

Constructing principals' professional identities through life stories: an exploration

Jabulani Mpungose

j.mpungose@sanbi.org.za

Adopting a humanistic perspective to the study of leadership, I discuss and describe how school principals adapt to their new roles, owing to the new education policies and educational restructuring within the South African Department of Education. The Life History approach was used to collect data from six selected school principals in KwaZulu-Natal. On the basis of the analysis of data, I conclude that leaders create their provisional selves and construct their professional identities from their personal and professional knowledge. Provisional selves, in this context, are temporary solutions principals use to close the gap between their current capacities and self-concepts, and the ideas they hold about what attitudes and behaviours are expected in their new roles.

Keywords: leadership style; life history; life stories; principals; professional identity; structure and agency

Introduction

Several studies that examine leadership roles of school principals (Gergen, 1971; Brott & Kajs, 2001; Abrahao, 2002) see policy role prescription and experience as the most significant leadership factors that influence principals' abilities and/or capacities. Within the context of this paper, the central argument is that the principals' source of influence is their professional identity. Such identity is constructed and developed over an extended period of time, ranging from their entry into the teaching profession to their appointment as school managers and leaders. This argument emanates partly from the fact that the feedback that principals receive from interacting with their staff, in formal settings or otherwise, is one of the major factors that largely influence ways in which they build their self-concepts and therefore reinforce their leadership styles.

Many school principals, who have no previous management or leadership experience, find it difficult to function in their new roles if they do not share meanings and values with their staff. This was confirmed by one of the principals who said, "*When I took over as principal, I did not have an idea of what my roles were, but working with and among my staff and tapping in their beliefs and values have made me grow and be a good leader*". It is in such circumstances that principals need to interact with each other frequently. This would create opportunities for them to share experiences and therefore re-define their identities and roles in line with the policy and structural changes. After all, identity is created for a particular position or role one holds within a group or organization and leaders use this identity in their behaviour

over a wide variety of circumstances (Gergen, 1971).

Principals, however, are also expected to play roles, like facilitating the appraisal process or cooperating with school governing body processes, that are largely pre-determined, and this is reflected in various policy documents such as the National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996, the Employment of Educators Act No. 76 of 1998 and the South African Schools Act (SASA) No. 76 of 1996. While this is the case, principals can make behavioural choices and decisions on how to perform their duties, which may not necessarily conform to the expectations linked to their prescribed roles. These choices and decisions are based on personal values, interests, beliefs and expectations that the principals bring with them and I refer to these, in this paper, as personal or private knowledge. It must be acknowledged though that in general, principals address both, social behaviour as spelled out in policies “social structure”, and personal behaviour “agency” in their day-to-day leadership roles (Giddens, 2005).

Constructing professional identity

Individuals who intend to define themselves and their roles within an organization would first ask themselves the question: ‘Who am I?’ This question assists them in setting their personal identities in the context of the expectation of the group members. In order for individuals to define themselves, they need to first be in possession of the self concept. In order for them to understand who they really are (Antikainen *et al.*, 1996:20), they have to own an idea about how they became what they are, and also where they are going. Answers to these very important questions in leadership serve as a foundation for organizing and establishing relationships with peers, both in the personal and interpersonal fields (Lessard, 1986; Rousseau & Van der Veen, 2001).

The identities that the principals construct in their day-to-day activities and relations at schools have three dimensions, namely: the personal, professional and socio-political. Abrahao (2002:8) argues that in education we cannot separate the personal from the professional self, particularly in a profession that is impregnated with values and ideals and that is very demanding from the standpoint of commitment to human relations.

The answer that the principals give to the question ‘who am I?’ gives a definition of themselves, which eventually influences how they respond to their professional and social demands. Thus, professional identity involves professional socialization and development which “... is a social learning process that includes the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills that are required in a professional role and the development of new values, attitudes, and self-identity components” (Brott & Kajs, 2001:2). This is the reason the manner in which the principals respond to their immediate socio-political and cultural environment results into building and accumulation of knowledge about themselves. During this process, each individual principal allocates his or her acquired knowledge, values and energies to shape his or her professional identity (Abrahao, 2002).

For Schein (1978), the experiences and meaningful feedback that allows people to gain insight into their central and enduring preferences, talents, and values make professional identity more adaptable and mutable early in their careers. The processes by which an individual selectively acquires knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to perform effectively the role of a school leader may range from carefully planned formal education programmes, for example, through less formal, but still planned experiences, like working with a mentor, to informal usually unplanned, on-the-job leadership experiences. Such processes may also yield positive and/or negative results, depending on the manner in which they are organized and offered to the principals (Leithwood *et al.*, 1992:148).

Burke and Reitzes (1981), for example, maintain that the meanings and expectations associated with the role of an individual form a set of rules or standards that guide behaviour. Given the fact that the leadership role of the principals require them to work among people in an organization, the process of professional identity construction cannot only be categorized as 'personal', but as both personal and social. It is in this context that I argue that individual principals construct meaningful descriptions of themselves in the context of the expectations and the use of collective values and meanings acquired during the interaction and socialization with 'relevant others' (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Life stories and professional identity

Qualitative researchers use the life history approach to gather events and happenings in people's lives as their data and then use its analytical procedures to produce explanatory stories (Polkinghorne, 1995:5). The advantages of using life history as a methodological tool in the process of researching for this paper are that its data illustrate the relationship between the selected principals and the communities they serve; they demonstrate how the principals continually negotiate their leadership roles in their daily activities; and they make possible the examination of the links between structure and agency and the construction of professional identity (Bloom & Munro, 1995: 100). In this paper, the concept of structure refers to the rules, roles and policy that principals are faced with in their daily activities. Agency refers to the intentions principals have in doing things and their ability and power to do these things (Musolf, 2003; Giddens, 2005).

The stories that the principals tell are professional life stories made up of events that take place in their professional lives that are defined by their leadership roles and responsibilities. These stories reflect on their confusions, indecisions, insecurities, contradictions, fears, joys, successes, fateful moments, and most of all, their complex lives as leaders of schools in the democratic dispensation (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). These give an idea to the educators about what to expect from the principal during the socialization process and what kind of support they can give to him or her. The principal's transparent nature sometimes motivates the educators to open up to him or

her, and therefore work together towards the common goals of the organization. This limits the incidents of misunderstandings and conflict.

This paper is based on an inquiry that was guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the professional life stories of selected principals to determine the extent to which they reflect the construction of professional identities.
- To explore the complex interplay between structure and agency
- To establish the extent to which school leadership is determined by personal values, interests, beliefs, professional expectations and social influence.

In this paper the life history approach, combined with social phenomenology, form the research tool that was used to deconstruct the stories that make up lives of the selected principals. Social phenomenology was used as a theoretical framework of this paper because it covers both the sociological and educational aspects of this research by explaining how principals view or perceive their leadership roles and construct their identities through their life stories. It also seeks to understand each principal's personal and cultural values, knowledge, beliefs, perspectives and expectations as they are constructed within the principals' life histories (Munro, 1993).

Research design

This paper relies on a qualitative, interpretive research method also known as a narrative approach. The qualitative, interpretive approach was chosen because it describes and analyses people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, experiences, views, and perspectives. The use of the qualitative research method, furthermore, provided this paper direct, first-hand, and more contextual information about the principals' behaviour because the focus was on their feelings, perceptions and opinions. Another reason for the choice of this approach was that the research focused on the principals' everyday work-related activities and situations, which I was trying to understand.

A purposive or selective sampling procedure was used. Purposive sampling identifies those people who have relevant information about and have experienced the process under consideration (Symon & Hornby, 1994). The procedure was judgemental because it was more informed by my experience and knowledge of the area of study to select cases that are representative or typical (Fogelman, 2002). Six school principals were selected using this procedure, from 1,403 public schools in the eThekweni Region. The selected principals were aged between 40 and 50 years. Two of them were females while four were males. Only one primary school principal out the six participated in the research process because the others that were approached had full teaching schedules and could not spare any of their teaching time.

Data collection

The life history approach was selected from the broad qualitative, interpretive

framework as the appropriate research strategy to collect and analyse data for this paper. Life stories were collected by means of interviews, and these were conducted with the principals at their schools. The purpose for interviewing was to find out how the selected principals interpreted or understood their lives, their roles, and the meaning they attach to what happens around them. In-depth semi-structured interviews were therefore used to access the perspectives of the principals, their experiences, feelings, thoughts, opinions, knowledge and intentions. The principals were allowed to tell their stories and then I would follow up interesting avenues that emerged. In order to capture the actual words of the principals accurately, I used a tape recorder. However, permission to tape-record the conversations was obtained in advance. Tape recording allows a much fuller record of the interview because the tape recorder does not lose or change what has been said, nor is it too slow to record all the spoken words.

An important factor in the interviews is respect between the participants and the researcher. Respect for one another in educational research helps to generate and test new, legitimate and valuable knowledge. This calls for a high moral awareness throughout, and an agreed framework of conduct (Whitehead, 2006). During the interview process, I tried to make sure that life stories did not lose their authentic meaning by maintaining a close and healthy relationship between the principals and myself. The principals were perceived and treated as the expert on the researched subject by allowing them a strong role in determining how the interview proceeded. Before the interviews, permission was requested from the principals and they were assured of confidentiality at all times.

Data analysis

My analysis draws from the responses of the selected principals to the interview questions and my attempts to respond to the critical questions of the study. In fact, the critical questions, which were influenced by the objectives of the study, were my beacon that guided me through my navigation into the selected principals' personal lives. The narrative approach, which is a component of the life history analysis, was used to analyse data that was obtained from the interviews. This approach was therefore useful since my research for this paper sought to explore the ways in which the public school principals understood their roles as leaders and professional managers of schools.

Life history analysis is about making sense of a story. It includes brooding and reflecting upon all the data that have been collected. When the raw data have been analysed, the key ideas and themes will flow from the story (Plummer, 2001). The analysis of data was arranged in themes which are regarded as important and relevant areas or events in the lives of the principals. The main aim for engaging in the thematic field analysis was to identify emerging trends and patterns in the responses of the principals and thus formulate general conclusions based on general patterns and trends.

Four major themes emerged from the principals' life stories:

- Professional socialization and professional identity.

- Coping with change in the new dispensation.
- Complex interplay between structure and agency.
- Interpretation of leadership roles.

The data analysis process aimed at determining if the data from the interviews with the six selected principals provided insight into their professional identity construction. The valuable, rich and authentic data from the principals' accounts are provided below in the form of direct extracts. The summary or interpretation of the principals' accounts is presented under the above four themes:

Professional socialization and professional identity

It became evident in the stories that the principals' socialization into the teaching profession had an influence on their professional identities:

I must say that my earlier experiences in my profession made me into the kind of a leader that I am today. I've come across a whole range of new experiences and I'm changing on a daily basis, thanks to my learners and teachers. I think I learnt from my principal to be strict but accommodating (Principal A).

When I started at this school, I joined the English department. We worked as a good team and that gave me a sense of belonging. I was a member of the teachers' union and that is where I gained hands-on leadership development, character development and conflict resolution skills, and interacting at high profile built my confidence (Principal F).

Issues of professional identity, which is an internal or subjective change of an individual in connection with a particular career role, stem from professional socialization and development. This, according to McGowen and Hart (1990), is a learning process that includes the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills that are required in a professional role and development of new values, attitudes, and self-identity components.

I was initiated into management through help, through experience and through professional socialization. When I became principal, we would have meetings where the superintendent would share with us some strategies, but I think the other important platform that really helped me was the principals' forum. So I learned a lot from that forum because it was where we would share problems, challenges and expertise (Principal E).

Schwier *et al.* (2004) believe that prior personal experiences are shared through conversation, negotiation, and construction of new knowledge products. In other words, the individual principal's knowledge and practice will reflect his or her cultural values, norms and beliefs.

My whole background and personal experience really does play a significant impact in my job. One of the teachings I got when I grew up was that when people talk, you've got to listen and respect their opinions and views. Teachers at this school are fairly and actively involved in decision-making. We always sit down, share experiences and knowledge around educational issues, and agree on what action to take (Principal E).

I prefer sharing information with my teachers, planning with them and involving them in decision-making. My Christian values guide me in performing my leadership duties and I've learnt not to exploit my colleagues misfortunes to my advantage so that I may be seen as an effective an efficient manager (Principal C).

The professional socialization into the teaching profession was not smooth for all of them because of the challenges that they encountered, but they all responded well to them and came out matured individuals. They learnt to be hard workers, focused and committed teachers, hence their promotions to leadership positions.

When I came to this school the attitudes were divided. I think it's normal when a new teacher comes that people become divided. I started as an HOD and the male teachers wouldn't accept to be managed by a female. The challenges I experienced made me strong and wise because I was prepared to face anything that would come my way. I worked my way up to this position through hard work and the support I received from other teachers and my former principal who was a strong and honest man (Principal C).

Coping with change in the new dispensation

In order for schools to be productive and effective and not to get stuck in a rut or become stale and reactive, principals need to change from being bosses to being leaders. The major challenge for most of the principals was coping with change in the legislative and policy framework after 1994:

Change is something that makes us uncomfortable. It takes us out of our comfort zones and therefore we are resistant to it because of that (Principal D).

The implementation of education policies was also a challenge to almost all the selected principals:

I think we have got excellent policies, like the FET policy, but there is not enough money, time and resources to implement and evaluate these policies. Some of our policies have shortcomings, like the monetary value that is attached to the IQMS, and lack of capacity to train people adequately on it (Principal E).

However, other principals supported democracy:

I enjoy being a principal in the current democratic dispensation. I mean the challenges are there but it allows so much more for you to be creative and innovative. A lot depends on the principal's interpretation of things and applications (Principal F).

Complex interplay between structure and agency

There is a set of departmental rules in the form of policy which guide the principals in their daily leadership activities, and there are personal leadership experiences which one uses to deal with matters that are not covered in the policies. There has been a lot of debate among the principals about the

combination of policy and personal experiences and values in the running of the schools:

I think policy acts as a framework and a guideline. However, there are times when you have got to use your discretion. There is nowhere where the policy says do not use your discretion. So, we have got to integrate the policy with personal experience and values to respond to the prevailing circumstances at the time, but act within the guidelines or the framework of the policy (Principal D).

Leadership roles and styles

One of the objectives of the study was to discuss how the principals' beliefs, personal values and interests shape or influence their leadership styles. As much as the leadership style of the principal may be influenced by what he or she believes in and what he or she values, in most instances it is influenced by the circumstances that prevail at the time and place.

I do have values and beliefs, and when I came here I had some ideas of what I'd like to do but at first I had to learn from the situation that I found myself in, get to know and learn from the teachers and learners, and their needs, then over the years I've built up my own view of leadership and attitude and self-worth (Principal B).

The above statement is supported by Principal F when he says:

I'd say values, interests and beliefs will influence the leadership style, but it's not a definite factor. Leadership also depends on the circumstances that prevail at that time. We do things differently because our behavior and actions are determined by the way in which we view the different situations at our schools.

It is the needs and expectations of learners and teachers that are most important in determining a leadership style.

I get my direction from the staff, their problems, their shortcomings, their influence and the decisions that we take together, and also from their needs and expectations (Principal B).

The leadership style is also determined by how the leader looks at the needs of the followers, their interests, commitments, and their expectations (Principal F).

The different situations at schools have taught the principals to be flexible in order to respond to the values and beliefs of their organizations. Successful and effective leadership in most of the schools has been a result of principals 'responding from within their daily realities at their schools', that is, drawing from their past experiences.

I subscribe to the policy of situation and leadership. I believe in responding to situational demands. I've grown as a person because of what I learnt from my teachers' experiences and my own (Principal D).

Discussion

My analysis of the stories show that although some of the principals may have sometimes responded in a way that would make them look transformative and

transparent, most of their responses were genuine. Their stories were constructed based on their experiences and the true reflection of the situations in the education system and their schools. The stories reflect transformed leaders of the learning institutions who understand their roles and the expectations of the people they lead. They have turned to be good listeners and change agents who promote participative decision-making and sharing of knowledge and information among all stakeholders.

In their stories, the principals speak of themselves and give meaning to their experiences, which makes these stories more subjective (personal) than objective (social). The questions that arise are, 'To what extent are the stories themselves constructed, and to what extent are the experiences and events appearing in these stories merely expressions with no connections to the past reality?' In order to address the gaps between reality, experience and expressions, life-stories have to reflect the past life and realise its events and parts of reality filtering through the principals' consciousness (Antikainen *et al.*, 1996).

Another question that comes up is, 'to what extent do these stories reflect the construction of professional identities?' The life-stories of these principals provide us with an understanding of various personal and professional changes in their lives. Personal changes are linked to behavioural change; while professional changes are externally induced, resulting from new and revised policies. These changes result in the reconstruction of identity and redefinition of the roles of the principals. A significant change in the lives of the principals was after the introduction of the post 1994 democratic education legislation and policies.

The events and experiences the principals chose to tell in their life-stories reflect their self-concepts and their concept of leadership, which guided them in enacting their leadership roles (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). The stories reveal that the principals were inspired by role models of various types in their social and professional development, which is one of the things that helped them to define themselves in terms of their roles as leaders. Furthermore, the life-stories are not only about who the principals are but also about how they became principals, why they were at their schools, what their roles are and how they should relate to their colleagues, learners and communities they are serving.

Conclusion

The analysis of the life stories of the principals revealed that constructing their identities as leaders of schools, the principals combined what they knew and could deliver, with what the stakeholders (teachers, learners and parents) expected from them. The stakeholders' expectations of the principals are related to how they interpret his or her position within the larger social structure. My suggestion would be for the principals to clarify their personal values and beliefs to the stakeholders in order for them to associate with. They should also ensure that the experiences that they choose to use to

address the expectations of the stakeholders reflect their self-concepts and their professional identity. The combination of the principals' experiences with what is expected of them could help to create awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.

The sharing of experiences and qualities between the principals and teachers led to the acquisition of new behavioural skills which were constantly refined and perfected during the process of development and learning. It is therefore my belief that if all the principals could be driven and inspired by the ideas of democracy and participative leadership in their roles and duties, they will always receive positive and meaningful feedback from their staff which would assist them in maturing in their behaviour and constructing their professional identity.

While learning from their teachers, the principals also improved on their performance and attitudes toward the new policies and their work as a whole. Further improvement in the principals' performance would be influenced by the choice of a suitable leadership style. A combination of education policies and personal experiences, and consideration of circumstances that prevail at the time, would allow the principal to be flexible in responding to the values and beliefs of the school.

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Author

Jabulani Mpungose is an Assistant Director in the Biodiversity Education and Human Capital Development Unit at the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI). He is responsible for coordinating and facilitating environmental education activities for schools and was previously a school principal.