Lack of support within the South African education system augments challenges principals experience

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ABSTRACT

Principals as crucial change agents are required to ensure that education changes are successfully implemented, and that school improvement takes place. This paper focuses on the challenges that principals experience regarding aspects within the education system. The qualitative approach and phenomenological design were utilized, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposely selected participants (13 principals). As national department, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa is strategically structured to service and support all the entities within the education system. The DBE places enormous pressure on principals to ensure that academic standards are met, quality teaching and learning takes place and that continuous education changes are implemented successfully. The importance of the education districts and Circuit Managers within the DBE to give continuous and relevant support is accentuated. This paper emphasizes that the challenges mentioned by the participants are ironically associated with aspects within the education system – the system that is supposed to support principals. Recommendations are made to the DBE to implement relevant strategies and planning through education districts and Circuit Managers to improve the indispensable support to principals.

Introduction

The continuous transformation in education globally and perpetual changes in the South African education landscape have had an impact on many facets of the organizational structure of education, leadership and education provision to schools (Naiker & Mestry, 2015). Globally education systems experience rapid changes that have to be implemented and place enormous pressure on stakeholders within education systems to ensure continuous quality education (Howard et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic is such an example that forced principals to implement unprecedented education changes, that most principals were not prepared for and where dependant on support from Circuit Managers (CMs). McDonald (2020) affirms that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the underbelly of many education systems and illustrates that the most education systems are not geared to deal with unforeseen education changes. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the already existing challenges in education as well as intensify the challenges that principals experience during education change (eNCA, 2020; Gabster et al., 2020). Principals that experience challenges are not restricted only to South Africa, principals worldwide encounter education change and challenges they must deal with on a daily basis (Alsharija & Watters, 2020; Tamadoni et al., 2021; Tintor´e et al., 2022).

Principals must be supported through continuously providing relevant training, mentoring and development to deal with education change (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; Myende et al., 2020). Unfortunately principals do not receive sufficient and effective support as additional workload and expectations are escalating (Bantwini and Moorosi, 2018a). Studies by Myende et al. (2020) and Zulu et al. (2021) have found that poor learner achievement is associated with challenging contexts in deprived communities where effective and sustainable district support is often lacking. Literature reveals that support programmes implemented to train or support district
Significant lessons must be learnt from the challenges that principals experience as it can contribute to establishing action plans or strategies for much needed changes that would increase support from the districts and CMs within the education department. Answering the following research question ‘what are the challenges perceived by principals when dealing with education change?’ gave valuable insight to make suggestions to the Department of Education, as without the relevant and prompt support to principals, no reform will be implemented effectively and be sustainable.

This paper gives an overview on relevant literature regarding important aspects pertinent to principal support within the education system. Focus is placed on the theoretical and empirical features that underpinned the research as well as providing the reader some perspective regarding the choice of research design and methodology. After the results are discussed, the paper concludes with recommendations to the departments within the education system to apply relevant action plans and strategies.

**Literature review**

This section gives the theoretical and empirical background that formed the basis for the study.

**Theoretical Review**

In this study, Deming’s organisational change theory (1993) and Fullan’s theory of action (2006) were the theoretical foundations for the study. Deming’s approach to organisational change was adopted in this study to understand the relationships between people and the elements within an organisation, and to what extent knowledge and thinking should be used to bring about change. Deming (1993, 2018a) focusses on the need for the system where all the parts within the system function effectively. Deming regarded the whole organisation as an operating system – a system wherein leadership is enabled to view the organisation from a systems perspective (Deming, 1993). The system provides a way of finding out what is going on in the organisation so that the goal is on productivity (Padro, 2009). It is imperative that every person in the organisation knows what he or she is doing and understand why he or she is doing it (Deming, 2018b). This entails that the organisational structure, mission and vision have to be realigned to implement effective change. Competition within the organisation is not permitted as the focus is on improving the way the organisation works and not act as isolated entities perceiving their own goals and agendas. The obstacles that obstruct working in silos from performing well are eliminated, and teamwork is promoted (Deming, 2018a), including the avoidance of conflicting instructions or unclear information.

Fullan’s (2006) theory of action is based on seven core premises. The first premise is built on collective and individual motivation over time within the organisation. The next premise focusses on capacity building where the emphasis is on achieving results. Fullan accentuate that each organisation has their specific contexts wherein they must optimally function, therefor learning in context is essential. Changing context is an important premise where capacity building is essential, and organisations learn from each other. The next premise concentrates on reflective action and that organisations need to reflect on various aspects to ensure ownership of everyone. Fullan points out the importance of tri-level engagement, the school and community, district and provinces need to interact at such a level that all stakeholders have a mutual understanding and interaction. The last premises requires persistence and flexibility to stay on course and push through the challenges. Fullan’s (2006) theory of action accentuate the importance of deep-thinking regarding strategies that would lead to change within an organization.

**Empirical Review**

There is an outcry from principals to receive appropriate support to be prepared, mentored, trained and developed and enable them to deal with education change (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; Myende et al., 2020; Zulu et al., 2021). The problem is that education districts and CMs unfortunately do not provide prompt initiatives or opportunities on relevant issues for principals to be developed that would empower them to deal with the challenging context in which they find themselves (Hussain & Al Abri, 2015). The challenges that principals experience have been well documented and various research initiatives accentuate the increase and intensity of certain challenges (Fullan, 2014; Tintoré et al., 2022). Expectations from Department of Education have increased drastically (Kaul et al., 2021; Mestry, 2017; Zulu et al., 2021). These expectations and continuous changes have the potential to intensify the challenges principal experience and encumber school improvement.

**Education changes within the education system**

Continuous change is not a new phenomenon in education (McLennan et al., 2018; Naicker & Mestry, 2016). Deming (2018b, p. 117) describes change as ‘a deliberate effort to alter the status quo by influencing or modifying the functions, structure, technology and purpose of an organization’. The efforts taken to adjust to these new ideas or to meet such needs can be categorised as education change. The aim of education change is to make improvements in the education system, escalating the provision of teaching and learning to all learners and to enhance the performance of schools within the education system (Hargreaves et al., 2014). Education changes within the education system have had an enormous impact on principals towards ensuring effective teaching and learning (Gabster et al., 2020; Will, 2021). Fullan (2007) points out that change initiatives are most likely to fail due to the absence of dedicated and sustained support within the education system.
Education system in South Africa

The education system has gone through numerous reform processes to rectify the injustices of the apartheid regime and to provide an education system that is just, equal and caters for all citizens of the country (Ajam & Fourie, 2016; Hussain & Al Abri, 2015). In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) governs basic education and provides education from the pre-primary (Grade R to the foundation phase) through secondary school (Grade 12 to the Further Education and Training (FET) phase). The DBE is responsible for close to 26 000 primary and secondary schools in South Africa (Department of Basic Education, 2020). Under the jurisdiction of the DBE, the Provincial Education Department (PEDs), education districts and circuit offices are mandated to provide schools with quality support and services. The DBE is divided into nine PEDs and 86 education districts in South Africa. These districts are the pillars for implementing policies and legislation, changes in schools and ensure that principals receive required support via the CMs (Department of Basic Education, 2013). However Ngozo and Mtantato (2018) mention that the basic education system is failing not only the economy but also education. South Africa is ranked 126th out of 138 countries regarding the quality of its education, although South Africa spends more money on education than countries with a similar state of development (Ngozo & Mtantato, 2018). They add that South Africa has the worst education system of all middle-income countries and that there are far too many schools that are underperforming despite the government’s funding allocation to support previously disadvantaged schools.

Challenges within the education system

The South African education landscape has a combination of first- and third-world schools and education institutions (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015). Myende et al. (2020) add that some schools in South Africa are dysfunctional, lacking effective provision of education for all learners. Discrepancies between previously disadvantaged schools (township, rural and farm schools) and advantaged or former Model C schools remain evident (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016; Myende et al., 2020). Continuous transformation in South Africa and perpetual changes in education have had an impact on many facets of organizational structures in education, leadership and education provision to schools (Naiker & Mestry, 2015). Furthermore, the fact that South Africa suffers from long-standing major school infrastructure backlogs because of the apartheid system is still evident, especially in poor and rural communities (Bhengu & Myende, 2016; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). Additional strain is put on the already restricted resources and is a contributing factor to the radical changes in the education system, thereby broadening the socio-economic gap between the poor and the rest of the citizens (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; Myende et al., 2020; Ncwane, 2019). Some schools are still struggling with inadequate resources due to corruption and the mismanagement of governmental funds (Hochschild, 2021; McDonald, 2020; Ncwane, 2019).

School principal

A school principal holds the highest authority within the basic education institution or school system in South Africa (Department of Basic Education, 2015). The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 defines principal as ‘an educator appointed or acting as the head of a school’ (Republic of South Africa, 1996, p. 4). The principal is accountable for administrative and strategic planning, curriculum implementation and is responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations in a school (Lynch, 2012). In the South African basic education context, the principal reports directly to the CM and the district office, which is under the jurisdiction of the PED (Department of Basic Education, 2013). In working with the School Governing Body (SGB) and school management team (SMT), the principal’s main responsibilities are to ensure that quality teaching and learning in the school are attained and to improve the overall performance of the school (Department of Basic Education, 2016).

Support from education districts and circuit managers

According to Merriam-webster (2016) support means ‘to keep from weakening or failing, to give confidence or comfort’. District offices are seen as vital institutional actors in education reform (Department of Basic Education, 2020). Districts are key elements and authorised agents in education change and are there to assist and support school principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their institutions through district interventions (Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). The principals do not only rely on education districts for essential support but also the CM. A CM is the head of a circuit office and executes prescribed functions to especially support principals (Department of Basic Education, 2013). The significance of the CM in supporting principals is central to driving educational reforms and achieving greater educational quality in the transformation change in the South African (Department of Basic Education, 2016; Ndlouv, 2018). The most critical aspects that fall under the role and responsibilities of CMs is the fact that they need to be experts, competent and skilled in education leadership and management to effectively support principals (Myende et al., 2020; Ndlouv, 2018). Howard et al. (2019) emphasize that the success and quality of any implementation process and change requires the district and CMs to be committed, knowledgeable, supporting and understanding of the contextual factors.

It is well documented that the support and guidance received from districts and CMs have been in most districts limited or nonexistent and has become alarmingly negative, with some principals even contemplating resignation (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; Kaul et al., 2021; Myende et al., 2020). Bantwini and Moorosi (2018a) accentuate that CMs are viewed as the weakest link in the district leadership chain, with principals seeing them as glorified administrators or compliance officers. The findings of various studies show that CMs do not provide principals and schools with sufficient support (Alsharija & Watters, 2021; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018a; Kaul et al., 2021). Not all CMs are capacitated to effectively implement the required education changes and deal with principals who show resistance to mandatory changes (Du Plessis, 2017; Myende et al., 2020; Zulu et al., 2021). Fullan (2009) states
that continuous support is critical and that there should be less focus on compliance but rather on sustainable support until people have adjusted to the new norm of change.

**Research and Methodology**

The qualitative research design was ideally suited for this study, positioned within the interpretivist paradigm. The phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to explore the principal’s lived experiences, perspectives and understanding to provide a comprehensive and truthful description of the research phenomenon in a natural setting (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). The sample of this study consisted of 13 principals from two districts that form part of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) in Gauteng. The number of participants for this research was viewed as being sufficient, as it was based on data saturation. Information-rich participants were purposively selected based on their experience and knowledge regarding challenges and support within the education system. The participants had at least five years’ experience as a principal and were willing to participate in the study. The principals of these schools represented farm, rural, township, semi-urban and urban schools. Independent district officials recruited principals to be participants in the research.

In the semi-structured interviews, an interview schedule was used with open-ended questions to generate data from the principals. This data collection method gave the researchers the opportunity to explore in-depth the challenges that principal’s experience and follow-up question were asked to clarify specific answers, eliminate any misinterpretations, and obtain rich data (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). The chosen method of data analysis for this study was through an inductive process. Four steps were followed during the content data analysis, namely the preparation, coding, categorisation and interpretation of the transcribed text (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). ATLAS.ita data analysis application was applied to systematically work through the data creating specific categories. The data was however coded manually by following the required coding rules (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Trustworthiness of this qualitative study was attained by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Numerous ethical aspects were considered and executed before and during the study. Permission was granted to commence the study by the director of the GDE, SGB and ethical clearance was obtained to conduct the research from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the North-West University. Principals as participants signed the consent forms and their anonymity and confidentiality were assured. The interviews had to take place during COVID-19 pandemic and the COVID-19 protocols were strictly adhered to.

**Results and Discussions**

The research question regarding the challenges that principals encounter when dealing with education change guided the researchers in the data analysis process. Various categories emerged from the identified codes of the transcribed text. The following challenges that occurred from the participants experiences were primarily associated with education districts and Circuit Managers within the South African basic education system.

**Communication and feedback from within the education system**

Principals mentioned that clear communication and direction from circuit and district offices, provincial and national education structures especially during education change was of grave concern to them. Myende et al. (2020) and Ndlovu (2018) confirm that communication between districts and schools is a major concern, as there are many mixed and unclear messages from districts and PEDs that principals must contend with. Most of the participants found the communication in the district structures to be poor and revealed that communication was often unclear.

*There is no real communication on the how and what must be reported on. It’s frustrating and waste of my time (P2).*

You will see principals not having the same level of motivation because we are operating from different levels of information and misinformation. And that creates a downward spiral for all of us. Uncertainty gets to be cascaded to the people who are leading schools. That's when we find schools become paralyzed to say, what direction are we taking? (P10).

Another aspect that the principals identified regarding communication was the lack of feedback and in most scenarios the feedback they received were after they had to submit information to the district or implement the required changes.

*I have been reporting this issue for the past 3 years and I have received no feedback from the DBE (P12).*

*I think we need to get feedback when we need it, because when you escalate a problem, you must sit with an understanding that it will be addressed but if there’s nothing coming your way, then that becomes a huge challenge (P13).*

From the above responses, it is clear that effective communication is lacking in the district structure, which negatively impacts on the required support to principals and the quality of education. This resonates with findings by various scholars (Myende et al., 2020; Ndlovu, 2018). Principals evidently point out that effective communication and prompt feedback is crucial from the district to enable them to ensure effective leadership. The responses also highlight the need for CMs to establish communication strategies between the district and principals to ensure that messages are clear of any misinterpretations and that information can be coordinated effectively between the district and schools.
Workload and administrative duties

All the participants found the workload as principal overwhelming, and they revealed that their workload had increased drastically over the past decade. Principals experience difficulty in adapting to additional workload and escalated expectations that impacts negatively on their role as leader (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Heystek, 2016). Participants referred to their overwhelming workload as follows:

After ten years of being a principal, I still find myself being overwhelmed, especially when there are certain things that are expected from me or the school which is out of my control or things that cannot really be managed (P4).

Your role and responsibilities as a principal are overwhelming (P2).

All the participants indicated that most of their time was on administrative duties and that is one of the major challenges they have. The administrative workload of principals in the education system is a serious concern that needs to be addressed (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b). Most of the participants responded that their administrative duties took most of their time and they find it difficult to attend to important school matters that need their urgent attention.

Administrative duties are ridiculous. Sometimes, more than often, I will sit till late at night just to submit what is needed to be submitted to district, provincial or sometimes even to the national department (P6).

It is a real problem that we are bombarded with work at times, it's very difficult for us (P13).

The administrative duties or responsibilities takes so much of my time that I can hardly take a bathroom break (P9).

The administrative duties of the principals are an overwhelming burden to the principals and many of the documents and reports that they need to submit are duplications to districts, PED and the DBE. The time that principals spend on ensuring that the documents are correctly completed and submitted timeously, restrict them to ultimately fulfil their actual role and responsibilities as the principal of the school.

Lack of resources

The absence in required resources for schools make it problematic for principals to deal effectively with required change (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Hussain & Al Abri, 2015; Naicker & Mestry, 2016). Many schools especially in deprived areas across South Africa do not have the necessary resources (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; Myende et al., 2020). Most of the participants mentioned the lack of resources.

Shortage of funding for projects, maintenance and acquiring additional infrastructure is always a challenge (P2).

Many schools do not have sufficient classrooms or no classroom at all (P7).

Staff room is dilapidated and leaking when it rains. Those are factors that will hamper your effectiveness as principal at school. Because, when it rains your focus is on things like that and not on your actual job (P13).

All the participants perceived the lack of funding available to appoint the required number of teachers as a challenge.

I must appoint teachers on SGB contracts, even though I have permanent positions available. My learner numbers increase, and the district just says there is no money (P10).

Shortage of teachers. Teachers are often forced to teach subjects that they are not qualified in (P3).

One participant clearly indicated that the absence of resources has an impact on providing quality education necessary for academic performance.

I need more teachers, classrooms and curriculum resources. My school is growing in numbers, and I cannot provide quality education if I do not have the resources (P11).

From the above responses, it is evident that resources are a central concern, and principals need urgent support from the DBE. The lack of these resources put pressure on the principal to reach their academic targets as set out by the stakeholders in the districts and DBE. This echoes the findings of many scholars (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Hussain & Al Abri, 2015; Naicker & Mestry, 2016). It also is in line with Moloi (2014) view that it is shocking that more than 20 years after democracy, there are still so many schools without the necessary resources or teachers to effectively provide education to all learners.

Professional development and training

All participants gave their view on professional development and stated that development and training must be implemented on a continuous basis to assist principals in performing their role and responsibilities. Without development, principals will be left behind and struggle to catch up with the expectations and continuous changes required by the DBE. Participants were clear on the importance of professional development and in-time training that must empower them to effectively lead their school and ensure school
improvement. They accentuated that professional development and training needs to be relevant to their specific context and challenges they experience within the system.

So, it is very important that as a principal, you upgrade your skills so that you can be able to work with different kinds of people (P12).

As a principal you need more relevant courses in specific areas, refresher courses updating on certain things, and professional development must be focused on what the needs are now in the system (P10).

Most of the participants found the training and development programmes on the Quality Management System (QMS) and South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMs) systems to be too generic and not dealing with the specific challenges they were facing.

The development programmes available on the DBE system is definitely not unique to my needs or aligned to my specific challenges (P11).

Most of the programmes is not relevant to my need for professional development. I complete the QMS template, it’s a tick exercise and then nothing really happens (P13).

Principals have to be continuously trained and developed, the focus must be on the challenging contexts in which principals find themselves (Myende et al. 2020; Hussain & Al Abri, 2015). Many of the participants stated that professional development, in-time training, and workshops relevant to the challenges they face were critically important for them to deal with education change and challenges. They concurred the lack of training and current training and development programmes available were too generic and did not address their context specific challenges.

We do get some opportunities. But that is a short-day course here or there. I do not attend any training because the training is not relevant to my challenges (P2).

There has not been any real planning or thinking about what principals actually need. The training available does not address my challenges (P10).

From the above it is clear that the participants were reluctant to participate in training and development programmes. The participants concurred that the training must be relevant to their specific context and must provide them with the knowledge to deal with challenges during education change. Participants emphasized that professional development opportunities must be applicable, continuously revised, upgraded and not just be a compliance exercise. In South Africa there is currently no formal qualification in leadership and management required to be a principal. The minimum requirement is a Relative Education Qualification Value (REQV) 14 qualification (matric + four years qualification) and obviously some years of experience. One principal pertinently referred to the lack of development and training for novice principals.

Principals are in many ways forced to grow into the position or the job, and I feel that is wrong. I was not prepared for this role at all. ‘In our system no principal is coached to become a principal. You have to teach yourself about the role and the system. (P6).

The nationally developed Advanced Diploma (level 7 on the National Qualification Framework) in School Leadership and Management was rolled out in South Africa in 2020 and principals are encouraged to attend the minimum 120 credits, two-year part-time programme, but up to date it has not been made a precondition to become a principal.

Support and experience of Circuit Managers

Districts and CMs are key elements and authorised agents in education change who are responsible to mainly coordinate support and oversee and guide principals in their day-to-day functions (Gauteng Department of Education, 2013; Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). Bantwini and Moorosi (2018a) state that principals need continuous support, especially in the challenging contexts in which they must function. Participants accentuated the support role of the CM by stating the following:

The role of circuit management support is very important, because the Circuit Manager can actually build the principal up or destroy the principal to an extent that he or she can frustrate you until you frustrate the staff which will lead to the school become dysfunctional (P1).

The significance of my circuit manager is critical in education change (P6).

Although there was a common agreement that the principals viewed CM support as important, there were mixed responses as to the perceptions of the principals in terms of receiving the required support from their CMs. There is a definite outcry from principals that they are not sufficiently supported by the districts and circuit offices during education change. The participating principals elaborated as follows on the experience they had over the years in terms of the support provided by the CM.

When you call for support, my CM would say he will coordinate with the curriculum unit at district office. There is minimal support, so my teachers and I are doing our best. (P2).
Lack of support is a killer. And in this district, it is actually a serious viral issue that you have in people who are less knowledgeable about education (P10).

A few principals stated that they viewed the CM as their direct supervisor and the CM as the closest point of contact for the principal to the district and provincial offices and they often had to guide the CMs on issues regarding teaching and learning. The participants overwhelming views were that CMs should be required to have served as a principal before being appointed as CMs, it was evident that the CMs lacked necessary experience to give appropriate and relevant support.

I feel if you want to work at district office and be part of schools and curriculum you should at least have the experience of being a principal to really understand what is happening at ground level (P6).

Because sometimes you find that the person was fortunate to be promoted to the circuit managers’ position. But they never served as a principal. And if someone has never walked in the shoes of a principal, they come down only from the point of reference of what policy says (P13).

The participants perceived that the CMs lacked experience and training to enable them to give the required support to principals who have years’ experience as educational leaders. Myende et al. (2020) and Ndlovu (2018) assert that because of the importance of the CM’s position in the district structure and within the education system, CMs must undergo proper preparation, training, mentorship and professional development before assuming the position of CM. Principals need experienced and knowledgeable CMs to effectively support them during education change processes.

Policies and legislation

An increasing number of education policies and legislation have been amended with the main aim on school improvement (Cameron & Naidoo, 2018). Several policies of the DBE outline the mandate given by the Member of Executive Council (MEC) for principals to function as educational leaders in schools. Principals however are limited by their mandate and can only function and operate within education policies and legislations (Department of Basic Education, 2018). Participants acknowledged the importance of policies but also perceived some of the policies are outdated and restrict them in performing their role and responsibilities as principal.

Yes, that policies and legislation are a factor or aspect that often inhibits or prevents principals to act their role and responsibilities, especially when continuous change is occurring (P4).

I do not always know if they are still relevant but there is nothing that you can do, you must work within those policy rules, and we try and find ways to legally work around policies. Policies can often be a hindrance, something that was discussed at upper levels within the education system without proper consolation with principals (P13).

The above responses confirm that principals can only operate and function within their prescribed mandate as outlined in policies. Policies however limit principals in dealing with challenges, especially unforeseen challenges that exposed many shortcomings within the basic education system (McDonald, 2020).

The district administration system and education system

Education district offices provide the link between PEDs and the schools that they administer. Districts are usually responsible for dealing directly with schools, both in an administrative and management sense. They are also tasked with providing support to schools and ensuring that they are kept informed of provincial education priorities. Districts report on schools to provincial and national departments via SASAMS or online platforms. All the participants indicated that the administration system of the district has become a major challenge. The administrative duties of the principals have not only increased considerably but has merely become a duplication of information consuming most of the principals’ time.

Many of the district’s admin expectation or request are a duplication. The same thing repeatedly, just on different forms. This takes a lot of time and effort to comply (P2).

We use the SASAM system in basic education. Any data related to the school and learners can be found on this system, it is there you just need to know how to extract the data. So continuously re-submitting becomes a frustration and a waste of our time (P13).

The district administration system that is supposed to support principals in their daily duties is a hinderance. It seems as if the different departments in the education system do not work uniformly as a collective, each requesting the same information in similar format. It is also apparent that the principals are disheartened, some participants indicated that the education system itself is failing them as principals.

The district focus was on the grade 12 results only and I must say there were other things that were just as important which I felt was not important to the district. The fact that the district and the education system did not really care about the principal and the teacher really caused people to lose focus and be demotivated (P1).

I’ve got learners that are supposed to be in special education schools. Unfortunately, they are in the system, they came from primary school into my system, and as the principal I have to deal with these challenges. So now you have to try and explain that the system is actually the cause of the learners’ failure (P2).
The problem is not in house (in the school), it is in our system (P6).

The DBE is responsible for maintaining the balance between widening access and academic success, this can only be achieved by providing essential and prompt support to principals.

Union- and political interference

Bantwini and Moorosi (2018a) exclaim that schools situated in highly unionised contexts experience major leadership problems in districts, which interfere with CMs’ provision of support and principals’ management of schools. Koko (2020), Nkambule and Amsterdam (2018) as well as Myende et al. (2020), mention that unions often have a hidden agenda that has a negative effect on education as they pursue their own self-interests. The self-interest of unions are usually evident when they want to strengthen their teachers’ union position and do not consider the effect it has on education (eNCA, 2020; Fengu, 2020; Mthethwa, 2020). Some principals indicated that most appointments in strategic positions are made to drive political or union’s agendas.

I’m referring to the interferences of unions and politicians. Unions that want to interfere in school process or the decision that has been made (P5).

I also had many issues with my SGB which was also politically driven. Those people had their own hidden agendas. That was a terrible time to be the principal. Well, politics is a very dangerous game, especially in our country (P8).

They were appointed in those positions to drive their political or union’s agendas. Like I said many of these people were political appointments or appointed on a friend-to-friend basis (P13).

The above responses resonates with Bantwini and Moorosi (2018a), Cameron and Naidoo (2018) research that indicate that many CM and district officials are appointed based on political and union interferences. Research conducted by Zulu et al. (2021) confirms that unions have immense power and especially in township schools where they constrain the normal functioning, and rarely add value to leadership and management within the schools. The DBE should strengthen the hand of the principal in matters relating to union- and political interferences as it can have a devastating effect on the role and responsibilities principals must fulfil and education itself.

Conclusions

Challenges that principals experience during education change within the education system is not isolated to South Africa, it is a universal phenomenon (Deming, 2018a; Du Plessis, 2017). In most situations principals are forced to implement required changes as soon as possible and do not have the luxury of time. However, Fullan (2016) emphasise for effective and sustainable education change, the change process takes time and cannot be forced. Principals need more support than ever before to ensure effective teaching and learning is taking place. Although it is clearly stipulated that the DBE and specifically education districts and circuit offices are mandated to provide schools with quality support and services it is not evident in all the districts. It has become imperative that education systems of any country take ‘stock’ of the challenges that principals experience from education changes and deploy appropriate action plans and strategies that will strive to diminish at least some of the challenges.

In the context of Deming’s theory (1993), competition and a climate of working in silos among districts, district subdepartments, schools and communities within the system have to be eliminated. What is needed is to establish an environment where everyone is working together as part of the system to achieve the goals of the basic education system. Although the DBE has gone through several restructuring processes, the prevailing style of leadership and management in the basic education system must undergo continuous transformation (change) to adapt to the changing needs of the country, industry, citizens and schools. It is therefore important not only to identify the parts of a system but also to focus on education districts and CMS relationship with principals within a specific context and what support is needed to bring about sustainable change that focusses on school improvement.

This paper recommends considering Fullan’s (2006) theory of action that consist of seven premises that will enable the departments within the education system to apply relevant action plans and strategies. The first premises that Fullan (2006) accentuate is the focus on motivation. The foundation for all the premises is built on motivation. Motivation needs to be part of any strategy, collectively and individually. It is clear from the participants answers that they are not motivated. Principals can be motivated to be part of education change for example by ensuring they receive relevant resources and appropriate support tailored for their specific context. The second premises namely capacity building focusses on results. Fullan (2006) accentuate that in any reform it is essential to apply positive pressure that will lead to internal and external accountability. Principals are forced to implement certain policies and education changes without the necessary capacity building and relevant training. Once again, the support aspect is crucial, it is evident from the data that principals do not receive adequate and appropriate support from the district and CMs. DBE needs to not only capacitate principals but also CMs that give support to principals. In the third and fourth premises the emphasize is on learning in context and changing the context. These premises are of extreme importance as most of the challenges that principals experience is associated with these two premises. In these two premises, require most of the districts and CMs to shape and change the negative culture that is currently associated with them. There are districts that function optimally and CMs who give valuable support, best practices need to be shared to elevate the functionality of all districts and CMs. Fullan (2006) regard factors that inhibit the optimal implementation of education change within the education system as distractors. The DBE needs to have in-depth discussions with
principals to become knowledgeable of what principal’s experience as distractors that constrain their optimal functioning as principals and assist them in managing the distractors. Distractors that are evident in the data analysis such as spending resources on maintaining the current situation instead of improvement needs urgent attention. Union- and political interferences are also regarded as distractors.

A bias of reflection practice is regarded as the fifth premises. A shared vision is required and mutual ownership towards the intended action plan. It has become essential that that districts and CMs within the DBE critical reflect on their actions and the effect that those actions have on the principals and education in South Africa. Communication channels between the principal and the districts must be improved. The administration system of the department is an excellent example where principals are required to submit an endless number of duplicate documents that take up most of their time.

Fullan (2006) accentuate tri-level engagement, the sixth premises that is essential for any system reform. Strategies should be implemented across three levels namely, school and community, district and state. Leaders within the three levels need to have a mutual understanding of what is required to ensure effective and sustainable change. Only when the leaders in the different levels work together towards school improvement can the system be changed, principals need to be consulted and involved.

The last premises is persistence and flexibility in staying on course. The data clearly acknowledges that most principals are flexible and creative despite out-dated policies, lack of resources and support as well as an education system that often restricts them to fulfil their role and responsibilities. The DBE must critically reflect on all the challenges that principals experience and urgently assist principals to overcome the challenges instead of enhancing the challenges.

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