Imagining the shaping of reflective deliberative education leaders: The devil is in the detail

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Abstract

In this article we critically engage with some of the challenges and issues pertaining to the implementation of the Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership following a national agreement by the national Department of Education, provincial education departments and several universities. The rather idealised vision of the programme to provide learning opportunities to promote quality education in South African schools through the development of a corps of education leaders who apply critical understanding, values, knowledge and skills to school leadership and management in line with the vision of democratic transformation seemingly meshed with our own approach to the development of leadership. However, consequent to the planning, budgeting and implementation of this school leadership programme we realised that realities posed serious challenges. In this paper we narrate how it became increasingly clear how “the devil is in the detail”.

Keywords: education leadership training programme, critical reflective leadership, deliberative democracy in education leadership, implementation training programme, training programme budget.
Introduction

Education management and leadership were soon after 1994 recognised as of special importance in the democratic transformation of education in South Africa. The Ministerial Task Team (Department of Education 1996: 8) on Education Management Development’s first key idea states that “The Task Team is convinced that education management development is the key to transformation in education”. Several national initiatives for the development of this key idea followed with little transformational success. Although large numbers of teachers qualified in education management and or leadership (honours and Advanced Certificates) for the purpose of improved promotion opportunities and increased income, it contributed little to transformation in education. This situation developed and continued even after the abolishment of the qualification related teacher remuneration frameworks and the closing down of teacher training colleges, rationalisation of education faculties and staff, and mergers in most higher education institutions. At many universities the provision of education leadership and management programmes were expanded and large numbers of students were enrolled. These programmes came to be seen as so-called ‘cash cows’. This contributed to the HEQC investigation of the quality of education leadership and management programmes.

Although matriculation results have improved there remain serious challenges for schools which led to a deepened emphasis on the need to improve leadership in education. During 2005 in an endeavour to improve education a national initiative for training school principals was launched. After the limited success of a nationally supported qualification and programme, the national professional diploma in education, to enable teachers to improve their qualifications that was mainly driven by private providers and Non-Governmental Organisations, the support of universities was mustered in the development of an education leadership and management training project. A national consultative process that included representatives from all interested universities was initiated by the Minister of Education to develop a programme that was hailed to perhaps become a prerequisite for all school principals. The vision of the programme that was conceptualised and developed during 2006 (Department of Education RSA 2006:3) reflect the high expectations as it was seen:

“To provide structured learning opportunities that promote quality education in South African schools through the development of a corps of education leaders who apply critical understanding, values, knowledge and skills to school leadership and management in line with the vision of democratic transformation”.
Learning materials were developed nationally by the DoE through commissioning the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) which engaged with material development and the editorial group being formed to deal with the monitoring of the material development. Bursaries to the value of R12 000 per student per year were awarded by the Department of Education to the first and second cohorts of (2007) and a (2008). This would enable students to register and study for two years for the Advanced Certificate of Education: School Leadership. The implementation took place in conjunction with the provincial Departments of Education who took responsibility for recruiting students who, however, had to comply with university entrance requirements.

After major debates and thinking amongst ourselves about whether or not to commit our department of education policy studies at a leading university to providing this programme we finally went ahead and the process for qualification and programme accreditation was initiated. At the beginning of 2008 we enrolled 54 students in the Western Cape and 50 students in the Northern Cape.

The idealised vision and outcome statements of the programme as envisaged by the Department of Education and by us would necessitate extensive interaction with students both at the university (lecturing) and on-site (mentoring and site-based assessment). Following the planning, budgeting and implementation of this school leadership programme aimed at school improvement we realised that realities posed serious challenges. In this paper we narrate how it became increasingly clear how “the devil is in the detail”. After serious and lengthy deliberation on the pattern of engagement, our pedagogy (including mentoring) and site-based assessment we found that implementing the plan that would contribute to shaping critically reflective and democratic deliberative leaders was becoming seriously compromised. After a brief introduction to the programme and the idealised notion of leadership that shaped our pedagogical position, some of these challenges and concomitant adjustments and the probable implications will be explored.

**Envisaging the ACE: School Leadership Programme**

Parallel to the idealism reflected in the thinking and documentation that was developed by the Department of Education, we entertained similar idealistic positions. After our initial scepticism as academics on our involvement and the tensions it would cause for our research activities we committed ourselves in the interest of both our department’s future development and the democratic transformation of schools to participate and provide the programme. This coincided with the DoE’s (2007) aims of the ACE: School Leadership; which is based on two tenets namely equipping school principals with rel-
evant democratic skills, values, and attitudes needed to transform schools; and contributing to improving the delivery of quality education across the school system, thus providing every learner with quality education. As such, the programme is the first of its kind and is expected to be different from other ACE programmes in the three following ways: learning principles; assessment approach; nature and orientation.

Our views on why and how to approach this programme was developed during several meetings and after hours of debate and deliberation about the challenges such a programme posed. In our engagement with the purpose and principles put forward for this programme that endeavours to improve schools, we gradually became of the same mind in our views of what constitutes leadership and the underpinning philosophical and pedagogical considerations that would speak to realising critical reflective and democratic deliberative education leadership.

The Department of Education’s position with regard to the programme is best indicated in the presentation to the Western Cape Education Department by Wim Slabbert (2007) on how to meet the agenda set by the Cabinet Lekgotla Capacity Assessment Tasks (CAT) process where the following objectives were decided on:

• Improving schools through professionalising and improving the status and role of principals
• Providing experiential training for principals
• Providing an entry level qualification for principals through
  – Clarifying roles and responsibilities of principals
  – Improving gender and overall access to the role of school manager
  – Introducing new conditions of service and education management systems making principals accountable (performance-related contracts).

This programme according to Slabbert (2007) was developed against a background that reflects great expectations. It was argued that good schools require effective leaders that can lead social change and promote key societal values. Principals and school management team members are core to school culture and improvement and should collectively be held responsible. This was further emphasized in the Education Laws Amendment Act 31, 2007 where the responsibilities and functions of school principals of public schools includes the following:
(1) The principal of a public school represents the head of department in the School Governing Body when acting in an official capacity.

(2) The principal must undertake the professional management of a public school by carrying out duties as stipulated in the ELAA 2007, and

(3) The principal must assist the School Governing Body in the performance of its functions and responsibilities, but such assistance or participation should not be in conflict with stipulations of the Department of Education.

Where schools are declared as underperforming schools the act (Section 16 and 58 of the Amendment Act) was extended to include the need for principals to provide specific improvement plans to the provincial head of department (PHOD) and the School Governing Body. The PHOD was furthermore granted the power to appoint a person to support these school principals or replace them.

In our submission for a new programme we put forward the following outcomes put forward for the programme:

- Empower the school principals and SMTs with democratic management of schools which should fulfil the aims of transformation in South Africa.

- Empower the aspirant and practicing principals to develop democratic skills, values, and attitudes needed to lead and manage schools effectively and contribute to improving the delivery of education across the school system.

- Provide an entry criterion to principalship.

- Provide principals with professional qualification which is career related.

- Provide a formal professional qualification which is consistent with the job profile of school principals.

- Provide leadership and management to enable the school to give every learner quality education.

- Provide professional leadership and management of the curriculum and therefore ensure that the schools provide quality teaching, learning and resources for improved standards of achievement for all learners.

- Strengthen and support the role of principalship.

- Enable principals to manage their organizations as learning organizations and instil values supporting transformation in the South African context.
Principalship is very closely linked to the development of notions of leadership in education where the primary concern for us was the distinction between leadership as it manifests in the traits or actions of an individual or thinking in terms of the influence or power exerted by an individual on the school. In accordance with the outcomes and goals of the ACE it can be assumed that the second position informs the thinking of the Department of Education as their foremost concern is with the improvement of education. Although the one approach does not necessarily exclude the other, the particular approach and goals inform the underpinning philosophy and pedagogy of the learning programme.

Promoting democracy and democratic leadership forms the basis of our thinking about the ACE programme. It can be contended that most of the teachers who eventually become principals most probably have not been given sufficient opportunity to practise democratic skills, values and attitudes and could lack confidence and skills in democratic learning styles and critical thinking. It would therefore be imperative for principals to become, as Waghid (2005) argued with regard to teachers and learners, responsive, democratic and critical and to act justly in order to break with South Africa’s apartheid legacy, in order to create the spaces for responsibility, readiness and deliberation which would enable education to produce responsible, responsive and democratic citizens. This demanded that not only had the ACE programme to create opportunities to grow in critical reflective thinking but also to engage in questioning, dialogue, debates and arguments about education leadership issues.

The deliberative democratic approach is intertwined with thinking and research that argues for the importance of critical reflective thinking in the shaping of leadership identity (cf. Barrell 1983; Sergiovanni 1987; Biesta & Miron 2002; Rodgers 2002; Lingard & Christie 2003; Funmi 2005; Warnick & Swaffield 2006). We therefore endeavored to develop and offer the modules according to a pedagogy of critical reflexivity embedded in democratic notions of deliberation and justice.

Research by Day (2000) shows that effective education leaders continuously review and rethink there actions whilst protecting what they consider valuable. The evidence indicated that in this individualized agential view critical reflective education leaders engage in at least five forms of reflexivity, namely

- the holistic, where the emphasis is upon vision and culture building;
- the pedagogical (on and in action), in which they place emphasis upon staff acquiring, applying and monitoring teaching which achieves results allied to their vision (which includes but is greater than the demands made by policy implementation imperatives);
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- the interpersonal, where the focus is upon knowing and nurturing staff, children, parents and governors;
- the strategic, where the focus is upon entrepreneurship, intelligence gathering and networking to secure some control of the future;
- the intrapersonal, where the focus is upon self-knowledge and self-development and fulfilment” (ibid:4).

The idea of critical thinking is considered by Osterman (1990:134) to be a special practice “… a challenging, focused, and critical assessment of one’s own behaviour as a means towards developing one’s own craftsmanship. While reflection is certainly essential to the process, reflective practice is a dialectic process in which thought is integrally linked with action. It is, as Schön describes, a ‘dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilful’.” He continues to argue that a truly reflective practice challenges one to discover those habits of believe and acting that supports inadequate practices and to generate imaginative alternatives.

Day’s (2000:5) view that reflexivity can be seen as the capacity to think in, about and with regard to a broad spectrum of contexts, developing and continuously revisiting a holistic view of the school, its needs and direction, is closely related to Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and field. According to Lingard and Christie (2003: 319) these notions of Bourdieu enables the thinking about education leadership to move beyond leadership traits, character and personal influence to “… emphasizing the recursive relationship between agency (individual leader habits) and structure (field) in the broader social context” (ibid. p. 319). The notion of field enables us to talk about the context of leadership “… as ‘structured social space’ with its own properties and power relations, overlapping and interrelating with economic, power, political and other fields” (ibid: 319). This allows us to think about the “… interplay between the practices of a school leader with a particular habitus, working across a number of fields with different power structures, hierarchies of influence, and logics of practice” (ibid. p. 320).

This view of critical reflective education leadership is for us further enhanced by considerations of democracy like the following four dimensions based on Dewey’s philosophy and generated by Rodger’s (2002:4), namely, that

“1. Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society. It is a means to essentially moral ends.
2. Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.

3. Reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others.

4. Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others” (ibid:4).

These rather idealistic views of education leadership posed particular challenges to our pedagogy and thinking about learning opportunities and assessment. The idealism was further buoyed by the following learning principles that were to support the ACE programme (RSA 2006):

- Directed and self-directed learning in teams and clusters;
- Site based learning (dependent on the content);
- Variety of learning strategies i.e. lectures, practice and research portfolios amongst others;
- Parallel use throughout of individual and group contexts of learning;
- Collaborative learning through interactive group activities, e.g. simulations, debates;
- Problem-focused deliberation and debate in group context;
- Critical reflection on group processes and effectiveness;
- Critical reflection and reporting on personal growth and insights developed;
- Research and experimentation (ibid: 4-5).

Budgeting and planning for the implementation brought home the major contradiction between the idealism of our own views and those of the Department of Education of this programme to make a major contribution to the improvement of schooling in South Africa and realities.

Realities ... the devil’s in the detail

Reality has become a thoroughly post-modern concept which implies that it not be seen to denote something out there but that reality is as it is beholden by the viewer. This means that meaning and the gaze constitutes or construct reality and that there is no single truth of what represents or constructs schooling and leadership. We, however, slowly learned that there is a rather positivist meaning to the notion of reality, namely that it denotes what can be positively measured and expressed as statistical data or in monetary terms. Because when we started rolling out the most appropriate way to create learning op-
opportunities that would contribute to the shaping of truly reflective education leaders we ran into a series of challenges that gradually made visible that … the devil’s in the detail.

Our story about the process and the growing awareness of the realities will depart from the budgeting process. According to Horngren (as quoted by Knight 1989:192) a budget is “… a quantitative expression of a plan of action and an aid to co-ordination and implementation”. It serves as a planning tool with which ‘requirements’ can be estimated and planned for. It is a document in which the school’s priorities are expressed in terms of income and expenditure. The most important ‘constitutive elements’ of a budget are that it is a process whereby the envisioned future is made concrete in terms of the financial implications of the resources needed – both in respect of the related income and expenditure. Resources and costs are weighed up against each other, thus making the feasibility of projects visible. The determination of income and expenditure patterns culminates in a ‘planning document’ that enables the monitoring of the budget. The budget document reflects the allocation of resources to various actions (persons within the structure of the educational institution). However, the budget document is not a financial statement such as a balance sheet or an income and expenditure statement in which the reality (based on documentation on income and expenditure) is reported. It endeavours to account for the future, a projection or estimate of a process that does not equal reality. Even though it may seem to be exact in terms of the numbers in rand and cents contained in it, it is not a statement of financial performance. It is an imagined depiction of, or ‘story’ about an educational institution and its future. One could also argue that it indicates what is important as it shows resources in terms of the Rc allocated. It is a way in which all activities in the educational institution are reduced to comparable quantities – including the related advantages and disadvantages. Because a budget is a representation of the educational institution in terms of a particular system of symbols, one could argue that a budget be seen as a Rc-expression (quantification) or story (narrative or discourse practice) about the resources that an organisation or in this case the ACE programme needs and will use to achieve its objectives.

The current student fee of the university for an ACE is R12 320 in the first year and R2434 for the second year. That is R14 754 in total. The ‘bursary’ from the DoE for the current students are R24 000 creating the impression that resources would not be problematic as the income for the programme were guaranteed and higher than the normal fees. There were, however, numerous issues that came forward in our engagement with the details of the budget and the planning of our ACE programme.
According to our initial planning we were going to enroll only 50 students from the Western Cape in our programme. This seemed like a fair amount of students to accommodate in interactive and discursive learning situations, mentor and visit their schools, continuously assess and engage in deliberative feedback on the reflective journals that would be kept. The six lecturers that form our department would each have to take responsibility for a module. The programme, however, has 12 modules and additional staff had to be bought in to teach the remaining six modules. The modules are as follows:

**Year one**

**Module 1:** Understanding the school leadership and management in the South African context (core; 10 credits)

**Module 2:** Manage Teaching and Learning (core; 20 credits)

**Module 3:** Lead and Manage People (core; 20 credits)

**Module 11:** Demonstrate effective language skills in school management and leadership (fundamental; 6 credits)

**Module 12:** Demonstrate basic Computer Literacy in School Management (fundamental; 6 credits)

**Year two**

**Module 10:** Develop a portfolio to demonstrate school management and leadership competence (core; 10 credits)

**Module 4:** Manage organisational systems, physical and financial resources (core; 10 credits)

**Module 5:** Manage Policy, planning, school development and governance (core; 20 credits)

**Module 7:** Mentor school managers and manage mentoring programmes in schools (elective; 10 credits)

**Module 8:** Conduct outcomes-based assessment (elective; 10 credits)

Planning and the concurrent budgeting opened up new challenges as the influence of these realities started to become clear.

**Planning and budgeting**

Fitting the programme into our Year Plan became the first disconcerting exercise. Like most faculties of education, our post-graduate programmes are taught outside the normal semester programmes of the university. These programmes are offered either on Saturdays, late afternoons/early evenings
or through alternative modes of delivery because teachers find it difficult to get time off from work for study purposes. The students enrolled for the ACE would have to continue in their teaching or principal roles whilst also doing the ACE. This meant that if we planned to meet students approximately once a month on a Friday and Saturday most of our staff would be teaching two Saturdays per month as well as during the recess period. A module of 18 credits constitutes approximately 180 notional learning hours of which it is expected that at least 18 hours would be contact time. Providing group sessions (lecturing or workshops) and written examinations is much less costly and manageable than the individualised site-based mentoring and assessment required by the programme. Site-based mentoring and assessment requires travelling and additional time from lecturers that if opportunity cost it taken into consideration made this ideal situation preventatively expensive. If we assume that a site visit would take approximately three hours, travelling there and back approximately another one hour (depending on the distance from the University) one visit per module per lecturer for 50 students would entail approximately 200 hours per lecturer. One site visit per year cannot be seen as mentoring or site based assessment but this is indicative of the hours that would go into the idealised notion of the ACE programme.

A request from the Northern Cape through the DoE made us to enrol 50 students from the Northern Cape, of which the logistics, detail of planning and budgeting posed serious challenges. Not only would classes have to be repeated but the whole process has to be replicated in the Upington classes. The Northern Cape’s desire for us to lecture in the western part of that province could not be accommodated, due to the huge distances. Apart from the barely surmountable problem this poses for site-based engagements combining the two groups of students at the university was not possible as it would be more costly for the provincial Department of Education who has to pay transport and accommodation to the Western Cape. This meant that staff would be involved in teaching on Saturdays up to three times per month. This creates a conflict of interest for staff in a research driven university where post-graduate students and research outputs are high on the strategic development agenda.

Apart from the conflict of interest for lecturers, the provincial Department of Education then indicated that they considered time-on-task as part of their own strategic interest and would not be able to allow students to attend classes during weekdays. Notwithstanding our strong stand on the importance of regular engagement to interact with students to allow for critical theoretical and shared reflection experience in their school setting and a letter to that effect, they could not be convinced to allow the principals and vice-principals leave.
Meeting only on Saturdays meant that each module could not be afforded sufficient interactive time. This constituted a further problem and the ideal model of meeting on a regular basis with the students to ensure engagement in dialogical learning situations evaporated. It was finally agreed by us and the Department of Education that one week during the April and one week during the July school holidays (to be repeated in the Northern Cape) would be the only opportunity for students and lecturers to meet. During this week each of the lecturers teaching the modules offered during the first year would be afforded a day session (which effectively translated into approximately six hours).

### Time for alternative delivery modes

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<th>Per semester</th>
<th>Total expected contact hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>180 hours per year</td>
<td>90 hours per semester work on the module</td>
<td>45 hours of contact time</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Saturday mode of delivery</strong></td>
<td>9:00-12:30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13:30-16:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seven Saturdays per semester</td>
<td>14 hours contact with lecturer per 18 credit module</td>
<td>Two hours per Saturday per 18 credit module</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Holiday mode of delivery</strong></td>
<td>9:00-12:30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13:30-16:00</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Five days per holiday in April and July</td>
<td>14 hours contact with lecturer per 18 credit module</td>
<td>Nine hours per day per 18 credit module</td>
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Although these models would provide for the same amount of contact time teaching students only twice for a full day would undermine the dialogical and reflective pattern that we intended to establish. A contact session to realise the outcomes across several themes would reduce the sessions to informative rather than dialogical and reflective with the expectation that what could not be addressed during the lecturer-student meetings would be effectively taken up by the mentors.

**The appointment of mentors**

The recruitment of mentors proved to be the next serious challenge. Calculating what was affordable within the budget reduced the availability of mentors to
one visit per term (four visits per year). Where mentorship has a much richer and deeper meaning of engagement and support than what could come from four visits per year became the next challenge.

Whether it would be possible to find mentors with education leadership and management mindsets that coalesced with the underpinning philosophy put forward was rather difficult. We were, however, fortunate to attract several “retired” school principals with “good reputations” who were prepared to serve as mentors. In the Northern Cape we, however, had to resort to mentors who are employed as district officials by the Northern Cape Provincial Education Department. Although the mentors were exposed to a special Mentorship training workshop and are expected to attend the classes by the lecturers with the students, one could still wonder about the mindset and pattern of engagement with leadership and schooling that has become embedded over a lifetime. Would that be commensurate with transformational leadership as espoused by the national Department of Education or the critical reflective and discursive approach fore-grounded by our department in the programme? Or would it become a system whereby mentors provide valuable tips to principals from their own experience? The mentors coming from the education departmental hierarchy raised questions about the universities’ role – would the programme become instrumental in assuring that all departmental instructions, regulations and minutes are followed to the letter? How would this hierarchical position affect the mentorship role when the official also have the power to use knowledge gained about the challenges the school principal faced and found difficult to deal with. Would the mentee be prepared to share honestly and request assistance if that could result in them being shown-up as inadequate?

To address some of these issues and ensure meaningful mentorship special emphasis is placed on the engagement with the mentors.

- We had a full-day orientation programme in February 2008, which was followed-up with full engagements and guidance to the mentors through the emails. This was coupled with reflection sessions to share experiences during the process of implementation and to factor the insights into the next cycle of on-site support.

- Our approach to mentoring has always been or is always on the notion of critical dialogue – guarding against the conventional idea of mentoring where the mentor (expert) is leading the mentee (ignorant). Furthermore our mentoring process is always designed to guard against the hierarchical arrangement that is open to abuse of power and the reproduction of a highly authoritarian system of guardianship.

- Mentors were exposed to the course outline of the ACE: School Leadership Programme. Furthermore they were exposed to the international and national debates on issues of mentorship.
Mentors were, and are continuously guided in report-writing; taking of field-notes; keeping of reflective journals; while we are being very sensitive about developing a mentor-mentee relationship that is constructive, and of mutual benefit and aimed at enhancing educational leadership and management in the context of South Africa.

Mentors attend each and every one of the contact sessions with the students so that they are well informed of issues being discussed there.

To have at least one mentor reflection per term and not per semester should be possible; followed by compilation of reflective report by mentors for the lecturing staff.

To have regular feedback from lecturers based on mentors’ report - and in so doing spaces will be created and opened for an ongoing communication between mentors and lecturers.

Site-based assessment

Enrolling 104 students meant that if every student did four assignments per module per year the time required to meaningfully evaluate and comment would become preventive. Setting an appropriate assignment linked to assessment criteria, ‘marking’ it and providing meaningful commentary would take 104 students x 4 assignments x 1 hour = 416 hours per module. If the assessment had to include appropriate site-based assessment opportunities the time and cost would be increased by the travelling time and communicative engagement at the school.

Although we could foresee the challenges that the assessment of the effects of a learning programme expected by the Minister of Education to ‘improve schools are’, and by us to shape the professional identity of school principals to become through a critical reflective process leaders, site-based assessment poses its own challenges. The ideal programme envisaged continuous assessment of reflective assignments and activities by the candidate principals to speak to assessment as the programme is ‘practice-based and transformation oriented’ and ‘50% of the work that comprises the programme is of activities that you will plan, execute and evaluate at your school. By the end of the programme it should be possible to provide evidence that your participation has helped to change your school for the better.’

The assessment framework of the ideal ACE: School Leadership according to the department should consist of the following:

- Assessment of the candidates’ ability to understand their own practice and context and their ability to
• Assessment of the candidates’ knowledge base and ability to apply this knowledge to problem-solving and the improvement of their practice
• Assessing candidates’ ability to apply their knowledge and skills through identified interventions at their school
• Assessing candidates’ ability to reflect on their practices in order to work towards improving their practices through

Furthermore, it is required that while attempting the above assessment criteria; candidates should demonstrate critical thinking, effective communication, the knowledge of relevant legislation, apply relevant legislation to the context, be proactive in dealing with the problem, reflection on his/her practice (i.e. candidates should be able to think before, during and after the process).

To do valid and reliable site-based evaluation of students’ work would require time to come to an understanding of the student and particular context within which he/she is leading and managing. This kind of assessment, as we already argued, takes on the format of an ethnographic or auto-ethnographic study which requires research skill and time to enquire and engage with the sense-making of the student. What might be considered totally inappropriate for successful leadership in one context might be exactly what is required for good results in another context and setting? This kind of extensive engagement would be unrealistic in terms of the time and budget for the programme. Assessment therefore had to be reduced to a limited number of written assessments and two site-based assessment opportunities of two hours per student per year.

Apart from the challenges moderation and standardization would require when several assessors are used, setting assessment assignments poses serious challenges. What exactly would have to be seen or heard at the school or provided as evidence? Would it be acceptable to interview some of the staff, parents and/or learners to verify the student’s claims? What kind of questions would challenge the students on-site in a meaningful way that could not as well be reflected in a written report by the student? What would prevent the assessment opportunity becoming reduced to the ticking off of a checklist?

We had to make use of the same group of people who are contracted for the mentorship to do the assessment. The assessment is organised to enable the mentor to be an assessor for other students than those he/she mentored. The assessment assignments were developed in conjunction with the mentors to enable a more coherent and coordinated response to the assessment. Oral or site-based assessment where there is only the assessor and the person being assessed could also be seriously challenging as it could result in a situation
where it could become the one person’s word against the other. Requiring lecturers to accompany the assessors would mean double time and double the cost.

There would also be the school context and community, staff and learners to take into consideration. What would the consequences be if the student (principal or vice-principal) failed the academic work whilst being seen by their peers as good principals? Or vice versa, what if the student passed the academic or written assessments but were seen by their peers as poor leaders? How much ‘observation’ and communication or what can also be seen as ethnographical research could we ethically engage in to assure that school leadership is indeed resulting in the desired improved school? Time and cost wise this will have to remain very limited.

**Concluding remarks**

*Reality* it is said ‘is not out there but imagined and constructed – and is in the eye of the beholder’, in making it work and to succeed against the odds. The idealised vision and outcome statements of the programme as envisaged by the national Department of Education and by our department would necessitate extensive interaction with students both at the university (lecturing) and on-site (mentoring and site-based assessment). Following the planning, budgeting and implementation of this school leadership programme aimed at school improvement of school and the delivery of quality education for all learners; we realised that realities pose serious challenges as it became increasingly clear that “the devil is in the detail”. After serious and lengthy deliberation on the pattern of engagement, our pedagogy (including mentoring) and site-based assessment, we found that implementing a plan that would contribute to shaping critically reflective and democratic deliberative leaders was becoming seriously compromised. Increasing challenges to the autonomy of our engagement by both the provincial and national departments of education furthermore challenged our understanding of critical reflective leadership. The process calls for the continued revisits of the process and a critical and deliberative process of engagement not only amongst lecturers but also mentors and students to come up with imaginative and appropriate alternatives.

**References**


