



Do principal-educators have the ability to transform schools?: A South African perspective

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ABSTRACT

Post-1994 South Africa adopted a new education system that would seemingly break with the past practices of the apartheid education system (Naicker, 1999) and produce citizens prepared for a democratic dispensation in South Africa. Accordingly, the new system of outcomes-based education was introduced in order to create the critical mass needed for the transformation of society. Thus, schools would become the sites where democratic practices for democratic citizenship would be fostered. Government duly promulgated the applicable policy documents (National Education Policy Act of 1996; South African Schools Act of 1996).

Our contention is that, despite the fact that education legislation paved the way for thinking differently about education in South Africa, principal-educators are not necessarily imbued with the ideals/virtues of democratic practices needed to empower them to engage in reflective democratic practices within a school context. We argue that the virtues of democracy must be learned through practising democracy. Many principal-educators, who were principals and educators pre-1994, as well as others, who qualified thereafter, may not have acquired any knowledge of the virtues of democracy, or having done so, may not be practising them. The authorities seem to assume that principal-educators are naturally imbued with the knowledge of the virtues of democracy and are able to put these virtues into practice.

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1. Introduction

The democratic government of South Africa (1994) set out to foster democratic practices within a transformed democratic society by means of a new education system based on the virtues of democracy. Our contention is that, although the government set out to engender democratic practices through the new education system, there seems to have been the assumption that principal-educators were able to establish democratic managerial practices on their own. The term *principal-educator* is a break from the Apartheid dispensation. The concept of “principal” was connected to an authoritative figure and

that is unacceptable in the democratic school system. Today the education system uses the term “educators” and the concept “principal-educator” refers to the educator leading the team. We argue that principal-educators, and all other citizens in South Africa, have had to learn democratic practices. Where were the knowledge and skills to come from if the virtues of democracy were to be inculcated through practice by principals who did not know what they are? Moreover, the position of the principal-educator has traditionally been locked into a paradigm of power that made principals authoritative and hence anti-democratic. First, we provide the background and context of the South African education system. Thereafter, the concept of change with the regard to the instilling of democratic virtues is contextualised. Further, we explore the meaning of democratic citizenship. Finally, we discuss the role of principal-educators with regard to democratic schools practices, and proposed strategies to empower principal-educators to engender democratic practices within the context of the school.

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2. The South African education system: historical background

The first democratic elections in South Africa in April 1994 marked the official end of apartheid in South Africa. According to the

National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) report (1992), education in South Africa had been characterised by large scale inequalities in the provision of services. Racial segregation and inequality persisted in education administration, the provision of schooling, non-formal education and organisation of higher education and training. **Nasson and Samuel** (cited in **Adams, 2008**) validate this statement in their observation that "...secondary school teachers in black schools in 1976 were poorly qualified to take up their positions. A total of 1.7% had a university degree, 10.4% had a grade 12 certificate, 49.3% had two years of secondary schooling and 21% had only completed primary school" (p. 11). **Naicker (1999)** concurs and believes that the advent of the first democratic elections in 1994 in South Africa, caused wide-scale change and transformation throughout the country. The unification of seventeen education departments into a single ministry of education was paramount to this change process. Methodological approaches taught to educators by separate apartheid teacher training institutions had limited peoples' thinking, experiences, belief and underlying values to a particular paradigm (**Naicker, 1999**).

The post-apartheid government had to oversee the process of transformation. The imperative to transform South African society by utilising various transformative tools stems from the need to address the legacy of apartheid in all aspects of human activity and in education in particular (**Alexander, 2004**; **National Department of Education (NDE), 2003**). Furthermore, a resurgence in the government, business, organized labour and providers of education and training emphasized the need for educational imbalances which had been prevalent in the country's rote learning/traditional schooling system to be redressed, and equal educational opportunities to be provided for all citizens (**NDE, 1997**). **Adams (2008)** acknowledges the efforts of the Department of Education in establishing free schools but also reports the numerous challenges to this ideal, claiming that, "Curricula remain underdeveloped and where they were developed, the training of teachers to deliver those curricula is limited or completely lacking. Learner-teacher ratios remain high, libraries are sporadically resourced or completely non-existent, computers are almost never part of education and students are forced to write science examinations without adequate prior access to the necessary technologies" (p. 2) whilst few "township" schools, which are characterised by black learners and black principal-educators are proactive in fostering democratic practices. **Muavia Gallie (2004)**, a representative of the South African Council of Educators (SACE), captures this sentiment aptly in the following words: "Township schools were more democratic than white schools and now we are taking township schools and transforming them into white schools. We are not going to get to democracy like this" (p. 8).

Against the backdrop of the above, it seems that the systemic and related human and physical resource issues affecting the South African education system might be a real challenge to the introduction of democratic virtues to schools.

As noted previously, the South African education system has been characterised by unprecedented change and transformation. We contend that an understanding of the change process in relation to the roles of the principal-educators is needed. Furthermore, we argue that, for the virtues of democracy to be learned, environments conducive to learning need to be established. This calls for principal-educators' critical contextualization of change within their schools.

3. Contextualization of change within the instilment of democratic virtues

The main change with regard to education in South Africa was that seventeen different education departments have been brought under one ministry with the focus on redressing the differences in

resources and access to education; and addressing the needs of curricula, qualification structures, support services and teacher education. The transformation of the education system requires that values, attitudes and perceptions of educators, learners, parents and the community should change (**Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana, 2002**). The **South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996)** introduced democratic change in school communities and granted equal opportunities to all (**Loock, Campher, Du Preez, Grobler, & Shaba, 2003**). The South African Schools Act necessitated a change in the manner in which principal-educators had managed their respective learning environments prior to 1994, especially in black institutions.

Lewin, Samuel, and Sayed (2003) view the role of principal-educators under the apartheid education policy as state functionaries with limited autonomy. The sole requirement of principal-educators was bureaucratic and political compliance with state education. Compliance was ensured through a complex set of instruments, including a system of school and individual inspection and a hierarchy of internal and external controls. Principal-educators were regarded as obedient civil servants who executed the well-defined instructional tasks. In contrast to the view expressed by Lewin, Samuel and Sayed, and **January-Bardill (2001)** argues that the breakdown in the rule of law in some South African schools is not because a "culture of human rights" has eroded discipline as implied by educators, but rather that the decades of illegitimacy and abuse of authority under the apartheid education system have resulted in a culture of entitlement and an attitude of non-compliance with rules and regulations. The challenges in South African schools can be attributed to a lack of legitimacy of the education system as a whole which is characterised by poor management and the collapse of teaching and learning (**Department of Education, 1996**). Our contention is that principal-educators need to be provided with the capacity to manage change in a democratic dispensation. In order to establish democratic virtues, principal-educators have to understand their roles as agents of change.

In their roles as agents of change and leaders of learning within their schools, principal-educators are expected to expand their schools' capacities to learn democratic values by creating learning communities that collaboratively solve problems facing the school. **Shuttleworth (2003)** and **Van Deventer, Kruger, Van der Merwe, and Prinsloo (2003)** state that, as an internal change agent, the school principal is expected to initiate, facilitate and implement change with regard to democratic school practices. Educators, on the other hand, are assets who appreciate in value through knowledge, skills and experience which can be acquired by means of professional development training sessions.

Democratic school governance is part of the moral agenda for a transformed South Africa. A commitment to decentralized, school-based negotiation and stakeholder participation requires a different mindset and set of leadership skills from principal-educators. The challenge at stake is thus for school leaders, such as principal-educators, to re-create schools as learning organisations **Calitz (cited in Calitz, Fuglestad, & Lillejord, 2002)**. The development of collaborative cultures which focus on teaching and learning is needed. This point is demonstrated by **Donahue (cited in Calitz et al., 2002)**, who states that, in many schools, teachers, principals, students and sometimes parents or the community are in conflict. Each group blames the other for the breakdown of the culture of teaching and learning. There is a mutual lack of respect in many schools: principals claim that students and teachers fail to do their jobs; teachers complain that the principal is both incompetent and authoritarian; while students accuse teachers of sexual abuse, harassment, corporal punishment, and of being unprepared and uncaring.

Taking the above into consideration, **Busher (2006)** posits that principal-educators should be actively managing and supporting the implementation of change within their schools and that these

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