Leadership for coping with and adapting to policy change in deprived contexts: Lessons from school principals

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This paper explores what, from school principals' perspectives, constitutes leadership for coping with and adapting to policy change within deprived school contexts. Using qualitative interpretive research, we drew from the practices of five principals that were purposively selected from a broader study, which focused on school principals' leadership in the changing education system within the rural context. The study included principals, heads of department, teachers and parents. The five principals selected for this paper were renowned for their positive image and their schools' success. From their stories we deduced three conclusions, which are important for theorising successful leadership for change in the deprived school context within a developing world. The findings suggest that principals' utilised creative and innovative ways to adapt and cope with change. Learning from their practices, this paper makes three important conclusions about leadership for coping with and adapting to change in the deprived context. We conclude that leadership practices are not fixed, but are fluid, and evolving, where leadership is not about compliance, but is about one's ability to identify what works at a given context. Leadership is also about being aware of the societal needs.

Keywords: adaptive leadership; change agency; deprived school context; participation

Introduction

> *Only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to sustained improvement in student achievement* (Fullan, 2002:1).

The above extract from Fullan's work emphasises the need for school principals to be able, not just to cope with rapid changes, but also to adapt and bring about sustained improvement in schools. Newmann, King and Youngs (2000) have echoed Fullan's (2002) sentiments. These scholars cited above, argue that principals' leadership capacities are critical for the schools' capacities to survive in turbulent policy environment.

Skills to handle complex and rapidly changing policy environment becomes even more complex when considering that Fullan (2002) is writing in the context of developed economies. However, the context in which we are writing this paper is that of a developing economy. The South African education system is complicated, where it combines features of both developed and developing economies simultaneously (Chikoko, Naicker & Mthiyane, 2015). While the developed economy section of the system comprises efficiently functioning schools, the other sector does not. Empirical research has consistently shown that schools in rural communities in particular and deprived school context generally, are characterised by underperformance in terms of learner achievement (Chikoko et al., 2015; Maringe & Moletsane, 2015; Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005).

In our view, continuous policy changes in education present schools in deprived contexts with enormous challenges, and a strong need for leadership for coping with and adapting to this change. Some schools within the same deprived context have demonstrated their functionality through their sustained, outstanding learner achievement. These schools indicate that leadership is able to adapt to and cope with the changing policy environment. The literature (Bush, 2008; Hallinger, 2011; Huber, 2004) has shown that principals' leadership is central in driving success of schools. Research on leadership in deprived contexts within the developing world is gaining currency (Chikoko et al., 2015; Maringe & Moletsane, 2015). However, leadership for coping with and adapting to policy change in such a context is under-researched and theorised. Thus, this paper uses principals' voices to explore what constitutes leadership for adapting to and coping with policy changes in the deprived context.

This paper adds to the body of knowledge by, *inter alia*, theorising the agency and the notion of multiple deprivations, which can help to further the debates on leadership, both locally and internationally. Furthermore, the paper supports the consensus over the contributions that leadership makes in improving teaching and learning in schools. The findings of this paper can further be used to inform the theorisation of leadership in a changing policy landscape within deprived school contexts.

Principals, Change and Deprived Contexts

The advent of a democratic dispensation in South Africa has provided an impetus for profound changes in terms of leadership and management in schools (Bhengu, 2005). Structural and policy changes brought about by democratic transformation have dramatically changed the way principals led and managed schools (Mazibuko, 2004; Msila, 2008). For instance, school governance powers have been devolved to school level in the form of

the establishment of school governing bodies (SGBs). In the same vein, safety and security of the school has become the responsibility of the SGB of a given school. The notion of embedding schools in the communities in which they are located is one of the responsibilities of the leadership structure in schools. With these changes, principals are expected to share leadership with School Management Teams (SMTs), and also to lead in a transparent, democratic and participatory manner (Department of Education, 1996; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). Policy changes further require principals to play a leadership role remarkably different from those of the past, as they were placed at the forefront of societal transformation (Naidu, Joubert, Mestry, Mosoge & Ngcobo, 2008). To affirm the new roles, the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1996), particularly Section 16a and its amendments (RSA, 2007), has mandated principals to provide leadership and management in public schools. However, the way in which the above ideals might be achieved is usually left up to individual schools. Consequently, these expectations have to be realised, despite a lack of support from the government to ensure they are achieved. Policy by its nature does not adequately cater for the contextual realities that may negatively affect the realisation of effective teaching and learning. Realities of schools in deprived contexts are not the same as in less deprived contexts within the same country.

There is a plethora of research suggesting that structural and policy changes do not necessarily imply changes to human resources capacities to perform effectively (Giles, 1998; Prew, 2007; Vally, 2000). Similarly, the issue of leadership in deprived school context is also under-researched. Therefore, it is important to understand how leadership in some schools within deprived context adapt to and cope with policy changes, despite their deprived context. In this paper, we share stories of five principals who have provided insight about how schools, despite the deprivations of their contexts, can cope with and adapt to policy change.

As mentioned earlier, schools in developing economies are already under pressure, due to poor academic results (Chikoko et al., 2015). This challenge is compounded by working in deprived conditions, where poverty, which is multifaceted and multidimensional (Woolard, 2002), leads to multiple deprivations (Barnes, Wright, Noble & Dawes, 2007). Noble, Barnes, Wright and Roberts (2010) highlight four dimensions of multiple deprivation, which may include: (a) income and material deprivation; (b) employment deprivation; (c) educational deprivation; and (d) living environment deprivation. Maringe, Masinire and Nkambule (2015) draw a distinction between multiple deprivation and challenging contexts. While

challenging contexts do not render themselves to measurability, Maringe et al. (2015) argue that multiple deprivation refers to the combined effects of a range of indicators of poverty on the quality of people's livelihood. We make no distinction between the two concepts, as both contexts have to do with negative situations that make the provision of quality education difficult. The range of deprivations suggests the need for integrated responses, in which income support is complemented by other interventions, which include delivery of services, and effective education (Barnes et al., 2007; Maringe et al., 2015). In our view, the practices of principals as leaders ought to complement these interventions within the schooling context.

Theoretical Framework

There are two theoretical constructs that underpin our analysis of principals' leadership practices, as discussed in this paper. These are adaptive leadership and change agency. There is a lack of agreement among scholars as to whether or not adaptive leadership is a fully-fledged theory. Some highlight that adaptive leadership is merely about how people adapt their behaviours to be responsive to the demands of the situation (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004). The concept of adaptive leadership has been applied across various disciplines including medicine, the military, psychology, biological studies, administration and education (Heifetz & Linsky, 2011). Yukl and Mahsud (2010) argue that adaptive leadership is essential in today's organisations. One reason for this is that adaptive leadership involves changing behaviours in appropriate ways, as the situation changes (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). In this paper, we are interested in unpacking how principals practise leadership in response to the continual policy changes they encounter. While situational leadership is closely related to adaptive leadership, a number of terms are currently in use to describe practices where the leader adapts his or her style to the situation. These include, but are not limited to, flexible, adaptable, agile and versatile leadership (Heifetz & Linsky, 2011).

Adaptive leadership is appropriate for responding to changes in the environment usually created by emerging threats or opportunities for the organisation. There is ostensible agreement in the field that successful adaptation requires innovative and new strategies rather than referring to pre-determined plans (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). To achieve any substantive change, it is important to alter people's values, habits and ways of working (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004). Therefore, adaptive leadership invites us first to mobilise people to meet their immediate challenges (Heifetz & Linsky, 2011), and secondly, to enlist the support of others within the organisation. Furthermore, we

believe that our ideas improve when we take the viewpoints of others into account, especially when incorporating the views of those who disagree (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004).

The second theoretical construct is that of change agency, as conceived by Sen (1999). In the first part of this paper, we have argued that school principals have been put in the forefront of transformation as change agents. In conceptualising the agency of change, we draw from the classic work of Amartya Sen, who views a change agent as "someone who acts and brings about desired change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of that person's own values and objectives" (Sen, 1999:19). In addition, an individual who is an agent of change executes such a function by taking part in various activities that directly or indirectly bring about desired change (Sen, 1999). However, freedom to act may be constrained by many factors, which Sen (1999) refers to as 'unfreedoms'. In Sen's view, unfreedoms consist of a number of social and economic vulnerabilities, such as famine, malnutrition, hunger, lack of elementary needs and infrastructure, issues of equity, redress and access. In South Africa, the new democratic government put in place a number of policies that were designed to deal with these unfreedoms. Consequently, principals in deprived contexts are obliged to deal with these unfreedoms as part of their leadership tasks and responsibilities. It is on these bases that we try to understand how principals coped with and adapted to the combined challenges of policy change, and those challenges posed by the unfreedoms of the context of deprivation, as they endeavour to attain their school goals.

Methods

The research on which this paper is based was conducted between May 2013 and October 2014 in 15 secondary schools, located in Eshowe, Empangeni and Ndwedwe in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This was a broad study, focusing on school principals' leadership in the changing education system within the rural context. The study included principals, heads of department, teachers and parents. For this paper, five principals renowned for their positive image and their schools' success (based on Grade 12 results) were selected.

The approach to this paper, which was framed within the ethnographic naturalistic approach to inquiry and conducted according to interpretive paradigm, enabled us to capture the lived experiences of the participating principals for a sustained period and from their own perspectives (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Kvale, 1983; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Burton, Brundrett and Jones (2008) describe the interpretive paradigm as a worldview that involves

deeper understanding of human behaviour and human experiences. In this study, we wanted to have a deeper understanding of principals' behaviour and practices, and how these, from their voices, assisted in adapting to and coping with policy change.

Purposive selection of schools was used. When using purposive selection, researchers would handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement as to their possession of the particular characteristics being sought (Cohen et al., 2011). In this study, characteristics such as rurality, schools' perceived good reputation within their respective communities, as well as perceived good reputation amongst departmental officials in the circuit, were used. An ethnographic approach was followed so that we could immerse ourselves in the environment within which the principals worked in order to better understand their context (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Understanding principals' professional lives from their own perspectives was crucial (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2012). The initial visits to all schools were dedicated to introducing the study to the schools and traditional leadership as it is a normal practice in rural communities within the jurisdiction of Amakhosi (Chiefs) in KwaZulu-Natal, and this also helped to establish rapport. The process of establishing rapport is an essential component in qualitative research. Therefore, it is necessary that the interviewer rapidly develops such a positive relationship for discursive interviews and participant observations to succeed (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

We spent a total of 17 months doing fieldwork (Wolcott, 1995) in the 15 schools. However, this paper reports on the data generated from five principals only. Three interviews were held with each principal on different days, and each interview lasted for 45-60 minutes at a time. The interviews were discursive (Kemmis, 2008), focusing on how these principals experienced policy changes, and how they practised their leadership, such that they were able to address several deprivations. The discursive interview is made up of one broad question, which allows the participant to talk openly without disruptions from the researcher (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). In this process, we listened attentively to the principals' explanation of their coping mechanism and probed for further information.

Five observations sessions were held in each of the five schools. To ensure that the observed practices were consistent, we had to do these observations at different times of the year. In our opinion, this strategy worked, because had we been in these respective schools, our presence would have influenced the behaviour of participants (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

The generated data was analysed qualitatively using content analysis (Jackson, 2003; Wald, 2014). The data was first transcribed *verbatim* from an audio-tape into written form, and was subjected to qualitative content analysis techniques, which entails creating codes of meaning, and organising these into themes (Henning et al., 2004). To organise the themes, we grouped together all those codes that related to leadership approaches that principals used, and those that related to the emphasis on integrating schools and community, to cite just a few. To ensure trustworthiness of the findings, we used various techniques, such as triangulation of data generation methods, member-checking, and confirmability (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. After we had requested and received permission from the provincial Department of Education and traditional leadership structures (chiefs) to conduct the study, we introduced the research to each school principal. We explained the purpose and nature of the research. Their rights and autonomy were explained to them as well. All participants agreed to participate in the study, and they signed consent forms as evidence. To keep with the ethical principles in the paper we do not use real names of schools and participants.

Brief Profile of Participating Schools

We thought it prudent to provide a brief overview of the schools in the study, so that the themes that emerged are not stripped from the contexts in which they were generated. All five schools were located in rural communities. These are communities who occupy communal land under the jurisdiction of traditional leadership structure, at the head of which is the Inkosi (chief), in terms of KwaZulu-Natal Traditional leadership and Governance Act, No. 5 of 2005 (KwaZulu-Natal Legislature, 2005). All five schools were no-fee-paying secondary schools, and they belonged to Quintile 1. The quintile system is a funding formula used by the Department of Basic Education to rank public schools in terms of the economic conditions of the population around them. In terms of this formula, the higher the quintile the school belongs to, the lower the level of funding it will receive, and vice versa.

On average, these schools had enrolments of between 800 to 1,100 learners accommodated in approximately 16 to 20 classrooms. School management teams comprised the principals, deputies and four heads of department. While they all had electricity, only School D had internet connectivity. With regards to clean, piped water, School A, School D and School E were endowed with this basic need and, therefore had flushable toilets; the other two schools did not. Learner achievement in the National Senior Examinations had, over the previous five years, improved from around 55% to an average of 70%. According to the principals, there were high levels of unemployment among parents.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that the participating principals understood that leadership ought to be guided by policy, but also that the demands from the context influenced the nature of leadership. Second, the principals believed that schools do not operate in a vacuum, and thus, that leadership embracing relations with the community is ideal. Third, they believed that leadership need not be framed by foreign conceptions, but should be embedded in local knowledge and practices. Lastly, the democratic principles governing the country were seen by these principals as crucial to leadership practices in their schools. To discuss these findings we use four broad themes, which are: making practical choices for effective school operation; integrating the school and the community; drawing from indigenous leadership; and principals' methodologies for participation.

Making Practical Choices for Effective School Operation

One question that was posed to the principals concerned was how they were dealing with policy changes that were introduced to the schools since South Africa became a democracy in 1994. 'Practicality works, not the law', and 'be everything to everybody', are two phrases that dominated the discourse during our conversations with the principals. The two phrases capture the essence of the five principals' perspectives of their day-to-day leadership and management practices. The above narrative highlights the frustration that the principals felt regarding what they perceived as policy impositions, which did not accommodate their particular circumstances. They reported that such policy impositions inhibited them from continuing with the business of ensuring that teaching and learning continued to take place in their schools. For instance, irrespective of the conditions, schools are not allowed to hold staff meetings during school hours (between 07:30 and 14:30). To explain what these principals did to cope and adapt in the changing policy environment, they all agreed that to cope and adapt in the changing environment, they were obliged to take some decisions that were responsive to the context, but which contradicted government policy. For instance, in School B, School C and School E, learners and teachers travel to and from town on scheduled buses. We observed that when schools closed for the day, at 14h30/14h45, the buses came, and by 15h00, there was no public transport available. So in order to hold staff meetings, schools make adjustments to the school timetables. For

instance, they reduce time allocated to each period so that teaching can stop by 13:30. By so doing, they ensure that all subjects are taught before 13:30 and also that the meetings do not go beyond 15h00. If they stay at school beyond 15:00, teachers will not be able to catch transport back home.

Principals claimed that staff meetings were held after lessons in all subjects had already taken place. The reduction of teaching time to accommodate staff meetings is against departmental policies, but principals remained resolute that leadership has to respond to local contextual realities in this regard. Principals did not regret their actions of interfering with teaching in order to accommodate time for staff meeting. Instead, the argument was extended that policy makers ought to think from their awareness of the contextual realities. The voice of one principal from School B clearly explains the foregoing point:

> Government officials theorise most [of] *the time and they do not care about what happens on the ground. So, normally, when we have to hold staff meetings, it is at 13:30. We reduce our periods from 55 min to 50 min, and we release learners at 13:30, so that we can start our meeting and finish it at 15:00 for staff members to catch a bus* (Principal B).

We realised that although principals acted as under the pressure of contextual realities, their actions also took into consideration the community's aspirations with regards to what should happen in schools. Given the impracticality of certain policies in rural context, principals reported being obliged to make independent choices. One principal from School A said:

> *Powers or no powers; practicality works, not the law. For example, corporal punishment was banned, but we have to find our own ways of doing things* (Principal A).

In the example of corporal punishment, we observed that all five schools used corporal punishment, where principals noted that in these rural communities, corporal punishment was preferred, and that they did not in fact agree with the banning of corporal punishment in schools. The important justification provided by the principals, which we think is important in understanding how they coped with and adapted to policy change, is that although some of their actions diverged from government expectations, they were able to keep their schools functional.

Principals in this study used corporal punishment, an illegal behaviour, which shows resistance to change. However, what can be learnt here is that leadership in these rural schools is characterised by multiple accountability points, viz. to both the Department of Basic Education (DBE), and the community, and that this may be a challenge when the two accountability points come into conflict. The principle of responsiveness of leadership to local context is at play in this regard. This argument leads us to the discussion of the next theme, which directly related to the principals adopting what was accepted and shared by the rural communities where this study was conducted, namely, the integration of the school and the community. Adaptive leadership, as espoused by Heifetz and Linsky (2004) and Yukl and Mahsud (2010), claims that leadership ought to concern about adjusting one's behaviour to respond to the current situation. While we do not support the use of corporal punishment, principals claim it is what worked in their context. Consequently, the scholars cited above argue that adaptation requires innovation, and in our view, corporal punishment may be seen as ideal by these principals, but innovation cannot be associated with the violation of rights. Nevertheless, corporal punishment did not constitute the main principals' practices for coping with and adapting to change, as can be seen in what follows.

Integrating the School and the Community

In our conversations with principals, we concluded that they had strong beliefs that schools were situated in communities that had an important role to play in their operation. Based on this belief, the findings reveal that there was an agreement among principals that building a strong school-community synergy could assist in coping with and adapting to change. While research highlights difficulties in creating partnerships between schools and their external communities in rural areas (Bhengu & Myende, 2015; Myende & Chikoko, 2014), principals in this study revealed some working strategies in creating this synergy. One important strategy used in School A that we observed during the study was the establishment of vegetable gardens within the school premises. These gardens were tended to by both parents and the learners, each with their own designated plots. While we did not anticipate that this helped the school to deal with a change in policy environment, the conversations we had with the principal suggested that this played a very crucial role in helping the school to adapt to and cope with change. This is what the principal said:

> *Through our gardens we bring parents in the school and by doing so, these parents have started to appreciate their role in the education of their children, as they always spend their time within the school. One important thing is that the community protects the school resources, because they feel that they belong to this school. The resources we have are very important for us to operate in this ever-changing environment* (Principal A).

We argued previously in this study that principals have to deal with unfreedoms in order to adapt and cope with change (Sen, 1999). One of the prevalent unfreedoms in the context of these schools was poverty and hunger. Through the garden project, the principals attempted to address these issues.

Furthermore, School D used their vision and mission to create a strong synergy between themselves and the local community. Their process of crafting the vision was inclusive in that the external community (parents and general community members) was involved, and their interests were catered for in the vision of the school. Through this vision, we learnt that the school had introduced some subjects that were responsive to the community needs. We asked the principal about this strategy and this is what he said:

> *When I started at the school I had an understanding that I needed to start from the basics…for me, revisiting the vision and mission of the school was the starting point. We involved the community in crafting the school's vision and mission statement in order to cater for their interests and make them see the school belonged to them. To further cater for the interest of the community, we started community gardens…* (Principal D).

The principals' agency is visible above, and is achieved by practising one of the aspects of adaptive leadership, which mobilises different people, with the aim of drawing from their capacities (Heifetz & Linsky, 2011). Further, in School D, we found that the school was not only receiving input from the community, but that they also developed plans to contribute towards fighting some unfreedoms in the community. One prevalent unfreedom in the area was unemployment, which leads to poverty. We further asked the principal how they gave back to their community and below is his response:

> *…through the vegetables that these young people plant they are able to harvest and cook in their families, and also some of them especially those planted by learners are sold to provide for the basic needs of the school and the community* (Principal D).

It was important for us to understand how the synergy between the school and the community helped towards coping and adapting with change. Learning from School A and School D, we realised that schools may not possess all the resources they need and that some resources are available beyond the school boundaries (Bhengu & Myende, 2015; Sanders, 2006). Involving the communities, as shown above, assisted the schools in two ways. First, the schools were able to tap from the resources of the community to drive the process of change. Second, the schools were able to protect their resources through causing the community to become part of the school, ensuring that the community did not steal these resources.

Drawing from Indigenous Leadership

Our findings also reveal that leadership for coping and adapting to change cannot be drawn from foreign notions of leadership. There is a need to observe and adapt the leadership patterns from the local community. As a result, the principals in this study adopted several ways of leading from indigenous leadership approaches. For example in School E, we observed that from time to time, the principal conducted what he called "izimbizo" (special gatherings), where he moved from one class to another soliciting learners' views and grievances. If trouble was brewing, the principal thereby had a means of determining and preempting it. Izimbizo are traditional ways used in rural parts of South Africa to get the views of the community about communal issues. They were used by Amakhosi (Chiefs) through the Izinduna (Headsmen) to solicit the views of the community on particular issues. The principals embraced the izimbizo as a way of problem solving, thus we argue that, by using this approach, the principal is drawing on traditional notions of leadership.

Similarly, in School C we concluded from the views of the principal that there was an element of indigenous leadership. This principal indicated that in his attempt to deal with change in the school, he faced the continuous lack of discipline amongst learners, especially males. He employed the strategy of calling the boys under the tree (Es'hlahleni) to deal with discipline issues:

> *Here at school we have more boys than girls, and sometimes, we get information about something brewing, that is going to disrupt the school. Boys know that in the community, as a tradition, when there are issues to be discussed, or that must be thrashed out* [sic], *men must meet under a tree and discuss men issues (Es'hlahleni). As part of that tradition, we do have our own tree here at school, Es'hlahleni sezinsizwa, where we addressed boys as 'Izinsizwa' (young warriors) and not just as school boys* (Principal C).

Once more, the aspect of indigenous leadership emerges in the above extract. Although this strategy is used in some communities, like the one where School C is located, the use of *is'hlahla* as the place to deliberate on community issues was used in the ancient days. *Es'hlahleni* used to be a place where the traditional Zulu communities would prosecute and sentence those who had misbehaved in the community. This approach, while traditional and indigenous, is in line with the values of democracy and participation as espoused in South African Constitution and the South African schools. We have indicated earlier that the principles in this study promoted the idea that 'practicality works, not the law', and note here that while change may be dictated from higher structures in the Department of Basic Education, principals may be shown to survive by drawing from what works in their context. This calls for leadership typology that is responsive and adaptive to contextual realities (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010) and is adjusted continuously to suite the kind of actions required from the leader at that particular moment. As part of our research, we requested the principal to invite us into one of the meetings with *Izinsizwa*

attending the *es'hlahleni* gathering to observe the deliberations. This is an indigenous way of resolving problems among the Zulus. Participants are treated as equals in such conversation. In this instance, school boys are treated as adults, and our observations during the gathering revealed that participating boys demonstrated eagerness to contribute to finding solutions. This demonstrated that adapting strategies used in the community to address challenges in the school can be innovative and achieve desired outcomes.

Principals' Approaches to Participation

From the outset, we believed in the value of participatory leadership in achieving organisational goals, and we argue here that leadership does not rest with the principal only. We believed that due to the rate and magnitude of change in schools, participation of all stakeholders is inevitable and desirable. Our observations and conversations with the principals suggested that as part of their approach towards coping with and adapting to policy change; they also believed in participative leadership. This corresponds with another study conducted in the Pinetown District, which revealed that principals believed in and promoted participation of different school stakeholders to achieve desired school outcomes (Bhengu & Myende, 2015). The findings of the current study suggested two approaches to participation. We call these approaches "open-participatory" and "closed-participatory" approaches.

Open-participatory leadership

The underlying principle for open-participatory leadership (OPL) as it emerged in the field is a democracy that is characterised by openness, transparency, as well as optimism and trust in the capabilities of others to lead (Stoll & Fink, 1996). Furthermore, our study reveals that OPL is guided by the principals' belief in 'multilateral wisdom', where a need exists to draw from multiple viewpoints through participative management. We indicated earlier that the five principals we studied, in one way or the other, had participation embedded in their leadership. However, the word 'open' distinguishes principals who used this style from others. For instance, the Principal of School D, as part of his transformational agenda, worked with the teachers to develop school vision and various improvement activities were set up, each of which was led by one of the teachers. This is what this principal had to say in this regard:

> *After our strategic planning, we developed various units; they have autonomy to make their own decisions in the interest of the school and are working very well; they understand their tasks. They keep development plans. A leader of a unit keeps plans and other documents and is responsible for what happens in his or her unit.*

> *Various units met monthly to discuss and assess progress that is being made.*

OPL style is premised on unrestricted, genuine (no hidden agendas) and active participation (Bhengu, 2005). Another important element of OPL is that principals who cope with and adapt to change are able to solicit and utilise the talents of others for the benefit of the school and this in line with adaptive leadership. Different committees are established in order to create space for all stakeholders to lead. These committees enjoyed autonomy from the principal and they kept their programmes running with little, if any, interference from the principal. We were eager to learn how principals used participation to cope with and adapt to change in the deprived context. One principal said:

> *In the school we have established several committees such as wellness and school community relations committee. The work of these committees allows me to focus on administrative matters while teachers and others deal with other matters. In this way, I am able to focus on the changes and through committees; teachers will aid my leadership in addressing other challenges that weaken our attempts to deal with change* (Principal D).

The principal of School E confirmed that their leadership towards change became constrained by many 'unfreedoms' (Sen, 1999), where failure to address these unfreedoms sometimes thwarted success in implementing changes required. However, the principal further indicated that by opening leadership to teachers, his school was able to concentrate on all contextually troubling factors, while also finding its foot in a changing educational environment.

Another advantage of this approach includes instilling a sense of ownership of the schools' vision and mission. Furthermore, where OPL is used, a friendly environment characterised by creativity and innovation, which are the pillars of adaptive leadership, prevails (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004). There is a high chance for the acceptance of decisions by all, since the process of decision-making is characterised by inclusivity and active participation. Two important advantages of this form of leadership were discovered to be that teachers have a role in transforming the school, and that tasks are taken willingly and with commitment, rather than through compliance with the instructions of those with positional authority. Despite these calculated gains, one principal raised the point that if more programmes are initiated, the focus of teachers may shift from teaching and learning, and this required concentrated co-ordination of programmes, so as to ensure that they did not consume teachers' time at the expense of other key school functions.

Closed-participatory leadership

'Closed-participatory leadership' (CPL) appeared different from OPL in multiple ways. While the element of participation is found in this approach, it is strongly embedded in authoritarian leadership. Structures are established, but these are mostly limited to formal structures, such as School Management Teams and School Governing Bodies. Participants in these structures may not be willing to participate. One example is School A. In this school, as mandated by the South African Schools Act (SASA) (RSA, 1996), teachers are part of the SGB, but their participation is, to some extent, marginalised. The principal of School A stated that sometimes teachers have to think that they were involved for principals' political reasons associated with attaining their support. In the end, it is the principal who will need to do what he/she is comfortable with. A certain culture prevails in the context where this type of leadership is employed. Our observations revealed that in School A and School C, the principals' positions on issues were both known, and unchallenged. Principals in these two schools took decisions alone before staff meetings, and to instil a false feeling of participation, they would privately lobby a certain group of teachers, who would then participate in the meeting. Once this is done, teachers would think that they participated. While principals in these schools used this approach, one of them was aware that it was not an ideal one. This is found in the views of this principal below:

> *You don't have to observe what the Department says. I have to do what I am comfortable with… the trick is, teachers have to be made to think they are part of the decision-making process, but you can't rely on them… their role is to teach whereas mine is to run the school* (Principal A).

While participation appears to be incorporated into this style, leadership as described in the above extract may lead to frustration and disillusionment among the teachers (Bhengu, 2005). Due to this, we associate this form of leadership with authoritarian participation, where teachers can only act as mandated by those in positional power. Although teachers may think they are participating, they held that they knew 'what the principal wants', and their behaviour in participation ought to be guided by what is wanted. One crucial element we identified is that, in cases where this type of leadership was used, principals tended to regard themselves as possessors of knowledge and wisdom. In that way, they were able to present to the teachers change-coping strategies, which were able to allow them survive in the turbulent environment.

While the above leadership style may not appear ideal, in the two schools where it was used, we observed that expectations of the principals were known, and people worked to fulfil them. Due to tighter control of teachers, schools' codes of conduct were respected and followed. There was also an element of fear, which caused teachers to complete their tasks. Due to the element of participation and relaxed supervision, teachers were still afforded freedom, to some extent, to do what they wished. The two schools coped with change, however there were limitations we observed which we associate with CPL. The climate was not friendly in these schools and tensions were at the order of the day. There was occasional mistrust, which limited teacher leadership. It was further observed that stakeholder participation was mainly dictated by the principals. Their claim was that they had control of what was happening, and teachers were focused on teaching and learning, which made their schools produce good results, despite the troubling contexts.

Conclusion

This paper explored what, from the principals' perspectives, constitutes leadership for coping and adapting to policy change within the deprived school context. We drew from the practices of five principals we interviewed, and at those schools, we observed and believed that they succeeded in coping with and adapting to change. From their stories, we deduced three conclusions important to theorising leadership, that work for policy change in the deprived school in a developing world context. First, we conclude that leadership practices in schools should not be fixed, but that they should be fluid and evolving. In the study, we noted that principals worked with policies largely based on a 'one size fits all' premise. However, the study has revealed that surviving principals continuously evaluated policies in relation to what they thought would work in their context. Leadership is therefore, adapted and framed by the beliefs of principals about what works. When this adaptation takes place, it causes leadership practices to be evolving and fluid.

The second lesson drawn from what the principals were doing is that leadership for change in a deprived school context ought not be about compliance, but that it should foreground one's ability to identify what works in a given context. In this study, principals expressed strong views in favour of the use of corporal punishment, despite the government policies banning it. While we have argued and criticised this on the basis that it appears to be a sign for resistance of change, the study has shown principalship in rural communities to be characterised by multiple accountability. Principals account to the department of education first, but due to the strong sense of connection between schools and the community, principals in circumstances where there is strong traditional leadership account to the community. In this case, there is a possibility for conflict between policies from the DBE and community values and practices,

leaving principals with a challenge. We do not subscribe to the notion of shunning laws and policies addressing human rights violations, but our argument here is that tendencies of mere compliance may limit the leaders' ability to identify what is working in a given context. Thus, leadership that goes beyond compliance should be able to identify other means in line with the law, that are able to work in their context.

The third lesson emanates from the principals' successes in using indigenous knowledge and localised practices to deal with schools' unfreedoms. From these principals' practices of using gardens, *is'hlahla sezinsizwa* and *izimbizo*, we can observe these principals' ability to have critical awareness of what works in the local society. Being critical also includes not undermining these practices, because they are ancient and traditional, but it includes understanding that they have served the community where schools are located, and that therefore, they form part of these communities' culture. These conclusions are important, because they do not only theorise leadership from the deprived context, but also demonstrate how indigenous ways of knowing can inform the study of leadership locally and internationally.

Note

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