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The role of leadership practices in establishing a curriculum policy platform at working-class schools

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This article focuses on the way in which the school management teams (SMTs) of three selected working-class schools have developed and implemented a range of leadership practices within their schools in order to provide a platform for optimal teaching and learning. The article is based on qualitative research conducted in schools on the outskirts of Cape Town. Employing the policy enactment theory advanced by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012), the article illustrates the way in which the context of these working-class schools impacts on the type of leadership practices that are employed; these practices, in turn, have an impact on the type of curriculum policy platform established in these schools. The article elucidates how governmental curriculum policy reform is 'received' by the SMTs, which are the schools' formal leadership structures, and implemented in the 'messy' reality of the selected schools. We present the argument that the leadership practices of the selected schools' SMTs are determined by the schools' 'materiality,' in reference to the impact of the schools' contextual circumstances on their curriculum processes and leadership practices. The findings show that the schools' leadership practices are based on a narrow and one-dimensional enactment of the curriculum policy, which has negative consequences for teaching and learning in the schools. This article contributes to an understanding of the challenges of leadership practices in working-class schools and the enactment of curriculum policy reform in them.

Keywords: curriculum policy; curriculum policy platform; leadership practices; materiality; policy enactment; school management team; working-class context

Introduction

This article is an exploration of the leadership practices of the school management teams (SMTs) of three working-class schools with respect to their implementation of governmentally authorised curriculum policy. It seeks to understand how these SMTs go about constructing a curriculum policy platform for effective teaching and learning at their schools. We define a curriculum policy platform as the bases and structures of support, as well as the development and motivation, which facilitate curriculum implementation and teachers' work in their classrooms. We explore how the current governmental curriculum policy, i.e. the curriculum and assessment policy statement (CAPS), is taken up and practically realised in working-class school contexts.

The national and international literature on leadership focus on the personalities of leaders and not on leadership practices or collective action (Grant, 2010:28; Naicker & Mestry, 2013). What this literature omits is a perspective on the actual practices of leadership in specific contexts and, more specifically, how the material conditions of differing contexts affect schools in their teaching and learning practices. This study focuses on the *how* of leadership, i.e. *leadership practices*, and concentrates on the interaction between leaders, their followers and their practices in the context in which they work (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001:27). Drawing on Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006), the article discusses four core leadership practices, namely setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organisation, and managing teaching and learning.

The study highlights the uniqueness of policy implementation in working-class contexts, a focus which academic work in South Africa and comparative contexts in other parts of the world neglect. The article focuses on the agency demonstrated by the school leaders in light of their adverse conditions. Working-class schools in South Africa are portrayed as under-performing, characterised by emotional turbulence, fragmented relationships, poverty and under-qualified teachers (Christie, Butler & Potterton, 2007:65; Fataar & Paterson, 2002:7, 89; Mampane & Bouwer, 2011; Moloji, 2010:622). Curriculum policy is enacted within these particular institutional contexts, each with its own history, economic resources and challenges, thus defying the expectations associated with a one-size-fits-all curriculum. We support the view that what is prescribed by policy is not necessarily what is practically implemented (Christie, 2008); this discrepancy results in tension between the intention of the policy and the actual practice of policy in schools. This article is an attempt to explain this gap between policy and practice; in other words, we explore, through a focus on the leadership practices of three schools' SMTs, the way in which these leadership structures attempt to bridge the gap between policy and practice. We suggest that it is important to understand the schools' working-class contexts in exploring the nature of their leadership practices.

Based on an application of Ball et al.'s (2012) policy enactment theory as well as qualitative research in the three school sites, the article answers the following question: how does the materiality of working-class schools impact on leadership practices in the process of curriculum policy enactment? The article first discusses Ball's policy enactment theory and the way that this theory relates to working-class school contexts. Secondly, the article describes the methodological aspects of the study on which this article is based. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of the data on the SMTs' leadership practices at the schools. The article concludes

by highlighting the impact of the unique materiality of working-class schools on the leadership practices adopted by the SMTs in their endeavour to construct a viable curriculum policy platform.

Theorising Policy Enactment

The theoretical lenses that guide the analysis in the article is provided by the policy enactment theory propounded by Ball et al. (2012). According to these authors (2012:3), policy enactment refers to the creative processes involved in interpreting and translating texts into action. Policy enactment focuses on the interaction between people, interests, events and chance (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Ball et al. (2012:43) highlight three constituent aspects of the messy reality of school life. These are the material, the discursive, and the interpretive. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the material dimension, which we will use as a lens to explore the four core leadership practices in the enactment of curriculum policy.

Ball et al. (2012:21) argue that policies are enacted in specific material conditions, which they refer to as contextual dynamics. They conceptualise and group these dynamics of context as follows:

- Situated contexts: referring to the location of the school and the school's history and intake;
- Professional cultures: referring to values, teacher commitment, experiences and policy management in schools;
- Material contexts: referring to the staff establishment, the school budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure;
- External contexts: referring to the degree and quality of learning area support, and pressures from the broader policy context, such as school ratings and responsibilities.

These contextual factors are interconnected and differ from school to school. Applying these four aspects of context to South African working-class schools, one can consider the situated context of the three selected schools as being characterised by gangsterism, a history of inferior education and low socio-economic status. These schools are labelled in the literature as 'dysfunctional' schools (Christie, 2008; Christie et al., 2007:89–97). Fataar and Paterson (2002:31) define dysfunctional schools as disorderly, chaotic environments with intermittent interruptions in the school's daily programme. Such schools do not have the necessary structures and leadership in place, while leadership in them mainly entails mediating between conflicting groups and alliances in schools (Fataar & Paterson, 2002:33). Moreover, demands from the external environment, including parents and the Department of Education (DoE), place tremendous pressure on schools to produce good examination results (Ball, 2003; Spies, 2012). Contextual factors impact heavily on the nature of the leadership practices that are adopted to implement the curriculum.

The material lens (Ball et al., 2012) enables us to uncover how contextual factors impact on curriculum policy enactment. We accordingly argue that the schools' socio-economic status, their geographic location and history, and the impoverished background of the students whom it serves are pivotal factors in determining the leadership practices in the schools. The material dimension further emphasises the impact of the various people working in schools, their inherent values, dedication, professionalism, attitude, relations, administration, and organisation. These are key to constructing schools' learning environments (Christie et al., 2007:58; Earley & Weindling, 2004). Furthermore, the availability of material resources influences their capability to implement much needed intervention.

In the process of curriculum policy enactment the school leaders are expected to engage with diverse and challenging contextual factors and act decisively to bring about meaningful education. In other words, the way that they mediate and construct their actions with the resources they have at their disposal is essential for curriculum implementation. Engaging with these contextual factors relates to the following leadership aspects outlined by Leithwood et al. (2006): leadership practices aimed at setting direction in terms of goals; developing people to upgrade their knowledge; redesigning the organisation with an emphasis on collaboration, motivation and an understanding of people's needs; and managing the curriculum to ensure effective monitoring of the goals that were set. The actions and behaviours associated with each of these core leadership practices depend on the specific context of the school and are subject to the school's unique needs (see Klar & Brewer, 2013); this in turn entails 'taking risks' and challenging the status quo (Clarke, 2007:2).

Using the material dimension as a lens to explore leadership practices, the research on which this article is based investigates how the external and internal aspects of the schools' context impact on the four core leadership practices. In other words, we explored the knock-on effect of these aspects on the SMTs' leadership practices. An analysis of each of these components would allow us to understand the way in which contextual factors contribute to the setting of direction for the school, the development of its people, and redesigning the organisation and the management of teaching and learning. In the next section we discuss the methodological underpinnings of the study.

Methodological Issues

The article is based on a qualitative study in three selected schools on the outskirts of Cape Town. We

collected data through semi-structured interviews with the principals of three working-class secondary schools and focus group sessions with the SMT members of the three schools. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups enabled us to explore the activities, experiences and perceptions of the SMT members and principals.

The study was based on qualitative research, because our main aim was to understand and interpret (Merriam, 2009:5) the leadership practices of the three SMTs in respect of their attempts to develop a productive curriculum policy platform at their schools. Based on purposive sampling (Punch, 2005:187), the sample size of the focus group from each school depended on the number of the SMT members at each school. We use the following labels to denote the three different schools, principals and SMTs: School A, School B and School C; School A – principal 1, School B – principal 2 and School C – principal 3. Principals 2 and 3 were appointed in a temporary capacity. School C is a newly established school in the township and has a rotating SMT as well as a rotating principal. This new school (School C) has fairly new SMT members. The SMT members of Schools A and B were all well established, with most having occupied their positions for approximately 10 years. At the time of this study the principals of all three schools were male. The deputy principals of school A were both female, the two deputy principals of school B were male and female and the deputy principal of School C was male. The rest of the SMT members of schools A and B consisted of 60% female members, and that of School C was one female and two male Heads of Department (HODs). Both schools A and B had a learner total of approximately 1,200 learners, whereas School C had a learner total of 831 for grades 8–11. School C would have had its first Grade 12 class the year following our research at the school.

We used the same two-part interview schedule for both principals and SMTs. The design of the schedule was informed by the material lens to understand curriculum enactment at the three schools. The first part of the interview focused on the context of the three schools and the second part probed the SMT's leadership practices, and associated activities, that were implemented in the schools.

Since the same set of questions was used in the interviews with the principals and the SMT focus groups, this enabled us to ascertain the similarities and differences in respect of how each school's stakeholders perceived their context, leadership practices, and policy enactment. The interviews with the principals were done first to obtain a general view of the context of the school, the organisation of their leadership practices, and how the school leader viewed their role in the

enactment of a curriculum policy platform. We followed the interviews with the principals up with focus group discussions with the rest of the SMT members, which, in addition to providing rich data in response to our research focus, served the purpose of verifying the principals' responses.

In terms of data analysis, the interviews were transcribed, coded and thematically organised according to the following three categories: external context (referring to the community life and role of the DoE); internal context (referring to school-specific factors); and the effect of materiality on the leadership practices. We adhered to the requirements of ethical research (Punch, 2005:276) by conducting the research according to accepted ethical protocols. The interview schedule formed part of the ethical application to do the research and this contributed towards its trustworthiness. Reliability was ensured by recording each interview (with permission) and personally transcribing them.

Data Presentation: The Dynamics of Context

Stephen Ball's earlier work (1990, 1994) highlights the impact of the exigencies of context as decisive in the way policy is implemented and plays out in schools. His work extends that conducted by earlier policy implementation analysts such as McLaughlin (1987) and Sabatier (1986). It is, however, only in Ball's later work with his colleagues published in 2012 (Ball et al., 2012) that he develops a concerted theoretical approach, via what they call policy enactment theory, and based on rigorous qualitative research in schools, for the analysis of the impact of context on policy implementation. Thus, drawing on Ball et al.'s (2012) policy enactment theory (as discussed earlier), this section is a discussion of the data in relation to the exigent impact of a working-class context on curriculum policy implementation in which the three schools are situated, and how this in turn impacts on the leadership practices in each of the schools. We discuss the external context, the internal context, and the effect of materiality on the school's leadership practices.

We start by presenting the influences of the community context on the way in which the schools function. We then present the data on the schools' contextually influenced internal functioning, followed by a discussion of how this impacts significantly on the leadership practices aimed at generating a productive teaching and learning environment.

External context

The external context refers to the outside influences on the school, such as parents and the DoE. The introduction of CAPS in 2011 was accompanied by monitoring systems, which placed pressure on schools to adhere to the DoE requirements. Based

on DoE expectations, schools are compared with each other and despite different contextual circumstances teachers and principals are held accountable for poor results. Such an undifferentiated comparative approach, despite vastly unequal circumstances, is reflective of a performative discourse that now permeates the functioning of schools (see Ball, 2003), in respect of which they are expected to behave in rigidly defined ways, monitored by the bureaucratic surveillance of the Education Department (see Christie, 2008, Fataar & Paterson, 2002). For example, pressure to achieve results was mentioned by the interviewees from all three schools. Principal 1 commented: *“It’s all about results really. Results, results and meeting the target. Sometimes I also feel that my teachers are being drained. It’s all about pleasing the master.”*

The SMT members of the three schools voiced a degree of despair regarding the pressure they experienced from the external context especially generated via the media and newspaper reports that discuss the poor results of schools and through constant monitoring visits from departmental officials for whom school performance and the achievement of excellent results are paramount. Their constant visits are aimed at checking whether the schools have met the required attainments in subject areas. If the schools do not achieve a 60% National Senior Certificate (NSC) pass rate, they are labelled as underperforming, and subjected to relentless scrutiny by subject advisers. Schools A and B obtained a National Senior Certificate pass rate below 60% during the year preceding our research, which meant that they were experiencing frustration and anxiety as a result of heightened departmental visits. Their SMT members complained bitterly about being under constant surveillance.

The department’s ‘Progress due to Years in Phase’ (PYP) system was also mentioned by some of the participants as a key monitoring instrument. According to this system, students are not allowed to fail more than once in a learning phase. The SMT members indicated that because of this policy many of these students, who are promoted without actually achieving the necessary grades, cannot cope with the demands of the curriculum in the higher grades. Consequently, according to the SMTs, this influences teaching time as intervention strategies have to be implemented by the teachers and HODs to support these PYP students. This in turn has a negative effect on the school’s functioning and results.

Regarding the impact of community influences on the schools, the overwhelming effect of the community is noticeable in the location of the three schools. School A is located in the hustle

and bustle of the township, surrounded by informal settlements, shebeens, and spaza shops.¹ The traffic congestion adjacent to the school causes incessant noise. School B and School C, on the other hand, are located at the periphery of the township and, as highlighted by the SMT members, they do not have to deal with the same level of noise that School A experiences. However, the SMT members of all three schools attribute the disciplinary problems they experience to the negative influence of the community that surrounds the schools. School A’s location is regarded as highly challenging by its principal, who explained that the school is constantly burgled. He suspects that the burglars are recalcitrant members of the surrounding community who steal the school’s resources for the sake of their own survival. As an already resource-deprived school, the endless burglaries have a major destructive impact on the school’s enactment of a curriculum policy platform, as the school is constantly expected to focus on repairs and procurement of resources, which reduces the teachers’ and SMT members’ ability to optimally focus on teaching and learning.

With regard to their location, School A’s principal explained that he has ongoing challenges with students who come to school late, and when he confronts them, they usually provide the following types of reasons for their latecoming:

I stay on my own; my parents are in the Eastern Cape.

I am the head of the family. I have to fend for the little ones.

After school I have to go and work at the restaurant. There was no power. I have to use a primus stove. I have to take the little ones to crèche.

These challenges are echoed by the SMT members of Schools B and C. The responses of these schools’ HODs indicate that drug abuse, low parental involvement, late coming, absenteeism and gangsterism are the order of the day. These community-related challenges consequently limit the time that teachers and students have available to focus on teaching and learning, as these issues need to be addressed first before actual teaching and learning can take place. Fataar and Paterson (2002:31) point out that schools such as these, what they call ‘dysfunctional schools,’ have great difficulty “generat[ing] a healthy learning culture [...] frustrated by the absence of consistent stable circumstances and routines in the student population.” It is therefore clear that the materiality of these schools impacts and positions them negatively for establishing a healthy learning environment in their schools. This is an aspect which the schools’ SMTs actively struggle with daily as they go about developing leadership practices to facilitate the implementation of curriculum policy.

Internal context

The internal context refers to the daily internal challenges (such as the condition of the school building and infrastructure, as well as the attitudes of the people working within the school) with which these schools are faced. The focus of this section is on the extent to which the internal context of the school is able to provide a productive basis for the reception and implementation of the curriculum policy. Each school has a few prefabricated classrooms that were erected in addition to their main school building to accommodate the growing student population enrolled at the school. Principal 1 and Principal 2 state that the poor condition of the prefabricated classrooms impacts on the SMT's enactment of curriculum policy, as it requires them to find alternative ways in which teaching and learning can take place as a means to compensate for the negative physical conditions. These prefabricated structures are associated with extreme weather conditions during hot summers and cold winters, respectively. The structure of the prefabricated classrooms is described by the principals as not conducive to teaching and learning as a result of poor workmanship, as well as vandalism by students. This has a negative effect on the school because it creates more challenges in terms of the management of teaching and learning as not all students can be accommodated in the damaged classrooms. An HOD from School B indicated that the damaged prefabricated classrooms also add to the disciplinary challenges encountered with the students, as some students use the broken ceilings as a place to hide their books if they do not want to work in class.

School C, on the other hand, is constructed entirely of prefabricated classrooms and does not have any specialised rooms such as science laboratories, a library, or computer laboratories. According to the acting principal at the school, the lack of specialist equipment and specialised classrooms limits the type and variety of subjects that the school can offer. He explained that subjects such as Computer Applications Technology (CAT) and Consumer Studies are not part of the school's subject choices as they do not have the necessary facilities at the school. Furthermore, teachers teaching science subjects such as Physical Sciences and Life Sciences are challenged to find innovative strategies to teach these subjects, as they do not have the necessary apparatus and chemicals to perform the prescribed scientific experiments. According to members of the SMT, these limited resources make it difficult for students to excel in certain subject areas, and this places further pressure on the teachers.

The SMT members of the three schools indicated that the challenges they face with the poor school infrastructure are exacerbated by the

lack of material resources. An HOD at school A contends that a shortage of textbooks and other resources impedes the teachers from optimal teaching, due to a lack of adequate information needed for their lesson preparation. The students struggle to work without the assistance of textbooks. Principal 1 ascribes the shortage of textbooks to the ineffectiveness of the DoE, which fails to deliver the requested textbooks in time. This places the students and teachers at a disadvantage in their struggle to cover the syllabus.

A further lack of resources such as computers severely hampers these schools' functioning. Although School A has a computer laboratory for students' use, most of them do not have this facility at home and this impacts negatively on their ability to learn and complete homework tasks. This lack of computers and other information communication technologies (ICTs) hampers the teachers' ability to provide effective learning experiences that are augmented by ICTs. An HOD of School C stated that their administrative duties are also severely affected as the school only has one laptop per grade, which is used by the teachers to set their question papers and to load marks onto the system. The lack of computers impacts on the way in which the SMTs are able to manage teaching and learning, as the school has to deliver the curriculum content within a specified time frame and they have to complete the required School-Based Assessment (SBA) tasks as part of their compliance with the CAPS. This has negative implications for the enactment of a curriculum platform in their context, especially since the CAPS is experienced by the schools' SMTs as a tightly packaged curriculum with an expectation of rigid implementation. This situation places constraints on the SMTs to productively support their teachers' ability to manage the pacing of lessons, as well as content explanation, consolidation and assessment. SMTs have to contend with the impact of a constrictive policy environment that negatively impacts on the way that they are able to manage teaching and learning at their schools.

Based on the responses from the interviewees, another aspect of the schools' context, namely the professionalism of teachers, is a contested issue. The three principals stated that all their teachers are qualified and are teaching in the field in which they are qualified. Principal 1, however, touched on the aspect of a dress code for teachers, which he believes impacts on teaching and learning. In his words: *"It's all about impartation. What children see is what children would like to be"* (Principal 1). This principal expressed the importance of an appropriate dress code for teachers as part of their professionalism. He associates the teachers' dress code with the way in which the students view their aspirations and desire for educational success. Poorly dressed teachers, according to him, reflect

negatively on the teaching profession. On the aspect of commitment, Principal 1 acknowledged that at his school, he has concerns about his teachers' commitment to the profession. Contrary to Principal 1's view on commitment, an SMT member at the same school is of the opinion that their school has dedicated teachers, as illustrated by them providing extra classes on Saturdays and Sundays. These extra classes are viewed as an illustration of the teachers' commitment and agency in respect of building a learning culture at the school, a sentiment that was shared by Principal 2.

School C has a temporary, rotating SMT, which presents challenges for the school. The principal of this school explained that the inexperience of his SMT leads to inefficiency in the management of teaching and learning. He is of the opinion that continually changing the SMT members disrupts the teaching and learning processes at the school, since the priorities and leadership styles of the rotating acting principals and acting SMT members vary. He also feels that the temporary nature of the SMT can lead to animosity or an 'unstable' situation, as people constantly fight for promotion.

Effect of materiality on leadership practices

This section is a discussion of how the external and internal material contexts of the three schools impact on their leadership practices in the enactment of curriculum policy. The discussion here focuses on the intersection of different aspects of a school's material dimension and the enactment of the curriculum policy. It also points to the level of agency exerted by these leaders in their adverse contexts, where they 'intervene,' 'act otherwise' and 'make a difference' in the process of transforming underachievement for all students (Pantić, 2015:762). We argue that the material dimension of a school has an impact on the reception of the CAPS curriculum and the development of the school's curriculum platform.

Setting direction

As an aspect of leadership practice, the direction-setting role involves building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high-performance expectations and communicating the overall direction of the school (Leithwood et al., 2006:35). Our research indicates that all three schools focused on high achievement for all students because of the academic expectations of the DoE. The curriculum policy expectations are thus interpreted very strongly around the need for the schools to achieve results. In all three schools the HODs indicated that they are responsible for setting the goals of their different subject departments. They do this by analysing the results of previous years based on the goals set by the

DoE, and they are under constant pressure from subject advisers to focus on improving students' examination results.

Some of the interviewees mentioned that the poor socio-economic backgrounds of their students prompt the SMTs to set high achievement goals as a means to motivate students to escape their harsh township environment. This type of motivation is used by the school leaders (the SMTs) to encourage students to achieve the desired goals, despite their circumstances. Principal 2 commented that the focus on learner achievement is a means "*just to take them out of this community environment.*" He elaborates that it is challenging to work with students from the township. As the goals are already predetermined by the DoE, the SMT members commented that there is little space for their SMTs to introduce innovative projects and ideas to improve teaching and learning at their schools. This constricted environment thus renders the SMTs relatively powerless to improve their schools' overall educational functioning.

Developing people

According to Leithwood et al. (2006), leadership practices required to develop people revolve around providing individualised support and intellectual stimulation, and the modelling of appropriate values and practices. The responses from the interviews indicate that the three schools in this study attempt to incorporate these aspects of development into a curriculum platform at the school, although they do struggle to achieve a consistent developmental orientation and changed practices among their staff members. As Principal 3 commented: *So far we only send them to workshops when there are workshops. We invite curriculum [subject] advisers to assist teachers with understanding and conveying the content.* This comment indicates that development is narrowly focused on increasing the teachers' subject teaching capacity to meet the results expectations of the DoE, and that workshop attendance is prioritised when they are provided by an external agency.

Not all teachers are keen to participate in development activities. Principal 1 mentioned that he tries to persuade his teachers to attend development programmes as this puts them in line to have their classrooms equipped with technology such as smartboards and data projectors. Attending workshops is perceived as a way to improve on the limitations presented by their contextual factors.

The principals also indicated that, because of the challenging nature of their context, they provide individualised moral and social support as part of their staff development initiatives. Principal 1 does this through "spiritually-inclined" morning sessions; Principal 2 does this through inviting outside community members into the schools to assist teachers in their daily tasks; and Principal 3

indicated that he supports his teachers in setting a good example. These actions point to a limited form of agency demonstrated by these principals in order to encourage the ongoing development of their staff members. The responses of the participants reveal that the teachers are in constant need of emotional and moral support as a result of the challenging contexts.

Redesigning the organisation

Redesigning the organisation is the third core leadership practice. It involves building collaborative cultures at school, modifying organisational structures to nurture collaboration, building productive relations with families and communities, and connecting the school to the wider community (Klar & Brewer, 2013:772). In realising this leadership practice, all three schools in this study indicated that they endeavour to build collaborative cultures as a means to improve results; albeit in differing ways, and not always successfully. The SMT members believe that collaboration would enhance the teaching and learning experience, as this may lead to a uniform interpretation and effective implementation of the curriculum policy in pursuit of better results, as working-class schools are usually characterised as having fragmented relationships. The schools attempt to build collaborative cultures by asking teachers to work in clusters of subjects.

The SMTs' comments indicate that the schools struggle to get their teachers to work collaboratively. In the case of School A, the principal commented that personal issues restrict collaboration as many teachers no longer have the passion to teach at the school. School B's principal commented on the negative attitude that some teachers may have when they are reprimanded if they did not follow instructions correctly. School C's principal highlights the challenge he faces in having to rotate members on his school's temporary SMT, which, according to him, has a negative influence on teachers who may aim for promotion posts. He commented as follows:

The school is going now into a position for a principal. Everyone is jumping for positions like that, you see. From time to time there's tension, you see. They are not so explicit, but you can see maybe in groups, favouring this person and not the other person. Situations like that can sometimes lead to sabotage of each other because somebody wants your position.

The comment points to the uneven level of professionalism that is present at the school. Principal 3 explained that sabotage takes place in the form of an invigilating teacher withholding certain teachers' examination scripts or interfering with the marks on the computer systems, thereby affecting the administrative duties of the teachers.

The principal of School A intervenes by attempting to modify the school's organisational

structure by establishing committees where all teachers can be involved. Schools B and C adopt the normal hierarchical structure as prescribed by the DoE as they believe that it assists them with the completion of administrative tasks. While, for example, Principal 3 started a vegetable garden at the school to get more parents involved at the school, all the interviewees indicated that they fail to build productive relationships with parents and the community, as neither the parents nor the community respond to the schools' call for support.

Managing teaching and learning

The previous three leadership practices culminate in this fourth leadership practice, which entails staffing the instructional programme; monitoring the progress of students, teachers and the school; providing instructional support; aligning resources; and buffering staff from distractions to their work (Leithwood et al., 2006).

Referring to the appointment of teachers, Principal 1 indicated that the principal is not solely responsible, but that appointments are subject to the input of the school governing body (SGB). This principal points to the lack of skills of the SGB in working-class schools. Principal 3 commented that the DoE interfered with their appointments when they instructed that the posts of teachers who had been employed at a school for more than six months should be converted to permanent teaching posts. This resulted in the appointment of teachers who were unqualified to present certain subjects.

The interviewees emphasised the constant surveillance by departmental officials by means of the monitoring and moderation process. According to the SMT members, they are directed by the subject advisers on how they should interpret the curriculum policy and this informs their actions. Principal 1 employs a check-up tool to monitor compliance, Principal 2 has a monitoring book to record his class visits to teachers, and Principal 3 has a moderation book in which he records work moderated. To assist with the alignment of resources, School A gives students access to the school after hours to assist with their studies. School B focuses on the availability of textbook information and allows teachers to make multiple copies of teaching materials. At School C, the students are sharing textbooks. All three principals referred to the discourse of progressive discipline as a means to buffer staff from distractions to their work. Progressive discipline is used as a means to obtain the expected results by disciplining teachers to act in a specific way. This involves strategies where the principals use their 'personal power and persuasion' to implement disciplinary strategies to gain compliance from their teachers in respect of obtaining specific teaching and learning objectives (see Pantić, 2015). The principals' personal agency involves example setting, persuasion, development

structures and processes, occasional threats and shaming of teachers, and at times the implementation of prescribed disciplinary measures against recalcitrant teachers. The principals' agency is intended to facilitate a healthy educational environment in the harsh conditions of their schools, the achievement of which, they admit, is hard to achieve.

Discussion

Policy enactment theory, especially the focus on the impact of 'materiality' on policy implementation (Ball et al., 2012; Braun, Ball, Maguire & Hoskins, 2011), illuminates the effect of the external and internal contexts of the schools on the leadership practices employed by the SMTs. In terms of the external context, the performative expectations imposed by governmental regulation, especially the strict monitoring of the schools in respect of delivering optimal results, set discursive limits on schools' functioning. All the interviewees indicated that their leadership practices are driven by the incoming CAPS and constant surveillance by departmental officials. Complying with the DoE requirements means that the leadership practices tend to focus solely on ensuring that they have covered CAPS content. This creates a curriculum policy platform in terms of which the schools focus narrowly on results, yet achieving these results is negatively affected by the challenges of the internal context within which these schools operate.

Regarding the internal materiality of the schools, their situated contexts impact heavily on the activities associated with their SMTs' leadership practices. The SMT members of all three schools described how a significant portion of their school day is spent on disciplining students, which impacts negatively on the time available for teaching and learning. These disciplinary challenges are ascribed to the low levels of parental involvement and this in turn requires the teachers to provide additional support to students. Additional support is normally focused on providing extra classes for students as a means to assist them with their studies. A further consequence of a lack of parental involvement requires the SMT to set the direction for the school without the input of parents. This also has implications for the leadership practice of redesigning the organisation, as this leadership practice depends on the involvement of parents for effective implementation.

The principals and HODs indicated that they are severely constrained by a lack of textbooks. They put the blame for this directly on the DoE, as they claim that they order textbooks well in advance, but they are not delivered on time. This points to the obstructive effect of the external context on the schools' internal functioning. The consequence of the lack of additional resources such as computers and scientific equipment is

restricted subject choices for students. Practical subjects such as Computer Applications Technology (CAT) and Consumer Studies cannot be offered by some of the schools. The limited subject choices result in students being placed at a disadvantage, as they cannot enter certain vocations such as engineering, information technology, science fields or the hospitality industry. A "hands-on" curriculum (Mills & Gale, 2010:40) is thus not viable.

The material context of the three selected schools reveals a lack of physical and human resources, overcrowded classes, and poor infrastructure (Christie et al., 2007:65; Moloji, 2010). Curriculum policy is thus implemented within this 'messy' reality. The contribution of this analysis, while not generalisable, is that it provides conceptual insight into the complex dynamics in terms of which leadership practices are enacted in difficult material circumstances.

Conclusion

The article has focused on how contextual factors affecting three working-class schools impact on the leadership practices adopted in the enactment of curriculum policy. This is a particularly neglected focus in the study of educational leadership and curriculum policy implementation. This article addressed this lacunae in the hope of turning the attention of policy makers, educational bureaucrats, school leaders and teachers to the ways in which specific contexts impact teaching and learning. Ball et al.'s policy enactment theory, especially their material lens (2012), was used to illustrate the complexity of the impact of contextual factors on the leadership practices of working-class schools. The findings of our study revealed that the working-class schools' impoverished contexts and severe lack of resources do not allow them optimally to pursue certain educational goals, including preparing students for certain vocations such as engineering and information technology, which are much needed by our country's economy. We argue that the inadequate internal material factors left the schools vulnerable to the expectations that emanate from outside the school. The DoE's narrow emphasis on student performance and examination results play a limiting role in the schools' ability to provide an enriching and supportive environment to raise their students' performance. The SMTs of the three schools performed their leadership practices within a context deprived of resources and they thus had to improvise in order to meet the requirements of improved exam and test results. Working-class schools have uniquely difficult contextual circumstances, which locate them in a deficit situation in respect of the implementing curriculum policy. Directed and controlled by the DoE, the official curriculum policy was narrowly interpreted by the schools in a quest for optimal results and the three

SMTs' core leadership practices were consequently aimed at achieving the prescribed results. The impact of their materiality, however, served to distract these schools from achieving a type of functionality that would facilitate a cohesive and productive learning environment. The resultant curriculum policy platform is narrow and restricted, and is therefore ineffective in serving the needs of working-class students and teachers. The study has shown that the three schools' materiality has a negative impact on their functioning, despite the important work that their SMTs and teachers do to mitigate the worst consequences of their circumstances.

Notes

- i. Spaza shops and shebeens are informal shops and bars, respectively. They are a cornerstone of the informal economy in the township.
- ii. This article is based on Rene Terhoven's doctoral thesis.
- iii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

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