# Leadership development for school principals: Evidence from South African principals and mentors

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# Abstract

This paper reports on and examines findings from a South African study on mentors’ and school principals’ experiences in a School Leadership Advanced Certificate (ACE) programme. Mentors were part of the training while principals were the students. Research evidence suggests that quality school leadership contributes to improved learner performance and teacher effectiveness. It is widely agreed today that such leadership is best achieved through deliberate leadership learning processes. Against this background, conscious of the many and increasingly challenging tasks the South African principal faces in a young democracy, and in keeping with international trends, the South African Department of Education, in conjunction with universities is sponsoring the ACE (School Leadership) programme,starting with serving school principals.However, there is still debate regarding what models or forms of learning produce effective leaders. There also seems to be a dearth of South African empirical evidence regarding how the already serving school principal responds to formal leadership development. Equally there seems to be need for more knowledge about the role of mentorship in leadership development. The study conducted individual interviews with mentors and focus group interviews with school principals. Findings show that mentoring plays an important role in leadership development. The serving principal seems to be a sensitive candidate for leadership development so extra care must be exercised if such development is to succeed.

# Introduction

Since the democratisation of education in South Africa after the attainment of freedom in 1994, the duties and responsibilities of the school principal have transformed quite considerably and demand that the school principal have specialised knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in order to successfully lead and manage schools (see Republic of South Africa, 1998, PAM Chapter A). Conley (2011) rightly argues that the school principal’s job is demanding, requiring energy, drive and many personal qualities and attributes. The expectations of this job have moved from demands of mere management and control to those for an educational leader who can spearhead staff development, parent involvement, community support, and learner growth, somebody who can succeed with major changes in legislation and policies, etc.

 Although principals are qualified educators, many of them have not received adequate training to cope with the new challenges that they are faced (Van der Westhuizen, 1990). Further, the qualification requirement for school principalship in South Africa is currently extremely minimal. The minimum educational qualification for school principalship is a three year post matriculation qualification inclusive of a professional teaching qualification (KZN Department of Education, 2008). In terms of experience, a candidate requires a mere minimum of seven years experience in education (KZN Department of Education, 2008). Consequently, an educator who has never occupied a formal leadership and management position at a school is eligible to apply for the post of school principal and be appointed to such a post. Given such low requirements to qualify for appointment to the post of school principal in South Africa, Mathibe (2007) asserts that this places school administration, management, leadership and governance in the hands of ‘technically’ unqualified personnel.

Research on school principals around the world has shown that the quality of leadership provided in a school has an influence on learner performance and teacher effectiveness (Day, 2005; Elmore, 2002; Reppa & Lazaridou, 2008). Internationally, a qualification in school leadership and management has become a prerequisite for the job of school principal (Business Report, 2007). To illustrate, in the United States of America (USA), more than 90% of the States require that a prospective school principal complete a state approved preparation programme that leads to a certificate as a school leader (Roberts, 2009). In England, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) is mandatory for prospective school principals (National College, n.d.; Olsen, 2007). In South Africa, the Gauteng province Department of Basic Education’s Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG) was established to develop leadership and governance competences in education. The explanation for this trend lies in that scholars widely agree that sound leadership makes a significant difference to student learning. It is widely agreed today that leaders need to learn how to lead better. However, the ‘jury is still out’ on what type of preparation is required to develop appropriate leadership behaviours (Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2011; Patterson & West-Burnham, 2005). Olivares et al. (2007) quoted by McGuire (2011, p. 157) advocate a holistic perspective to leadership development as follows:

Leadership development, as a type of human development, takes place over time; it is incremental in nature, it is accretive; and it is the result of complex reciprocal interactions between the leader, others, and the social environment. Hence, effective leadership development realizes that leaders develop and function within a social context; and, although individual-based leader development is necessary for leadership, it is not sufficient. Leadership requires that individual development is integrated and understood in the context of others, social systems, and organizational strategies, missions, and goals.

Consistent with the international trend described above, the then South African Department of Education, now the Department of Basic Education (DBE), in conjunction with universities in the country has developed and is implementing on a trial basis, the Advanced Certificate in Education in School Leadership (ACE: SL) for serving school principals and more recently has included deputy principals in the programme regardless of current academic and professional qualifications. The DBE finances the programme. The former Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor spelt out the vision of this qualification when she stated that ‘we regard this as a critical contribution to building a new pool of capable education leaders for our schools’ (Republic of South Africa, 2007, p.11).

The ACE: SL programme is run by selected University Faculties of Education. The programme comprises of lectures at the university in question, the development of a portfolio on his/her practice on the part of the student-principal, and on-school-site mentorship. This mentorship is done by selected seasoned educationists such as retired school principals and education inspectors/officers. However, there is still debate regarding what models or forms of learning produce effective leaders. There also seems to be a dearth of South African empirical evidence regarding how the already serving school principal responds to this new requirement for formal leadership development. Equally there seems to be need for more knowledge about the role of mentorship in leadership development. In this connection, this paper reports findings of a study on how selected ACE: SL graduates (student-principals) experienced the programme and how mentors experienced their role there in. The study revolved around the following critical questions:

1. How do practising principals experience undergoing a formal leadership development programme?
2. How do mentors understand and cope with their mentorship role?
3. What can we learn from this project regarding the future of leadership development for South African school principals?

# Research Design and Methodology

This study is a qualitative study located within the interpretive research paradigm. Qualitative research emphasises the lived experiences of the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001). That orientation enabled us ontologically to enter the school principal’s and mentor’s life-worlds and understand and make meaning of how they experienced the ACE: SL. We also chose to work within the interpretive paradigm since it relies on first-hand accounts (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999), in our case those of the mentors and school principals. Additionally, this paradigm is also used to research peoples’ behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999) which is what we set out to elicit from our participants.

For school principals we used focus group interviews, a technique that produces data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researchers (Morgan and Krueger (1998). Informed by Krueger and Casey (2000) we found this method of data generation useful in providing multiple viewpoints from our participants. Further, ‘the type and the range of the data generated through the social interaction of the group is often deeper and richer than those obtained from one-to-one interviews’ (Rabiee, 2004, p. 656). In determining the number of focus groups we were guided by Krueger (1994) cited in Rabiee (2004) who suggests that for a simple research question the number of groups should be three or four. We opted for three focus groups constructed along the lines of school context: urban, rural and township. In homogenising the grouping of school principals along the lines of school context we felt this would allow principals in the group to understand better the leadership and management challenges and possibilities experienced by them and their experiences of the ACE:SL.

In terms of sampling, we first grappled with question as to how many participants should comprise each focus group. Drawing on Krueger (cited in Struwig & Stead, 2004), that focus groups generally comprise four to eight research participants, we settled on group size of about four to five participants. We then engaged in purposive sampling in order to access ‘knowledgeable people’ i.e. those who have in-depth knowledge about issues of the ACE: SL (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 114).

Focus Group One: This group comprised four school principals serving township schools. All the participants were male were appointed to primary schools. All of them held post-graduate degrees and their experience as principals ranged from 8 years to 15 years.

Focus Group Two: This group comprised five school principals serving urban schools. Four of the participants were female and one was male. Two were appointed at secondary schools, one at a primary school and two at a school serving learners with special educational needs. Three of the five participants held post-graduate degrees and their experience as principal ranged from 3 years to 12 years.

Focus Group Three: This group comprised four school principals serving rural schools. Two of the participants were female and two were male. Two were appointed to secondary schools and two at primary schools. Their qualifications ranged from higher diplomas and certificates to undergraduate degrees. Their experience ranged from 9 years to 14 years.

For mentors we elected to interview each of the four individually. This was informed by their having worked with specific groups of principals in particular geographical set ups, unlike the principals who had undergone a common leadership development programme. The interviews took place at agreed upon venues convenient to the participant. Each interview lasted for about 90 minutes.

Informed by Henning’s (2004) assertion that data analysis involves converting ‘raw’ data into patterns of meaning, we audio-recorded all the interviews and then subjected them to *verbatim* transcription. McMillan and Schumacher (2006, p. 355) contend that audio recording the interview ‘…ensures completeness of the verbal interaction and provides material for reliability checks’. The transcripts were then subjected to a rigorous process of content analysis in accordance with the themes emerging.

Mertens (1998) contends that the observation of ethical practices in research is of paramount importance in order to protect people from the harmful effects of research. To this end the aim and purpose the study was explained to all participants at the commencement of each of the three focus group interviews. The consent of the participants was then obtained and they were assured that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable. We also made it clear that their names and that of their institutions would remain confidential and in any reporting *nom de plumes* will be used to anonymise their and their institutions identities.

# Findings

The data is presented under themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. A discussion of the data is integrated into each of the themes.

## Responses from mentors

### Understanding of the aims of the ACE: SL

We asked the mentors what they understood to be the aim of the ACE:SL. Some viewed it as an opportunity to strengthen the principal’s leadership.

Schools require strong leadership and this programme is designed to specifically do that. As an educator and especially as a head teacher of a school, you need not only worry about the day to day running of the school but you also need to have broad leadership. Leadership is action- not just about the position. A weak principal, clearly, is not what a school requires. It requires a strong principal. A principal, who knows what is happening, widely read, has a good personal library on leadership programmes. So, you become a vital cog.

Some fore-grounded the up-grading of the principal:

I feel that the ACE course is intending to broaden the principal’s knowledge of running the schools and also to expose the principals on the new changes taking place and thirdly to empower the principals so that they will be in a position to manage their schools effectively.

Well my understanding from day one was that principals needed to be upgraded because the whole education system changed but principals did not change. That the student would go to the university and learn academically and the mentor would go to the school to assist the student of what he was taught academically.

Others felt that the practicing principals, particularly the aging ones should not have been the target:

In my view it was a mistake to take principals who are in their fifties who are waiting to retire into this programme, now you put them in the exam situation. Mr ----, this was a big mistake. We should be saying to the new teachers: you can only reach a management position if you have an ACE (SL). That is the impact.

The HODs [Heads of Department]. Those are future principals and deputy principals. In fact we need to put pressure on the department to ensure that this qualification become compulsory.

### Role of mentor

In attempting to explain this role, one participant told us what the mentor was not:

You are not going there as an inspector. You have to be careful how you handle that visit of yours. Teachers at school must not think, we have an inspector at school because at the end of the day this ACE (SL) is a principal’s programme. It is not a school’s programme. It is a leadership programme for an individual. So a lot of interaction should take place with the individual not necessarily at the school. Therefore small class units are vital.

But some element of inspection seemed to exist in some mentors, to check…..

To influence him in some way so that he in turn can go back to apply the principles he has learnt about in his school situation. That was the bottom line. So, mine was to check the extent to which … eer...the student had applied the principles learnt from theory. To see the extent to which he applied and the extent to which the course had influenced his inputs with regards to the outcomes as outlined in the various modules.

To another participant, the mentor was a shoulder to cry on, on the part of the school principal.

They need a shoulder to cry on. They can cry on mine. That, to me, was the most important thing in my mentorship. And when I go back to my days as the principal, I had my colleagues around and yes we cried on each other’s shoulder. So I understand the need to talk. You must also remember- the principal’s job is sometimes the loneliest job in the school. He sits up there and he takes all the wind. I think it’s the loneliness of the principal that makes mentorship important.

Mentorship is about walking with somebody, they said.

As a mentor I would go to school and say let’s see your policy on playground supervision, let’s see if there is one. And I could help them develop through the stages. But a mentor never walks the road for somebody; he/she walks the road with somebody.

The mentor was reported as a supporter, but sometimes cornered to play the lecturer role.

Interesting, at times the mentorship programme might overlap with the lectures’. But then, that’s the nature of the programme. The mentorship programme as I see it, is there as a background support to the school principals who can contact and gain as much as possible from the wealth of experience that the mentor has. The mentor is not there to do the assignments; the mentor is not there to lecture but rather to untie knots.

### Mentor Preparation

We asked the mentors about the adequacy of the preparation they were taken through for mentorship. Some felt they had adequate preparation.

To me it was adequate. I don’t know… maybe because I had my own experience and I felt it was quite adequate.

But some felt it was inadequate.

I would say inadequately because we were asked to come out here on a Saturday. We spent the whole day here. We had a lot of interaction but in my humble opinion I think one day is hopelessly inadequate to be trained and to be put out in the field. I know there are some people will say that sometimes it is best that you are thrown in at the deep end and find your way which of course is what we tried to do because we interacted a lot with other mentors with whom we attended the course but as for the period of training I would imagine that at least for a week…

Another would not consider what he went through as real training.

I was never trained, but I did an IBM course on mentorship which was of great help to me. Look when we started, we had Dr ----- who came for about three sessions who taught us the overview of what mentorship is.

### Time

Did the mentors have the time it takes to play the mentorship role? To some, time was a major constraint.

Well… an inhibiting factor here was distance because being based here in….. I travelled as far as ….. and of course trying to find the schools was an ordeal. I thank God for the cell phone because some of the schools were so remote and of course the roads were terrible to say the least. But we tried to get to these schools but then when you eventually got to the school, you only had about an hour or so before the school day ended. You then ask the principal to stay after school but he has his own issues. In some cases those that were closer we were able to pay them a second visit otherwise we just had to use our cell phones. The other thing that helped was that we had contact sessions at the university because they had to meet their lecturers.

Due to shortage of time, some resorted to group mentoring.

No. I think here mentors need to meet groups of principals more. What I found interesting was: principals also learn more from their own colleagues at a meeting. If colleague A is given a question and he has to answer, principal B is learning from that as well. But if you do it one-to-one, that aspect is missing. I found that to be very vital because then I tell them- listen: Mrs Ngubane is doing it in her which is two kilometers from your school. So I didn’t have enough time there, without doubt.

Some reported they had the time but would have liked to be with the principals for more semesters.

I think the time was okay. I could go to the school as often as I wanted to. if I was at your school today and there was a problem, in two days’ time I could come back to you and say okay, has it worked? Or they could phone me. I would have liked to have four semesters with them, and not three.

### Relationships

What did it mean for mentors to build relationships with mentees? To some, the issue of authority mattered.

That is a very interesting question… The fact that I was a retired principal helped a lot with authority… authority not in the sense that I called the shots… no, no, no, but in confidence in me. I was asked a few questions which I was able to answer because in most cases I had had that experience. I was able to answer most of them because I had been a principal and had come through the ranks.

Trust was reported to be very important.

For the mentee to listen to you he must trust you and you must be open. If not you are not going to get information. They must feel relaxed because at the end you only succeed if they tell the truth… they tell you everything that is happening. Once they keep back some of the things you can’t succeed in solving the problems. So that relationship is very important.

One of the factors is that you must be a person who will understand the mentee. They must not feel that you are above them. The must feel that you are just part of them. Because if they feel that now… and they keep away from you.

Matching mentor and mentee seemed to be a complex matter involving age, race, language and culture.

There are pros and cons here because matching the mentee with the mentor you don’t know what the mentee is going to look for. Some will look for age… is he old enough to be my father I will probably get very good experience from this person and guidance and that type of thing. Another person will say I don’t want this type of person, I prefer someone who is closer to me in age… maybe we will be able to get on. I know that in South Africa I think it is a relatively new concept this mentoring story overseas they actually have semesters whereby the students associate with the mentors to be and they gravitate towards a person whom they feel should be their mentor and they actually make a choice… there is a choice story. In South Africa that is not the case. We are simply told this is your group of students. So too they are told this is going to be your mentor and we just simply take it from there.

There was a wide variety of responses that one got. What helped me was my grey hair. But then you found the younger principal seemingly asking: there is this old chap coming... what he can tell me? They come out of tertiary institutions with the qualifications and you come along and they say let’s hear what you have to say but one was able to balance that. Generally speaking the principals were very receptive and cooperative and appreciative of what we tried to give them.

**…..**But race might be a factor. Personally, I do think that there are some people who might not accept a person of another colour.

I can only speak for myself. I think that I was able to get on with the mentees because I am able to speak Zulu and 90 something odd percent were Zulu speaking principals, secondly they were female. I know a little bit of the culture… the Zulu culture you know there is that male-female issue and with the new dispensation that must fall away. Some male principals found it a little difficult to accept me as a woman mentor. But as I said speaking Zulu and knowing a little bit of the culture was useful.

Did they experience any mentee over-dependence?

Over-dependence: Yes… especially in the rural areas. I tell them, you got a problem that you need to address at school, what have you done about it. Show me the correspondence to the Department. If they haven’t then I would mentor the person by saying look I think you should use this or that approach. Our purpose is mainly developmental…To develop the person, to help the person so that that person can grow. And of course the person must also have confidence in him or herself so that if you are not there the person is able to stand on his own to a certain extent. So... we are aware of this type of thing... dependency.

The over-dependence came in when they wanted me to interpret the assignment questions for them. I said I do not do assignments. There is a tendency for over- dependence. They think you are there to solve all their problems. You are there to guide them –not to walk the walk for them.

Some felt it was difficult to prevent over-dependence.

It’s difficult... if he or she wants me to help I must give him help by explaining to him what to do but not to do it for him or her. You must explain the procedure. Sometimes I can invite them to the workshop and workshop them as a whole.

### Challenges/Issues

What did the mentors experience as some of the challenges in the mentorship role? One mentor was concerned about how principals got appointed, which negatively influenced their performance.

Look- this is a frank interview so I’m going to pull no punches. The principals in the schools are appointed by the Selection Committee of the Governing Body. Sadly, many of the heads of schools are now either Union people or are politically appointed. Very few of them have the skills to be administrators.

Related to the preceding response were issues of work ethic and attitude.

First, the personality problem… some principals… they have to change their attitude towards the assistance. Number 2 is the work ethic: unless the principal has a very good work ethic he cannot expect teachers to do the same… Then number 3 is lack of confidence on the part of the principals. They doubt themselves. That’s what I discovered.

Another challenge reported related to work overload on the part of the principal.

You visit a school and the principal has five thousand other things to do. The principal’s day is not yours. And you get there at 11 o’clock- s/he is having tea and somebody knocks at the door and the child has injured her/himself outside or that... The principal has enormous responsibilities at school and when you come there, you are interfering.

Balancing between university assignments and school work was another challenge.

There were times when ... if you write a schedule to visit them, the guy will say... I am busy, because I have an assignment to submit. The guy would say: can we re-schedule for another day? That was the type of talk.

Some principals were unreliable, and perhaps unprepared for mentorship.

I would arrange to meet this principal at his school at a pre-determined date and time at his office. I would even confirm on the very day early in the morning that I’m on my way and the guy would say: I’m waiting for you Mr P. Then I would drive all the distance only to find that he is not there.

Some principals expected the mentor to pay for travel and venue booking expenses. Others expected the mentor to ‘fight their battles’ with the Department of Education.

……When I come there, the other guys are there already. We are taken to the auditorium. We get through with whatever we doing there. Then at the end of the day, I am issued with an invoice. *Hawu, kwenzenjani manje?* (What is happening now?)

They thought may be, I would be the ‘go-between’, not all of them but certainly most of them- between them and the Department. But may I immediately say I ran myself into that *(laughing)*. Because, in one of the schools, a soak pit in the school had not been cleaned for the last three years- and I phoned the physical planner of the district and I said you know- that hasn’t happened. They wanted me to do things for them and I said no.

In some cases some mentors were inefficient resulting in their mentees seeking help from mentors elsewhere.

This is confidential. I had calls from principals from other districts, to ask if they can come across. They had not seen their mentors. This made me think that this whole thing is going to fall flat because some people were not doing what they were supposed to be doing.

### Impact

We asked about what the mentors saw as the major impact of the ACE: SL. Some said it was a morale booster.

It boosts their morale and eliminates feelings if insecurity. Mentoring definitely reduced stress levels among principals as this position is a very lonely position. If work is also shared, this reduces stress on one person. Nothing succeeds like success. If you feel good about yourself, you do well, self esteem.

Some felt the programme has helped principals to improve their schools.

When we started the schools were dysfunctional but after two years there was improvement.

In one school there was the problem of learners and educators coming late. After the mentoring, the principal phoned me to say there was no late coming any more. that no late coming now in the school.

Power sharing was reported to have improved in some cases.

I witnessed increased power sharing in the schools. Some of the principals that I mentored are from the old dispensation and you know for a teacher to get up and ask you a question at a staff meeting that was unheard of in my days. We tried to introduce the story of a flatter structure whereby everybody must be involved. In one case a principal said to me: Well Mr K, I did not realise that I had so much talent among my staff members.

### Suggestions

What suggestions did the mentors have for the programme? One suggestion was to implement the multiplier effect.

So we need now to make use of the people that have been trained and then they should be able to train more principals … the multiplier effect and then be able to have this thing have an impact on a greater number of people.

Another suggestion related to the course duration and content.

 The training period was too short and then secondly, I met some of the principals who were going to enroll for this ACE course who made it quite clear that they need a course that deals with the law of education.

Mentors were to be carefully selected and mentees needed to be informed.

Mr-----, let me tell you, I have interacted with all the mentors in the ACE (SL). The quality of mentors is absolutely crucial. That is why you have to carefully select them. You don’t just look for a retired principal. You look for someone who is committed and you have to vet that with the people who know that person well.

The mentees need to be given a brief from the university who the mentors are –which was lacking. At the end of the day you can only lead people who are willing to be led. Therefore the matching of the mentor and mentee is very crucial.

I think when recruiting mentors, we should not talk about distance much. Say for the …..area, look for someone from outside, someone who can do an honest appraisal. Don’t forget there will always be history in these things. Distances are not an issue anymore. Technology has made life so easy for us.

Also, circumstances have changed immensely. Don’t take someone who was out of the school before year 2000. Take someone who is recent, who understand what is going on.

## Responses from school principals

### Feelings on being selected for the qualification

We asked how they felt after being accepted into the ACE: SL. The emotions of the majority of participants across all three focus groups ranged from being relieved to excitement. Some of the comments of the participants were:

I felt rather honoured to be chosen for the ACE leadership programme... There is no training for principals. You train to become a teacher or an educator... this is the only programme where you are empowered to take on the duties and role function of principal.

I was very excited to be accepted... When I applied I was a first year principal... I gathered my experience by going through the ranks and I thought this was such a good opportunity to learn.

I was relieved that at last I might learn what to do as principal... [because] since I have been here at this school no one has come to me to say this is what you need to know to be the principal.

But one participant indicated that some school principals viewed the programme as a means of increasing their salary notch. He stated:

If I get the qualification I am going to get an extra [salary] notch.

### Content of the ACE: SL programme

We asked the focus groups how useful they found the content of the ACE: SL programme. There was near unanimity that the content was very relevant to the principal’s job today. One participant had this to say:

You could use the theory and apply it to practice. I have got a board meeting tomorrow and I have been tasked to bring about change in the school... a school that has been doing the same thing for years. I actually whipped out my semester two 2009 assignment on how to manage change in our schools... I said I am going to use some of the snippets from here and use that as part of my presentation [to the board].

However, some participants added that the content could have been better handled.

To me the content was excellent but the way it was presented was very often skipped over.

I feel that the time spent on the content did not do justice… there are so many aspects we just scratched the surface. We didn’t go in-depth and it is so important.

### Teaching and learning

We asked how the principals experienced teaching and learning on the programme. One of the issues that emerged was low lecturer quality. This is what some participants had to say:

We had one lecturer who was a head of department and lecturing to us. We found her wanting... she should ask us about how you do this in school. She was not sure... she was short on experience... she was put in this position... she was head of department but you could see she was lacking.

The lecturers that presented the stuff... some were not very competent... even not having the right attitude. There were some Saturdays we went and I thought it was a total loss of a Saturday.

The lecturers you will find were adequately prepared. In terms of content they did a lot of preparation... but in terms of practical experience they were lacking to some extent.

However, those lecturers that were recruited from practice were viewed very favourably by the participants.

Those [lecturers] that came from the school background, who were ex-principals or practicing principals did a good job because they spoke from experience.

A second issue that emerged related to mentoring. The participants expressed both positive and negative comments with regard to their experiences of mentoring. The following comments were from rural based principals.

We had the best mentor... it was a breath of fresh air. We really enjoyed that. She left us with very salient short morals and stories… Those stories will live with us for the entire period in the profession.

She came and she shadowed us for many hours... In the last hour she had a conversation with us about our day and how we handled it. She would say shouldn’t we have looked at it from this perspective.

In contrast, the experiences of the focus group participants from urban schools were largely negative. They commented:

With our mentor he was a very wonderful person... but I do not feel that I gained at all from him because he did not have a good look at my work... he did not sat that is wrong and that’s right. Worst of all I got no help whatsoever with my portfolio... I did not want someone to come and say this is a nice school and this is nice over here but someone to come and say hey let me see that log book of yours and hey no this is wrong.

He was a fantastic guy but he didn’t help me in the way that I expected. He did not give me enough of support.

Another participant from an urban context owed her negative experiences of mentoring to a lack of understanding of the mentor of her school context. She volunteered:

My school is an ex-model C school [affluent]. My mentor was not from an ex-model C school. In an ex-model C school there is so many management structures... The mentor needs to be somebody from the same type of school... The mentor did not extend me. Not for the lack of trying but for the lack of knowledge of how my school runs.

Thirdly, the school principals commented on the portfolios they were required to compile as part of their learning. The portfolio was seen as a valuable learning tool by almost all participants. One participant commented:

If you take your five fundamental areas of the programme you open five files. You put all the aspects for example [the module] Teaching and Learning… your worksheets, your notes, your minutes… you put them in your file. You have compartments for things like minutes… circulars and that is your portfolio. If you want to look for something you are not looking in a haystack for a needle. There is much more organisation. This is what the portfolio taught us.

Another participant had this to say about how his portfolio became a collective effort in the school:

My entire management had a hand in my portfolio. Let us be honest it was the school in a way being assessed not the principal… So if there was any shortcoming in the portfolio it was the school’s shortcoming. We sat and had a meeting and I said this is your portfolio. What would you put in there? And believe you me within five days it was a shocker.

Across all three focus groups the participants commented on how valuable the reflective journals in the portfolios were to their practice. They commented:

Reflection has lots of benefits. You can’t write certain things in your log book but you can write your feelings in your reflective journal. It gave us an opportunity to reflect on our own practice.

You know reflection sharpens your practice. We are human beings as principals and you find we do make wrong decisions and we sometimes need to correct ourselves. Reflection allows you to ponder and come back and to correct yourself... In your reflective journal you can say that I addressed this issue in this manner...and probably my original comment was out of line.

The reflective journal was part of my thinking process as a principal... I reflected on where I was, where I am at present and where I want to be.

Fourthly, at the learning centres the school principals were clustered into groups of twenty to thirty. For many of the participants this was a learning community from which they gained much knowledge on leadership and management practices. One participant commented:

In the classroom you find that you had about twenty… thirty principals there… We unpacked issue... It is the combined knowledge of looking at the issues and seeking solutions that was a great opportunity. The programme was most beneficial in that regard.

Another participant from the township focus group spoke of how initially in their cohort only some individuals contributed to the discussions. However, as time went by others in the group became empowered by colleagues in the group and they soon began to make input during discussions. He Indicated:

In the lecture rooms we should lead the discussion. I used to feel bad sometimes because we were hogging the discussions. But at the end of the two years other colleagues from disadvantaged schools were contributing just as much. So you could see that they were empowered now.

A participant from the focus group comprising urban principals spoke of how learning occurred from her colleagues at disadvantaged schools. She indicated:

There was this newspaper article on discipline... I explained how I would do it. They [principals from disadvantaged schools] said wow you are applying the schools act perfectly... I was from an ex-model C school and he was from Umlazi. I was high school he was primary school... We cross pollinated and actually shared ideas.

Fifth, all three focus groups commented on the very formal way in which assessment was done. They had to complete assignments and write examinations. They felt that this was ‘not on’ for a practice-based qualification. One participant commented:

In terms of the assessments we did not expect it to be so rigid and formal. We expected it to be in the classroom, ongoing, informal and not to catch you out in terms of your theoretical knowledge... because in terms of the programme we thought the programme should be geared towards practice... making you a better principal.

A major downside for many of the participants in all three focus groups was the lack of feedback on assessment tasks more so in their first year of study. Some of the comments were:

There was no feedback whatsoever.... In the first year we did not get any feedback. We did not even get our marks. We did not get the assignments back. I felt that was absolutely shocking. In the second year it did improve and some people gave us excellent feedback.

 Sixth, almost all the participants commented on how the ACE: SL unintentionally led to the formation of learning networks. The school principals developed ties with colleagues on the programme who became critical friends. These critical friends became ‘sounding boards’ to bounce ideas. One participant commented:

Oneof the big advantages is that you build up a relationship with people in the same boat as you. I trust my colleagues who were on the course with me much more than I trust any other colleagues. With [person’s name] I could say gee I am making a mistake here what do you think... We are very honest with each other.

The networking for me in this course was most valuable...I would happily phone [person’s name] and say what would you do. In networking you learn how each one does things. You then take a little bit from everything and then apply it. You meet with the people from disadvantaged schools who don’t have facilities and see how they cope with the problem. They may have a better solution than us advantaged and better resourced schools.

### Organisation of the ACE: SL

A concern that was raised in response to how the ACE: SL was organised was the grouping of the principals. Participants, more especially in the focus groups comprising urban and township school principals, felt that using a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not take into account the learning needs of the principals serving schools in different contexts. They argued that school principals at deep rural schools need a different ACE: SL learning ‘diet’ compared to a school principal at an ex-model C school. The participants commented:

You have got different types of principals. People come in from different school contexts. You will find principals coming in from affluent schools to deep rural schools… A deep rural school may not have any of the policies or structures in place. At our school we got all our committees and structures… You will find that we already have things in place. So, some of the things were not pertinent to us.

It is like putting an infant with an adult... putting an infant with an adult is going to be problematic. But if you know these ones require more development here these ones require little development you can cater for their specific needs.

A few principals felt that grouping principals in terms of school context was a negative step. They believed the current set up of heterogeneous groups of school principals in terms of context creates benchmarks for them to emulate. They commented:

In terms of the others coming from real difficult situations, won’t it be better for them to look at how we do things... you have a standard to emulate... We all want to get to Manchester United (BT)

You had circles within circles. You had schools in Umlazi which formed a circle on their own and the rural schools and whatever... and those circles like overlapped and I did feel after the course I did have a feel of what was happening in Umlazi. I found this to be good learning.

### Value of the ACE: SL

The focus groups were asked to respond to what they believed was the value of the ACE: SL to them. What came through almost unanimously in all three focus groups was the confidence that the ACE: SL instilled in them in enacting their roles as school leaders. Some of their comments were:

Confidence... You see before you are a practicing principal without any [specialised] qualifications. Now you got qualifications plus you got practice. So that increases your confidence. .... You see your position in the school with more purpose.

Confidence... you can’t empower others if you are not empowered. I feel so much more confident and I think my staff can see this. Staff has the need to feel secure and for that they need a confident leader.

For one participant the ACE: SL was a renaissance in that it helped reawaken latent knowledge and skills. He commented:

We had the knowledge but it was reawakened. It was like a renaissance in us... It gave us a wake-up call in terms of sharpening our skills. It also affirmed some of the things that we knew. It made us feel good because we were doing it and now they tell you that you are doing it right and you feel good.

Another principal mentioned that the programme helped him reposition himself in terms of his discourse as a principal. He stated:

It gave you new language tools to use which is brilliant... Whenever a teacher came to me for example for concerts I told her what systems have we in place. So they had to come with a flow chart to the finish.

In all three groups there was unanimous agreement that the ACE: SL should continue. The following comment sums up the feelings of the participants:

I feel it should be mandatory for every principal. Even if you got your Masters you must go through the ACE Leadership… Masters is just an academic qualification whilst the ACE leadership is a professional qualification. In any profession… a doctor needs to have a specialised knowledge of practice… a principal must be specialised in order to practice and in that way I feel it should be mandatory.

Another participant was more metaphorical in expressing his approval for the programme. However, he felt that some areas needed improving he commented:

In my opinion if you have a beautiful painting and it has got a horrible frame that will distract you from the painting. To me the ACE course was a very good painting but what did spoil it for me was when you had the lack of the infrastructure... the communication and perhaps some of the tutors did spoil it for me.

## Discussion

Responses from both mentors and school principals in this study show that the ACE: SL was accepted as an asset towards re-awakening and re-energising the principal. Participants indicated that South African schools need strong leadership and the ACE programme was an ideal route towards achieving this goal. On our part as researchers, our initial fears that the practising and already ‘qualified’ school principal may not readily accept having to undergo a mandatory formal principalship qualification was proved wrong. Statements such as ‘Now I have an opportunity to really learn how to be a principal’ suggest a lack of preparedness on many a South African school principal for this job. This further suggests that the majority of South African principals currently need formal, well structured leadership development such as the ACE: SL. This notwithstanding, our findings indicate that the practising principal remains a very sensitive candidate for formal leadership development. He/she may easily mistake leadership development efforts for inspection leading to imminent resentment thereof. He/she may not always be available for development sessions due to pressure of work. He/she is likely to have little respect for those without prior principalship hands-o experience as mentors or lecturers. The latter misgiving may be just a stereotype, and it seems the practising principals had more such, but if ignored, they can derail the entire leadership development project.

South African principals are not a homogeneous group particularly because of the racially segregated education system of the apartheid era. Some principals operate in at-risk, dysfunctional school set ups while others work in the comfort of fortified environments. These principals will have different development needs. Evidence from this study suggests that the ACE: SL in its current state does not seem to address this heterogeneity among the school principals. This may explain the apparent dissatisfaction about mentorship by school principals in urban schools.

Our findings concretise one of the South African education system’s school leadership development dilemmas. Should attention be on the practising principals some of whom are retiring soon or should focus be on tomorrow’s leader? One is persuaded to say the answer is both because as a young democracy, there are immediate development needs that remained unattended to during the apartheid era but also there is an urgent call to prepare for the future. Whether or not South Africa will cope with addressing both challenges remains to be seen. Perhaps the multiplier effect, where those trained can be harnessed to train others may be the way forward. However, this can only be successful if the lack of commitment displayed by some principals and mentors as well as the shortfalls of the current ACE programme, are addressed.

Mentoring as part of the multi-approach to the delivering of the ACE programme was reported to be crucial to successful leadership development. But for successful mentorship, an intricate mentor selection process is necessary. While ‘grey hair’, experience as a former school principal, race and language were reported to be important in matching mentor and mentee, these factors are responded to differently by different mentees. For example, while the retired former principal may have ‘walked this path’ before, there are issues relating to new developments in the education system for which they may not be adequately familiar. Also, the practice used in the ACE: SL to impose mentors on mentees was problematic. The ideal situation is to involve mentees in deciding on those to mentor them.

The importance of thorough mentor training cannot be over-emphasised. Findings show that some mentors were not very successful in addressing the apparent dependency syndrome among the principals. Some mentors did not display the ‘depth’ expected of them by the mentees. Others converted the development process into exclusively a group affair thereby sacrificing the seemingly equally important individual focus.

The ACE: SL seems to have awakened the spirit of learning on the part of the principal. To illustrate, learning communities where neighbouring principals formed voluntary groups to increase their coping mechanisms in the ACE: SL were reported. Such self-directed learning is to be encouraged. Further research would be necessary on such issues as the sustainability of such learning communities.

## Conclusion

South Africa has made an important start in the leadership development of its school principals. A formal qualification for school principalship seems to be the way forward. The multi-faceted leadership development approach adopted in thecae: SL is to be commended. However, the South African practising school principal is yet to be adequately understood. Similarly the appointment of a mentor should not be taken for granted.

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