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Academies in England and dysfunctional schools in South Africa

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Background

Not withstanding the progress that has been made in South Africa to bring about equity in the schooling system; affording children, irrespective of their parents financial position and background quality schooling, it would still be fair to say that the state schooling system is a two tiered system with pockets of excellence comparable with the best in the world and schools failing year after year (Chisholm, 2004; Jansen & Taylor, 2003; Bisschoff, 2001; Bisschoff, 2009).

With the promulgation of the 1996 Schools Act (RSA, 1996) the state school system was firmly placed on a route towards site based management with locally elected governing bodies taking most of the responsibilities for delivering quality education in schools.

It is clear that the radical intent of the policy with regard to the academy schools programme in England is also to tackle the inequalities in achievement that are present in schooling in England (Blair, 1998). The government's belief in academies has informed its proposals that state schools become 'trust schools', to provide greater autonomy and to involve sponsors in their governance; this is seen as a way to turn around failing schools (DfES, 2004a & 2004b).

The conversation on academies is not without its controversies and there are clear divisions within the community (Curtis, Exley, Sasia, Tough & Whitty, 2008; Gunter, Woods & Woods, 2008).

The governance structure shows some resemblance with the present state school in South Africa. A state school is under the Schools Act a juristic person governed by a governing body democratically elected by four separate constituencies and the principal in an ex officio capacity (RSA, 1996; Joubert & Bray, 2007). They are legally accountable for the governance of the school but the day to day running of the school is conducted by the school management team (SMT). In the same spirit academies are established as companies limited by guarantee with a governing body that acts as a Trust. The governors also act as the Trust's Board of Directors (they are legally, but not financially, accountable for the operation of the academy). The Trust serves as the legal entity which the school is part of, and the governing body oversees the running of the school (although the day to day management of the school is, as in most schools, conducted by the principal and their senior management team, who are appointed by the sponsor).

Research Questions

This paper is part of an ongoing research project funded by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) to investigate the possibilities of introducing an academy school type in South Africa to address the problem of failing schools in South Africa.

For this paper however, only a small part of the bigger project is focused on, namely the perceptions of principals in two provinces in South Africa (Gauteng and Kwazulu-Natal) on the partial privatization (partnerships with sponsors) of state schools to address the problem of failing schools?

Methods

In 'good' research according to Denscombe (2003) the researcher should state clearly the tradition he is going to work in, state the methodology and mention the specific methods he is going to employ

(see Heck, 2006). Now without expanding too much on these three aspects the following need to be stated.

This research is done in the Humanistic tradition (Gunter & Ribbins, 2001) but with a specific pragmatic slant which borders on the modern day Pragmatism as postulated by Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Cherryholmes, 1992; Rorty, 1982 and Bisschoff, 2008. What works is regarded as the 'truth' (Birnbaum, 2000).

Six principals, three in Gauteng and three in KwaZulu-Natal will be individually interviewed. The six will be selected using purposive sampling considering the following criteria, racial identity, rural, urban, affluent, poor, male, female (Arksey & Knight,1999; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Merriam, 1998). The sample attempts to cover the broadest spectrum of opinions within the two provinces. Most of the interviews will be conducted by the author but in one or two cases a field worker will be used who is more fluent in the local language to ensure good communication. The conversation will be about academies and its possible introduction into the state schooling system to address the problem of failing schools. Each participant will be provided, in advance of the interview, with some background knowledge on academies in England.

The interviews will be audio-taped transcribed and analysed employing to Constant Comparative method (CCM) of analysis to identify recurrent themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Frame

This study is framed by the discourse on schooling and partnerships with stakeholders (stakeholder involvement) (Woods, Woods & Gunter, 2007; Woods, & Woods, 2009; Pampallis, 2004) as well as the literature on site based management and leadership within such a context (Avery, 2004; Heck & Hallinger, 2005).

Research findings

At this stage, before the commencement of the interviews, it is hard to state what the findings would be but early indications are that South African principals from the black community mistrust the good intentions of sponsors considering the way big business behaved during the political struggle in the country before 1994. White principals view the academies as a possibility to ensure sufficient funding and greater accountability for teachers to perform well. It is however early days and the full extend of the views of South African principals is only possible after the conclusion of the study.