

## School principals' perceptions of team management: a multiple case-study of secondary schools

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*The notion of school management through teams (team management), though not a new phenomenon in South Africa, was formalized after the advent of democracy in 1994 and the subsequent reorganization of the education system. The concept was subsequently fleshed out in official documentation where the composition and roles of school management teams (SMTs) were elaborated upon. The notion of team management is rooted in theories that stress participation, notably site-based (school-based) management, teamwork, and distributed leadership. We report on a study in which the perceptions of secondary school principals, in Grahamstown, South Africa, of team management were explored. The study was interpretive in orientation, and utilized qualitative data gathering techniques in all (ten) of the state-aided secondary schools in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape province. We found that, while team management was generally welcomed and even celebrated by principals, there were fundamental tensions surrounding principals' understanding of their leadership roles in a team context. We consider the implications of these findings for leadership development in the context of team management.*

**Keywords:** educational leadership; educational management; leadership development; school management teams; team leadership

### Introduction

A significant development in the South African education system over the past decade has been the move towards site-based management and its associated management approaches, chiefly those that stress participation. The tendency to regard school principals as solely responsible for leadership and management of schools is gradually being replaced by the notion that leadership and management are the prerogative of many, if not all, stakeholders in education (Department of Education, 1996:19). This is evident in a range of policy documents, ranging from the South African Schools Act (1996) to the more recent Draft Policy Framework: Education Leadership and Management Development (undated). The Department of Education has also attempted to give substance to this purpose by providing manuals to guide educational managers in the implementation of decentralised management structures, such as the School Management Team (SMT), the Learners' Representative Council (LRC), and the School Governing Body (SGB).

The political/social imperative to democratize the system as well as the organisation (the school in this case) is strongly supported in literature. There is significant evidence to support the notion that hierarchical, top-down structures are not appropriate for school leadership and management. Owens (2001:327), for example, is of the view that the "... top down exercise of power

and centralized control have demonstrably failed to produce the organisational results the advocates of traditional organisational theory claimed it would". Similarly, leadership theory has moved consistently and progressively away from the notion of the single, 'heroic' leader. While transformational leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2004) may still seem to be privileging the power of the individual over many, post-transformational approaches stress participation and teamwork. These developments have occurred within a different conceptualisation of 'organisation', where more rigid notions associated with bureaucracy have gradually given way to more flexible, 'intelligent' constructs, such as in the learning organisation (Jamali, Houry & Sahyoun, 2006).

It was against this background that in this study we sought to explore secondary school principals' experiences and perceptions of team management, focusing on School Management Teams (SMTs) as the structural sites of participative management within schools.

### Literature review

The gradual shift towards site-based (school-based) management in education systems has been a world-wide phenomenon, driven by the dual imperatives of changing societal values and the rate of change (Walker, 1994:38). Site-based management is seen as having the potential to reflect social values of democratic participation as well as to respond quickly and flexibly to contextual challenges (*ibid.*). The increased emphasis on participation in management has resulted in a renewed interest in teamwork, and in team management and leadership in particular.

Concurrent with this development has been the evolution of leadership approaches which de-emphasise the individual leader and stress group or team leadership. One of the most prominent of these is distributed leadership (MacBeath, 2005; Bauer & Bogotch, 2006). In this brief literature review we attempt to find conceptual and practical coherence among three inter-related concepts: site-based management, teamwork, and team leadership. The coherence thus established serves as a conceptual framework for the study of principals' perceptions of team leadership in the context of SMTs in secondary schools.

### Site-based management

The devolution of decision-making in schools in South Africa advocated by official documents (from the Task Team Report on Educational Management Development (Department of Education (DoE), 1996) to the more recent (undated) Draft Policy Framework for Educational Management Development rests on an acceptance of site-based management (SBM). SBM is based on democratic principles. It enables broader participation by those 'on site' dealing directly with issues that need to be resolved, people who potentially have 'on site' expertise. It posits a view of the school as an organisation that is less locked into overhead control and authority, working against hierarchical models towards learning organisations (Jamali *et al.*, 2006). But it also

— significantly — problematises the notion of accountability. According to Cheun and Cheng (1996:6), SBM shifts the locus of accountability as “schools shift from external control management to active self-management”. In a context of strong “external control management” accountability is relatively unproblematic: the school principal is clearly accountable to external authorities; the staff are accountable to the principal. In SBM, by contrast, lines and areas of accountability can become blurred since the expectation is that all organisation members will be accountable for their practice, to themselves, to each other, and to authority figures.

There is also little evidence to indicate whether SBM has any effect on teaching and learning and curricular practices, the core ‘business’ of schools. In fact, Bauer and Bogotch (2006:465), reporting on research findings, found that “the relationship of SBM to classroom practice was virtually non-existent.”

SBM is, therefore, by no means as unproblematic as it may appear, and the next sections focus on some of the tensions and challenges inherent in the SBM-related concepts of teamwork and distributed leadership.

### Teamwork

There is strong support for management through teamwork in literature (Everard & Morris, 1996:156; Hayes, 1997:28; Belbin, 2000:219; Drach-Zahavy & Somech, 2001:52; Sheard & Kakabadse, 2001:133), and in this sense the move towards formalizing team management in school contexts through establishing SMTs is justified.

The advantages of teamwork are also fully documented. Indeed, Stott and Walker (1999:51-52) suggest that “the advantages of teamwork are taken almost for granted, given the extensive coverage in recent education literature”. The benefits they mention should be familiar to any student or practitioner interested in team management, including “collaboration, empowerment, co-operation and consultation” (Stott & Walker, 1999:51). They cite arguments that teamwork provides teachers with “a significant role in school decision making”, “control over their work environment”, and “opportunities to contribute to [a] range of professional roles” (Stott & Walker, 1999:52). Finally, they record the claims that teams can solve problems more creatively than individual leaders and that modern organisations need ‘processing machines’ to deal with the overwhelming flow of information (Stott & Walker, 1999:53).

More importantly, there is growing understanding of the conditions necessary for effective teamwork, and the characteristics of effective team functioning. These serve as important guidelines for managers who want to take seriously the sobering caution “that it is easy to form so-called teams and then claim that the school is structured ‘collaboratively’, but unless there are major shifts in thinking ... little real change will result” (Walker, 1994:38-39). These ‘major shifts’ involve the development of conditions necessary for teamwork, which may broadly be described as two-fold: structural and cultural. By

‘structural’ is meant the logistical arrangements and decisions that need to be made to accommodate teamwork in a school. ‘Cultural’ refers to the culture and climate of a school, the less visible norms and values that inform practice, and the resultant ethos that prevails. The argument is that teamwork needs favourable conditions of both a structural and cultural nature to flourish.

### Structural support

Schools are by nature highly structured organisations, with (usually) clear lines of hierarchy and accountability (Bush, 2003:45). This feature is systemically linked to the self-evident reality that schools are complex organisations, peopled by complex individuals, often drawn from a range of cultures, all working towards the goal of effective teaching and learning. It would simply be impossible for schools to function without clear procedures, firm guidelines, and clear lines of accountability. This obvious truth is borne out whenever one chooses to visit a dysfunctional school, only to discover that the school is lacking in basic infrastructural and logistical needs, such as a working timetable, or that expectations of teachers and learners are either not spelled out or not taken seriously. Moving towards a ‘flatter’ structure is therefore a significant challenge, but it is a challenge that needs to be faced if team management is to succeed. A hierarchically rigid organisational structure will clearly work against important attributes of team management, such as flexibility, creativity, and risk-taking (Stott & Walker, 1999:53-56). This implies that organisational structure needs to accommodate teamwork. Walker (1994:39) argues that schools need to nurture “more organic organizational patterns”. Organic here is taken to mean patterns that are dynamic, growing in response to needs and projects, as opposed to patterns previously determined and static. The term should, we think, refer not only to the formation and dissolution of teams (as in *ad hoc* project committees) but also to ways in which groups function. An organic pattern of functioning suggests a climate in which all team members feel free to participate, and conversation is shaped by interest and participation rather than rigid procedure.

A further structural condition is support. Nothing new flourishes without support, and teams are no different. Support here refers to more than — but includes — logistical and administrative support. Clearly teamwork needs an investment of time, space, even money. Less obviously teams need to have free and easy access to information they may need to tackle problems. But what teamwork needs from the organisation as a whole is clarity concerning their roles and structures, as well as how each team links with other teams and the organisation as a whole (Stott & Walker, 1999:53). Clarity of roles and functions can be difficult to attain. In the case of the SMTs in South Africa, the manuals issued by the DoE provide little assistance in this regard. Clearly these are issues that are expected to be resolved locally, ‘on site’, suggesting a strong need for principal leadership.

Team composition is also viewed as a key structural element. Belbin’s

(online) work in this regard serves as a benchmark in the field, and his sophisticated model of role allocation to members of teams (co-ordinator, shaper, 'plant', monitor, implementer, teamworker, completer, resource investigator) is widely used and cited. It is on this basis that he argues for heterogeneity, and suggests that "The deliberate creation of homogeneity in a management team has the effect of unbalancing the occupational breakdown of the teams we compose" (Belbin, 1981:20). This argument finds support in Musaaazi (1982:54), Bush (1995:49), and especially Drach-Zahavy and Somech (2001:44) who see the diversity in teams as the driving force for the achievement of results because people from different backgrounds bring with them different experiences and different knowledge bases.

But heterogeneity is perhaps a more complex issue in a South African school context where true heterogeneity would ideally include cultural and perhaps ethnic differences too, given the country's transformative agenda. This would be difficult to accomplish at this stage. Despite the democratic environment schools are operating under, most South African school staffs do not yet represent a cross-section of the population. Hence, while heterogeneity in terms of gender, experience, and expertise may be achieved, composing teams that are heterogeneous on cultural and linguistic grounds would hardly be possible. The teams reported on in this study were indeed non-heterogeneous in this sense. Heterogeneity in terms of formal 'seniority' or even experience, by contrast, may be more achievable, though here too it would be difficult — given the nature and function of SMTs — to manage composition in ways suggested above. It would be desirable, though, since it has the potential, if managed carefully, to work against competitiveness among teachers and foster a spirit of co-operation (Stott & Walker, 1999:56).

### Cultural support

Cohesion is widely acknowledged as a key characteristic of effective teams (Stott & Walker, 1999:56; Dione & Yammarino, 2004:181; Šumanski & Kolenc, 2007:102). Cohesion refers to the extent to which team members 'cohere', feel that they belong and are happy to work together. It also refers to the extent to which team members agree on and identify with the work at hand, and clearly links with structural support in the sense that a team which knows its role in the organisational structure as a whole is more likely to feel a sense of belonging and purpose. Ultimately, though, cohesion is about relationships, and this simple fact raises issues of attitudes and leadership. Among the key values that underpin cohesion are trust, openness, and a willingness to participate (Stott & Walker, 1999:54; Joseph & Winston, 2005:6; Bauer & Bogotch, 2006:454). Stashevski and Kowlowski (2006:66) include "interpersonal attraction, task commitment, and group pride" as key values. These values point to the importance of interpersonal, social relationships in teams, and also highlight the role of the team leader (Belbin's "co-ordinator"). This is an element easily overlooked in teamwork, but it would be naïve to imagine that teams will simply continue to function in the absence

of leadership. As Stashevski and Kowlowski (2006:64) put it: “even a team has a dominant person who, for our purposes, can be called a leader who may well play a central role in determining group performance.” This leads to the third dimension we discuss, distributed leadership.

### Team leadership

As mentioned earlier, the renewed interest in teamwork resonates with approaches to leadership that emphasise group rather than individual input. In terms of the ‘task–person’ dichotomy that characterises leadership theory, contemporary theories emphasise leadership as relational and ‘constructivist’ (Lambie, 1995), focused on ‘service’ (Russell, 2000), and ‘distributed’ (Macbeath, 2005). Distributed leadership, in particular, provides a useful lens to make sense of leadership in a teamwork context.

It must be noted at the outset that the notion of distributed leadership is different from delegation. Macbeath (2006:354) adopts Rogers’ term “symbiosis” to clarify the difference:

Symbiosis is a term used to describe a form of reciprocal relationship in which there exists an implicit give and take and a level of mutual respect. This is by definition different from the concept of ‘delegation’, which underpins much of thinking about distributed leadership. While delegation is expressed in ‘giving’ responsibility to others or allowing responsibility by structural default, symbiosis has a more organic quality.

This suggests that leadership (as a construct and phenomenon) be reconsidered; rather than being a function of position and privilege, leadership is seen as an ever-present potential, available to any member of the organisation. Leadership is, in a sense, infused throughout the organisation. Culturally this presupposes high levels of mutual trust and willingness to accept others’ leadership; structurally, distributing leadership would seem possible only in organisations that have moved away from traditional hierarchical models. Distributed leadership would seem to be an appropriate approach to follow in leading and managing an organisation in which teamwork is utilised.

Yet distributed leadership is also not unproblematic. Bauer and Bogotch (2006:446) warn that distributing leadership can have negative effects, arguing that “individual possessiveness and security become secondary to the needs of the school”. In systems still geared towards rewarding members on an individual basis this could become problematic. A more significant threat seems to be the tension school heads may experience between “holding on and letting go” (Macbeath, 2005:354). This refers to a tension between a desire on the part of school heads to ‘let go’ and enable the distribution of significant responsibilities, and the opposing desire to ‘hold on’ for fear of losing control and perhaps being exposed in the event of team failure. Tensions like these are exacerbated by the apparently universal phenomenon of increased state control within an espoused climate of SBM (Gunter, 2004:29; Bush, 1999: 243; Glatter, 1999:254). This is certainly the case in South Africa, where demanding quality assurance measures — such as the Integrated Quality

Management System — are expected to be applied in a ‘developmental’ way. Macbeath (2005) found significant levels of reservation surrounding distributed leadership in a study conducted in schools in England. One school head felt strongly that: “In the end I’m the one who is accountable, the one whose neck is on the line as it were. So I delegate much leadership but my intuitive style is somehow benevolent dictatorship” (Macbeath, 2005:353). And another claimed he was happy to distribute leadership “... provided I can assemble a staff that is skilled and efficient and trustworthy” (Macbeath, 2005:353). The implication for headship is that leading a school is a balancing act, distributing responsibility as far as possible but not to an extent where “the head becomes so removed from the school because [he or she is] not intervening” (Macbeath, 2005:354).

In closing this section we argue that the formalisation of team management in the form of SMTs in South African schools has rested on the adoption of SBM. The successful implementation of teamwork in a school is likely to require structural as well as cultural support. The most important change required is a shift in how leadership is perceived, and leadership practices that involve distribution of responsibility are more likely to succeed than those which cling to traditional ‘heroic’ leadership approaches. However, distributing leadership and devolving team-based management brings challenges and tensions, particularly in an era where significant overhead control continues to reinforce the principal’s sense of accountability. Perhaps it is as Lucia (cited in Bauer & Bogotch, 2006:465) has argued, that

while mandated policies of accountability and formal leadership roles provided the initial thrust needed to launch ... the distributed cycle, it was within-school relationships based on structures and a collaborative culture that were significant to sustaining a focus on curricular and instructional issues.

Perhaps the most significant ingredient of effective team leadership is the ability to manage human interaction:

Understanding the needs of people for connection and belonging is a critical principle of effective high performing team leadership. People walk through the door to do the right thing each day. Individuals on the team have a significant or less significant degree of need for human interaction and involvement. Understanding the team members and their needs for involvement, contribution and overall social interaction of the team is of critical importance (Wing, 2005:11).

### **Research question**

In this study we set out to explore education leaders’ understanding of their roles in a team context. We report on findings of a multiple case study in secondary schools in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape province in response to the question:

What are school principals’ experiences and perceptions of team management in secondary schools in Grahamstown?

## **Methodology**

### **Research orientation**

This research was situated in an interpretive orientation. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) suggest that the interpretive researcher's purpose is to gain understanding of situations that are complex. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000:22) "... the central endeavour in the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subject of human experience". Working in this paradigm opens up the opportunity to find out how respondents understand the phenomenon of team management based on their lived experience rather than theoretical knowledge.

### **Research participants**

This study included all the (10) government-aided secondary schools in Grahamstown. The choice of these schools was on the basis of "availability, accessibility and theoretical interest" (Schwandt, 1997:140-141), and also on the understanding that schools from different historical backgrounds may well have been experiencing team management in diverse ways. This diversity is, however, not explored here, since our intention is to present a broad picture across the sample as a whole.

This study was based on a bigger study which probed all SMT members' and teachers' perceptions of team management. Since reporting on all of the findings would exceed the scope of a single publication, the authors decided to report on data gathered from the principals of these schools only. It was felt that principals' perceptions would be especially significant given their perceived positions as the formal leaders of the schools.

## **Research tools**

### **Questionnaires**

The first step in the data-collection process was a questionnaire administered to the SMT members of the schools, including the principals. Data from the questionnaires were used to inform follow-up interviews. The questionnaires included open-ended questions to invite honest, personal comments from the respondents (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:255). These questions probed participants' experience and perceptions of their roles within SMTs in managing the school, and their understanding of the opportunities and challenges involved in team management.

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were the chief data-collection tools. These allowed for in-depth probing and extended responses. Questions focused on how respondents experienced and perceived team management, probing strengths and weaknesses in particular. The researchers made every effort to encourage respondents to refer to lived experience and narrate lived examples of the perceptions they shared.

### Observation

To strengthen findings and provide the possibility of triangulation, overt observation of SMT meetings was undertaken where feasible and possible (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:314). Observation was regarded as a supportive or supplementary technique to collect data that may complement or set in perspective data obtained from questionnaires and interviews (Robson, 1993:238). The object here was not to check for accuracy of data, but to help gain a picture of how participants lived what they believed, hence to enrich rather than confirm findings.

### Findings

In presenting these findings, codes (P1—P10) are used to distinguish the respondents. As already mentioned, only principals' responses are discussed. Qualitative data from both the questionnaires and interviews are presented, with references to observation data where appropriate. Findings are presented in three themes identified as significant, namely:

- The benefits of team management;
- The leadership tension; and
- Threats to teamwork.

### The benefits of team management

#### Sharing the load

Data from the questionnaires confirmed that the concept of team management was not regarded as a new phenomenon in schools. However, it emerged that the formalisation of SMTs had enabled principals to spread the workload of managing schools among staff members, occasionally including post level one teachers in a co-opted capacity. In one of the meetings observed, the principal called in an '*expert*' post-level one teacher to participate in deliberations. The idiom "*many hands make light work*" expressed by P4 captures the idea of sharing the load. Observations of SMT meetings confirmed that in most cases roles were clearly allocated to SMT members.

#### Empowerment and staff development

A strong benefit identified by respondents was the idea that teachers were empowered through teamwork. For several principals the SMT provided a platform for professional development. P5 told of how he used delegation to "*build on people's strengths*", for example, by allocating academic tasks to academically inclined teachers. For P3 distributing leadership helped to prepare teachers for when "*they apply for senior posts, so wherever they go they don't feel unempowered*". And P5 argued that opportunities to grow meant "*they're going to become better managers or administrators*". Principals also distributed duties such as chairing and finalizing the agenda among SMTs. At the SMT meetings observed it was clear that members had been given the responsibility of managing portfolios within the schools. In four of the schools investigated post-level one teachers who had the "*know-how, skills*

and expertise of some kind" (P1) were included on the SMT. In one case the principal referred to the post level one teacher as an 'expert' when she was invited to participate in deliberations.

### Site-based policy development

Another striking feature of some of the principals' leadership was the creative use of policy and official guidelines (such as the SMT Manual). P2 explained that his SMT had designed "*additional guidelines*" for their internal school policy. P3 argued that school problems were unique and the departmental guidelines were generic, and therefore "*you then have to adjust policies and have your own (guidelines) which you can use in a particular school*". In similar vein P4 had "*formulated guidelines from the experience that we have*" and he was also of the view that "*HODs need to formulate departmental policy that is in line with the school policy*".

### Participation

The strongest theme to emerge from the data was the notion of participative management which was seen as the cornerstone of team management and the effective functioning of SMTs. Participants generally showed high levels of commitment to participative management. Three respondents — P2, P4, and P5 — stressed the importance of consultation. As P2 put it, "*if I've got an idea I have to sell it so that it can be endorsed in the SMT meeting and then taken from that point to the teachers*". P4 warned that unless you consulted "*you will be seen as a dictator ... you will lose support*". P3 enjoyed the "*lovely debates*" and said, "*You've got to learn to see that difference (of opinions) as a strength rather than a problem*". SMT meetings observed showed high levels of free and open debate within a participative climate

In summary, the general picture that emerged was favourably disposed to team management. However, there were also some significant tensions identified by respondents.

### The leadership tension

A significant tension may be described as a tension between the leader's role in *initiating and driving teamwork* on the one hand, and *being in control and accountable* on the other.

On the one hand, principals saw themselves as team-workers and delegators. P2 and P5 believed that principals were initiators in their schools. P5 preferred to talk about "*leadership rather than management*" as he believed that leaders "*emerge*" while managers "*are trained*"; according to him "*management is a structured thing; I like to use the term leadership because with leadership I have got to initiate changes — management doesn't come with changes*". P1 felt that leadership could "*be prompted*" in other SMT members. Leadership was therefore not necessarily positional. As leaders they also needed to delegate, though P4 warned, "*when you give somebody responsibility, don't interfere, wait for the end result*". As leaders, principals were free to

exercise their discretion in certain circumstances. P3 felt that as a principal *“there are decisions which you’ve got to take sometimes but it must not be your style of taking decisions alone all the time”*.

These views were by and large substantiated by observations of SMT meetings; there was considerable evidence that: SMT members participated freely in discussions; chairpersons (usually the principal, but not always) were careful to solicit input; participants’ feelings were respected; and participation usually depended on individuals’ areas of expertise.

However, running counter to this belief and practice was the inescapable sense that principals felt accountable to the authorities, and therefore sometimes acted independently of others’ input. P5 acknowledged the assistance of SMT members, but stressed that *“if something goes wrong it starts with me”*. When it came to accountability, P2 lamented, *“really you have to account as an individual. It’s not the whole SMT who accounts”* and consequently could feel *“embarrassed accounting on behalf of other people”*. P4 claimed that *“some principals do everything themselves”* because as a principal *“You cannot abdicate responsibility — give it away to somebody else”*. He argued that principals needed to:

*Accept being accountable because somebody should be accountable ... it [accountability] comes with the package of being a school principal [laughs]. You are paid to take whatever comes and it’s also to the position as the principal you have to be accountable.*

He argued that SMTs were to some extent restricted in their participation:

*The principal represents the whole SMT when it comes to the district office ... whatever happens at school comes back to the principal ... it is almost like you are the guilty party — you are the guilty person as the principal because you couldn’t bring that person around or change his problem.*

And he warned: *“When there is a problem like a crisis it (the principalship) becomes a very lonely position”*.

In elaborating on principals’ roles, the responses revealed a similar dual nature. Some of their roles seemed purely technical or bureaucratic, such as:

*Ensuring that there is a meeting if there is a need for it; ensuring punctuality; accounting to whoever comes to school (such as parents and departmental officials); chairing meetings; monitoring staff; coordinating meetings; being in control; being responsible.*

The questionnaire responses similarly emphasised the principal’s key role in calling and chairing meetings; responses frequently referred to principals as *“having the final say”* and being *“ultimately accountable”*.

On the other hand, some of the functions identified in the interviews and questionnaires indicated an acceptance of their roles as human resource developers, such as:

*Giving guidance; making use of the staff’s skills and talents; being very open and transparent; being involved; setting an example; listening to ideas coming from the SMT.*

This tension highlights the fact that team management does not diminish the

importance of leadership. Leadership seems even more important in a team environment, both in terms of its role in developing human potential, but also, significantly, in terms of leaders' acceptance of being ultimately accountable, almost on behalf of team members. Hence principals felt they needed to be authoritative at times. P5 remembered being coercive at times: "*If I want the staff member to do something and he is not keen on it I'll say 'No, you've got to do it because it needs to be done'*".

### Threats to team management

One of the challenges that emerged was the realisation that a group of people were not necessarily a 'team'. P1 pointed to the challenge of forming a strong team. He argued that "*More effort should be put towards building a team so that you really have a strong team ...*" He felt little if any attention had been given to this aspect of teamwork. P3 highlighted personal clashes that arise:

*Where people are involved there will always be difference of opinions and personality clashes... there might be problems emanating from staff to other staff ... there might be personal clashes which cannot be accommodated properly, there might be different agendas.*

An interesting dimension of team management that emerged was the notion of acting in ways that arise from having to be '*politically correct*' rather than truly participative. So for example, because of the political attitudes of some teachers, principals at times felt pressurised to consult more broadly than they wished to. On the question of whether post level one teachers should be included in the SMT, some of the principals took defensive positions. According to P1, if teachers were not included in the SMT:

*They (the staff) will not accept it (the resolution) because they were not part and parcel of synthesizing the solution — they will reject it; they would oppose the decision to ensure that the planning is done by them as well ... But if there are teachers in the SMT they readily accept whatever the SMT comes up with.*

He added:

*If I can call a staff meeting without having consulted the SMT members they would disagree vehemently to that; they might boycott the staff meeting because any staff meeting must be sanctioned by the SMT.*

According to P5 "*if you are working as a team, that team is going to convince the rest of the staff that what you are doing and the decisions you are making are the right decisions*", but even he believes that including post level one teachers in the SMT "*would create a problem with other post level one teachers because why are they left out?*". Interestingly, the questionnaire data revealed that SMTs usually consist only of teachers in promotion posts; other teachers are occasionally 'co-opted' for their expertise, as reported earlier.

P2 also saw "*Policies of the department*" as threats to team management because they had to make sure that "*whatever decision we take is not contrary to any of the policies of the department*". Compliance with policy also emerged as an issue for P3 who claimed that "*to manage the school on a daily basis*

based on the departmental policy” was a challenge team management was facing.

Principals also identified variable levels of competence among team members as a threat. P1 stressed that relying on other team members may mean that “*You might not meet certain due dates and the major thing is to meet due dates by the department*”. P4 argued that some teachers were lazy: “*You get teachers who would want to do the basic minimum, saying that’s where my job description ends. You get teachers who are negative*”, which obviously threatens to derail attempts at team-building. According to P3: “*Working in teams you rely on the weakest person*” and “*not every HOD is pulling his or her weight*”. This may lead to some members being overloaded, as P5 explained: “*I do a lot of things myself because the staff is overloaded ... experience tells me when they are overloaded*”.

Disloyalty to the team was another issue that surfaced in the interviews. P2 referred to ‘sabotage’ as a threat to teamwork:

*I would not say to ‘sabotage’ as it were but they (SMT members) would go around the corner and seem not to agree with you on what you agreed on as the SMT when they meet other colleague teachers and would view the same point in another way.*

To P5 this could also occur when “... one or two people who were not part of the discussions go out and cause problems”. A more deeply rooted cause of disloyalty may be, according to P3, that “*You might not share the same vision and then you’ll find disruptive elements within the team ... those are present dangers*”.

Some principals clearly found it difficult always to trust all team members. P5 believed that teamwork was difficult for the leader because “*The job may not be done the way you would like it, you may not get that personal satisfaction*”. P4 took a similar view, suggesting that some members did not practise what they preached. He explained: “*You get people who can tell you the most beautiful things in a meeting situation, the most beautiful ideas; but when it comes to reality it is not implemented*”. P4 pointed out another reason why some principals preferred to do everything themselves: he recalled his predecessor who kept back information because “*He was almost afraid that if he showed somebody, that man will know more and will take over his position*”. It seemed that the need for personal satisfaction with a job well done could drive principals to tackle projects individually rather than delegate to team members. P5 explained:

*The job may not be done the way you would like to do it. If I’m going to run the governing body elections — I know how I would like to do it but I have delegated it to someone else he may not do it the same way I want to do it. You may not always have that personal satisfaction but if you trust whatever they do it’s going to be fine.*

Principals also felt that teamwork was time consuming. P3 argued:

*Things are not done quickly enough because of the process of consultation and talking because sometimes it does take time to actually come to one*

*opinion about something or to an acceptable opinion, and things that need urgent attention sometimes don't get it.*

And according to P4:

*Maybe you would like to do something today but now remember you have to consult with the team — you have to call the team together and discuss. Based on the time factor again sometimes it is not easy to agree on something it takes hours and hours to debate and to ... I won't say argue, but to debate this thing, you go back and say let us go back again and come back in two or three days' time.*

The overall picture that emerged was therefore overwhelmingly positive. Principals by and large welcomed and seemed to practise team management. They pointed to clear benefits. Points of tension and threats were, however, clearly identified, and these form the basis of the discussion that follows. We chose to focus on these since they had the potential to provide guidelines for practice and research, and were also in concurrence with Walker (cited earlier) that the benefits of teamwork are fairly obvious.

### **Discussion of findings**

The tension between “holding on and letting go” (Macbeath, 2005:354) emerged strongly in this study and perhaps typifies the key difficulty of team management. That is to say, structural arrangements and support notwithstanding, a key to how well team management works seems to be the extent to which principals are able to ‘let go’. We have cited examples of principals expressing their reservations about trusting all of their colleagues, and their fears about being let down. Behind these feelings lies an apparent buckling under the pressure of accountability, which “comes with the package of being a school principal.” It is indeed, as Cheun and Cheng (1996:6) have suggested, that in site-based management accountability becomes more complex. It may be that in team environments, the official leaders’ sense of formal accountability (upwards) may even be increased. But it would be simplistic to infer that these two forces — the ability to trust team members and the sense of accountability — exist in inverse proportion to each other. There are other complicating factors, not least of which is the sense that not all team members are deemed equally competent. One of the principals suggested that the team was only as strong as its weakest member. In these situations trust takes on a strategic character, and principals who are discriminatory about where and to what extent they apportion trust may simply be astute readers of followers’ readiness and professional maturity, rather than overly conscious of accountability.

This points to a significant challenge for team leadership: leaders do, after all, need to ensure effective functioning of their schools, and distributing responsibilities to members who may not be competent is a clear threat to effectiveness. On the other hand, leadership is also about professional and human resource development, and it follows that the developmental virtue of teamwork — identified as a benefit in this research — is likely to be compro-

mised when responsibilities are withheld from selected team members. Hence it is not only effectiveness that is threatened: the interpersonal, 'social' elements of teamworking (Stashevski & Kowloowski, 2006:66) are also affected, and it is likely that team cohesion will suffer. As mentioned earlier, cohesion is about relationships (Stott & Walker, 1999; Dione & Yammarino, 2004; Šumanski & Kolenc, 2007:102), and team participation is seen as a fundamentally *human* and *social* activity (Owens, 2001:284). But can a principal who does not have complete confidence in all team members be blamed for apportioning responsibility selectively, even at the risk of cohesion? This question becomes particularly pertinent in the current climate of policy preponderance in the name of quality assurance.

This perspective goes some way towards explaining why some of the principals in this study placed such a premium on policy, even to the extent where policy was regarded as a "stumbling block" to good practice. This leads into the second tension, that between *mere compliance* and *creative leadership*. Coupled with creativity is the notion of risk-taking, regarded by some as a key characteristic of team management (Stott & Walker, 1999:53). Creative, risk-taking leadership suggests an attitude which regards policy as guidelines rather than law, and in this view the notion of being constricted by policy would be anathema to any form of effective leadership. The sample included responses from principals who reported a more creative and pragmatic approach to policy (discussed earlier) which is indicative of an interpretation, rather than blind implementation of policy. This brings into focus the significant role of leadership in team management, and in particular the importance of intelligence in leadership. Clearly the ability to interpret policy (as well as contextual factors such as organisational culture) requires intelligence and recent studies have shown that intelligence is fundamentally related to effective leadership (Stavsheki & Stowlowksi, 2006:64).

Again, though, the situation is more complex than it seems, and it would be simplistic to suggest that leaders who merely comply lack intelligence. The findings also revealed instances of compliance with what was expected (by policy and what had become accepted practice) from the *fear* of possible criticism and even sabotage, rather than from personal commitment. We describe this as *nervous* leadership. Nervous leaders consult others lest these individuals cause trouble and oppose decisions. While this tendency is clearly a significant threat to teamwork — which thrives on trust and mutual acceptance — it is in many ways an understandable reaction to a school climate characterised by political and social tensions. And it may be possible to argue that leading in this way may be an 'intelligent' course of action, if sheer survival is at stake. But of course it is the survival and effectiveness of the *group* or team that is at stake and the challenge becomes one of social or emotional intelligence. Stott and Walker (1999:55) warn:

Teamwork effectiveness could be seriously impaired in schools that foster secrecy and suspicion. In such conditions, people play safe and pursue low-risk strategies. An absence of interdependence and the pressure of

high levels of animosity between teams may affect overall organisational performance.

Stott and Walker (1999:55-56) argue that the leader's role in 'climate enhancement' is crucial, and we would argue that leaders require social or emotional intelligence to accomplish this.

Emotional intelligence has been strongly associated with participative forms of management and leadership (Singh, Manser & Mestry, 2007). Emotional intelligence is a key ingredient of building and nourishing relationships, and we argue that this skill lies at the heart of team management in politically and socially tense environments. We would add that the ability to recognise and confront 'secrecy and suspicion' requires courage and a strong sense of self.

The final tension is perhaps the most human and the most understandable. Literature reports comprehensively on how managers are torn between efficiency — making quick decisions without consulting — and real teamwork, i.e. taking the time to consult and really *listen* to others' views. Naturally, the 'quick fix' approach leads to what Bottery (1992:165) described as "pseudo" or even "non-participation." It is tempting to interpret this as merely a matter of not having the time to consult. Many respondents in this study referred to time as a serious threat to team management. But the problem is again more complex, and we argue that framing the challenge as simply a 'time' issue cloaks the real problem. While it is true that some decisions need to be made quickly and therefore can and should be taken by the principal, it is equally true that very few really important decisions cannot wait a day or two. Perhaps failing to consult and really *use* teams stems from a lack of real commitment to the *process* of decision-making, through which personal and professional growth is enhanced. We argue that leaders who *insist* on consultation and constantly look for ways of achieving group decisions are simply expressing their respect for their colleagues, and reinforcing their commitment to relationships and personal growth.

## Conclusion

Based on questionnaire, interview, and observation data the study confirmed that team management through SMTs was generally in place in the ten schools investigated, and that the principals were committed to making it work. While the findings pointed to significant benefits of team management, the tensions and challenges discussed above in our opinion represent key challenges for educational leaders and managers in South Africa. To review briefly, there was the over-riding tension between holding on and letting go, and the concomitant challenge of trust, as key ingredient of building cohesion; there was a tension between mere compliance and creative, courageous leadership, and the associated challenge of social and emotional intelligence; and there was a tension between efficiency (getting the job done) and effectiveness (honouring a commitment to teamwork and personal growth).

The prevalence of these tensions and challenges in the findings suggests

that team management is not yet entrenched in these schools. To use Walker's (1994) framework, while the structures may be in place and operational, it seems too that cultural support is lacking and that some of the schools have not yet developed the necessary climate for the effective functioning of teams. We have identified the values and attitudes required for the establishment and well-being of such a climate, and the question remains how such values and attitudes may be developed in school leaders.

What seems self-evident is that leadership development that focuses on skills and excludes attitudes and values can never suffice. Leadership training programmes and academic programmes in leadership and management should focus on teamwork and team management, not only as a theoretical issue — though that is obviously important — but also experientially. In other words, courses and programmes should integrate the pedagogy of teamwork and team learning. One way of achieving this would be through utilizing organisation development (OD) into course designs. OD principles are inherently aligned with those of participative management and teamwork.

Incorporating experiential learning is another strategy that is likely to yield results. In this regard it is encouraging to note that the new ACE in School Leadership is strongly rooted in experiential and practice-based learning. At the Department of Education (Educational Management and Leadership) Workshop held at Isando on 5 September 2005 the underlying philosophy of the ACE course was firmly established as being

based on the notion that professionals develop their practice most effectively by maximising their experiential learning through engaging in reflective processes ... the effectiveness of any learning experience lies in its influence on the formation, or modification, of concepts that guide the individual's basis for action (Reeves *et al.* cited in DoE, 2005).

This is a bold statement of intent followed through by assessment strategies that stress practice-based performance and reflexive practice (such as portfolios and site-based evaluations). In this way the ACE course has the potential to put practical flesh to theoretical framing. At the very least it promises to offer opportunities for the kind of professional learning and hence personal growth that seems so crucial for education leaders in South Africa.

But learning about teamwork and team management can clearly not be confined to externally organised courses and programmes, and the chief training ground for organisational learning remains the school itself. Some of the respondents in this study saw the role of team management as providing opportunities for personal growth and this is an attitude we feel should be encouraged. Schools need to be learning organisations and clearly one of the best ways of learning how to work together is through doing precisely that in teams and committees within the school structure. But, as has been shown, this requires cultural (social) support and a disposition on the part of the principal that places the development of human potential on at least the same level as getting the job done.

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