Problematising the Standardisation of Leadership and Management Development in South African Schools

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In 2007 the Department of Education introduced the standards-based Advanced Certificate in Education: School Management and Leadership. The standardisation of leadership and management development in South African schools has been uncritically accepted by most academics and professionals. The purpose of this article is to problematise the standardisation of leadership and management development, using the critiques of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium standards of the United States as the basis of analysis. This article indicates the following areas of concern: the lack of clarity regarding the empirical basis of the unit standards; the incorporation of certain non-empirical ideals into the programme; the generic instead of contextualised approaches to leadership and management development; the use of a generic programme for school principals, deputy principals, and heads of department in spite of their differentiated roles; and the lack of a single, generally accepted policy document containing an exposition of the role of school principals that could form the basis of leadership and management development. This emphasises the need for the unit standards to be subjected to regular scrutiny and revision to address areas of concern and to ensure relevance thereof in the face of current developments and empirical research findings.

Key words: Development, leadership, management, unit standards, standardisation

Introduction

Since 1994 numerous policies have been formulated in an attempt to transform South African schools into democratic, professional, and collaborative learning and teaching environments. A variety of factors have been responsible for the slow pace

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of implementation of education policy, and for preventing the development of a praxis in which policy and practice mesh to form a coherent whole. One of the main contributing factors has been the lack of effective leaders and managers at school level. In 2007 in response to the leadership and management development needs that exist within South African schools education system the former Department of Education introduced the Advanced Certificate in Education: School Management and Leadership (henceforth referred to as ACE: SML). The main purpose of this programme is "[T]o provide structured learning opportunities that, while recognising the diverse contexts in which schools operate, promote quality education in South African schools through the development of a corps of education leaders who apply critical understanding, values, knowledge, and skills to school leadership in line with the vision of democratic transformation" (DoE, 2008: 3).

One major innovation of the ACE: SML programme is the fact that it is based on unit standards generated by the Standards Generating Body (SGB), which was established by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The SGB had a brief to contribute towards the development of programmes in education management and leadership at, amongst others, ACE level by generating unit standards that could serve as the basis for the continuing professional development of school management teams and departmental officials. Part of the rationale for the generation of unit standards as the basis of the ACE: SML is the assumption that "a measure of standardisation is essential if the course is to become an entry-level requirement for new principals" (Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2011: 35). Exisiting research on the ACE: SML generally tends to focus on the formulation and implementation of the ACE: SML. For example, Bush et al.'s research (2011) contains a summary of the main findings from the evaluation of the pilot programme focussing on aspects like the teaching materials, contact sessions, mentoring, networking, assessment, and the impact of the programme on leadership and management practice. Mestry and Singh (2007) explore the rationale behind why school principals decided to enrol for the ACE: SML programme and its impact on their leadership style, while Msila (2012) investigates the implementation of the mentoring component of the ACE: SML programme in selected cases in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Van der Westhuizen and Van Vuuren (2007) probe the development of the ACE: SML, amongst others, as an attempt at professionalising principalship in South Africa. A lacuna in the research exists in terms of a systematic analysis of standardisation of leadership and management development. The purpose of this article is to problematise the standardisation of leadership and management development in South African schools.

A Background to the Utilisation of Standards-based Education as the Basis for Leadership and Management Development

During the mid 1990s the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) of the United States of America, which consisted of various stakeholder groups in educational leadership, established the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) with the express purpose of creating a set of professional standards for school leadership. The ISLLC consisted of individuals representing various professional organisations and 24 states. In 1996 this initiative resulted in the formulation of the initial set of ISLLC standards which were intended to provide "a framework for reconceptualising leadership in schools" (Pitre & Smith, 2004: iv). Since its initial use to guide performance, it has progressed to become a tool to determine principal licensure (Catano & Stronge, 2007: 264; UCEA, 2012: 1) and a set of standards to assess competency (Glenewinkel, 2011: 27). By 2006 the ISLLC standards had been adopted by 48 states in the USA. The ISLLC model has since been emulated in many different countries, notably Australia, Canada, England and South Africa. This is part of what Mombourquette (2013: 10) refers to as an international trend to define and codify the role of school leaders. In the formation of this framework the ISLLC standards played a pivotal role.

Although the ISLLC standards elicited a favourable response from various quarters and gained widespread acceptance, the standards met with a fair degree of criticism. Murphy (2003), who served as the head of ISLLC, provides a comprehensive response to the wide-ranging criticisms levelled at the ISLLC standards. Murphy (2003: 21) expresses scepticism at the fact that most of the detractors have emanated from the field of academia, while colleagues from what he refers to as "the practice and policy domains of the profession" have provided no criticism of the standards or the implementation thereof. While Murphy (2003: 21) acknowledges "the responsibility of university faculty to provide critical perspectives", he emphasises the fact that the position of the academics on "the intellectual and reform landscape and the perspectives (they employ)" to a great degree determined their critiques and resulted in numerous contradictions and ambiguities.

Unlike in the United States of America, there has been no adverse criticism of the standardisation of leadership and management development in South Africa. The introduction of the ACE: SML has generally been welcomed in academic and professional quarters. The adoption of the programme by the majority of South African universities, the financial support for the programme provided by provincial education departments, as well as the support provided by professional organisations are indicative of this support. One notable exception is Heystek (2007: 500) to whom the ACE: SML represents an attempt by the South African Government to maintain power and control over leadership training for principals, and an example

of leadership moulding rather than training. The relatively uncritical acceptance of the standardisation of leadership and management development in South African schools is problematic, especially given the amount of criticism that a similar move in the United States of America has elicited. This has served as the main rationale for the writing of this article.

Problematising the Use of Standards-based Education as the Basis for Leadership and Management Development in the ACE: SML

This critique of the standardisation of leadership and management development which underpins the ACE: SML is based on an analysis of the unit standards as contained in official ACE: SML documents, official policy documents relating to the role of school leaders and managers and their development, as well the results of some South African empirical research on the implementation of the ACE: SML. For the purpose of this article a decision has been taken to only focus on the five core unit standards. A conscious decision was taken not to use the ACE: SML study materials as the basis of the critique as these are not always in compliance with the unit standards. Examples exist where the material developers ignored certain learning outcomes, or included their own learning outcomes in order to ensure the relevance of the study material. The study materials are thus not always a true reflection of the unit standards on which they are supposed to be based.

In this article Murphy's (2003: 23-39) categorisation of the critiques of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards around six issues is used as the basis of analysis.

Issue # 1: The standards lack an empirical basis.

The SGB consisted of representatives nominated by the national Department of Education, six provincial education departments, six universities, one technikon, three primary schools, and eight other organisations involved in leadership and management development in schools (SAQA, 2004). In preparation for the formulation of the unit standards the SGB consulted some international authorities, like the National College for School Leaders in the United Kingdom, the Scottish Executive, and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLCC) in the United States. The unit standards were further based on various policy documents in South Africa, like the Norms and Standards for Educators, and Qualifications for the Educators in Schooling. The SGB has not made explicit the empirical knowledge base on which the standards were premised. Interested parties are thus compelled to speculate regarding the origin of the ACE: SML unit standards. Bush and Jackson (2002: 420-421) performed a comparative study of leadership development centres in Australia, Canada, China, New Zealand, Singapore, Sweden, and the United States of America. Their main finding is that the content of leadership development programmes at these centres shows remarkable similarities. Most of the courses focus on vision, mission and transformational leadership, issues of learning and teaching, and the

task areas of management, such as human resources and professional development, finances, curriculum, and external relations. This also applies to the unit standards of the ACE: SML. From this can be inferred that the SGB based its unit standards primarily on the work done in first world countries, and not empirical research done in South Africa. This makes the relevance of the unit standards questionable.

The SGB made some attempt to validate the unit standards. The draft unit standards were published in the Government Gazette of 11 June 2004, and comments were invited and had to be submitted by 13 July 2004, little more than a month later. A preliminary survey amongst academics involved in leadership and management development programmes indicated that many academics did not attend the road shows that were held at provincial level to publish the draft unit standards, nor did they respond to the publication thereof. This validity exercise was thus flawed. The unit standards were given a measure of legitimacy by the establishment of the National Management and Leadership Committee (NMLC) whose brief it was to develop appropriate curriculum outlines for each of the specific outcomes of the unit standards and to identify possible assessment activities to ascertain whether the assessment criteria had been fulfilled. The National Management and Leadership Committee comprised representatives of the national Department of Education, the universities that had indicated an interest to implement the new programme, as well as non-governmental organisations like Delta Foundation, Mark Shuttleworth Foundation, and Zenex Foundation. According to Van der Westhuizen and Van Vuuren (2007: 440) the universities provided "consultative constituency through their nominated members on the NMLC and accordingly mandate(d) the process through representation". This was a strategic ploy on the side of the Department of Education. The fact remains that "a mutually agreed understanding of what the country's education system expects of those who are entrusted with the leadership and management of its schools" does not exist in South Africa (Van der Westhuizen & Van Vuuren, 2007: 439).

Based on the above-mentioned it is thus not possible to conclude, as Murphy (2003: 18) did, regarding the ISLLC standards, that the ACE: SML standards were built on "deep historical analysis, the best available research, and sound professional judgment". A mitigating factor is the fact that the research base on leadership and management in South African schools is very limited (Hoadley & Ward, 2008: 4). Those studies that have been undertaken tended to focus on policy rather than practice.

Issue # 2: The standards are based too heavily on non-empirical ideals.

One recurring theme in the core unit standards is the emphasis that is placed on transformational leadership as a vehicle for actualising quality education in South African schools. This propagation of transformational leadership which is regarded as

the panacea for the ills that prevail in the South African schooling system is not based on empirical evidence; neither does it exhibit a consciousness regarding the limitations of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership still represents the traditional view of leadership as centred in individual role or responsibility instead of placing the focus on multiple sources of leadership. This represents "superhero images of leadership" (Sergiovanni, 2001: 55). Transformational leadership is a form of charismatic leadership that can, according to Fullan (2001: 2), at most result in "episodic improvement" and eventually "frustrated or despondent dependency".

Distributed and other forms of participative leadership are not afforded the same prominence as transformational leadership in the core unit standards. What should be guarded against is an approach in which the various notions of leadership are regarded as "ready made or universally applicable theories that we can simply pull off the shelf" (Law & Glover, 2000:4). The viability of any form of leadership in schools is dependent on several contextual variables. These are the level of control and autonomy allowed by departmental officials at provincial and district levels, the organisational structure and agency of the school, the social and cultural context of the school, and the source of the impetus for developing the preferred form of leadership (Bennett, et al., 2003:8). In some instances other forms of leadership or a combination thereof might be more desirable and advantageous to the school. These realities should be reflected in the critical outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit standards.

Closely linked to the aforementioned is the strong dependence placed on the school principal in the ACE: SML. The whole programme is geared towards the development of existing and aspiring school principals who are regarded as being responsible for the overall development and implementation of policies and procedures that will enable the school to achieve its mission and vision of providing quality teaching and learning. Ironically, Bush, Joubert , Kiggundu, and Van Rooyen (2009: 7), who evaluated the pilot programme of the ACE: SML, recommend that the programme should focus even more on the learning needs of school principals, rather than on those of the rest of the school management team and learners. While much emphasis is placed on school principals as curriculum leaders, extensive empirical research done by Hoadley, Christie, and Ward (2009: 381) indicates that school principals do not consider curriculum leadership as their main task; instead they focus on routine administrative matters and learner discipline. The strong dependence placed on the school principal as an agent of transformation in the ACE: SML is thus also based on a non-empirical ideal.

Issue # 3: The standards do not cover everything; or they do not include concept "X" or examine concept "Y" deeply enough.

The ACE: SML is relatively comprehensive and it would be tantamount to nit-picking to list each and every bit of knowledge, disposition, and performance that has not been included in the unit standards. To expect the unit standards to include everything

and to do so at sufficient depth is unrealistic. Instead, the focus in this critique of the ACE: SML will be on those areas of concern that have been discerned by ISLLC critics.

Research undertaken by Van der Berg, Taylor, Gustafsson, Spaull, and Armstrong (2011: 24) indicates that the South African school system consists of two sub-systems that function at different levels. The majority of schools serve historically disadvantaged communities consisting mainly of black and coloured children. Within the second sub-system are schools that consist mainly of white and Indian children, and increasing numbers of black and coloured children. Taylor (2008) ascribes the under-achievement of learners in the majority of schools to the problem of absenteeism and latecoming amongst teachers which he (2008: 9-13) regards as a manifestation of "a very weakly framed regulative order; the focus on routine-administrative matters; the low levels of subject knowledge exhibited by many South African teachers; and the use of conventional chalk and talk teaching methods. Unsurprisingly, Fleisch (2008: 121) describes the classroom as "the major source of crisis in primary education". Other contributing factors are ill health, poverty, and lack of resources (Fleisch, 2008: 121). Christie (2010: 694) avers that discourses that do not engage earnestly with the local context and the day-to-day experiences of school principals are likely to result in "distorted depictions" and "unrealistic expectations of principals' work".

In the ACE: SML the unit standard that one would expect to help students to engage with the local context and day-to-day experiences of school leaders and managers is known as Understand school leadership and management in the South African context. However, in this unit standard the focus is on acquainting school leaders and managers with regulative legislative and policy frameworks affecting schools. These legislative and policy frameworks include the South African Constitution and the Integrated Quality Management System. While it is important for school leaders and managers to be acquainted with these regulative frameworks, these are adequately dealt with in the other modules, especially in the module called Manage policy, planning, school development and governance. In the module Understand school leadership and management in the South African context the focus should be on acquainting the school leaders and managers with the real challenges that they will have to face given the contexts within which they find themselves. Instead, the module focuses on developing and applying "the ability to highlight generic leadership and management principles with regard to planning, organising, governance, evaluation and control" (DoE, 2008: 17). Christie (2010: 708) cautions against generic instead of situated approaches to principalship. Much more appropriate would be "to recognise the situated complexities of the work of running schools". Unfortunately, the ACE: SML does not contribute towards a more thorough understanding of what Christie describes as "the landscapes of leadership". The nullification of the social, cultural, and political context within which schooling occurs means that the ACE: SML programme does not contribute towards ensuring social equity, but in fact contributes towards the reinforcement and perpetuation of

social inequities. This is exacerbated by the fact that the core modules require school leaders and managers to understand and implement state policies unquestioningly as state functionaries. The students should be required to critically analyse the state policies that they are intended to implement. This should have been reflected in the assessment criteria.

In the ACE: SML unit standards, sufficient attention is given to the day-to-day management of the school. In the core module called *Manage organisational systems, physical and financial resources,* topics like financial and physical resources management as well as the use of ICTs to manage organisational systems are covered in sufficient depth to equip students with sound management knowledge, competencies, and dispositions. The inclusion of the core module *Manage teaching and learning,* in which the focus is on curriculum leadership, ensures that the core business of school leadership and management is not neglected in the ACE: SML programme. The inclusion of the core module *Lead and manage people* ensures that sufficient prominence is given to the people orientation of school leaders and managers. In this module, topics such as the employment and deployment of staff, staff evaluation, and personal and professional development are dealt with, thereby ensuring a measure of balance between task and people orientation within the programme.

Issue #4: The standards are over (or under) specified.

In this section the focus will be on ascertaining the specificity of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

An analysis of the core unit standards that constitute the ACE: SML indicates that the learning outcomes and assessment criteria are not over specified. In fact, some of the assessment criteria tend to be under specified. One of the assessment criteria of the unit standard *Understand school leadership and management in the South African context* reads as follows: "Demonstrate a basic understanding of the principles and values informing educational transformation in South Africa …" (DoE, 2008: 16).

The expectation is that the principles and values which are included in the preamble of all state policies that are intended to transform South Africa would be specified under the section dealing with curriculum content.

These are left unspecified except for perfunctory reference to the South African Constitution. The inclusion of curriculum content as well as obligatory study material as an integral part of the unit standards that underpin the ACE: SML indicates a tendency towards specificity and prescriptiveness. The cited examples of a lack of specificity is thus of minor concern.

Another shortcoming of the ACE: SML is the fact that it is a generic programme intended for school principals, deputy principals, and heads of department in spite

of the fact that they are required to fulfil quite unique roles. Here too a measure of specificity is required in order to cater for the differentiated development needs of the various promotion post holders.

Issue #5. There is no legitimate place for dispositions in the standards.

South African literature on the subject seems to indicate a general acceptance of the legitimate place for dispositions in the standards that are used for leadership and management development. Christie (2010: 696) provides the following justification for this: "… (school leadership) inevitably involves normative judgements of right and wrong, good and bad." In the South African Standard for Principalship (DBE, 2014: 4) it is suggested that the core educational and social values form the basis of all that happens in the schools. This includes the leadership and management by the school principal. The inclusion of dispositions in the unit standards that form the basis of the ACE: SML thus seem to be relatively unproblematic.

In four of the five core modules, equal prominence is given to dispositions, and knowledge and action.

Issue #6. The standards are exerting undue influence on the profession.

Initially, the intention was that the ACE: SML would become an entrance qualification for appointment to principalship. If this had been realised it would have provided the ACE: SML with a privileged status. As no public statement has been made in this regard, it is not clear why this has not been realised. While there seems to have been general acceptance of the ACE: SML, professional organisations seem to disagree whether the ACE: SML should be the only entrance qualification. One can only assume that this point of disagreement has been the main cause of the deadlock.

If the unit standards had formed the basis of the evaluation of school leaders and managers, it would have afforded them considerable influence. However, in South African schools the unit standards that forms the basis of the ACE: SML are not used as the framework within which the evaluation of school leaders is undertaken. The DBE (2014: 1) acknowledges that there is no clear understanding of the role of school leadership and management other than the limited definitions that are contained in the Personnel Administration Measures (PAM) and the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS). In fact, the role of the school principals that finds manifestation in the unit standards is at variance with the role of the school principals as contained in PAM and IQMS. In PAM, which sets out the terms and conditions of school principals and other educators, general and administrative duties and responsibilities are placed in the foreground, while only cursory reference is made to professional leadership (Christie, 2010: 704).

Some research has been done to determine the efficacy of the ACE: SML. Bush et al. (2011: 38) finds that, although most candidates that took part in the pilot project of the programmes indicated improvement in their management practice, this did not translate into improved teaching and learning. It is thus evident that the unit standards that have been generated by the SGB under the auspices of SAQA, other than forming the basis for the ACE: SML, are fairly inconsequential.

Concluding Remarks

This analysis indicates that there are some areas of concern: the uncritical acceptance of the SAQA unit standards as the basis for leadership and management development; the lack of clarity regarding the empirical basis of the unit standards; the incorporation of certain non-empirical ideals into the programme; the generic instead of contextualised approaches to leadership and management; the use of a generic programme for school principals, deputy principals, and heads of department in spite of their differentiated roles; and the lack of a single, generally accepted policy document containing an exposition of the role of school principals that could form the basis of leadership and management development.

It is imperative that the unit standards be subjected to regular scrutiny and revision to address areas of concern and to ensure that they keep abreast of the latest developments within the education system and of current findings of empirical research. The purpose of such a revision should be to examine the validity and effectiveness of the standards (Glenewinkel, 2011: 18). The pilot programme of the ACE: SML was subjected to a relatively comprehensive evaluation. The evaluation team was commissioned by the erstwhile Department of Education "… to inform the development of the course and to provide advice to the Minister of Basic Education about the suitability and sustainability of the qualification for its intended purpose" (Bush *et al.*, 2011: 33). The evaluation focused on the teaching materials, formal contact sessions, mentoring support, networks of candidates, site-based assessment, and the impact of the programme on leadership and management practice. In this evaluation no attempt was made to evaluate the standards–based approach to leadership and management development. The unit standards that form the basis of the ACE: SML have thus not been subjected to scrutiny and revision since the inception of the programme in 2007.

The replacement of the current ACE: SML by the Advanced Diploma in Education: School Leadership and Management (AdvDip: SLM) in compliance with the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework and the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification has provided an excellent opportunity to systematically review and revise the unit standards on which the ACE: SML was based. However, this has hitherto not been done. Instead, the formulation of the new AdvDip: SLM has entailed the following procedure: the completion of a seriously flawed external literature review by Prof T Bush (University of Nottingham, UK) and Dr D Glover

(Witwatersrand University); the drafting of a core curriculum outline by the South African Institute of Distance Education; and the approval of the core curriculum outline by the National Management and Leadership Committee based on a two-day workshop. This procedure is problematic as it means that no provision has been made for a reflection on the appropriateness and effectiveness of the unit standards that had been generated by the Standards Generating Body. The lessons that have been learnt since July 2007 have simply been ignored.

Based on the above-mentioned it is not surprising that the proposed AdvDip: SML is really the old ACE: SML in a new guise. Except for the addition of a new module (Working with and for the Community) and the deletion of an old module (Language Skills in School Management), the specific outcomes, curriculum content, assessment criteria, and possible assessment activities of the old modules have remained largely unaltered in spite of the fact that the AdvDip: SLM is meant to be offered at a different NQF level (7) than the old ACE: SLM (6).

The development of the draft South African Standard for School Principalship in Government Gazette 37897, which was published by the Department of Basic Education for comment on 7 August 2014, shows a similar indifference to the lessons that could have been learnt from the ACE: SML experience. The South African Standard for School Principalship is a policy document that is intended to serve as a template for the design of professional leadership and management development programmes for aspirant and serving principals. Furthermore, it has the potential to become a tool to determine principal licensure and a set of standards to assess competency. It is problematic that the South African Standard for School Principalship has been formulated without taking due cognisance of the lessons that were learnt from the first attempt at the standardisation of leadership and management development in South African schools and without consulting the role players that were instrumental in the implementation of this first attempt.

The standardisation of leadership and management development in South African schools is a welcome initiative by the erstwhile Department of Education and more recently the Department of Basic Education to address the pressing and widespread needs of South African school leaders and managers. While policy makers have borrowed liberally from related international policies they are ostensibly unmindful of the lessons that can be learnt from international and South African experiences. This is something that needs to be addressed on the way forward in order to avoid an unnecessary repetition of past mistakes.

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