The pedagogic principal and the pedagogic principle – stories of principals in South African schools

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I hoped that life might offer me the opportunity to serve my people and make my own humble contribution to their freedom struggle. This is what has motivated me in all that I have done. – Nelson Mandela

Abstract

This paper attempts to identify and isolate the essence of principalship. It employs a phenomenological qualitative research design to achieve this.

Introduction
This paper focuses on principalship, its legitimate role and place within the South African education system. The genesis of this paper is a research project funded by the University of Johannesburg's Central Research Fund on school leadership. The project was embarked upon because the project members believe that principalship matters (Ribbins & Marland, 1994)! The research team became aware of how little we actually know about principals as people. Why this should be so, why principalship should matter and how we might go about filling this gap in our knowledge are amongst the initial questions the team were confronted with. In order to realise the main objective of our research we followed the pragmatice position which augurs with what Creswell (2003) postulates. He (Creswell, 2003) indicates that any research (also in education management) should start with a clear exposition of the knowledge claim position (this is what Lincoln & Guba 2000 and Mertens 1998 call paradigms). This means researchers start a project with certain assumptions about how they will learn and what they will learn during their inquiry. Researchers must make claims about what is knowledge (ontology), how we know it (epistemology), what values go into it (axiology), how we write about it (rhetoric), and the processes for studying it (methodology). Then he goes on to discuss four paradigms of which one in our view is very relevant to

education management research namely pragmatism (pragmatic knowledge claim). This paradigm derives from the works of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), and John Dewey (1859-1952) (Cherryholmes, 1992). There are many forms of pragmatism. For many of them, knowledge claims arise out of **actions**, **situations**, and **consequences** rather than antecedent conditions. There is a concern with **applications** – "what works" – and solutions to problems (Patton, 1990). Instead of methods being important, the problem is most important, and researchers use all approaches (qualitative and quantitative) to understand the problem. This paper is based on the qualitative data collected (the data of a questionnaire that are presently being executed will also form part of the final report).

The assumptions are:

- Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality (it is eclectic in nature)

- Individual researchers have a freedom of choice. They are "free" to choose the methods, techniques, and procedures of research that best meet their needs and purposes.

- Pragmatists do not see the world as an absolute unity.

- Truth is what works at the time; it is not based in a strict dualism between the mind and reality completely independent of the mind.

- Pragmatist researchers look to the "what" and "how" to research, based on its intended consequences – where they want to go with it.

- Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts.

- Pragmatists believe that we need to stop asking questions about reality and the laws of nature (Creswell, 2003: 12).

The dilemma is clearly that we do not always agree on when is something working ('what works'). Karstanje in Bolam and Van Wieringen (1999: 11) clearly states that the impression that a coherent consensus on principalship (in Europe) exists is false. There are several reasons according to Karstanje why a European consensus on principalship will not come into being in the near future. Some of the reasons are "Education systems in the different European countries vary greatly" and "The lack of a common European education policy…" This also applies to South Africa where deeply divided communities (divided by apartheid) have different views on educational management including the role of principals and only since 1994 a process was started to bring about a South African view on principalship (see South Africa, 1996). However, what may work for one community may be a complete failure for another! This line of reasoning leads us to what Giddens (2007: 221) calls the "agentic" role of leaders. We argue thus that principals have an agency; they are partly reflexive and are capable of monitoring their actions and orient themselves to the

behaviours of others. Logically this further leads us to the rational choice theory that will be explored later (Craib, 1992: 70).

Pragmatists are aware of the fact hat the debate on 'what works' moves between socialism (the welfare state perspective) and neo-liberalism. The following quote demonstrates this very clearly:

"In the definition of the welfare state, the state has important responsibilities in the field of education, in particular for reasons of (social) justice. The neo-liberal approach rejects this plea for special treatment for education through the welfare state, proposing that education should also be subject to ordinary market forces (to achieve higher learner achievement). By operating as it has done, the welfare state has produced unpleasant and unfavourable results. Neo-liberal ideology challenges this view and is gaining ground with the introduction of various concepts into education management (including the role of the principal), such as concepts of the market, consumers, competition, pricing, private enterprise, and marketing" (Bolam and Van Wieringen 1999: 4).

On the one hand one community can regard "what works" as high learner achievement (e.g. pass rate in the grade 12 examination) and another community can regard "what works" as the achievement of social justice. The question is can both have an equal weight when a country decides on how educational resources should be allocated.

It is interesting to note that the Government's principal aim for the education service at all levels and in all forms of learning in England, is:

To support economic growth and improve the nation's competitiveness and quality of life by raising standards of educational achievement and skill and by promoting an efficient and flexible labour market (DfEE, 1995: 1).

A very interesting study done by Adjibolosoo, (1995) came to the conclusion that in sub-Saharan Africa education is viewed as a combination of the human capital approach to education where it is in the best interest of the state and the individual to invest in education and that universal schooling is essentially a means of social control. The study also indicates that more and more recognition is given to appropriate personality characteristics in the education and training of the labour force.

The title of the paper
The word play in the title is intended. For principals to be principals they must first and foremost adhere to the pedagogic principle – what works to obtain the goals of schooling: social justice (for all the role players: learners, educators and society) and higher learner achievement. On a theoretical level that means one derives meaning from an interpretation of life-world experiences, with an analysis that resists a priori and abstracted theoretical presuppositions. Methodologically this means a 'strong' (Evans, 1999) and committed reading of the experiences of being a principal. The 'stories' of principals' experiences are the basis of the research. These accounts, derived from interviews and on site visits by members of the research team, invite the reader to share in the interpretation of the meaning of everyday situations encountered by principals in schools.

Purpose of the study
The purpose of the study is therefore to understand the response of principals (their decisions) to everyday situations in a school with the view of exposing the pedagogic results for the child of these decisions. In order to interrogate the decisions of principals for their pedagogic content – or lack thereof – excerpts of principals' accounts are provided and analysed.

Research design
The underlying paradigm for this study is the eclectic-mixed methods – pragmatic paradigm. The eclectic aspect of the paradigm refers to its openness to borrowing the methods of the other paradigms to collect information and solve a problem. The mixed methods aspect relates to the recognition that multiple perspectives are necessary to triangulate or bracket information and conclusions regarding a complex phenomenon such as principalship. The pragmatic aspect reflects the practical orientation that, although ultimate prediction and control may never be achieved in education management on the theoretical and praxis level things can improve (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003: 34).

This paper is not concerned with ultimate conceptions of reality but deals with practical problems that confront principals. Modes of inquiry are only tools to understand and offer solutions to principalship problems. It is important to note that we as researchers accept our interconnectivity with the phenomenon (principalship) that we seek to understand and change. We are aware of the fact that the analyses remain tentative and the essences are meaningful within the context in which they reside (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003: 35) 35).

Aspects of the phenomenological design type within the qualitative paradigm were utilised in this research project.

According to Merriam (1998: 16) phenomenology is a school of philosophical thought that underpins all of qualitative research – and herein lies much of the confusion surrounding the writing in this area. Qualitative research draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation. In this case, the researchers opted for this design type purely for the opportunity to use the particular "tools" of phenomenology (because they seemed so well suited for the purpose of this research) and not so much to be followers of the philosophy of phenomenology.

In the conduct of a phenomenological study, the focus would be on the essence or structure of an experience (phenomenon). According to Patton (1990: 20), this type of research is based on the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experiences. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analysed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon. In this case it is about the essence of being a principal in general but also specifically in the South African context. The assumption of essences, like the ethnographer's assumption that culture exists and is important, becomes the defining characteristic of a purely phenomenological study.

Based on Spiegelberg's (1965) outline of the process of conducting a study of this nature the research team undertook the following in this research:

- The researchers have an "intuitive grasp" (1965: 659) of the phenomenon (most of the researchers in the project team were indeed school principals in different types of schools in South Africa which include historically white, black, coloured and Indian schools (rural as well as urban). This "intuitive grasp" does not however contradict our earlier statement that we became aware of how little we actually know about principals as people.

- This "intuitive grasp" was followed up by investigating several instances or examples of the phenomenon to gain a sense of its general essence (ten personal interviews with principals and school site visits were conducted)

- The researchers apprehended the relationships among several essences and then systematically explored "the phenomena not only in the sense of **what** appears, whether particular or general essences, but also of the **way in which** things appear" (1965: 684, emphasis in the original).

- The next thing the researchers had to determine was how the phenomenon of being a principal has come into consciousness.

- The beliefs about the phenomenon were then bracketed (insofar as this is possible)

- Finally, the meaning of the phenomenon was interpreted.

To explain this rather philosophical and abstract process of what was done even further, the next paragraph uses the same format used by Merriam and Simpson in their 1995 research (Merriam, 1998: 16) showing how it was adapted for this study:

We wanted to analyse what principalship is, so firstly we described the subjective views (see Giddens, 2007 notion of agency) of a number of principals looking at their own observations and our observations in specific settings (what Howard (1994) calls interpretation of the "text' of the experience) taking note of their expressed feelings and reactions to situations that required leadership action. In our attempt to attend to the "modes of appearing" we saw that leadership action is rooted in first observing and identifying a problem, taking ownership and finally finding a solution mixed with both rational and emotional involvement. Finally, to establish how leadership "constitutes itself in consciousness" we looked at the sequence of events through which problems are solved in various schooling contexts with the concomitant decisions that are taken. Only then were we as researchers able to bring the experience of leadership into consciousness, analyse it and attempt to grasp its meaning from the principals' point of view.

The procedure we used for the analysis of the data was thus borrowed from phenomenology. We analysed the data using themes which were loosely structured in patterns (eventually essences) that had commonalities with the intention that the structures give order and flow to what might otherwise have been jumbled up statements. However, we were consciously aware that principals also have an agency – they make meaning of structured procedures (Giddens, 2007: 221). The concern and the rationale behind the analysis were twofold: first, to reveal everyday meanings and experiences of principals and the aspects that determine their behaviour, and second, to be able to do so without disturbing the data, retaining the voices of the participants and the sense of originality.

The essence of being a principal

The literature on the essence of leadership is vast (Van Rensburg, 2007; Avery, 2004; Gordon, 2002; De Vries, 2001; Goleman, 1998 & DePree, 1989) and it is a mammoth task to even try to summarise what is available in the literature and then to apply it to principalship as a specific "type" of leadership. Throughout the literature relating to leadership in education, the theme of the central importance of education, or of teaching and learning, recurs. However, current practice and notion in South Africa is for leadership to tend to lie with individuals who have specialised in areas such as law, finance and human resource management, rather than being educationists per se (South Africa, 1996). Nevertheless, current research on school effectiveness and school improvement stresses the importance of what goes on in the classroom and educational leadership is seen to be about providing a culture within which teaching and learning will prosper. To link up with Duignan and Macpherson (1992) on educative leadership we presume that the quality of school life is greatly dependent on the quality of learners' experience in the classroom. It follows that pedagogic principled principals will be central to the negotiations of what is to be regarded as valuable in the curriculum and what is believed to be excellent in teaching methods. This epitomizes principals' agentic role in knowledge construction and dissemination (Giddens, 2007). This approach to leadership will nurture and protect these ideas of exemplary practice. To achieve this condition means defining excellence in specific terms. It also means planning in sophisticated ways to achieve desired outcomes. Pedagogic principled leaders should, therefore, take responsible leadership actions (decisions) to create organisational cultures that enhance the growth and development of all involved in teaching and learning (Duignan & Macpherson, 1992: 83)

The research team however felt that at least an attempt must be made to give a cursory description of principalship in the literature to frame the empirical research that was undertaken. This was a mammoth task because as one principal puts it *"Only God need apply"* because a modern day principal must be a manager, instructional leader, visionary, politician, strategist, community leader, and counsellor (Kennedy, 2008:1&2).

The one essence of principalship that is not part of the essence of other leaderships is that principals carry a particular onus; principals are acting *in loco parentis,* and therefore bear the responsibility for the experiences of the learners in the school. It is perhaps the nature of this responsibility that differentiates principalship as different in kind from other types of leadership.

In whatever situation principals might be, they always have a choice, an agency, in how to respond. It is a choice to either think of yourself as a disempowered victim of circumstances or to think creatively about ways to improve it. The choice can include other people or exclude them. It can be a choice to benefit others, to ignore them or to blame them for the situation. The principal (principle) choice is to serve others with one's abilities and resources, and take others along with the initiative. Principals act not only to serve their own interest but are mindful of and willing to assist others with their knowledge and resources. The opposite mindset in this situation would be the person who is only concerned with his or her own discomfort for which he or she angrily holds others responsible. That would clearly display absence of principalship. All great leaders and principals hold other people's interest in mind. They realise the needs of others as much as they do their own. They are prepared to sacrifice their energy and at times their personal interests for the sake of the common good. Leadership intent is to create a better future for and with others. It is internally motivated and comes from a sense of responsibility to make positive differences in life. It is in principle about serving others with one's own talents and potential.

Most people would say that the above might be true in the ideal world but in the real world principals are those people who outperform others and are rewarded for it with more responsibility and a promotion post. If such a person improves his or her performance further and gets others to improve theirs, he or she will be regarded as an even better principal. Although we would like to see an attitude and behaviour in principals that would convince us that they truly care about the people they lead, we often do not expect it in the context of the modern school.

Even if this holds true the following essence need to be stressed:

Leadership, is not the function of a position a person holds. It has its foundation in the **will** of an individual to improve the circumstances of any situation as a service to others (Van Rensburg, 2007: 2; Maxwell, 1998: 13).

In a much popularised website Sabrina Laine and Albert Bennett (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2008: 2-12) make mention of seven guiding principles for principals:

- Vision: See the forest. Tend the trees
- Community: Let go of solo
- Professional development: Mine the wealth within
- Governance: Policy matter… more
- Integrity: Stand and deliver
- Judgement: Expect the best. Forget the rest
- Assessment: Speak in data. Harness its power

The overlap between these principles and the stories of principals is encouraging in our quest to isolate the essences of principalship.

Rational choice in human social relationships

Without going too deeply into organisational theory there is a need to look at the theoretical frame of this paper. The data were analysed within the rational choice theory. This theory originated most clearly in the work of Max Weber when he postulated that human social relationships are patterned and stable because people act rationally. It is not claimed that all action is rational – Weber himself distinguished between four types of action: traditional action, affective action, action orientated to ultimate values (principles) and action orientated to practical goals in this world. Stability and order are brought about by individuals making free rational choices (Craib, 1992: 70 also see Elster, 1986; Carling, 1986; Hindness, 1988 and Ryan, 1991).

In the discussion of the data emphasis will be placed the principal's action orientation.

Essence 1: Policy driven leadership (Defending the Code of Conduct for learners)

Before analysing the data from the study a word or two on the so called bureaucratic manager; schools have traditionally been managed by a bureaucratic management style principal. In this method principals rely on a rational set of structuring guidelines (policies), such as rules and procedures, hierarchy, and a clear division of labour. Principals using this style receive lots of credit for an efficiently and effectively run school. Over time this style of management eventually backfires as creative teachers and learners become unsettled. These types of principals tend to be control freaks who find it difficult to let go of the detail and are particularly threatened by the idea of empowering other leaders for fear of diminishing their own power base. These principals soon forget that schools exist for learners and not for administrators (Baraniuk, 2005:1-4).

A grade 10 learner foul-mouthed a teacher who reprimanded him for pushing another learner during classes. The principal feels that decisive action is called for and hands the boy a 3-day suspension "… *we have heard your side of the story and you are suspended for 3 days – I will tell your parents…*" Other than justifying the action to the boy's parents, it seems as if the problem can be considered solved. An analysis of this decision clearly indicates that the principal prioritises the school as a moral place but he does not see its pedagogical activity as primary. Or rather he sees the pedagogic character of schools as deriving from its moral character rather than the other way around. What the principal orients to is the specific section in the code of conduct for learners (demonstrate respect to teachers) rather than to the normative necessity for the section. There is clearly an important difference between just asserting codes and acting morally in the pedagogic interests of the child. It may well be that by simply enforcing a code, the child may not learn any greater appreciation for what constitutes ethical behaviour, and from a pedagogic view, does not learn to exercise better judgement or self-control. Moreover, in simply enforcing codes, the opportunity is also lost for the child to develop an appreciation for codes within the terms of responsibility for others.

Sergiovanni (1998: 43) concurs with this conclusion when he states: "The source of authority for leadership (principalship) is found neither in bureaucratic rules and procedures nor in personalities and styles of leaders but in shared values, ideas and commitments".

Harber and Davies's research (1997) indicated that this is a problem within developing countries like South Africa. … (in) developing countries, where there tends to be a

bureaucratic style of management, and an authoritarian style of leadership sometimes as a result of the inheritance of colonialism (Bush & Coleman, 2000: 26).

Essence 2: Child centred leadership (The emotional state of the child dictates)
A principal explaining the need for different leadership responses under different circumstances states that if a child is crying and upset about something, the principal should not go and upset the child even further. He explains that you need to sit and negotiate and really listen to the child. *"…you are going to stop what you are doing and then you can talk about it."* What the principal orients to is the child's needs at that specific time. From a pedagogic view, he does exercise better judgement and self-control to manage the situation. The focus is thus on the child and by carefully listening and applying an appropriate response, the development of the child assumes primary focus.

Linked to this essence is also the role of learner leadership (Learner representatives on School Governing Bodies (SGB) should know their role).

A principal explains his dilemma with learner representatives on the SGB. On the one hand he is adamant that learners should have a say but then clearly expresses his concerns: *"…they should not come and complain about what they want but contribute to school development…"*; *"I do not involve them during discussions on teacher performance…"* and *"…their role is to prevent crime, fighting, punctuality, absenteeism and keeping the school grounds clean".* With reference to his own SGB he confesses that the learners are mostly shy and speak very little at SGB meetings but that they are very verbal when sport and social activities are discussed. On the issue of transparency he is also very firm *"…learners are not given equal access to information like the other constituencies on the SGB –they are after all children who do not know what to do with the information".* What the principal orients to is recognition of the need to involve learners (as legislated) but only in a qualified manner. The SA Schools Act does provide for certain provisions for minors on SGBs but with the lowering of age of adulthood from 21 to 18 most if not all SGB learner representatives are regarded as adults.

Essence 3: Strong parent-school relationship-based leadership (Trust me I am your leader)
A principal explains in an emotional tone the death of a child due to drowning on a field trip and how he handled it with the specific parents but also with the rest of the school's parents. The following words still haunts the principal *"…Meneer, Arthur (not his real name) is late (dead)…"* The amicable handling of this most unfortunate situation could only have taken place due to the existence of a strong parent-school relationship before the incident took place. What the principal orients to, is the parents' relationship with the school at all times. From a pedagogic view, he does exercise good judgement in utilising the existing strong relationship to manage the situation. The following verbatim evidence supports this:
"Would you say one of the major reasons for parents to recognise you as a leader ... [is because of the way] you handled the issue?
I would say it was one of them …we managed to establish a relationship up to today …"

Essence 4: Community-based leadership (I have to participate as a leader in the community)

A principal explains her dilemma as a female principal and how she must be a leader on different levels for different groups outside the school. For example the need for a more lenient admission policy because of the need in the community to find spaces for their children in the school, led to a situation where the teachers did not like her decision because of the overcrowding of class rooms. They criticised her for being emotional about the matter *"…because what they saw was emotion and emotional black mail and tantrums."* She further encounters problems ("miss perceptions") from the poorer groups in her community when she encourages them to contribute to the school fund: *"…they seem to think if you request school funds that it is for you personally."* Leadership in the broader community is according to her important, otherwise the gap is filled by *"mob leaders" "the kind of leaders that we would not want our kids to look up to"*. *"To put it very bluntly the majinbo kind of leader"*. What the principal orients to is the needs of the community. From a pedagogic view, she needs to address the pedagogic needs of the children first and the needs of the community second.

Essence 5: Leadership as influence (let me show you the way)

"…in this school the principal is still called meneer and I believe he has the wisdom to lead us and we are happy to follow him and agree with his decisions…"

From this excerpt it is clear that a principal to a greater or lesser degree, exercises influence on the school environment. The question is what kind of influence and how effective are principals in influencing others to develop their potential as human beings. As teachers we are called to lead our children. We need to give them hope and direction. We need to model character, integrity, courage and discipline. We also need to create an environment in which they can grow and flourish. We lead them with care and with wisdom. The essence of principalship ability is therefore more clearly visible where the personal influence of the leader is met with people following him or her willingly. As Maxwell (1998:13) says, it is not the position that makes the leader; it is the leader that makes the position. What the principal orients to is recognition of his role as an influencing agent. This orientation should however be driven by a need to seek what is best for the pupils to ensure a pedagogic principled influence.

Van Rensburg (2007:77) suggests in his book the following principles for an organisation and that links up with the five essences from our data. The researchers see the sixth principle as an integration of the five essences above.

TABLE 1: PRINCIPALSHIP ESSENCES FOR TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Principles for organisations – including schools	Principalship essences	First attempt to operationalisation of these essences
1. Systems perspective See the bigger picture – interrelationships, interconnectedness a movement away from "silo" thinking	Policy driven leadership (Defending the Code of Conduct for learners)	Change from manager to leader Focus on purposing
2. Individual consideration	Child centred leadership (The emotional state of the child dictates) Creating a growth environment – care, inspiration, discipline and wisdom (team and cultural orientation)	Focus on learning in staff meetings Make shared decisions about curriculum and teaching Focus on empowerment
3. Building community (ubuntu philosophy)	Strong parent-school relationship-based leadership (Trust me I am your leader) Modelling leadership – character, integrity, courage and personal mastery (personal growth orientation)	Focus on public service Focus on collaborative and political skills Focus on dependency
4. Open communication and dialogue	Community-based leadership (I have to participate as a leader in the community)	Focus on dependency
5. Servant leadership (Sergiovanni, 2000)	Leadership as influence (let me show you the way) Vision and direction (proactive orientation)	Coaching/mentoring Monitoring of teaching and learning on all the levels
6. Valuing process	Integration of all five essences	Begin to value the important role that teachers play in the success of their school.

Conclusion
In the theoretical frame provided by the Rational Choice Theory a principal in his or her leadership decisions (choices) acts rationally in the sense that the actions orient to ultimate pedagogic principles which will lead to achieving practical goals set by the school thus "pragmatic principalship". The cost benefit motivation in human action must not only been seen in a monetary sense but if a principal is a pedagogic principled leader he or she would act upon what is in the best interest of the child – short term and long term.

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