

ABSTRACT

This research is focused on an examination of executive leadership in education which has emerged in the South African independent schools sector over the past two decades. School leadership is based on the premise that the role of the principal or head of a school is to lead and manage teaching and learning. Executive leadership per se is generally associated with business practice in large, corporate organisations, and the introduction of executive leadership structures in education was therefore seen as a paradigm shift which warranted investigation.

Shortly after the first democratic elections in 1994, the South African Schools Act (SASA) was passed by parliament in 1996. The Act provides amongst other things the right to every person to establish and maintain, at their own expense, an independent educational institution. Since then the number of independent schools in South Africa has increased and some of them have doubled or tripled in size over the years. Independent schools fall into the category of private providers of education and are required to operate within the legal and education policy framework of the Republic of South Africa and to obtain accreditation from Umalusi, which is the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training in South Africa. In addition, and as part of their membership obligations, independent schools that are affiliated to ISASA (Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa) undergo a periodic quality assurance process which is carried out by IQAA (Independent Quality Assurance Agency). Compliance and quality standards are therefore considered as key aspects of leadership and management of an independent school.

This research study is located within qualitative methodology, and grounded theory was used to determine theories to explain executive leadership in the selected case study school. As there were no available previous studies or theories to explain the trend towards executive leadership, grounded theory was considered most appropriate for this study. According to Dimmock and Lam (2012), grounded theory is well suited to research in educational leadership because of 'its ability to offer a theory of explanation of complex interactive situations involving human beings in their natural or organisational settings' (2012: 189).

One case study was selected in the Gauteng Province of South Africa and the experiences of eight participants were investigated. The participants comprised of two executive leaders (these are known as Rectors and are the current Rector of the school and his predecessor), the five designated principals of the schools within a school, and the business manager. The research instruments used included questionnaires and interviews; the questionnaires were structured with the purpose of eliciting as much data from each participant as possible. The interviews were semi-structured with follow up probing questions, designed to enable full and frank engagement by the participants.

The analysis of data revealed that the role of an executive head (or Rector in the example of the selected case school) is strategic, policy-based and relational in nature. The role serves to galvanize a school towards a particular long-term shared vision and helps to focus all role-players on what must be done in the present and immediate future in order to achieve the long-term vision of the school. It was also revealed that the role of the Rector does not extend to matters of teaching and learning, and that these are delegated to the designated principal within a particular school environment.

The research concluded that executive leadership structures can be of great benefit to education. The core business of schools is teaching and learning and therefore the principal's key role should be about instructional leadership. The Rector or executive head on the other hand will be the best placed person in a school to lead and manage strategy, vision and policy compliance.