

Wanted: Accountable Principals



Louise Smit has been employed by NAPTOSA since 1997. She is currently Senior Executive Officer in the NAPTOSA Gauteng office. She has been a NAPTOSA national negotiator in the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) for the past 12 years.

“What then makes a good principal, one capable of leading his/her school to success in examinations, on the playing fields, and in the preparation of learners for the hard knocks of life? There is no short answer to this question. There are, however, issues that point to the answer, most which relate to the principles of accountability.”¹

If it were not so painful, one could find the discourse about the state of education in our country amusing: “The education crisis is a threat to democracy.”²; “There is no crisis in education.”³; “Of the 15 countries in the study, SA had the third highest proportion of functionally illiterate learners (27%) and the fifth highest proportion of functionally innumerate learners (40%).”⁴

Reality tells us that our education system is in trouble. The focus of this article, however, is not to lament over the shortcomings of our schooling system, but rather to reflect on one possible way of improving accountability of school principals, as championed by the National Professional Teachers’ Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA).

One issue on which there is general consensus amongst most education stakeholders is that principals, as leaders and managers of their schools, are pivotal to the success of schools in providing quality teaching and learning. The opposite is also true. If poor leadership is evident and the school is poorly managed, the primary task and central purpose of a school – of providing quality teaching and learning – is likely to suffer.⁵

The core duties and responsibilities of a principal are set out in the Personnel Administrative Measures.⁶ These responsibilities relate to administration, personnel, teaching, extra and co-curricular activities, interaction with stakeholders, and communication. As far back as 2005 the then Minister of Education announced that she intended introducing legislation that would increase the power and authority of school principals. The reason given for this intended policy adjustment was that there was a need to re-assert the professional responsibility of principals.⁷

This became a possibility when the Education Laws Amendment Act was promulgated in 2007. The Act makes it clear that:

“the main purpose of the school is learning, elevating it above the myriad of other priorities with which principals are besieged daily. The law places accountability for learning squarely with the principal, making it mandatory for heads to report annually on the state of learner performance in their schools, to formulate a plan for improving learning, and to report progress against the school plan.”⁸

In contrast to these expectations (and legal obligation), many principals do not realise that their main function is to lead and direct teaching and learning within

the school. Some principals also seem to think that their primary responsibility is to discipline learners and perform administrative duties.⁹ Of even more concern is the perception of some principals that their primary accountability is to the district office.¹⁰ Where does this leave accountability to learners, parents and communities for teaching and learning outcomes in the school?

The call for accountability within schools has been made over many years by many concerned educationists. According to Hoffman¹¹ accountability “entails a culture of justification in which those in authority are required to explain their policies and justify their decisions, actions and omissions, rationally and responsively to the needs of those they serve ...”.

What stakeholders are calling for is for principals to give an account of the actions they take in ensuring quality teaching and learning in their schools, and being held accountable for these actions.

One way of giving account of one’s actions and being held accountable for them is through a performance management system. Christie¹² states that the setting of “professional standards” for principals forms part of the broader drive for accountability. She also quotes Moller (2009) who concludes that “these standards are codified descriptions of work and operate as a regulative framework of accountability.” One would, therefore, expect that the performance assessment instrument applicable to principals would reflect the responsibilities of principals as required by law and other policies.

That is sadly not the case. Principals’ performance is still assessed in terms of the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), which was agreed to in the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) in 2003. There are 12 standards in terms of which a principal’s performance is assessed – 7 of which are exactly the same as that of a post level 1 teacher – focussing on teaching that happens in a specific classroom. In addition to these seven standards, the principal must also give account of administration of resources and records, personnel, decision-making and accountability, leadership, communication and servicing the governing body, and strategic and financial planning. Clearly omitted is the overall responsibility of the principal of being the leader and manager of the teaching and learning process that should be the central focus of the school.

Great expectations were raised by the Minister of Basic Education when she announced in June 2011 that Government would empower principals to manage their schools and they would be held accountable for maintaining a high standard of education in schools. Principals and deputy principals would be required to enter into performance contracts with clear performance targets. NAPTOSA welcomed this announcement as the Union had argued for many years that there is a distinct difference between the responsibilities of a principal of a school and a post level 1 teacher. Mr Ramasehla, the then President of NAPTOSA added, however, that the matter would have to be negotiated in the ELRC.

The Minister repeated this statement in the Basic Education Budget Vote Speech on 17 May 2012:

In addition to these seven standards, the principal must also give account of administration of resources and records, personnel, decision-making and accountability, leadership, communication and servicing the governing body, and strategic and financial planning. Clearly omitted is the overall responsibility of the principal of being the leader and manager of the teaching and learning process that should be the central focus of the school.

“Our system is as good as its teachers. Teachers are at the heart of curriculum delivery. Accountability across the system is the key. A process is underway in the ELRC to streamline the IQMS, to improve the evaluation of educators’ performance. This is done as a broad accountability process for the sector. An integrated assessment instrument to improve performance of principals, deputy principals and teachers is in its final stages of negotiation.”

At the time of the Minister’s announcement, draft documents had already been discussed in the ELRC, setting performance standards (key result areas) for principals and deputy principals such as: leading the learning school, shaping the direction and development of the school, managing quality and securing accountability, developing and empowering self and others, managing the school as an organisation, working with and for the community, managing human resources in the school, management and advocacy of extra-mural activities and training and development needs.

What the proposed QMS is doing, is defining and evaluating a principal of a school first and foremost as a class teacher, and then, as an afterthought, as leader and manager of the school.

NAPTOSA fully supported (and still supports) this draft quality management system and performance assessment instrument for principals as the Union believed that it reflected the core responsibilities of principals, that it would go a long way in improving the accountability of principals and should result in the improvement of teaching and learning. This was in line with the growing recognition that school leadership requires a different skills set from classroom teaching.¹³

To NAPTOSA’s disappointment, the proposed performance management system was withdrawn in the ELRC in 2012 owing to the input of one of the unions. It was replaced by another draft performance assessment instrument, which undoubtedly will not take education forward. Once again principals are regarded as being class teachers in the first place and are expected to give account of, inter alia, the seating arrangements in his/her class, teaching environment and other classroom specific issues. This in spite of the statement that the “streamlined” IQMS, now called the Quality Management System (QMS), is “designed to evaluate the performance levels of individuals in order to achieve high levels of school performance. It is critical in assessing the extent to which educators are performing in line with their job descriptions in order to improve levels of accountability.”

When breaking down the proposed performance standards for principals, an uninformed person may conclude that the single biggest responsibility a principal has, is to teach and that almost 60% of what is expected of a principal, is also expected of a post level 2 educator (head of department) – the same functions, job description and levels of accountability. This totally defeats the object of trying to improve the accountability of principals as leaders and managers of their schools. What the proposed QMS is doing, is defining and evaluating a principal of a school first and foremost as a class teacher, and then, as an afterthought, as leader and manager of the school.

When the perception is created that there is no real difference between the responsibilities of a principal and a post level 1 or 2 teacher with regard to teaching and learning and curriculum delivery, what effect could it have on the authority of the principal as leader and manager?

Cecil Scorgie, NAPTOSA chief negotiator in the ELRC, summarized this situation neatly:

“We believe that central to the underachievement of any school is the inability to manage practical aspects of a successful learning environment. [...] This would require a clear job description for specifically principals and deputy principals that can be used to set clear targets for them to achieve and to be assessed by. This will restore the authority and status of the office of the head of the school. The head of the school can then be held accountable for the performance of the institution measured against a valid, reliable and fair instrument.”

There is a dire need to improve the management and leadership of principals of schools in South Africa. Having a set of core responsibilities and duties on paper, in training manuals and law books on the one hand, while equating the principal's role and responsibilities with regard to teaching and learning to that of a classroom teacher when being assessed, sends confusing messages to principals, teachers and the school community. This will not assist in clarifying their role and responsibilities to principals and what they are accountable for.

NAPTOSA believes that education can be turned around. The Union believes that in a school, it starts with the principal. Isn't it time for everybody to recognise that a school principal is being paid to be the leader and manager of the school – not to be a class teacher – and that the principal must be held accountable for what he or she is paid to do?

NOTES

- 1 Paul Hoffman, 2009.
- 2 Prof J Jansen, 2012.
- 3 Minister A. Mothsekga, 2012.
- 4 Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality III (2007), survey of grade 6 mathematics and reading.
- 5 Christie, 2010.
- 6 Employment of Educators Act, 1998.
- 7 Swanepoel, 2008.
- 8 Taylor, 2008.
- 9 Hoadley and Ward, 2009.
- 10 Bush et al., 2011.
- 11 Paul Hoffman, 2009.
- 12 Christie, 2010.
- 13 Bush et al., 2011.

REFERENCES

- Bush, T., Kiggundu, E. & Moorosi, P. (2011). Preparing new principals in South Africa: The ACE: School leadership programme. Downloaded at: http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S0256-01002011000100003&script=sci_arttext
- Christie, P. (2010). Landscapes of leadership in South African Schools: Mapping the changes. Downloaded at: <http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/educate/download/landscapes.pdf>
- Hoadley, U. & Ward, C. (2009). Managing to learn: Instructional leadership in South African secondary schools. Downloaded at: <http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za/product.php?productid=2244>
- Hoffman, P. (2009). Public school principals and the principles of accountability. Downloaded at: http://www.ifaisa.org/Public_School_Principals_and_Accountability.html
- Swanepoel, C. (2008). 'The perceptions of teachers and school principals of each other's disposition towards teacher involvement in school reform'. South African Journal of Education, Vol. 28(1). Downloaded at: http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S0256-01002008000100003&script=sci_arttext&lng=pt
- Taylor, N. (2008). What is wrong with South African schools? Downloaded at: <http://www.jet.org.za/events/conferences/What%20works%20in%20school%20development/Papers/Taylor%20Whats%20wrong%20with%20SA%20schools%20JET%20Schools%20Conf%20final.pdf>