

The preparation for principalship in the Mpumalanga Province (South Africa)

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on findings from a qualitative implementation evaluation study on the Advanced Certificate in Education: School Management and Leadership (ACE:SML) 2013-2014 programme presented by the School of Open Learning (SOL) of the University of the Free State for serving and aspiring school leaders in Mpumalanga Province (MP). Utilising Patton's (2002) research guidelines for qualitative implementation evaluation studies, the aim of the study was to investigate how students experience the programme under investigation; the services provided to the students; as well as how the programme was organised. Based on thematic data analysis and evaluative studies on the preparation for principalship in South Africa, findings from this study shed light on factors influencing principals and aspiring principals' decision whether to enrol for the ACE:SML programme. The study found that students' experience of the ACE:SML programme was mostly positive. Their negative experiences may be attributed to factors both inside and outside the direct influence sphere of SOL. The SOL provided well-organised academic, administrative, mentorship and ICT services, as well as network opportunities to all the students.

Keywords: preparation programme; principals; programme evaluation; professional development; school leadership; South Africa

INTRODUCTION

South Africa spends 18.5% of its annual budget on education. Yet, the education system remains in a poor state of affairs (Modisaotsile, 2012). Countless reasons for the failure of schooling in South Africa, among other things ineffective principalship, have been identified (Bush, Joubert, Kiggundu & Van Rooyen, 2010). A reading of the literature (Bush et al., 2010; Jooste & White, 2011) highlights the appalling conditions of education in South Africa in general, and in Mpumalanga Province (MP) in particular. There is, however, recognition that effective leadership and management are important if schools are to be successful in providing sound learning opportunities for learners (Bush, 2009; Bush et al., 2010; Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2011; Naicker & Mestry, 2015). There is, nonetheless, no compulsory and specific qualification requirement for principalship in South Africa (Bush, 2009; Van der Westhuizen & Van Vuuren, 2007). According to Bush and Oduro (2006: 362), principals 'are often appointed on the basis of a successful record as teachers with the implicit assumption that this provides a sufficient starting point for school leadership'. Mathibe (2007: 529) warns that this practice 'places school administration, management, leadership and governance in the hands of "technically" unqualified personnel'. It may therefore be argued that a programme aimed at preparing serving and aspiring school leaders for their task may improve schooling in MP.

The existence of a programme to prepare serving and aspiring principals for their task in MP is however, not a guarantee of the programme's effectiveness. Patton (2002: 160) writes that 'is important to know the extent to which a program is effective after it is fully implemented'. To determine the effectiveness of the Advanced Certificate in Education: School Management and Leadership (ACE:SML) 2013-2014 programme presented by the School of Open Learning (SOL) of the University of the Free State (UFS) for serving and aspiring school leaders in MP, a qualitative implementation evaluation study was undertaken during the second semester of 2014. Utilising Patton's (2002) guidelines for qualitative implementation evaluation studies, the aim of the study is to answer the following research questions regarding the ACE:SML 2013-2014 programme presented by SOL of the UFS in MP: (1) What did students in the programme experience? (2) What services were provided for the students? (3) How was the programme organised?

It is important to note that this study focuses only on the preparation for principalship in MP through the ACE:SML 2013-2014 programme presented by SOL, UFS. This does not mean that this evaluation study does not have broader significance. Patton (2002: 162) aptly writes

that the 'failure to monitor and describe the nature of implementation, case by case, program by program, can render useless standardization, quantitative measures of program outcomes'.

The findings will be linked to the literature on the development of principalship in South Africa.

CONTEXTUALISATION

Principalship is a specialised occupation that requires specific preparation. Prior to the launch of the ACE:SML, there have been numerous fragmented and uncoordinated attempts to prepare new and aspiring principals in South Africa (Mathibe, 2007). To give coherence to the preparations of school principals, the South African Department of Education introduced a threshold qualification for serving and aspiring principals as part of a strategy to improve educational standards. The programme was piloted in six provinces from 2007-2009. The pilot was open to serving principals, as well as deputy principals (DP) and heads of departments (HODs) aspiring to become principals. Since then, the programme has been rolled out to all provinces. Provincial departments of education use a tender process in awarding contracts to different providers (universities) to present the programmes in the different provinces. The SOL (UFS) was, for example, contracted to present the ACE:SML at three centres in the Free State Province and one centre in MP for the 2013-2014 cohort. The ACE:SML is delivered through a common framework agreed upon with the national Department of Education and the National Management and Leadership Committee. The intention is that the programme should be 'different from typical university programmes in being practice-based' (Bush et al., 2011: 32). The ACE:SML programme is still (2016) a voluntary certificate course. It was, however, envisaged at the inception of the programme that it would eventually become a compulsory requirement for all existing and would-be principals (Van der Westhuizen & Van Vuuren, 2007). The education departments did not advertise for new tenders or make bursaries available for new cohorts of students wishing to enrol at the beginning of the 2015 academic year. It is speculated that the education departments have put their financial support for the programme on hold until an Advanced Diploma in Education: School Management and Leadership (ADE:SML), that is under development, can be introduced. Since the inception of the ACE:SML, students have received full bursaries that cover their class fees, and make provision for a subsistence allowance that covers travelling costs, accommodation and food. All expenses of facilitators, administrative staff and mentors are also covered by money made available by the provincial departments of education. The high cost of the ACE:SML programme that may, among other things, be attributed to the subsistence allowance for all students, as well as the remuneration and subsistence allowance for facilitators, administrative

staff and mentors, make it virtually impossible for universities and/or students to carry the costs of the programme. The unavailability of tenders means the (temporary) termination of SOL's ACE:SML programme in MP.

The two-year, part-time modular programme comprises core, optional and foundational modules. The core modules are: Understanding school leadership and management in the South African Context; Managing teaching and learning; Leading and managing people; Managing organisational systems - physical and financial resources; and Managing policy, planning, school development and governance (Department of Basic Education, 2008). The core modules are compulsory for all students. Optional modules are offered at the discretion of the provider. Foundational modules intend to help students with a limited proficiency in English or Information and Communication Technology (ICT) capability. All core, one optional (Mentoring school managers and managing mentoring programmes in schools) and two foundational modules (Language in leadership and management and Leading and managing effective use of ICTs in South African Schools) were offered by SOL to the 2013-2014 MP students. Students also had to complete a portfolio of evidence of their school management and leadership competencies.

All 40 principals or aspiring principals from MP who were enrolled for the ACE:SML presented by SOL in 2013 were presented with laptops which were bought by the university through the Student Laptop initiative. Funding was provided by the MP Department of Education. Contact sessions were organised into block sessions of five days each, four times a year, in either Bloemfontein (where the university is situated) or Ermelo (in MP). The contact sessions were during the school holidays. The students stayed in either school (Ermelo) or university (Bloemfontein) residences during these sessions. As there was no reliable internet access in the areas where most of the students lived, the decision was made not to use an online learning management system, but rather to create the ACE:SML course with all its modules in OneNote. This allowed for offline usage, as well as for online sharing and communication. OneNote was introduced during the first ICT workshop as a program that could be used to take notes in class. When students were shown how to use it offline, they easily adapted to the online version where they could collaborate on documents. This was enforced during the second ICT workshop. Within two contact sessions, students started using their laptops for notetaking in all their ACE:SML modules. Students were also encouraged to utilise free Wi-Fi, available in eateries in the larger towns and if available, at their schools. Some of the students who reside in areas that have internet connectivity, later on entered into contracts with 3G

service providers. Although the latter may have been a (minor) financial burden for these students, it improved their learning experience in general and specifically, in the Leading and managing the effective use of ICTs in South African Schools' module.

Three full-time and one retired academic, a retired HOD with years of experience as an English teacher, as well as a retired school principal acted as facilitators. Two members of SOL's administrative staff (Sandra, the Chief Officer: Professional Services of SOL and Maritsa, an administrative officer at SOL) were always available during the contact sessions to assist in the event of any technical or administrative problem or query. The block sessions in Bloemfontein gave the students the opportunity to work in an environment where there was adequate, high speed Wi-Fi internet access. The visit to the UFS campus was also important as it was possible for a technician to be available to support students with issues, such as viruses on their laptops, forgotten passwords, or hardware-related issues.

METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative implementation evaluation research design to collect, analyse and interpret data. Patton (2002: 161) argues that an important way of studying a programme implementation is 'to gather detailed, descriptive information about what the program is doing'. Using Patton's (2002) guidelines for implementation evaluation studies, qualitative data were gathered from the students during the second semester of their final year of study. Additional information on the programme's organisation was provided by the programme administrators.

This study primarily utilises data originating from the informal interviews with ACE:SML students during the second semester of 2014 (their final year). Self-selection sampling was used. Self-selection sampling is useful when a researcher wants to allow individuals to choose to take part in research on their own accord (Laerd Dissertation, n.d.). All 34 students who were enrolled during the period the data were gathered were invited to take part in the study (cf. Table 1). Eight of the students volunteered to participate in the study (cf. Table 2). The interviews took place at opportune times during the block sessions. Sandra and Maritsa, the two full-time administrators, interviewed the eight volunteers. Sandra and Maritsa were part of the MP project from its inception. There was a relationship of trust between them and the students. The role of a qualitative researcher is usually to collect, analyse and interpret data, and report findings for the purpose of increasing understanding the phenomenon under study (Jack, 2008). This study mainly uses data gathered by Sandra and Maritsa. Sandra and

Maritsa therefore had to switch roles from administrators to researchers, whilst conducting the interviews. This may have resulted in role conflict (Jack, 2008). In line with Jack's (2008) guidelines on how to minimise role conflict, Sandra and Maritsa clearly defined and articulated their roles to the eight participants. Jack (2008) however, warns that if participants' experiences have been negative they may purposefully omit information. With this in mind Sandra and Maritsa assured the participants that their confidentiality would be respected at all times. Participants were told that pseudonyms would be used throughout the study. Participants were also assured that no identifiers, not even pseudonyms, would be used when reporting on their negative experiences with administrators, facilitators or mentors.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher had several conversations and e-mail correspondence with Sandra and Maritsa prior to the interviews to clarify the aim of the project, as well as ethical matters. To gain insight into the programme and the context of some of the data, the researcher had numerous conversations and e-mail correspondence with Sandra whenever she needed clarification.

Tables 1 and 2 give summaries of the students who enrolled and completed the ACE:SML in MP and the eight students (hereafter referred to as 'participants'), who participated in the study, respectively.

Table 1:

Demographic details of the students for the ACE:SML (2013-2014)

Post level	Enrolled (n=40) (2013)		Completed the programme (n=34) (2014)	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Principal (P)	19	47.5	13	38.2
Deputy principal (DP)	5	12.5	5	14.7
District supervisor	1	2.5	1	2.9
Head of Department (HOD)	14	35.0	13	38.2
Post level 1 teacher	1	2.5	2	5.9

Table 2:

Demographic details of participants

Name	Gender	Age	Home language	Post level	Years teaching experience
Ayana	Female	45	SiSwati	DP	18
Thabo	Male	56	Northern Sotho	Principal	31
Fabio	Male	49	SiSwati	HOD	24
Salomae	Male	42	SiSwati	DP	19
Bheki	Male	49	SiSwati	Principal	23
Mafa	Male	50	Shangaan	DP	25
Nathaniel	Male	29	SiSwati	HOD	6
Fran	Female	49	SiSwati	HOD	24

The research was conducted with the consent and support of the Dean of SOL, UFS. The participants' dignity, privacy and interest were respected at all times. Pseudonyms were used. Before conducting the interviews the participants were informed that the process was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage during the process.

The data analysis used a thematic approach to identify the main themes of this study (Nieuwenhuis, 2007) that assisted the researcher in comparing the core findings with the literature on the preparation for principalship.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis and evaluative studies on the preparation for principalship in South Africa (Bush, 2009; Bush et al., 2010; Bush et al., 2011), the following main themes were identified in the study:

1. Factors influencing principals and aspiring principals' decision whether to enrol for the ACE:SML programme;
2. Students' understanding of the impact of the programme on students' professional and private lives;
3. Students' thoughts on the learning facilitators and administrative staff;
4. Mentoring as a distinct feature of the programme;
5. Networking; and
6. Lack of support as a stumbling block for students' success.

Factors influencing principals and aspiring principals' decision whether to enrol for the ACE:SML programme

The ACE:SML is a voluntary programme for principals and aspiring principals. Prospective students' applications are submitted to and accepted/rejected by the different provinces' Departments of Education in line with universities' entrance requirements. Despite the voluntary character of the programme, education departments more often than not receive more applications than they can accommodate (Department of Basic Education, 2008). Some of the reasons why principals and aspiring enrolled for the ACE:SML 2013-14 programme became clear during the interviews.

Three of the participants said that they applied for inclusion in the programme because they realised the need to expand and update their professional knowledge. Salomae noted that although he already holds an ACE:SML qualification (obtained from another university), his hunger to expand his professional knowledge resulted in his registering for the ACE:SML presented by SOL. Bheki said I thought of getting another qualification ... My qualification was a B.Ed. Honours. That gave me some idea about how to run a school, but things change.

Mafa enrolled for the programme because

I always wanted to act in a professional manner. So I was expecting to learn a lot of professionalism [and] ... give quality to the people I am working with.

Ayana, a DP, on the other hand, said that she was going to use the ACE:SML qualification for career advancement:

I really want to move and grow, especially with the knowledge that I have gained with the ACE School Leadership. I wish I could be given the opportunity of getting my own institution; I am going to do things in the manner in which we are taught.

In motivating why the ACE:SML programme is important, Fabio moved beyond his own professional growth and aspirations, and looked at the problems regarding education in South Africa:

The reason why many schools are collapsing is that of a lack of leadership. I think that principals need to be taken on board with this course. If it could be compulsory for them it would be good [laughs].

In their motivation for studying, participants alluded to the potentiality of the ACE:SML programme in providing opportunities for professional growth that could lead to the professionalisation of principalship, the enhancement of career-opportunities, and the improvement of schooling in South African. The enhancement of principals' professional knowledge is advocated by many researchers (Bush, 2009; Bush et al., 2010; Bush et al., 2011; Mathibe, 2007; Naicker & Mestry, 2015).

The blended mode of delivery, which requires the students to attend classes for eight weeks over a period of two years and communicate with and use ICT, intellectual prowess as required for a Level 7 National Qualification Framework qualification, numerous assignments and onsite evaluation (by a mentor), may have prevented many potential students from enrolling for the ACE:SML (Msila, 2011; Naicker & Mestry, 2015), despite suggestions that a formal qualification may become a prerequisite for principalship in South Africa. Msila (2011: 435) found, for example, that some principals or potential principals do not enrol due to an 'unmanageable' workload. The current study also revealed that participants often found it difficult to stick to cut-off dates for assignments, due to their dual responsibilities as students and education leaders and the high standards set by the programme. Fabio made reference to the

...difficulty of the assignments that we are doing – they are really challenging.

This study additionally found that a lack of interest may be a reason why potential students do not enrol. According to Nathaniel, none of the other staff members were interested in attending the course:

We had a meeting with the principal and he could not attend the course so he asked who was willing. The deputies were not interested.

Students' understanding of the possible impact of the programme on their professional and private lives

Six of the participants emphasised the role the programme played in confidence building. Ayana said for example

I am applying to be principal without any fears or doubts.

Participants used phrases, such as 'really empowering' (Thabo) and 'I feel so positive [and] I will be able to apply the skills that I have learnt [when appointed as a principal]' (Fabio) when describing their newfound confidence. Mafa gave reasons for his growth in confidence:

If you know something, it builds confidence obviously, because you know what you are saying is right. If you can distinguish between right and wrong it builds confidence.

Nathaniel mentioned that the programme gave him the confidence to articulate new ideas in front of colleagues.

Three of the participants mentioned that the programme led them to acknowledge the impact of community factors on teaching and learning. Salomae said he came to realise that not all schools are the same, and that

...you can bring an idea from somewhere, but you must learn to contextualise it.

The importance for education leaders to acknowledge the unique circumstances in which they must lead, is also highlighted by Jooste and White (2011) and Mathibe (2007). Jooste and White (2011) find that MP schools struggle with problems common to most rural schools in South Africa, such as the inadequate provision of study material and teachers not being prepared sufficiently for curriculum changes. MP schools however, also experience localised problems which often relate to traditional and cultural aspects, such as a lack of respect for female school leaders in a predominantly male chauvinist society, together with a decline of discipline among learners and educators due to the erosion of traditional values (Jooste & White, 2011).

The ACE:SML brought about change in the way Bheki sees his role as leader:

There was a time when we thought to run a school you leave curriculum monitoring to the deputies and HODs, but it is not that effective. It is effective if you, yourself do it. So I got involved.

Bheki's original assumption, namely that teaching and learning is the responsibility mainly of middle managers is in accord with existing practices (cf. Bush et al., 2010; Taole, 2013). Taole (2013: 75) writes that not all principals are knowledgeable about curriculum content and development in South Africa 'especially in schools where principals do little or no teaching themselves'. Bush et al. (2010: 165) argue that 'the closer leaders are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to make a difference to students'. Bheki's insight that principals should become instructional leaders is in accord with the research (Bush et al., 2010; Mathibe, 2007; Taole, 2013).

A distinct feature of the MP programme presented by SOL is that all students were given laptops. Using a hands-on approach, the ICT facilitator taught the students how to use a computer, and to utilise social media to communicate with her and fellow students. Through innovation and flexibility she tried to accommodate the students' different ICT competency levels. Six of the eight participants mentioned the positive impact of the ICT module on their personal (e.g. being able to communicate with family and friends and do internet banking) and professional (e.g. PowerPoint presentations, budgeting and communicate with colleagues and departmental officials) lives. In his reflection on the different modules, Bheki highlighted the empowering impact of the ICT module on him as a leader. As a result of his new insights into the uses of ICT, he advocated the use of ICT in his school. Bheki embraced his role of ICT leader at his school. Afshari, Bakar, Luan, Samah and Fooi (2009) argue that the leadership role of the principal is the single most important factor affecting the successful integration of technology in schools.

Four of the participants alluded to the fact that the programme enhanced their ability to analyse current management practices and act as agents of change. Fabio made the following comments:

I will be a wonderful principal, because I can see where we are missing the point and what mistakes we are making as managers of the school.

Bheki moreover mentioned that he now realises the importance of motivating his staff. Salomae believes the programme motivated him to be more organised. Participants also made mention of better time- management; insights into how to handle stress; the ability to work with others as a team (mentees working together); and how to interpret education policy (specifically with regard to budgeting and school discipline).

This evaluative study highlights the participants' positive experiences: they grew in confidence and gained new insight into their multiple roles as curriculum, instructional, ICT and community leaders, school managers, and agents of change. Their new insights moved beyond their professional development: the participants acknowledged the impact of community factors on education and gave credit to the empowering influence of the ACE:SML on their personal lives. Findings from this study on the positive influence of the ACE:SML on participants, is in line with findings from a study conducted among ACE:SML- alumni (Bush et al., 2009), a longitude study (Bush et al., 2011), as well as an evaluative study on the ACE:SML programme presented by the University of Pretoria (Aluko, 2009). The Bush et al. (2011) study reveals that the programme enhances alumni's confidence as educators and leaders, improves their financial management and budgeting, as well as ICT and instructional leadership skills. Statistics however, reveal that schools led by ACE:SML alumni who participated in their study had differentiating success when comparing matric results over a five-year period (2006-2010). Bush et al. (2011: xiv) nonetheless conclude that 'training school principals leads to school improvement in the majority of cases, for the benefit of learners and the South African education system'.

Students' thoughts on the learning facilitators and administrative staff

An analysis of the data highlighted the importance of the University using knowledgeable and committed people to act as facilitators. Mafa praised an associate professor for setting high standards:

Prof. R set a standard of 'if you want to pass this course then this is what you need to do; you need to work very, very hard'. It elevated me; it took me up to the next level.

Salomae acclaimed the hands-on approach followed in the ICT module, as well as the insightful way the facilitator responsible for the financial management module unpacked the

content of the module. According to Salomae, this attests to the two facilitators' profound knowledge of their subjects.

It should be noted that not all participants were unanimous in their praise for the facilitators. One of the male participants said that

most of the lecturers are presenting their modules well. The ... module was the only disappointment.

Whilst this participant gave no reason for his critique against the specific facilitator, it seems from his colleague's interview that this facilitator lacked in-depth knowledge:

It was a general presentation ... he was speaking in general about what we were going to do ... when you get the assignment you realise he did not cover everything you needed to know.

Mafa highlighted the importance of good administrative support for students. He told Sandra

Just keep up with the hard work that you are doing ... the energy that you show as administrators; the love of the work.

The participants suggested that experienced, knowledgeable facilitators and administrative staff are essential for the effective delivery of the ACE:SML programme. Whilst it seems as if all the facilitators and administrators have good credentials (cf. Contextualisation), two of the participants alluded to shortcomings regarding one of the facilitators. This suggests a flaw in the quality of service provided.

Although most of the participants commended the work ethic and knowledge of the facilitators, and hailed the work done by administrative staff, it should be noted that 'satisfaction' is not necessarily related to effective learning. Aluko (2009) argues that it is sometimes necessary for students to move outside their comfort zone for deep learning to occur.

Mentoring as a distinct feature of the programme

Mentoring is a 'distinct and central feature' of the ACE:SML programme (Bush et al., 2011: 35). According to Sandra, the Chief Officer: Professional Services of SOL and one of the interviewers, the mentors are 'the top retired principals from very large secondary schools in Mpumalanga'. Some of them were previously employed as mentors by another university (this university's contract to present ACE:SML in MP was terminated at the end of 2011) and others were recommended to Sandra by serving principals. Her point of departure in selecting mentors was that 'if a person was able to lead a large secondary school successfully, he/she will be able to mentor new or aspiring principals'. Ten students were assigned to one mentor for the duration of the programme. It was decided by SOL that the mentors would mentor their mentees for a year after they had completed their studies. The reason for extending the mentoring programme to three years was to give additional support to the mentees. A two-stage model, i.e. group facilitation and individual on-site support, was used. The mentors sat in during the contact sessions, took part in class discussions, met with their mentees for 45-60 minutes after the classes to clarify any uncertainties that might have arisen, helped with the completion of school-based assignments, undertook school visitations four times a year and were in constant telephone and e-mail contact with their mentees. According to Sandra, it was 'wonderful' to witness the respectful manner with which mentors and mentees treated one another. Sandra said that numerous students told her that the key to their success was the continuous support and motivation of their mentors.

From the interviews it became clear that the mentors supported the mentees with their studies; were readily available; acted as links between mentees and their colleagues, as well as between fellow-mentees; helped them apply theory to practice; and even supported them emotionally. During the interviews mention was made of the important role mentors played in participants' academic success. Ayana said:

...mentors remind you of things that you might have missed in the contact sessions ...
Their presence during the contact sessions is of importance, because we are not on our own with the lecturers.

Mafa furthermore said:

We need them to help and guide us. There is a lot we learn from them.

The fact their mentors were readily available and willing to help them, were cited by several mentees in their praise for their mentors. Ayana said that

Even if you are far away, he will come to you and assist you.

Fabio mentioned that

When you call him he will respond immediately. You ask for support, he will immediately help you ... within ten minutes he could give me a response.

The mentors moreover, acted as a link between the educator-as-student and his/her colleagues during their onsite visits. Ayana said that

Some mentors go the extra mile and interview other staff members about how the school is doing.

Several participants mentioned that they often feel lonely and isolated (living and working in remote rural villages), but acknowledged that their mentors acted as a link between mentees. Mentors' empathy with and understanding of mentees' unique personal and professional circumstances seem to be important to the participants' success. Fabio said his mentor:

...is always positive when he talks to us ...He does not put unnecessary pressure on us.

Thabo, on the other hand, is in favour of a mentor pushing him to go the extra mile:

He can push you. He is good. It is actually surprising to get that support and to be pushed in the right direction. I appreciate that.

Salomae hailed his mentor's empathetic, insightful demeanour:

There are sometimes situations where you just feel you've lost your morale. But the mentor will come and make you feel that all is not lost.

Only one of the eight participants had something negative to say about the mentors:

He usually visits us after the assignments are done, so for me that is not good. He should visit us before the assignments are sent in so that we can go through them and make some corrections. But he comes after, so what is there to discuss because my assignment is already in.

This study highlights how important it was for the providers of the ACE:SML MP programme to appoint experienced, knowledgeable and empathetic mentors who were willing to support their mentees in a respectful, professional manner. Participants' praise for the mentorship programme is reassuring, since Bush et al. (2011) believe that the success of the ACE:SML programme largely depends on the mentoring practices of the mentors.

Networking

Networking, 'a central component' of the ACE:SML programme (Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2012: 216), is 'a powerful leadership development process' (Bush et al., 2011: 36). Although no formal networking structures were put in place by SOL for the 2013-2014 ACE:SML MP students, ample informal networking opportunities were created for the students during tea and lunch breaks. According to Sandra, students, mentors and administrative staff mingled freely during these breaks. Sandra said it was not uncommon to find students in deep conversations about experiences at their respective schools or with their assignments. Their common abode and the seven-hour bus trip between Ermelo and Bloemfontein also created network opportunities. Networking also occurred during meetings with mentors. The importance of these network opportunities was recognised by four of the participants who mentioned that interaction with fellow students was especially important in learning about management problems and how to address them. Salomae was very positive about the group activities; he revealed that he often learnt more through the interactions with fellow students than from his facilitators. Nathaniel likewise said:

Since I went to Ermelo, I met other people from other villages and I learnt a lot from them.

The importance of interaction with fellow students, as highlighted by the participants, is supported by research on networking as a resource for collaborative learning (Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2012). These two researchers are guardedly optimistic that some of the networks created during face-to-face contact sessions may continue (with the use of technology) after

the completion of the students' studies. They however, acknowledge that the main aim of networking is often to receive support towards the completion of assignments (Bush et al., 2011 for similar findings).

The lack of support as a stumbling block for students' success

The aim of the ACE:SML programme is not only to improve the management and leadership skills of principals, but to train future leaders. Whilst some of the participants who were not principals were given the opportunity by their principals to complete the school-based assignments and implement their newly found knowledge, others found it extremely difficult. Whereas Nathaniel enjoyed the support of the principal and members of staff in the implementation of a new discipline strategy, three of the other participants said they experienced negativity, which may be the result of jealousy, from colleagues and the principal. Fabio talked at length about the lack of support he received from colleagues:

I am a HOD and I don't have any authority in decision making; my role can only be advisory... I drafted policies and submitted them to my principal and I could see that he was very uncomfortable... I don't get support... I only managed to do the vegetable garden, but the other things... it's really difficult to get support.

A lack of support for aspiring education leaders who are furthering their careers through studies by serving principals and colleagues is not uncommon (Bush et al., 2009: viii). Naicker and Mestry (2015: 8) find that the implementation phase of development programmes for principals will influence 'whether the change is ultimately successful or not'. It is therefore essential that ACE:SML students get the opportunity to implement what they have learnt in school settings. Bush et al. (2011: 41) recommend that ACE:SML students who are linked to a school where they get little or no support should be moved to other schools 'where they can receive appropriate support'.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Findings from this study should be read against the background of the following limitations: (1) The study relied exclusively on self-reported evidence from students and administrative staff. According to Bush (2009: 384) this is a weak approach 'because it is not subjected to corroboration... it is inevitably subjective'. (2) The interviews were conducted near the conclusion of the participants' studies. The possible impact of the programme takes time. It is

unlikely that noteworthy changes in leadership practices will have occurred during the training period (Aluko, 2009; Bush, 2009).

CONCLUSION

This paper reports on findings of a qualitative implementation evaluation study into an ACE:SML programme presented by a South African university during 2013-2014 in MP. A number of factors, such as the existing and aspiring principals' desire to expand their professional knowledge, uplift the collapsing education system and career aspirations, motivated students to enrol for the programme. High academic standards, a heavy workload and a lack of interest however, prevented potential students from enrolling. Students' experiences of the ACE:SML programme were mostly positive: The programme had a positive impact on students' self-confidence, time-management skills, ability to work in groups, interpret policy, act as instructional and ICT leaders, and their understanding of the uniqueness of each school. Participants attributed negative experiences to factors both inside (unprepared or unknowledgeable facilitators) and outside (uncooperative colleagues) the direct influence sphere of the university. The study highlighted the role of knowledge and level of commitment by academics, administrators and mentors on students' satisfaction. The SOL provided well-organised academic, administrative, mentorship and ICT services, as well as network, career advancement and intellectual growth opportunities to all the students. The study also highlighted the fact that the financial burden for this rather expensive programme rested largely on the shoulders of the MP Department of Education. The Department was responsible for all costs incurred by students, including university fees and the laptops, as well the ad hoc costs of facilitators, mentors and administrative staff. Even though the ACE:SML programme under investigation provided ample informal networking opportunities, it is recommended that formal networking structures and additional support for students who lack support from their principals whilst studying, be considered for all future programmes. Ideally the ACE:SML programme should be used as platform for continuing collaborative capacity building among ACE:SML alumni after the conclusion of the mentorship programme.

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