Teachers’ views of a flexible management framework: A case study in selected schools

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Abstract

The implementation of change in schools has implications for the culture that has developed in schools. This article explores aspects of the current practices in culture changes and the need to improve schools. I present a case study that focuses on principals’ managerialist functions that necessitate the integration of policies. An interpretive research with grounded theory included both qualitative elements, namely in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that contextual factors influence the changes in culture of each school and that the driving forces need to be identified to assist in the ventures. Teachers reflected about the limited influence of a flexible framework, since it appeared that the potential of schools in general has not been realised.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: Culture changes, flexible management framework, managerialist approach, policy

1. Introduction

The school education system in South Africa and related curriculum changes pose challenges to school management. Notwithstanding government initiatives, many schools remain dysfunctional (Moloi & Bush, 2009). In this article, I argue that such changes, including curriculum changes, require managers that inspire, support and promote the culture of performance excellence. I thus contend that principals direct the mandates of schools, which is to teach and to ensure that learners learn and that prescribed standards and outcomes are met. Principals have a further responsibility to identify driving forces that could assist change processes.

Changes involve management and leadership processes, which Grant and Singh (2009) maintain are complementary, as both processes are needed for a school to prosper. Leadership is linked to the managerial approach where activities of schools are operationalised through role players with an emphasis on relationships. To this end, management of curriculum change is necessary to ensure effective teaching. This management process commits role players to participating fully in different contexts. These include contexts such as demographics, economics, resources, violence, health and culture (Bush & Oduro, 2006) and all these must be integrated into the management processes of a school. However, since most black teachers in South Africa began their teaching
careers under the apartheid regime where they were required to practise in racially prescribed settings (Moloi & Bush (2009), they are currently faced with various realities within their contexts.

Contexts are flexibly integrated into the management processes of a school. Meaning teachers, learners and communities at all levels are engaged in give-and-take relations (Van der Westhuizen, 2008) to improve teaching and learning in a context where changes are prescribed and where they are not seen as agents of change. In terms of managerialist approach and the implementation of new policies relative to teaching I maintain that the implementation of policies should be customised and be flexible to accommodate differences in and between schools. A customised and flexible management approach may assist in integrating all functions and identifying common values, norms and culture essential for continuous improvement in different schools’ context. The purpose should be to achieve and maintain excellence in schools, with service and teaching learning as the objectives.

2. A flexible management framework

Management and leadership theories of change underpin this study. Theories of change are complementary and are weaved together in this article to show increase focus on integrated management framework and policies related to change in attaining the goals of schools.

The argument in this article is based on school principals’ work that is increasingly focused on integrated managerial tasks within the framework of performativity and control. Policies necessitate a continuous change in the culture of teaching and learning processes as well as in how learning should empower learners’ efficacy through the achievement of measurable outcomes. I argue that managerial tasks have less consideration for other factors such as people or the context because managerialist initiatives are aimed at achieving results and focus on knowledge and skills. I contend that the use of a flexible management system including teamwork, structural support, cultural support and team management (Van der Mescht & Tyala, 2008) is critical.

There are successful managerialist approaches in schools. Fleisch’s (2006) education action zone programme in the Gauteng province in South Africa, for example, turned around dysfunctional schools through a new managerialistic approach. Fleisch’s study identified dysfunctional schools that had an examination pass rate of 20% or below and that exhibited poor planning, preparations, disruptions and chaos. The successes of the initiative surpassed the targets initially set and successful schools were ultimately awarded a silver medal for service delivery innovation. In the implementation of the curriculum policies, it is therefore evident that the managerialist approach has the potential to contribute to quality education.

In bringing about change, principals need to be inspired and supported by senior management – specialists who are committed in their ventures to institutional development. Their role should be to provide contextual insight and appreciation of various forces effecting change in schools. Fleisch (2006) postulates that senior management should lead the process of social change within social contexts of schools through modelling, scaffolding, thus promoting joint construction and independence.

Aspects such as the vision, strategies and objectives of schools that are identified and predetermined stress role players’ participative engagements. Since schools vary according to contextual community differences, a lack of support for the implementation of policy changes (Ntshoe & De Villiers, 2009) strengthens arguments that policies are difficult to implement. Hence, a flexible framework could assist role players in other schools to meet the requirements of policy implementation and change. The framework may assist in eliminating barriers to contextual change.

The problem statement in this research is whether or not a flexible management school system could be an approach to improve the culture of teaching and learning. My purpose in this article is to explore how a customised managerialist framework could assist in improving the culture of teaching and learning.

3. Research design

An interpretive research with grounded theory included both qualitative elements, namely in-depth interviews in Gauteng Province of South Africa. Principals of 14 Further Education and Training (FET) schools were included in the purposively selected sample to determine a flexible framework in terms of culture changes. Each second
principal of the 14 schools was intervieved (N=7) by means of semi-structured interviews. In order to ensure trustworthiness, Guba’s model (Krefting, 1991) was selected because it is well developed conceptually and has been used effectively by qualitative researchers in education to assess the trustworthiness of respondents. To ensure the trustworthiness of responses, an audit trail was created for principals. Raw data were recorded on audiotape and field notes and were transcribed from audio to print. Data were coded, reconstructed and synthesised into a structure of categorised specific themes for analysis and interpretation purposes. The purpose of the investigation was to investigate whether or not a flexible management framework can be regarded as an approach that could assist in improving the culture of teaching and learning.

4. Findings

The findings from this study were summarised and synthesised. Four trends emerged as essential: identification of driving forces, role players’ engagement in change processes, the role of senior managers, and objectives of schools.

Driving Forces and role players: The principals’ responses are presented verbatim and in italics in this section to indicate their views. As a first step to achieve congruence in continuous curriculum change, principals indicated that it was important for role players to know their own strengths and weaknesses, so that their efforts can complement one another, and can effectively contribute to goal attainment through participative and collaborative teamwork (Principal D). Secondly, principals agreed that the driving forces must be identified to assist in directing key actions to empower role players. Such driving forces may be persons such as females (gender), and teachers with the highest academic and management qualifications that are committed to institutionalising change.

Role players: Other trends also emerged: These examples included principals who were considered to be the most important and essential role players. Principals indicated and solicited assistance from the senior management in districts. In this instance they referred to the Institutional Development Specialists (IDSs) from the District that should provide manuals to guide change processes. Principal A responded as follows:

Senior managers must demonstrate that they are serious about improvement of quality in schools and this is embedded and reflected in policies. The IDS and principals have management roles to play; however, it appears that they not only had to grasp their management organisational roles but need to assist guide role players of schools for whom they are responsible, and ensure that their own commitment was communicated. Only then the process towards changes in culture could be popularised throughout the schools to involve all and sundry.

Objectives: Another example noted the importance of setting objectives. Principals indicated that annual objectives set by the district are achieved by personnel who are empowered and receive awards from the department. The following comment illustrates Principal C’s response:

Commitment to efforts of empowerment from the department has the necessary obsession and free from lip service and a sound guidance is essential and fundamental to the requirement for culture changes for achievement of goals. My school was less successful compared to those who were empowered to make decisions and trained for their roles with information to guide their decisions.

It has also been found that a school’s contextual factors such as the community’s cultural values, socio-economic status, and the culture at a school influence the quality of education offered to learners. Principals indicated that they therefore need to establish learning and teaching environments that are conducive to classroom climates that maximise learner success and efficacy. For example, I found that Schools A and C were readily successful in aiding learner efficacy while Schools B and D, notwithstanding considerable efforts, were found to be dysfunctional, even in a good socio-economic areas.

Principals indicated that it is important to first eliminate barriers to bring about change and continuing professional development. The following comments from Principal F illustrate this view:

Barriers are often the result of silo management within which schools themselves are treated like separate containers. Schools are not talking to one another, not supporting and working together. Something has to be done to inspire support.
The other aspect was related to policies that were imposed. Principals felt that there were various policies that they had to deal with simultaneously. The following comments came from Principals E and A responses respectively:

Common to all is the capacity building that there is no relevant training and development for role players to deal with continuous changes (Principal E).

We are not making long-term commitment because of lack of support for transformational processes to ensure continuity of experience in the management of teaching (Principal A).

The above responses indicate that principals, as managers of schools, do not feel a strong sense of responsibility to influence priorities. The drive to act upon the current state of the culture of teaching and learning with a view to continuously eliminate resistance is questioned. Positive role players in each school need to be identified to assist principals in this process. Strategies need to be informed by positive values from which schools derive their focus and strengths – the foundation on which the unique culture is built. Negative values that do not fit into the current and future reality, because they are perceived as having a negative effect on the quality of work-life, need to be identified for attention. Negative values such as resistance, failure and depression need to be reflected upon, exposed and communicated to steer role players more willingly towards quality culture. To this end, positive values such as achievement, recognition and success inspire role players to do the right things (effectiveness) irrespective of circumstances (resilience). These must not be seen as quick-fix solutions to culture change but as long-term solutions to schools.

5. Discussion

It is evident from the survey and literature reviewed that there is a need for contextual factors that would accommodate differences in and between schools and that a ‘one size fits all’ framework is not appropriate. For example, in some schools there was a marked improvement, whereas in others there were no changes. To this end, a flexible and more accommodating framework is required to allow differences in and between schools since the feature of a ‘one size fits all’ framework has proved ineffective because schools operate from different contexts. Flexible frameworks have been successful in commerce, industry and the public service and consequently they could also be put to good use in schools.

The importance of flexibility is supported by empirical findings that suggest that the ability to effect continuous improvement and/or to manage change depends largely on: the enterprising capacity of individual schools and/or their ability to customise a framework to their specific settings or contexts; the levels of principals’ knowledge, skills and dispositions in their schools; the extent to which their communities could be regarded as enterprising; the coherence of improvement, facilities and resources; the quality of communication, especially with regard to defined objectives and principals’ visionary leadership.

The need for flexibility relates to the ability to involve positive role players to help effect changes and shifts in the reconstruction of the culture of teaching and learning. A paradigm shift depends on individual principals’ commitment to use an appropriate framework to continuously change role players in a structured and systematic way to improve existing culture. This existing culture could be realised through an emphasis on measureable objectives defined by principals and cascaded down to all.

Guided by inferences, claims and insights, this article presents a set of contributions that could serve as an implementation framework for any intervention aimed at continuous improvement. Realising that the missing factors are essential features of the framework, I propose that a flexible and integrated managerialist approach could be a solution to schools’ problems. I realise that the use of such a framework does not necessarily guarantee the success of continuous improvement in schools. I also realise that, like its predecessors, this intervention might very well fail unless it successfully eliminates the causes of previous failures and/or builds on previous successes wherever these were evident.

Given the need to accommodate differences, these factors could direct processes and serve as criteria for monitoring performance in schools where the framework is used. Used correctly, the framework could assist school principals and role players in implementing continuous improvement plans, equally involving all of them regardless of their position or status in the school community. Though it is an integrated and flexible framework suggested for dysfunctional schools in South Africa, it is flexible enough to be tested in other, international settings or contexts.
with a view to determining its possible global use in schools, implying generalisation from the daily existing practices.

The framework identifies driving forces regarding school improvement. Drawing these catalysts into an integrated managerialist approach – and so into new \textit{episteme} – offers an alternative to silo management with individual objectives living up to the ideals encapsulated in their desire to make a contribution to knowledge. For example, in improving existing culture, the process driven must be objective-based, starting with vision as an idealised future of a school, selecting strategies to achieve goals on the basis of objective evidence about school improvement and measuring results in order to assess their degree of success and provide knowledge required for improving future performance. Principals are required to exercise prior control (before the fact) so that objectives of schools are clearly defined, articulated, observed and met or exceeded.

I consequently suggest that as a first step, and to achieve congruence, it is important for role players to know their own strengths and weaknesses, so that their efforts can complement one another and that they can effectively contribute to schools’ goal attainment through collaborative teamwork. Although this implies an eventual change of culture, role players have to start from where they are, not from where they wish to be some time in the future. As a second step, I highlight the importance of determining role players’ levels of directiveness (that is their attempts to influence control and lead others) and levels of affiliation (meaning their attempts to form close personal interrelationships with others). One way I contribute to scholarship, is that principals may influence directions to assess role players’ directiveness and/or affiliation against the description of the flexible model. The suggested model consists of four relationships: (1) Relators are often thoughtful, helpful, involved, tactful, cooperative, polite, friendly, warm, calm and considerate. They are good at creating and maintaining good relationships with others. (2) Motivators are often creative, quick, sociable, exciting, initiative takers, humorous, enthusiastic, outspoken and open. They are good at enthusing and involving others. (3) Processors are often careful, patient, objective, logical, stable, congruent, practical, methodical, specific, concise, tenacious and thorough. They are good at analysing and structuring complex data and situations. (4) Producers are often goal-oriented, direct, self-assured, demanding, independent, stable, decisive, ambitious and determined. They are good at driving projects and tasks towards measurable goals.

It has emerged from this model that the Department of Education needs to develop a tool for measuring role players’ visible behaviour and level of directiveness, affiliation and effectiveness. For this purpose, role players may draw from one another’s strengths to complement their own weaknesses, thereby creating a sense of synergy amongst participants, with role players serving as driving forces towards efforts to provide knowledge required for collegial culture and continuous improvements.

I argue that distinct teams that work together should collaborate based on their individual strengths in terms of who may create and maintain good relationships, who may enthuse others to participate effectively, and who may analyse complex situations and the driving forces. Clearly, schools require greater central steering capacity and strengthening balance between tasks (managerial and teaching) that are performed. This raised issues about role players’ collegiality to determine levels of directiveness and affiliation. I customised this model grid as a possible tool to measure role players’ visible behaviour and then to infer such behaviour on each person’s level of directiveness, affiliation and effectiveness regarding the implementation of a flexible framework.

6. Conclusion

This article gives an indication that the limited influence of government initiatives regarding the culture of teaching and learning could possibly be ascribed to the challenges posed by constant changes. On the whole, it appeared that these changes were too demanding for principals, teachers, learners and school communities to handle. The role players found it difficult to understand what their schools should be achieving regarding the continuous culture changes. They did not know what they, as individuals, have to do to contribute to the re-establishment of the quality culture with entrepreneurial innovations and ethos such as in the curriculum policy implementation.

Successful culture changes require the formulation of a powerful, shared vision and strategies. Without such efforts to improve, schools may be ineffectual. The vision and strategies must therefore be flexibly integrated in the framework and communicated to all role players in the form of documents (such as letterheads, newsletters, reports
and the business plan). The process is sectorial in the sense that only those sectors that are committed to change may benefit possibilities of new culture change with transformative possibilities, effective and dominant systems of school meanings, values and actions.

References