

The difficulties of school development planning

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The South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 requires that school governing bodies develop school mission statements and, by implication, school development plans. The Gauteng Regulations and Rules for Public School Governing Bodies specifically direct school governing bodies to draw up and amend school development plans. Whilst training in development planning has been provided to school management teams and educators, schools generally still do not have realistic development plans. The difficulties of school development planning are demonstrated with reference to schools in the Gauteng Department of Education, through personal experiences of the researcher and a case example of the development planning process at two schools. This is premised on the fact that school development planning is a highly technical process that requires skill and know-how to be executed successfully. It is argued that school development planning is fraught with numerous challenges that require an approach that focuses on its purpose, i.e. school improvement and management of planned change.

Background

The South African Schools Act No. 84 (SASA) (Republic of South Africa, 1996) advocates promotion of the best interests of the child as a critical cornerstone of education delivery in South Africa. According to this Act, the school governing bodies (SGBs) are required to develop mission statements of schools and the best way of achieving this is by engaging in school development planning. The Gauteng Schools Act (Gauteng Department of Education, 1997:22) specifically directs that the SGB "... shall draw up and amend a school development plan."

The researcher was invited to one district in Gauteng to (re)train School Management Teams (SMTs) and educators in school development planning in November 2003. The thinking could have been that the initial training was not successful, hence the need for re-training. A number of schools have taken it upon themselves to hire service providers to retrain them in this process. This attests to the apparent difficulty of the development planning process at schools. Clearly, most schools struggle to execute development planning and to develop SDPs, let alone implement them. For this reason, it is important to have a clear understanding of school development planning.

Problem statement

School development planning intends to effect change and innovation for school improvement and is therefore a comprehensive long-term planning process (Cuckle & Broadhead, 2003:230). According to Bell (1998:453), the purpose of development planning is to assist the school to introduce changes successfully, so that the quality of teaching and the standards of learning are improved. In this regard, MacGilchrist and Mortimore (1995:207) assert that school development planning can be a school improvement strategy although not all SDPs lead to school improvement. This is based on how SDPs are drawn up and mainly what they focus on. Jones (1998:281) considers school development planning as a widely adopted approach to the man-

agement of planned change, advocated as a facilitating mechanism to aid the implementation of multiple innovations introduced in the education system.

The development planning process needs a deep understanding of what its intentions are and how it should be done. Schools would have to distinguish between planning for school improvement, innovation or change and simply planning for management aspects of the school, which could translate into simple operational planning; this against the background of schools generally being stable environments. In fact, Hargreaves (1995:217) argues in this regard that, unlike companies which operate in dynamic and uncertain environments,

schools are remarkably stable for most of the time and are particularly difficult to change because parent clients want astonishingly stable schools, and while schools are under pressure to innovate, much of this innovation is externally shaped and imposed on educators who have very little choice in the matter.

Clearly, from this exposition, school development planning requires technical knowledge and skill for its execution. For example, determining and setting, *inter alia*, realistic objectives, time-frames, performance indicators and costing are some of the activities that require knowledge and skill to determine. In the light of the foregoing exposition, this research intended to answer the following questions:

1. What is school development planning?
2. Which difficulties regarding the school development planning process are experienced by schools?
3. How can school development planning be facilitated at schools?

Aims of this research

Based on the exposition of the problem statement, it is aimed to

1. expose what school development planning is;
2. expose difficulties experienced by schools regarding the school development planning process; and
3. submit recommendations for facilitating development planning at schools.

To achieve these aims, the school development planning concept is outlined. A case example of two schools is reported and difficulties of school development planning are exposed. The writer draws from his own experiences as an ex-official in the department of education to describe some aspects of school development planning in the Gauteng Department of Education.

Research method

Literature review

Conceptualisation of school development planning

School development planning can best be understood within the framework of the school as a system in which change of any part affects all the other parts (Haynes, Emmons, Gebreyesus & Ben-Avie, 1996:123). Therefore, school development planning is a systematic, collaborative and inclusive, ongoing and progressive process undertaken by the school to promote whole school effectiveness, school improvement, quality enhancement, staff development, partnerships, effective resource deployment, change management and the furtherance of aims and priorities of the national education system (SDPI, 1999:11-15). School development planning is undertaken to give direction to the work of the whole school in order to ensure that learners

receive quality education in terms of both their holistic development and their academic achievement (Broadhead & Cuckle, 2002:310; SDPI, 1999:12; Bell, 1998:452).

In essence, school development planning entails the school's analysis of its development needs, prioritisation and planning for addressing such needs and developing an SDP to address those identified development needs (*cf.* McNamara, O'Hara & Ni Aingleis, 2002:204). For this purpose, the school development planning process comprises a framework in the form of a planning cycle revolving around a central core, namely, the school's mission, vision and fundamental aims, and the planning cycle itself comprising the school review, design, implementation and evaluation thereof (*cf.* MSTP, 1998; SDPI, 2003:1).

In terms of this framework, the school has to formulate its vision, mission and fundamental aims which articulate the reason for the school's existence, what it wants to create and achieve, and what it considers to be the fundamental purpose of education (MSTP, 1998; SDPI, 1999). The mission statement addresses questions like: Whom does the school serve? What service does the school provide? How is that service provided? And what are the key beliefs and values the school stands for (SDPI, 2003:2)? In this regard, the school plan should arise out of discussions involving all the people in and connected with the life of the school and should thus focus on whole school issues which define the quality of learning and teaching, management and organisation of the school, planning for the curriculum, monitoring, evaluation and review processes (Guyana Ministry of Education, 2004). The planning cycle addresses questions like

- Where is the school now?
- Where does the school want to be at the end of the planning cycle?
- How will the school get there?
- How will the school check whether it is getting there?
- How will the school know if it has got there? (Bell, 1998:452).

These questions examine the current situation at the school, identify developmental priorities, targets, action planning, performance indicators and the mode of monitoring and evaluation. The crucial part of the development planning process relates to the review areas of the review phase, namely mission, vision and aims, context factors, curriculum, care and management of learners, staff organisation and development, school-home community links and school management and administration (*cf.* SDPI, 1999:19; Broadhead, Cuckle & Hodgson, 1999:277; SDPI, 2003:4).

Equally crucial in the review phase, are the review instruments. SDPI (1999:20) cites surveys, questionnaires, interviews, checklists, SCOT (Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, forms and evaluation grids as some of the review instruments. These instruments are meant to elicit school needs by eliciting information from school stakeholders. This phase is then followed by the prioritisation of needs that should be addressed and a number of possibilities for development. It must be pointed out that this phase ensures that as broad a consultation process as possible is undertaken.

The review phase is followed by action planning (SDPI, 1999:21). In this phase, identified priorities are translated into specific objectives or targets and action plans are drawn up to achieve those objectives, culminating in the SDP. Action plans have to be detailed and specify objectives to be achieved, action to be taken, persons responsible for actioning those activities, costs involved, time frames and monitoring mechanisms. To ensure that implementation of the plans takes place, action planning has to be as detailed and realistic as possible.

Development planning, being a process for the school, relies heavily on stakeholder participation as advocated by the SASA (Republic of South Africa, 1996). SDPI (1999:26) emphasises that school development planning is essentially a collaborative process that draws the whole school community together in shaping the school's future.

An analysis of the whole process of school development planning exposed above highlights the challenges it poses for schools. At Gauteng schools, this process seems even more arduous due to the way in which it was introduced at schools, as well as due to departmental expectations.

Empirical study

Phase 1

This phase was exploratory because the problem had not yet been clearly defined. According to Anon. (undated), this allows the researcher to familiarise himself with the problem to be studied and to help in determining the research design, data collection methods and selection of study subjects, and can be informal, relying on such approaches as, for instance, informal discussions. Informal conversational interviews and discussions were conducted with school principals, educator-, parent-, and learner-members of SGBs on difficulties they experienced in development planning. It is on the basis of this interaction and the personal experiences of the researcher that school development planning in Gauteng schools is exposed.

Phase 2

This phase was phenomenological as it intended to identify difficulties in development planning as perceived by educators involved in the planning process. Lester (1999) describes the purpose of the phenomenological approach as being concerned with how phenomena are perceived by the actors in a situation. This enables the researcher to employ a variety of research methods including group interviews, conversations, and analysis of personal texts. This approach, Lester asserts, is effective for understanding subjective experiences, gaining insight into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of conventional wisdom and assumptions. Formal and informal interviews and discussions with SMT members and educators in a workshop for development planning highlighted difficulties schools experience in executing development planning.

Phase 3

This phase involved a facilitation of the development planning process at two schools. The researcher was engaged as a facilitator of the process and was thus a participant and an observer in the process. Unstructured interviewing and process observation were used to gain an understanding of difficulties relating to school development planning at these schools. The combination of participation and unstructured interviewing is valuable in that it guides researchers to some of the important questions they want to ask the respondents, while interviewing helps to interpret the significance of what researchers are observing (see Qualitative research methods, undated).

The researcher noted the limitations of the case study of two schools in terms of generalisation. However, the researcher combined data from the three research phases to highlight the difficulties of school development planning for schools, based on the advantages of the approaches used (Frost & Sullivan, undated).

School development planning at the Gauteng schools

As alluded to elsewhere, the SGB is required to develop a mission statement for the school and, by implication, the SDP. Unlike the situation in Britain and Ireland, the requirement for school development planning is implied in the Schools Act by prescribing the development of a school mission (McNamara *et al.*, 1998:201; SDPI, 1999:5; Republic of South Africa, 1996). This places the onus entirely on provincial departments of education, their support structures and schools to develop an understanding and parameters within which school development planning is to be done.

Schools in the Gauteng Department of Education underwent training in school development planning (*cf.* Management Support Training Project (MSTP, 1998). Some educators and SMTs were trained by district officials using training manuals prepared by an NGO (MSTP). Training varied from district to district, with most districts taking two days to conduct the training. The idea was that training would be cascaded to other staff members and SGB members, and eventually development planning would be embarked upon at their schools. However, this kind of training had numerous limitations. Among others, the following limitations were noted:

- School development planning was introduced as an external requirement from the department of education. Responses regarding the reasons for school development planning largely indicated that whilst this was acknowledged as a valuable tool for school improvement, schools were meeting the departmental requirement. Issues associated with the development planning process included meeting submission and target dates, submitting technically correct plans and ensuring that the school filing system included a file for the SDP. Frustration was expressed with the arduous task of the process on top of other administrative tasks required by the department.
- The training offered to schools involved only SMTs and educators. The parent component of SGBs was not involved in the training. This limited their involvement, as well as stakeholder involvement, especially in the school review process of development planning. Besides, this posed the question of who should initiate and lead the process of development planning and therefore take accountability for its implementation.
- The cascading approach to training assumes that subsequent training will be successful. Experience has shown that this is very often not the case. In most instances, once the training was done, it was usually business-as-usual, as people re-focused on existing matters and relegated training to lower priority levels. Added to that, most principals found it difficult to train the staff and the parents, then engage the school in development planning, hence the outsourcing of the training function.
- The mode of training involving all SGB members at school level is fraught with difficulties. Firstly, not all members are always available. Secondly, time for training is usually set for school afternoons, which are not always suitable or long enough.
- The school review phase of development planning requires understanding the various dimensions of the school's operations. Usually schools tended to focus on unrealistic factors such as challenges/weaknesses, strengths, threats and opportunities, especially those from the external environment. Consequently, unrealistic targets were set and this led, accordingly, to difficulties in implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This was coupled with unclear and unrealistic performance indicators and success criteria.
- School development planning is seen as a process that has to produce a plan of new objectives and activities. This, in a way, ignores a school's ongoing improvement activities

and revokes a discrepancy between the current status of the school and what is desired. Consequently, schools largely appeared to be forced to think of new ideas for change, which led to unrealistic plans.

Taking these limitations into consideration, the approach to school development planning needs to be tailored to the circumstances of schools. The following case example of two schools illustrates this.

A case example of two schools

Both schools are in the same large township, neighboured by informal settlements and low-cost housing units. The majority of learners come from poor backgrounds, with most parents unemployed. Both experience similar challenges, *inter alia*, recently elected SGBs, non-involved and poverty-stricken parents, lack of teaching and learning resources, high rates of learner absenteeism, significant drop-out rates.

In both schools, development planning workshops took place over two days, a Saturday and a Sunday. Attendants included all staff members, including support staff and all SGB members. The overall facilitation brief was that at the end of the workshop, a school development plan was to be produced and adopted by the school stakeholders.

The starting point was a review of the school's vision and mission statement. While the process of development planning was explained, the stakeholders were directed to reflect on the relevance of their vision and mission statements.

At each school, the review phase focused on factors in and outside the school which made it easy to achieve their goals and objectives, and those which made it difficult for them to achieve their goals and objectives (These were labelled "enablers" or enabling factors and "disablers" or disabling factors, respectively).

They were then divided into teams to identify enabling and disabling factors. Each team was assigned a broad performance area to deal with. There were six teams, each dealing with one of the performance areas, namely, management and administration, school governance, safety and health, curriculum delivery, physical resources and the school environment, and extra-curricular activities.

Care was taken that team members could deal with the areas allocated. For instance, management and administration included some members of the management team, whilst general workers were involved with the physical resources and school environment. This session took three hours to complete and, for an hour, the team representatives reported to the entire school team in a plenary session. The reports were engaged and interrogated and general consensus reached on enablers and disablers. For the sake of communication, English, Sesotho and IsiZulu (as dominant languages) were used. This made it easy for parent governors and support staff to participate fully in the process.

The next phase was the design of the plan. Teams were commissioned to identify areas that needed development and those that needed enhancement. They also had to prioritise these areas in terms of their urgency and need for attention. They then drew up plans to address these areas. Plans had to detail objectives, activities, performance indicators, costs, resources needed, persons responsible and co-responsible, and timeframes. The plans were brought back to the plenary session where they were meticulously interrogated until consensus was reached.

The plans from the plenary session were then loaded into the computer and finalised. At the end of the workshops, the completed school development plans were presented to the

school stakeholders and adopted as authentic SDPs of the schools. The following issues were observed limitations in the process:

- The views of the broad stakeholder spectrum were not sufficiently canvassed. This was because only school staff and SGB parent members were in the planning workshop. The reasons cited for not eliciting the broad stakeholder views at both schools were illiteracy and community apathy, therefore school review data collection instruments, like questionnaires, were not used. As a result, the school review relied mainly on those stakeholders who were present.
- It was clear that people involved in the school development planning process did not really understand the purpose of the process. As a result, it seemed the aim of the process was to have the SDP ready for submission to the school's IDSO (Institutional Development and Support Officer, formerly school inspector/superintendent). In fact, after the production of the SDP in one school, the principal indicated that he was ready for the IDSO with "his" plan. Apparently "his" initial plan was rejected by the IDSO.
- The school review phase was viewed as an academic exercise that sought to satisfy the requirements of a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) "cliché". This was evidenced by the identification of the local industrial and business community as both schools' opportunities. However, the reality is that the local industry is so removed from the schools' sphere of influence that it would not be readily involved in sponsoring schools in the township. Furthermore, the businesses in townships are themselves so poor that they could not be expected to contribute financial resources to schools.
- The technical language of development planning was cited as being difficult to understand and use. For instance, engaging in SCOT analysis was seen as too academic and difficult to apply in local school conditions. The literacy level of parents and support staff was also identified as a reason for this difficulty. Professional staff largely understood the meaning of the SCOT analysis, but were unable to apply it in practice, hence the simplification of the language in that regard.
- The actual planning phase is rather technical and demands a great deal of skill and know-how. It was difficult, for instance, to articulate objectives and activities, to formulate performance indicators (this had to be substituted with "expected outcomes"), to cost the activities and resources needed, to decide on realistic time-frames and, overall, to identify and avoid repetitions. This demand for skill and technical know-how is aptly expressed in Robinson's research which lists knowledge, skill and understanding of professional language or limited understanding of practical procedures and processes as (trustees') governors' limitations and consequent communication barriers (Robinson, 2003:271). In fact, this research reports that governors attributed limited understanding to the use of professional jargon, rather than to their knowledge.
- Generally, planning tended to focus on operational matters, rather than on strategic matters. Consequently, time-frames and costing, among other things, tended to be unrealistic and mostly short-term or operational.

Discussion

Findings from the case examples of the two schools were consistent with findings during the first two phases of the research. These made it clear to the researcher that the execution of

development planning at schools is a challenge. For instance, it was found that some schools went to the extent of "borrowing" other schools' SDPs in order to submit them to the department. To this end, principals and educators reported that there was no monitoring from the department once plans were submitted, and they felt that the whole exercise was thus a waste of time and resources.

The involvement of a limited spectrum of stakeholders was evident in both schools. This limited the canvassing of adequate information with which to judge the schools' current state. The reason cited for not eliciting the broad stakeholder views at both schools was illiteracy and community apathy, some parents being at work, whilst others simply did not care and lacked commitment, so the school review data collection instruments, like questionnaires, were not used. The school review, accordingly, relied mainly on those stakeholders who were present. These views were consistent with those expressed during research phases 1 and 2. Educators, in particular, expressed their frustration caused by having to plan for the sake of submission to the department with no implementation being carried out. The school review was thus inadequate and lacked a baseline against which to assess the schools' status (*cf.* Hargreaves, 1995:222).

Inadequate knowledge about development planning was obvious in both schools. This was also noted and articulated clearly during the research phases 1 and 2. As a result, it seemed the aim of the process was to have the SDP ready for submission to the school's IDSO. Consequently, producing true and realistic plans reflecting schools' circumstances seemed to be largely ignored. In other words, schools were concerned more with the correctness of the plans and adherence to submission dates, than with the realistic projection of their change and school improvement intentions.

Clearly then, planning seems to be done in order to appease departmental officials or to meet due dates of submission. In fact, after the production of the SDP in one school, the principal had indicated that he was ready for the IDSO with "his" plan. This confirmed the notion that school development planning is undertaken as an external requirement or to meet an outside demand and not the schools' internal needs (*cf.* Hargreaves, 1999:222; Bell, 1998: 453).

It was clear that the school review phase was viewed as an academic exercise that sought to satisfy the requirements of a SCOT analysis, which rendered the review phase a superficial exercise done for the sake of having a plan and not really delving into the schools' actual challenges and opportunities (*cf.* Hargreaves, 1995:222).

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The actual planning phase was rather technical and demanded a great deal of skill. It was difficult, for instance, to articulate objectives and activities, to formulate performance indicators, to cost the activities and resources needed, to decide on realistic time-frames and, overall, to identify and avoid repetitions. As a result, educators felt that their SDPs were irrelevant to their school's particular circumstances and needs. This was compounded by limited time provided for training in development planning and time available for developing the plans. It was

reported that training in this regard was offered over two school afternoons of two hours each, which was seen as inadequate.

This demand for skill and technical expertise is aptly expressed in Robinson, Ward and Timperly's research, which lists knowledge, skill and understanding of professional language or limited understanding of practical procedures and processes as governors' limitations and consequent communication barrier (Robinson, Ward & Timperly, 2003:271). In fact, governors at the two schools attributed their limited understanding to the use of professional jargon, rather than language they could understand.

Generally, planning tended to focus on operational matters rather than on strategic matters, i.e. school improvement and planned management of change. Consequently, time-frames and costing, among other things, tended to be unrealistic and mostly short-term and operational. However, positive outcomes were observed from the process. Among others:

- The whole process opened avenues for a climate of teamwork among the school stakeholders present. There was meaningful interaction between parents, governors and staff, general and administrative staff, including support staff, and it produced valuable contributions, especially during the school review and planning phases, from staff who are usually marginalised at schools, namely, the general workers (cleaners, gardeners and night-watch people). This was mostly seen in the commissions dealing with school safety, health and the environment.
- The process enabled staff to deal openly with issues relating to interpersonal relationships. The significant outcome of this was the team spirit that prevailed during and after the planning process. This was one disabler that was cited at both schools — that there was little or no teamwork at the schools.
- School governors realised, through the process, the importance of their roles and responsibilities in promoting the interests of the school. This became evident in how issues in the SASA were tackled and elucidated. They generally expressed awareness, for the first time, of the influence they had on how the governance of the school was handled. Consequently, a great deal of focus was placed on the policies at the school. This highlighted the need for training of SGB members in school governance and was included in the SDP as a challenge that needed to be addressed.
- The process induced everyone to realise the state of the schools' external environment. The issues of poverty and parent illiteracy were unpacked and understood in the context of parental and community involvement in the school. As a result, the need for home visitation was acutely identified and was included as an aspect of the school's long-term plans.

The foregoing exposition indicates the difficulty and challenge of development planning for schools. It is clear, however, that schools can achieve much through proper development planning, which would also make implementation possible.

Conclusion

It is clear that school development planning is a powerful instrument for school improvement and ensures a coherent action-planning process for school renewal, innovation and change. It is also evident that planning, for the sake of achieving externally imposed requirements like submission target dates, defeats the very essence of development planning.

Therefore school development planning should aspire to introduce change and/or effect

innovation and should thus be a volitional exercise initiated by the school community in a quest for continuous improvement. Clearly, this is limited when the development planning process is an external requirement (*cf.* Mather, 1998:476). It gives the impression that the department of education sees the need for school improvement and change, and then directs schools to develop plans for this. Therefore it is understandable when schools find it difficult to engage in the process because they are "merely" fulfilling an externally identified need. Consequently, schools struggle to find areas needing improvement. Development planning tends to yield superficial and unrealistic targets. This happens at the expense of the need for real innovation and change at schools.

It is clear that this process cannot be solely and simply located in the SGB domain of functions. The principal and SMT members should be responsible for initiating and seeing the process through. However, since SMTs in South Africa are appointed in their positions on the basis of minimum qualification requirements and experience as educators, and not on their qualifications as educational managers or their skills in school management (*cf.* Juta, 2000:1-89; Department of Education, 2000), two alternatives seem appropriate. The first should be to locate school development planning initiatives squarely in the SMTs functional domain. In this way they would be responsible and accountable for the entire process. However, care would have to be taken that the process is not a mere operational planning exercise. Therefore intensive management development in this regard would be absolutely imperative. Monitoring of the SDPs would have to be stringent, although care must be taken that planning should not be for the purpose of submission to the department. This implies that departmental support teams responsible for this function should themselves be skilled and knowledgeable to support the process.

The second alternative would be to outsource the development planning process to knowledgeable and skilled service providers. These would then be responsible for helping schools plan and ensuring that the final planning product is compiled. The danger in this alternative is that it would be difficult to hold such service providers accountable for the final product and implementation of the plan. The solution could be to hold departmental officials responsible for school development and support (IDSOs) accountable for development planning at schools. This implies ensuring that they themselves are first capacitated in school development planning and are part of development planning processes undertaken with the service providers and are held accountable for monitoring the implementation of plans.

For the school development planning process to be successful, the following should then be considered:

- The cascade method of capacity-building should be discarded for a hands-on approach that will see capacity-builders taking schools through the process of planning and actually producing the SDPs. In this way, school stakeholders would be empowered to engage in the task independently in future planning attempts.
- The school principal and SMT must be charged with the responsibility of ensuring the initiation of development planning as well as its implementation. Capacity-building regarding monitoring and evaluation of its implementation should receive the highest priority.
- Instead of seeming to "force" change and innovation, the school development planning process should have learning as its starting point so as to ensure that school development planning objectives and activities are focused on the achievement of learning.

The success of the school development planning process is therefore a function of the understanding of its intentions, as well as being initiated by the school community. In this way, schools will be in a position to self-audit in a realistic manner which focuses on schools' own improvement, innovation and change needs.

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