the sampled participants. The researchers chose secondary schools because at the heart of democratic schools are the voices of the learners (RSA 1996c) and SASA makes provision for the Representative Council of Learners only in schools that have learners in grade eight to twelve.

Ethical Concerns

At the outset of this study, the researchers were conscious of ethical implications and consequences. To avoid pitfalls hanging on ethical issues, an application was forwarded to the Department of Education to pursue the study. Thereafter, upon approval, principals of sampled schools were contacted for official permission and support to carry out the study. Importantly, sensitive or pertinent issues like confidentiality and anonymity were discussed and agreed upon.

Data Collection

Data was obtained from principals, learners' representative, teachers' representative and parents' representative serving on the school governing body (SGB) at the sampled schools. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data,

because it allows for gathering descriptive data in the respondent's or participant's own words (Naidoo 2012; Potokri 2012). An audio recorder was used to capture the responses of participants and thereafter interviews followed, hence transcriptions of interviews. In transcribing the data, the researchers listened to the played recorder and wrote out the responses. The interviews were approximately 40 minutes in duration. The researchers preferred the use of the audio recorder, as they believed this was an appropriate way of capturing the actual words of the interviewees. McMillan and Schumacher (2006), claim that audio recording the interview provides material for reliability checks. Silverman (2005) corroborates the preceding claim by suggesting that audio recordings allow for the tapes to be replayed and the transcriptions improved.

Having obtained data, the researchers proceeded with the analysis knowing that the obtained data is meaningless until it has been analyzed. While they embarked on analysis, the suggestions of Neuman (1997) and Henning et al. (2004) were 'alive' on their mind. Henning et al. (2004) contend that during the analysis process, it may be necessary to summarize responses. Neuman (1997) however asserts that the interviewer(s) should avoid summarizing or even paraphrasing, as this could result in the answers becoming distorted. For the researchers, they were actually interested in getting detailed expressions of participants. This assisted them in getting a clearer picture of participants' responses, as well as with checking whether initial understanding from the literature and theoretical framework corresponded with that of the interviewee (Henning et al. 2004).

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study seeks to address one main question, how can the leadership role of principals in democratic schools be understood? In attempt to answer this question, the principals, teachers, parents and learners representatives 'explain the principal's leadership role in a democratic school'.

All the participants unanimously agreed that in a democratic school, leadership emanates from others and not only from those in formal leadership roles. This notion came across clearly in the comment from the teacher representative of

Wet Secondary School, who maintained, *"I think these days principals realize that one person does not run the school."*

The words "these days" clearly refers to present-day practices. O' Hair et al. (2000) maintain that in a traditional school the primary decision-maker is the principal. However, referring to the teacher's response, the researchers emphasize that principals understand that one person cannot solely run a school. Similarly Gronn (2003:17) elaborates that the notion of the "hero paradigm" which is the individual-focused heroic approach to leadership has been challenged, shifting the focus to include concepts like participation, collective leadership, teamwork and empowerment.

The teacher representative at Wet Secondary School went on to explain,

"Leadership would be [distributed]. It's throughout the different levels—level 1, level 2, and level 3, but also you do not really feel that there's somebody you are answerable to. You are a leader. He has confidence in you to run your subject, to do your work in the classroom, make decisions amongst yourselves in little committees. So, you know you find that you don't actually feel that you lacking. You are pretty much in control of what you doing in the school" (Wet Secondary School teacher).

From the preceding response it can be deduced that the teacher is referring to delegation as well as participatory leadership. The teachers are also able to take leading roles and make decisions in their committees. The participant at Wet Secondary School also pointed out that the principal has faith in the potential of his teachers. By allowing his teachers to take control and make decisions in their committees implies that this principal is empowering his teachers. Bush (2008) refers to school-wide leadership by suggesting that leadership is spread throughout the institution and this also suggests that leadership is shared. From the teacher's response it appears that the principal is spreading leadership throughout the school and perhaps views leadership, as a collective responsibility.

The learner representative at Dry Secondary School felt that the principal was democratic. She stated, *"You know if I have to describe him he is like a democratic leader because he takes into consideration what's best for everyone"* (Dry Secondary School learner).

According to the learner, the principal is democratic because he considers the needs of all stakeholders. However, Woods (2005) posits that democratic leadership involves being committed to fundamental ideas and values that form the bedrock of democracy. From the preceding discussions, it is evident that both the principals are committed to the democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution of Republic of South Africa.

Similar ideas of the principal being democratic were echoed by the teacher in Dry Secondary School, who said,

"Our principal is very democratic. He allows other members of the staff and school community to be involved in the functioning of the school. He caters for involvement of other members. He can delegate very well... I think by delegating he's allowing people to come on-board and give them an opportunity to grow. I mean, he's always there to encourage us to get involved. He's always encouraging us to take up new projects and I think in this way he's being very democratic and open. He's not stifling the growth of level one teachers. He's giving them a chance to progress. So through delegation he is empowering others, encouraging development. Most of us do not know our potential until we are given a task. A good thing about our principal is that he encourages professional growth through improving our professional qualifications. If there is trust and honesty then faith in the potential of others comes about naturally" (Dry Secondary School teacher).

According to this teacher, as shown in the above excerpt, the principal at Dry Secondary School is democratic and he assists in the teachers' professional development, as well as focuses on developing his teachers' potential through delegation. Delegation can be viewed as a way of empowering others. Gastil (1994) posits that democratic leadership accentuates empowerment of individuals in the organization. Besides, Prinsloo (2003) maintains that a democratic leadership style offers opportunities for good human relations and Woods (2005) elaborates that democratic leadership supports dispersal of leadership. Moreover democratic leadership is rooted in the belief that all individuals "can contribute to, and enhance the work of, the school" (Reitzug and O' Hair 2002: 122). According to the teacher, the principal allows others to get in-

volved in the activities and functioning of the school. The teacher at Dry Secondary School added,

“For example, we senior educators mentor new educators and student teachers. We conduct workshops on curriculum issues and school policy in general. Presently I am tasked with reading the new policy document on learner attendance and I will workshop the staff early next year” (Dry Secondary School teacher).

It is evident that with regards to leadership the teachers are provided with opportunities like conducting workshops and are therefore not stifled. Rusch (1995) states that principals in democratic schools engage in capacity building and November, Alexander and van Wyk (2010) elaborate that staff development is an essential element in the democratization of school structures. The principal at Dry Secondary School asserted,

“The other thing I said is have faith in people... You draw on the expertise. You draw on their knowledge, even if they haven’t got expertise. If they haven’t got the knowledge, draw on their enthusiasm. The learning will take care of itself. You’ll always learn. It’s very easy to learn when you are enthusiastic. The worst is when you are unenthusiastic and you don’t want to learn. That’s a terrible combination...” (Dry Secondary School principal).

From the preceding response, it is evident that the principal believes in getting others onboard with regard to the activities in school. The response above suggests that the principal is not afraid of sharing power. Both these principals have faith in the potential of their staff and this also was aptly captured in the statements made by the principal of Wet Secondary School, who commented,

“I can see myself becoming obsolete because of that honesty. If I had to say now what role am I fulfilling, how am I adding value I will have to answer others can do all these things, others have new ideas and they can take the institution further” (Wet Secondary School principal).

In other words, the principal has faith in others in his school and believes that they can take the school further because they have the ‘know how’ and the potential. Hess and Johnson (2010) contend that faith in people to be active, participatory and responsible is fundamental to a social understanding of democracy. Kelly (1995)

as well as Beane and Apple (1999), resonate the idea pertaining to the need for faith in individuals. Similarly, Dewey (1939) viewed democracy in association with faith in the potential of human nature. This principal was also not afraid to mention that his staff can take the school to greater heights. Even the learner at Wet Secondary School felt that other personnel in the school contribute significantly to the functioning of the school. She stated that,

“...Although he (the principal) is the face of our school there are so many people behind him that help to make the school what it is today, not only in leadership but also in his decision-making which is shared” (Wet Secondary School learner).

The learner’s response implies interdependence with regard to the relationship between the principal and staff and this also suggests that they are working together. This interconnectedness contributes to the spirit of interdependence in the school. The idea of interdependence amongst all individuals and more specifically how an individual’s behavior has an influence on the organization as a whole finds resonance in a participatory perspective on leadership (Davidoff and Lazarus 2002). In effect, a participatory perspective on leadership not only allows others to lead but it also allows individuals to work together and it seems as if this idea of working together is accentuated at Wet Secondary School.

In describing his leadership style the principal at Wet Secondary School shares his own belief,

“My leadership style places emphasis on serving learners, educators and parents, rather than assuming the position of an authority figure.”

It is evident that the principal does not see himself as a figure of authority wielding power. The principal felt that, “The leadership style that one adopts in a democratic school should therefore allow for growth of strong teams comprising all the relevant stakeholders.” Essentially his emphasis is on teamwork so that all stakeholders are onboard. His leadership was, to a large extent, characterized by collaboration and team efforts. Thus, the leadership structure at both these schools is actually fairly flat because as evident there are many individuals involved in decision-making. Instead of a hierarchical type of leadership that follows a top-down approach

a very horizontal type of leadership seemed to be in place.

At Wet Secondary, the idea of working as a team was expressed by the parent representative,

“Our principal has never adopted an authoritarian approach and this is precisely what works in his favor. He involves everybody in decisions and allows level one teachers to be given important tasks. This really develops team-building skills and unity.” (Wet Secondary School parent).

The parent appeared steadfast in her belief that the principal does not adopt an authoritarian style of leadership. She opines that by delegating tasks, leadership skills and team unity are enhanced. She also alludes to the principal advancing participatory decision-making. Admittedly the parent representative at Dry Secondary School added another dimension to leadership in the school as he stated that he (the principal) ‘fosters a spirit of interconnectedness of individuals and team effort’. Finally the participants at both the schools referred to the principals offering support to individuals, creating productive school cultures and developing structures that foster shared decision-making. The aforementioned characteristics as mentioned by Bush (2007) point towards transformational leadership hence suggesting that both these principals also displayed characteristics of transformational leadership. From the responses at both the schools it was evident that these principals were to a large extent democratic as well as supportive in their roles. At both schools the principals felt that leadership could emanate from others in the school community.

This study illuminated clearly that leadership is a key role of the principal in democratic schools. An important finding from the interviews was that, at both sampled schools all the participants felt that their principal practiced democracy. Even the principals themselves indicated that they practice democracy in school. The participants concurred and clearly articulated that principals play a pivotal role in promoting and practicing democracy in the school through their leadership style—participatory leadership. In essence the principal plays a fundamental role in orchestrating efforts to promote democracy in the school and the unequivocal support from the principal is essential. Both sampled schools’ attempts to democratize the schools were initiated

by the principals themselves and they seemed to be committed to this course. In short, these efforts were top-down rather than bottom-up.

The principals at the case study schools displayed strikingly similar characteristics. These common strands included commitment, openness, integrity, excellent communication and interpersonal skills, being good listeners and having faith in others. They also respected the rights and dignity of others. In addition, they were caring and supportive of others. They placed a high premium on personal values and their practices revolved around personal values like integrity, respect and caring for others. These aforementioned characteristics of the principals at both schools point towards servant leadership. Servant leadership is driven by the desire to serve, support team members, promote shared decision-making and caring behavior, as well as empower and develop the potential of staff so that they can give off their best (Spears 2010). Other characteristics associated with servant leadership include listening and empathy (Antonio 2008; Spears 2010). The researchers also found that the principals’ practices resonate with their notions of democratic schools. Furthermore, the principals’ practices were linked directly to various democratic principles.

According to participants, the principals are striving to move their schools to an ideal democratic state where democratic principles permeate every aspect of school life. As mentioned, at both sampled schools the notion of creating democratic schools emanated from the principals. The principals’ practices of democracy at both sampled schools revealed many similarities. These principals practiced sharing of ideas and expertise. They fostered a democratic culture that embraced the cultures of collegiality, respect, care and trust, listening and participation, communication, consultation and collaboration (see Gore 2002; Kensler 2010).

In addition, it was evident that the practice of various democratic principles contributed towards developing a democratic culture in the sampled schools. The principals at the sampled schools emphasized the centrality of listening and also aimed at promoting the Bill of Rights. Even though they put into practice varied democratic principles they acknowledged that they are ultimately accountable for the running of the school. The principals also had faith in the potential of others and therefore sought the skills

and expertise of staff members. All the participants—principals, teachers, learners and parents, seemed to be happy about the democratic culture and practices in their school.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the notion of a democratic school is workable, achievable and sustainable. Although the principal is instrumental in creating a democratic school through participatory leadership, a whole school approach to practicing democracy is necessary and suggested. Democratic schools should not just be an abstract notion but a notion that is brought to life through practice. The notion of a democratic school is an ideal we need to continually move towards. Therefore, the researchers believe that democratic schooling is work in progress. On this note, the researchers emphasize that democratic schools are necessary if South Africans are to defend and sustain democracy, a practice in the country since 1994. This argument resonates with the assertion that, “The logic of democracy begins with public education and as such we maintain that democratic schools have the potential to deepen our understanding and practice of democracy”. Hence, the researchers concur with literature that there is a need to create schools that will serve as incubators of democracy. Although parents were interviewed via their representative implying that they were not neglected as documented or as policy required, nevertheless, the researchers suggest to future researchers a more detailed research project focusing on them. The researchers believe that such researches will further contribute to our understanding of parents’ role in democratic schools possibly develop structures that could help improve their skills and capabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the finding that leadership is a major role of principals in democratic schools and was extended to others in the school community and the notion that a democratic school is ideal, the researchers recommend continuous in-service training for SGB members. SGB members being representatives are leaders in their own rights who are often involve in consultations and collaboration processes. On this ground, in-service training on deliberation and

leadership skills is specifically suggested given that skills are acquired through formal training or experience. It is the researchers’ opinion that improved deliberation and leadership skills for SGB members could help save time spent on consultations yet enhance quality of decisions, thereby promoting leadership efficiency and effectiveness across stakeholders.

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