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Leading and managing diverse schools in South Africa

Abstract

All school populations are diverse in many ways. The diversity in South African schools has been compounded since 1994 with the migration of Black learners to former ‘white’ schools. Some schools and their principals have succeeded in coping efficiently with the new social and cultural makeup of their schools, while others have been struggling and even resigned under the pressures of all the conflicting demands from stakeholders. The theoretical and empirical investigation reported in this paper shows that principals and schools could benefit enormously from learning from the experiences of the more successful schools and their principals.

Keywords: diversity, uniqueness, unity, multicultural, dimensions, education, principal, management, leadership, guiding, best practice, stereotype.

JEL Classification: I24, I21.

Introduction

The South African population, like all nation-states around the world (Banks, 2010), is highly diverse in terms of obvious differences (length, age, gender and so on), as well as more tacit differences (intelligence, religious affiliation, sexual preference and so on) (Department of Education, 2000b). The pre-1994 apartheid Government of South Africa seemed to have been preoccupied with managing racial and ethnic differences to the extent that people from different races/skin colour were statutorily kept apart (segregated), even in the format of (dis)placing them physically in different geographical areas (Hemson, 2006). The changeover to a non-racial society in 1994 puts an end to this. Ever since that date, the racial and other elements of diversity in South Africa are being accommodated under the stipulations of a progressive *Manifesto of Human Rights* (chapter 2 of the South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996). The promulgation of the new Constitutional dispensation in South Africa has brought about a wide-ranging number of reforms in education (schooling), one of which was that all schools became united under a single national department of education (administered by nine provincial departments of education) (Department of Education, 2001).

The new constitutional dispensation has understandably brought about a number of new challenges, one of which is how to manage the wide diversity of people effectively in schools. Although some schools are only gradually becoming ‘racially diverse or mixed’, others have gone a long way towards total racial intermixture. Apart from this

‘new racial’ form of diversity in schools, the learner and teacher populations of all schools, irrespective of where they are situated, are characterized by diversity in terms of different ages, socio-economic background, culture, race, religious background, historical background (ancestry), gender, sexual preference, interests and many more.

Our liaisons with school principals, those who survived the pre-1994 ‘apartheid’ dispensation, as well as others appointed after the advent of the new democratic dispensation, brought us under the impression that leading and managing have become crucial and challenging tasks in schools that are not homogenous, but consist of learners exhibiting individual, as well as group-based differences where diversity is openly acknowledged as something to be cherished and accommodated (Grant & Portera, 2011). Schools can be (come) virtual minefields of problems and potential conflict; to guide and manage schools today has become a gargantuan task for principals (Moule, 2012). The fact that many South African principals have, in the last two decades, resigned from their jobs and entered other professions or retired early attests to the difficulty of this task. Its difficulty is compounded by often conflicting demands from stakeholders such as the national and provincial departments of education in terms of affirmative action, the composition of the educator corps, the accommodation of learners, the parents, the wider community and others (Devarakonda, 2013; Hemson, 2006). Balancing unity and diversity is a continuing challenge to recognize and legitimize difference and, at the same time, building a national identity that embraces all diverse groups (Banks, 2010).

Our observations of principals and schools led us to investigate the problem in greater detail. Based on those investigations, we contend that some South African schools and their principals have succeeded in finding working solutions to the problem of

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guiding and managing schools having to cope with increasing diversity, and that other (newly appointed) principals and schools would benefit from learning about their experience and the solutions that they came up with. We can all benefit from more ‘tools’ that might cultivate human thriving in an ever-changing, globalized landscape by adding value to educational leadership and management in sharing experience and passing along successful strategies (best practices) (Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano & Asghar, 2013; Grant & Portera, 2011). The purpose of this article is to present evidence in support of this contention. This aim dictated the structure of this paper. We, firstly, present an analysis of the key concepts of the study in the process creating a conceptual-theoretical framework. We, then, discuss the empirical research design that we founded on that framework. This is followed by a catalogue of our findings and a discussion thereof. We conclude by making a number of recommendations.

1. Methodology

In one of our other articles (see: Authors, 2010), we explained that, in preparing a conceptual-theoretical framework, we made use of an interpretive-constructivist heuristic. We indicated that this heuristic helped us to determine the nature of a specific situation, in this case, the phenomenon of diversity which has to be ‘managed’ and, for the coping of which followers (parents, teachers, learners), needs leadership and guidance in accordance with education policy in South Africa. In the case of the problem addressed in this article, application of the heuristic enabled us to look at diversity, its management, and the leadership to be provided as constructed and interpreted realities of human interaction in social context (also see the discussion of the empirical design below.)

2. Literature review

2.1. Key concepts. Our investigation revolved around three concepts, namely *leading/guiding*, *management* and *diversity*. We defined *leading/guiding* as blazing a trail for others, walking ahead, showing the way, accompanying. A leader is a person possessing the personality, charisma, knowledge, insight and skills to show the way ahead to others, i.e., his or her followers where they function collaboratively towards shared objectives (Johnson, 2015).

In the already mentioned previous article, we analyzed the term *management*, and traced its origins back to Latin via Italian (see: Authors, 2010). Based on that analysis, educational management is defined as a form of professional

work in education consisting of a series of actions by a person in authority with the required competence in a specific area of regulation (in this case, providing leadership in managing diversity in a school) for the purpose of allowing formative education to take place in a school (Van der Westhuizen, 2008).

The concept *diversity* occurs frequently in literature as a popular theme, but has been interpreted from a variety of perspectives (Devarakonda, 2013; Moule, 2013; Wise & Tschirhart, 2000). A call by Cross, Cloete, Beckman, Harper, Indiresan and Musil (1999) was earlier made for further research to provide semantic clarity, but still a plethora of perspectives prevail in this regard. However, the most common interpretation of *diversity* is that it primarily refers to differences among individuals and groups of people. In a cultural context, for instance, diversity is taken to refer to multiculturalism. Especially, the differences among people and groups of people are regarded as factors determining uniqueness among people (Robles de Meléndez & Beck, 2013). A broader and more inclusive interpretation extends the meaning of *diversity* to embrace similarities as well. Put differently, both differences and similarities are embraced in this interpretation. We tend to agree with Kassimeris and Vryonides (2013), Moule (2012), Jordaan (2002), and Cushner (2001) that this interpretation is more in accordance with a balanced, holistic perspective of reality and of personhood as a whole. This view understandably finds widespread support in literature.

2.2. Theories about diversity. The primary and secondary dimensions theory about diversity makes use of a dimensional frame of reference. According to this theory, people view each other through a filter of primary and secondary dimensions. The primary dimension of diversity refers to the inborn human differences that one has no control over, but exerts an impact on people. The primary dimension embodies the core aspects through which people shape their view of life and is related to their respective cultures (Knowles & Lander, 2012; Cronje, 1999). The secondary dimension is more mutable and refers to those aspects of diversity one may have partly control of and which can be changed, discarded or modified throughout a person’s life. This dimension adds depth and individuality to people’s lives (Lillie, 2013; Knowles & Lander, 2012; Carrel, Elbert, Hatfield, Grobler, Marx & Van der Schyf, 1998).

The related tangible-intangible theory is that diversity refers to the tangible, as well as intangible features of individuals and groups. According to

Talib, Loima, Paavola and Patrikainen (2010) and Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2009), features that can be observed, manipulated and agreed upon, for example clothing, food, and appearance, count among the tangible. Educational inputs that focus exclusively on these aspects of diversity have been referred to as tourist- or surface-level efforts. Features that are not immediately observable, such as one's background, value system, norms of behavior, modes of interaction, socialization practices, and linguistic patterns count among the intangible (Talib et al., 2010; Holt & Wigginton, 2002; Cushner, 2001). These theories about diversity both provide a practical way of distinguishing between the obvious and the deeper layers of diversity.

The divergence theory operates with the divergence of identities and affiliations in an organizational setting (Cushner et al., 2009; Schermerhorn, 2002; Williams, 2000; D'Netto & Sohal, 1999). Diversity refers to differences among people in an organizational context in terms of attitudes, needs, desires, values and work behavior.

Three other theories can also be distinguished. Diversity can, firstly, be seen in a political sense to promote mainly the aims of equal employment and affirmative action within organizations. Secondly, diversity can be accentuated in the recruitment and selection of ethnic groups and women to reflect a particular demographic composition in an organization, and, thirdly, it can refer to the management of people in an environment characterized by the presence, as well as an appreciation of diversity. This approach is likely to be found in organizations with well-devised diversity programs (Grant, 2005; Carrell et al., 1998).

2.3. The risk of a restricted approach. Several dangers or risks lurk behind some diversity approaches. Emphasis of only some aspects of diversity may lead to a restricted or one-sided view of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. An approach in education (or school) that is built around a fixation on, for instance, only culture-related concerns does not account for the ramifications of diversity as a complex, interrelated and inclusive feature of reality. Several authors also warn against the 'emancipatory advantages' ascribed to multicultural education. In their opinion, phony learning about other cultures can be misleading and empirically spurious since the opposite of intentions may, in fact, realize, resulting in fallacious knowledge of other cultures. This might, according to Kassimeris and Vryonides (2013), as well as Troyna (1987), enhance feelings of otherness that reinforce isolation by perpetuating

stereotypical representations of all things alien. Sleeter (1995), furthermore, argues that an emphasis on cultural concerns alone tends to conflate race and ethnicity issues. Torres (1996) takes this viewpoint further in observing a neo-conservative tendency in the multicultural education discourse that promotes the isolation of cultures as a form of separatism. Kassimeris and Vryonides (2013), as well as Matonis (2003) concur: an exclusive focus on culture-related concerns alone might lead to tendencies of segregation. Kassimeris and Vryonides (2013), McCray, Wright and Beachum (2004) further fear that multicultural education might intensify segregation and fail to meet the requirements of bridging the gap between theory and practice. These may explain why, since the dawn of the new democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994, the authorities in South Africa have replaced the concept of multiculturalism with diversity in education policies and legislation.

2.4. The need for a balanced perspective with regard to ontology and anthropology. Irrespective of which ontologically and anthropologically balanced diversity theory a school and its principal chooses to operate with, they have to manage the manifestation of diversity effectively in their schools in the interest of creating a unified nation to which all citizens pledge allegiance (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Brown, 2004; Mitchell, 2003). The challenge in education today is to provide a truly national experience for all the learners and, at the same time, to acknowledge, appreciate and promote diversity. Principled leadership and strategic clarity are regarded as essential for ensuring an equivalent emphasis on unity and diversity (Kassimeris & Vryonides, 2013). The concept of unity and diversity, in this regard, is not a contradiction; unity is only possible through the harmonious unification of diverse people (Grant & Portera, 2011; Maharaj, 2001). Since 1994, awareness and promotion of diversity in terms of the unity-diversity tension has been taking centre stage in the education arena in official documentation and practice in South Africa.

2.5. The management of diversity. As mentioned before, changing demographics bring about changes in the composition of learners and staff with inevitable consequences for the diversity profile of the whole school community. Societal changes on a broader (even global) scale must be accounted for, because schools are not an 'islands', but microcosmoses of larger societies. As school leader and manager, the school principal must deal conscientiously with the dynamics of diversity to ensure a harmonious environment conducive for formative and quality education. In addition to this

essential task of the principal, particularly in the South African context, the management of diversity also has to do with the correction of past injustices or the denial of diversity in the past (Kassimeris & Vryonides, 2013; Moule, 2012; Cross, 2004; Lumby, Middlewood & Kaabwe, 2003; Coleman, Graham-Jolly & Middlewood, 2003; HSRC, 2001). The rationale for the management of diversity in schools can be summarized as: achieving a strategic advantage in serving the educational needs of all learners by means of formative and quality education.

The management of diversity can be described as a planned, systematic and comprehensive process consisting of a series of phases and a particular course of action or action steps to ensure that diversity is recognized and cherished as part of a plan to ensure institutional and national unity by taking advantage of a diverse workforce (Johnson, 2015; Human, 2005; Mavin & Girling, 2000). From literature, it seems that the following are viewed as key elements for best practices to manage diversity: policy directives, situation analyses, preconditions, management strategies, implementation and evaluation (Robles de Meléndez & Beck, 2013; Van Vuuren & Van der Westhuizen, 2007; Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1998).

Despite any success that one might have in creating such a plan or framework, one also needs empirical information and evidence about practice-based guidelines or action steps in managing diversity in schools (also see Moses & Chang, 2006; Hemson, 2006; Ivancevich & Gilbert, 2000). For purposes of acquiring such information, we launched an empirical investigation into what can be regarded as 'best South African practices' with respect to the management of diversity in schools.

3. Empirical research

3.1. Purpose of the empirical investigation. The purpose of the investigation was to fill the above-mentioned hiatus in our knowledge, in other words, to discover practice-based guidelines or action steps for the management of diversity in schools. Although such guidelines and action steps gleaned from an empirical investigation cannot be regarded as normative for the policies and actions of principals and schools (an 'ought' – a norm, cannot be derived from an 'is' - a state of affairs), we contend that the best practices that have been followed with a degree of success by certain school principals and their schools can be emulated by others, on condition that they amend the guidelines in accordance with their own life-view and other convictions, as Knowles and Lander (2012), Zecha (2007) and Swartz (2006) convincingly argue.

3.2. The research design. We used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to address the complexity of the research problem. A mixed methods triangulation research design was adopted as outlined by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010). This research design provides a complementary set of data and offers the advantages of the qualities of both approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Sutton, 2006; Thietart, 2007).

3.3. Study population and sampling. We conducted an analytical cross-section investigation to acquire an experiential overview of and insight into the meaning of the concept *diversity* and of the management of diversity in schools in one of the nine provinces in South Africa. Since we used non-probability (purposive) sampling (Kumar, 2014; De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2005; Neuman, 1997; Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996), our findings cannot be generalized to all schools (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Our sampling method resonated with the purpose of the investigation in the sense that the sample included schools that had proved themselves as exemplary in the management of diversity (see Brundrett & Rhodes, 2014; De Vos et al., 2005; Fogelman, 2002). The study population consisted of 20 schools from the North West Province in South Africa.

The Education Management and Governance Development (EMGD) Unit of the provincial Department of Education, with the assistance of 5 EMGD regional coordinators, identified 4 secondary and combined schools in each of the 5 education regions of the North West Province. We used the list of secondary and combined schools as demarcated per education region, area project office (APO) and clusters of the North West Province as the sampling frame for the selection of schools (Bak, 2005; McMillan, 2000; Keeves, 1997). The following criteria were determined for the identification of schools in consultation with the Department:

- ◆ School leadership demonstrates an understanding of the concept of diversity.
- ◆ The manifestation of diversity is acknowledged.
- ◆ Diversity is managed efficiently.
- ◆ Qualities to manage diversity are being demonstrated by the school leadership.
- ◆ Diversity-related policy directives are being implemented.
- ◆ Preconditions exist in support for the management of diversity.
- ◆ A management plan for diversity is being implemented.

In each case, the school principal was chosen as respondent because of his/her unique role as

educational leader and head of the school. We interviewed the respondents and requested them to also complete a questionnaire.

3.4. Research instruments. As part of the mixed methods triangulation research design, a structured questionnaire based on the conceptual-theoretical framework and similar questionnaires developed by Gordon (2005), Ngobese (2004), Molefe and Louw (2004); Department of Education (2002); Cross (2001); Bean, Sammartino, O'Flynn, Lau & Nicholas (2001), and Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998) was used. A four-point Likert scale was used to capture the incidence, potency and intensity of the extent (as the case may be) to which diversity was managed by the respondents.

The interviews were based on an interview schedule drafted for the purpose of gathering purpose related information about the respondents' experiences, opinions and beliefs.

3.5. Data analysis. The analysis of the questionnaire was done by means of a three-stage statistical procedure. The initial stage involved the calculation of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient to determine the reliability of the various subsections of the questionnaire and to assess the internal consistency of the various question items. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (α) of ≥ 0.6 was obtained for all these items, which ensure the reliability of subscales and the internal consistency of various subsections (Best & Kahn, 2003).

The second stage involved descriptive statistical techniques for quantitative interpretation. The final (third) stage consisted of the calculation of the practical significance (effect size) of different population groups, which consisted of an analysis of the practical significance of differences between the means of different groups (d -value). This value indicates whether differences between groups were significant to have an effect in practice. A result of $d \geq 0.8$ was considered practically significant (Cohen, 1988).

The transcriptions of the interviews were verified, deconstructed and interpreted according to a content analysis process, as recommended by Roberts, Priest & Traynor (2006), De Vos et al. (2005), Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit (2004), and Gall et al. (1996). The qualitative content analysis involved a three-step coding process of open, axial and selective coding for identifying patterns, categories and thematic relationships (Barbour, 2014; Thiétart, 2007; Henning et al., 2004; Neuman, 1997).

3.6. Trustworthiness issues. In accordance with Babbie and Mouton's (2008) guidelines, we made use of data, investigator and methodological

triangulation. We also strove for descriptive validity (cross-checking) and interpretive validity (ensuring that the participants' meanings or perceptions were accurately recorded and verified). Although our findings are only valid for our sample, the three-fold triangulation increases the likelihood of potential generalization (transferability of findings to other comparable settings) (see De Vos et al., 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.7. Ethical considerations. Participants took part voluntarily in the study. They understood that there would be no risk involved, and that confidentiality would be respected. Consent to undertake the study in the schools was obtained from the North West Department of Education, as well as from the principals (participants) in the sample. The study was ethically cleared by the university under whose auspices it was undertaken.

4. Findings

The findings are presented in accordance with the following themes: conceptualization, an intrinsic point of departure, principles for managing diversity, diversity policy, situation analysis, diversity management plan, implementation and finally a review program. The Tables with statistical data, i.e., means, standard deviation, frequencies, and practical significance (effect size) are not presented, but are reported in related detail.

4.1. Conceptualization. The participants tended to view both collective (universal) and distinctive (individualistic) aspects of diversity as a mixture of human differences and similarities. This viewpoint is in accordance with a balanced and holistic interpretation of diversity that transcends any limited emphasis or one-sided view about isolated aspects of diversity. However, they also opined that cultural and racial matters were easily politicized and tended to overshadow other important aspects of diversity. They agreed that multicultural education could reinforce some kind of separatism, a point that was emphasized in our own theoretical framework. They did not see *cultural* differences alone as representative of diversity in its totality. It was evident from the responses that a narrow focus on multicultural education alone failed to address the broader issues of diversity. They, furthermore, experienced diversity as dynamic, and said that continuous changes caused in particular diversity-related challenges for school management.

The effect size for the age groups ($d = 0.86$) indicated that respondents older than 50 years were inclined to see diversity more as an inclusive concept. This can be ascribed to the fact that these respondents had more life and work experience, as

well as longer exposure to deal with diversity in schools. This specific age group may also have experienced the apartheid dispensation that had been characterized by an emphasis on only one aspect of diversity and that they, therefore, were more aware of, and sensitized to the dangers and risks associated with such overemphases.

4.2. An intrinsic point of departure. Some of the qualitative responses revealed the necessity of introspection as a precondition for dealing with issues of diversity. Some of the participants said that they had to assume not only a new mental approach, but also a different orientation towards dealing with diversity issues. Responses in this regard were:

"Successful management of diversity starts with a mind set".

"I had to undergo a mind-shift in the process to get away from stereotypes and restricted perceptions".

These responses refer to a new mind orientation with respect to the diversity 'problem' in schools, and dovetail with a viewpoint of Human (1996, p. 5) who states that "*the better we manage ourselves and our insecurities, the better we manage diversity*". It would, thus, be safe to say that school principals have to deal, firstly, with their intrinsic views and beliefs about diversity.

4.3. Principles for managing diversity. Respect and caring for other people based on recognizing their uniqueness as individuals were identified as a key principle on which to base the effective management of diversity in schools. Knowledge of diversity and of the complexity of situations and challenges was also identified as another principle for managing diversity in a school. A large effect size ($d = 0.95$) indicated that principals of smaller schools were more positive than their counterparts of larger schools to create a non-judgemental environment in which diversity can be caringly managed. This is understandable, because personal attention seems more feasible in a smaller context. This does not mean, however, that the principals of the larger schools neglected this humane aspect. All the respondents indicated that caring and respect for the other should be regarded as essential preconditions for managing diversity effectively in schools.

4.4. A diversity policy. The participants indicated that a policy for coping with diversity had to be implemented as an integral part of the school policy, and not as a separate stand-alone policy. Although the current education legislation provides a legal framework for diversity policy development and implementation, some of the participants said that they seldom consult the legislation and official documentation. A lack of support from the

education authorities in implementing the policies in the school situation was also mentioned.

A large effect size for the male and female principals ($d = 0.88$) was recorded with regard to inclusiveness of school policies for diversity. It is difficult to find a reason for this, but it emerged that the female principals were more receptive and proactive in involving as many role players as possible in policy development and implementation.

4.5. Situation analysis. Most of the participants were aware of the diversity profile in their respective schools. However, some of them did not view diversity as a strategic priority in their schools. They were clearly in need of a strategic vision that could provide them with guidance and direction in their efforts to provide in the unique needs of their diverse learners, and to realize the goals and objectives of their respective schools. Most of the principals also reported that their learners were able to accept and tolerate other 'different' learners and groups of learners. These participants viewed diversity as part of the school culture, particularly as an integral part of the values, norms and convictions of their schools. According to some, diversity was integrated into the fabric of the school and became part of their daily school life. Others indicated that learners tend to congregate in homogeneous groups, and that this, occasionally, results in stereotyping and intolerance.

4.6. A diversity management plan. Most of the participants raised issues concerning the implementation of a diversity management plan. Fifty percent of them used a management plan for diversity in their schools; the others did not. Some of them indicated that they did not make use of a specific member of staff to oversee or steer the management of diversity in their schools. Others raised the need for practical guidelines and for training to manage diversity and to promote diversity awareness.

A large effect size was recorded ($d = 0.83$) between the gender groups regarding the school management's involvement in diversity matters. The female respondents indicated that they experienced greater allegiance from their management teams and governance bodies in recognizing and promoting diversity in their schools. They also responded more favorably than their male counterparts with regard to prioritizing and communicating diversity as part of the school culture without the impediment of prejudices and restrictive management systems. The female participants also seemed to be able to maintain more favorable working relationship with school management. They seemed to have an understanding of diversity that is more amenable to practical recognition of it in their schools.

4.7. Implementation. Most of the participants add to the guidelines for ‘best practices’ that could be implemented. They also reiterated that these practices could only be implemented in the context of each school’s uniqueness. A practice that worked well in one school will not necessarily be effective in another. We classified the best practices that they mentioned as personal and school-wide. At a personal level, the participants mentioned: understanding the needs, customs and values of people; avoidance of stereotyping and discrimination; promotion of respect and justice for all; leading by example, and to be uncompromising about academic and other standards. At school-wide level, they mentioned: effective organization of cultural, sport and social activities; ensuring a mix of learners in classrooms; making diversity part of the school management system; incorporating diversity in the curriculum; appointing someone to oversee the management of diversity; monitoring group-forming closely; setting benchmarks; making use of experts and procuring the support of parents and the community.

4.8. A review program. Some participants mentioned that they did not, or only to some extent, implement a review program for evaluating the management of diversity in their schools aimed at improving future alignment and intervention.

Recommendations

Training. Diversity-specific training initiatives should be devised and launched to promote diversity awareness and to develop the diversity management skills of those in charge of schools. This training should also inculcate and stimulate a mind-shift in principals not to see diversity in their schools as a threat, but rather as an opportunity and advantage. This basic reorientation will help them to deal effectively with all the other challenges flowing from diversity of whatever nature that might be prevalent in their schools. The recommendation for diversity training is in accordance with the viewpoint of Kassimeris and Vryonides (2013) that training should entail much more than a mere public relations exercise to project a positive public image. Training should be to gain competence in specific skills, attitudes and knowledge.

Conceptualization. Given the myriad of definitions of and theories about diversity, principals should attain for themselves a clear understanding of what diversity means in general, and also in their particular schools, and should strive at relating their understanding of diversity to the principles embodied in their personal life-views. Such a conceptualization has to be balanced and holistic, in other words, it should transcend any limited emphasis or one-sided view about isolated aspects

of diversity. Semantic clarity forms part of a principled framework in which respect and caring for the uniqueness of people are key elements when dealing with diversity in schools.

Diversity as reality. Principals should analyze and understand the diversity in their schools, and, at the same time, avoid a (colour) ‘blind’ approach in dealing with such diversity. School leadership has to set the example in embracing and cherishing diversity in the school.

Planning. The principal and his or her advisors should put a diversity management plan in place for meeting the diverse needs of all the social actors in the school. The plan should be based on the abovementioned mind reorientation, conceptualization of and insight into the diversity in the school. In setting these plans in action, principals would benefit from emulating the best practices of successful school managers that we uncovered in this project. Principals should, furthermore, understand that a single approach will not necessarily work for all schools, and, therefore, have to adapt the best practices to the conditions and demands of their particular schools and communities. Adherence to policy directives, a situation analysis, implementation (action plans) and a review program are the key elements of a comprehensive management strategy to deal effectively with diversity.

Conclusion

We commenced this paper by contending that some South African schools and their principals have already succeeded in finding working solutions to the problem of guiding and managing schools having to cope with increasing diversity, and that other (newly appointed) principals would benefit from learning about their experiences and the solutions that they came up with. We, then, presented two sets of evidence in support of this contention, namely a conceptual-theoretical framework and the findings flowing from our empirical investigation based on that framework. The contention seems to have been vindicated by the evidence. While our findings cannot be generalized to all schools in South Africa and abroad, we identified a number of school principals in the North West Province in South Africa whose schools, according to the provincial Department of Education, seem to have managed the (increasing) diversity at a commendable level. The data flowing from the questionnaire and the interviews with the participants revealed why this has been the case in these schools. In our opinion, the practical working solutions (‘best practices’) that emerged from our investigations can, indeed, be applied and emulated with a great deal of success by other (including newly appointed) school principals.

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