

## Leadership in school-based management: a case study in selected schools

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*According to the literature on school-based management, there are two clear schools of thought on this issue. One school views school-based management as a positive and successful vehicle of school improvement. The other argues that it has been minimally successful in school improvement. The leadership role of the school principal is widely regarded as the primary factor contributing to a successful relationship between school-based management and school improvement and is therefore an essential dimension of successful school-based management. This article, derived from a qualitative case study undertaken among a number of divergent secondary schools in Gauteng province, is an attempt to conceptualise the important and pivotal leadership role of the school principal in ensuring school improvement via effective school-based management in South African schools.*

### Introduction

During the past 20 to 30 years there has been a major shift towards greater self-management and self-governance in educational institutions throughout the world. This trend is evident in a number of countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and parts of the United States of America (*cf.* Imber, Neidt & Reyes, 1990; Taylor & Bogotch, 1994; Murphy & Beck, 1995; Griffen, 1995; Johnston, 1997) and is related to a move towards institutional autonomy, the so-called school-based management (SBM) or self-management of schools (Hart, 1995:11; Mosoge & Van der Westhuizen, 1998:73; Gultig & Butler, 1999; Bisschoff, 2000; Bush & Heystek, 2003; Marishane, 2003; Taylor, 2004).

Similarly, in South Africa, educational policy investigations undertaken within the last decade by the Department of Education (DoE), such as the Report of the Task Team on Education Management Development (DoE, 1996) and legislation such as the South African Schools Act of 1996, focus *inter alia* "... on the need for all stakeholders in education who can work in democratic and participative ways" (RSA, 1996:2). At the core of these policy initiatives and legislation is a process of decentralising decision-making as well as "a significant process of democratisation in the ways in which schools are governed and managed" (DoE, 1996:27).

The participative management required of SBM structures means that authority is delegated from higher to lower levels (Mosoge & Van der Westhuizen, 1998:74) and entails major changes of roles. The customary role of the school principal has therefore changed under SBM as decision-making is shared among stakeholders. The current position of the principalship renders not only authority, but also leadership, to the incumbent. As more and more countries worldwide implement SBM, principals are empowered and given more authority over what happens in their schools. School principals in these countries increasingly find themselves with the power to make on-site decisions such as how money should be spent, where educators should be assigned, and even what should be taught in the classrooms (in countries where there is not some form of centralised curriculum development). Provincial education departments no longer tell schools and school principals what to do, but instead try to help them accomplish

what they decide independently to do. SBM therefore demands more of the school principal, specifically in terms of principal leadership (*cf.* Mosoge & Van der Westhuizen, 1998:74; Dimmock & Wildley, 1999:298; Squelch, 1999:128; Bush & Heystek, 2003:127; Marishane, 2003:20).

Although there are other factors, the leadership role of the school principal is widely regarded as the primary factor contributing to a successful relationship between SBM and school improvement and it is therefore an essential dimension of successful SBM. According to Herman and Herman (1993:92), the SBM literature is consistent in describing the school principal as the “key player in the decentralisation and restructuring process”. Van der Westhuizen (1997:187) also touched upon this redefined leadership role of the principal when referring to principal leadership as the ability of a principal “to convince, inspire, bind and direct followers to realise common ideals”. The culture of a democratic order displayed in SBM requires school principals to exercise leadership that fully promotes participation of all stakeholders.

According to Van der Westhuizen (1997:28), authority in school leadership tends towards the extremes of authoritarian and *laissez faire* types of leadership. Neither of these types of leadership are, however, envisaged in SBM. The collaborative setting of SBM calls upon school principals to exercise leadership in various roles in a school, namely, in the fields of “visionary leadership, transformational leadership and mentor leadership” (Mosoge & Van der Westhuizen, 1998:78).

This indicates therefore not only the importance of principal leadership, but also a change in leadership roles of the school principal, under an SBM system. Effective leadership by the school principal in SBM is now widely regarded as a pivotal and essential dimension contributing to a successful relationship between SBM and school improvement (*cf.* Malen, Ogawa & Krantz, 1991; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1996; Bush & Heystek, 2003; Marishane, 2003).

From the above, it is clear that in both the literature and other studies undertaken on this issue point towards the school principal as the most important stakeholder in SBM and school improvement. The crucial leadership role of the school principal in this regard is also emphasised. The Commonwealth Secretariat (1996:2), for example, refers to this issue as follows: “The leadership role of the school principal plays the most crucial role in ensuring effectiveness in school-based management”, whilst Gurr (1996:27) argues in this regard: “The role of the school principal under school-based management has become more pivotal in providing the professional leadership required to provide positive learning environments”.

### **Purpose of the study**

The two quotes in the preceding paragraph on the importance of principal leadership in SBM echo and reiterate the main conclusion reached in a recent study on the leadership role of the school principal in SBM and school improvement in a number of extremely divergent schools in Gauteng province of South Africa.

The purpose in this study was to examine school principals’ and educators’ perceptions of the relationship between SBM and school improvement, and the leadership role of the school principal in this process in a few purposefully selected divergent schools in Gauteng. The study was specifically designed to determine whether or not participants believed that effective leadership in SBM results in school improvement.

## Methodology and data collection

The study was qualitative in design and used a case-study approach. The sample for this study (i.e. four extremely divergent schools in Gauteng) was selected in accordance with an earlier study done by Piggot-Irvine and Locke (1999:6) on school effectiveness criteria, in which they argued that the leadership influence of the principal on school improvement in SBM can be conceptualised according to two extreme and divergent categories of schools, namely:

- Totally or highly effective schools, characterised by strong principal leadership as well as strong, effective participation from stakeholders in SBM, called Category A schools for the purpose of this study. These schools can be typified as “actively restructuring” and are successful in aspects such as principal leadership, participation in SBM and school improvement. The main effectiveness criteria for this category of school is academic achievement, i.e. the “excellent” academic results of learners exiting the school after their final year of schooling, the strong culture of learning and teaching which prevails in this category of school, the high attendance rates of learners, and well-qualified teachers.
- Totally ineffective schools, characterised by weak or non-existent principal leadership, as well as weak or no participation from stakeholders in SBM, called Category B schools for the purpose of this study. These schools can be typified as “struggling” with aspects such as principal leadership, participation in SBM, and school improvement initiatives. The main ineffectiveness criteria for this category of school is also academic achievement, i.e. in this case, the “extremely bad” academic results of learners exiting the school after their final year of schooling, the poor culture of learning and teaching which prevails in this category of school, the low attendance rates of learners, and poorly qualified teachers.

Permission was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to purposefully select four secondary schools in Gauteng province for this study. As it was deemed important to select categories of schools that exhibited varied and divergent levels of success in implementing SBM and improved school performance, the schools were purposefully selected according to the distinction of the two categories of schools by Piggot-Irvine and Locke (1999) as explained above. Two schools in each category were selected.

Although there are a number of other effectiveness criteria or indicators such as learner attendance rates, teacher qualifications, and community satisfaction, by which the success of a school can be measured, it follows from the distinction made between the two categories of divergent schools above that academic achievement (i.e. the matriculation pass rate of schools) is arguably the one effectiveness criterion that can be quantified in the easiest manner. It was therefore decided to use this effectiveness criterion or indicator as the point of departure in purposefully selecting the four schools for this study. The GDE assisted in this process by providing a list of names of schools in each of the two categories described above.

Schools that had obtained excellent matriculation results during the last eight years, while operating under the SBM system (i.e. schools with a 95% or higher matriculation pass rate), were listed as Category A schools for the purposes of this study, whilst schools that had obtained poor matriculation results during the last eight years while operating under the SBM system (i.e. schools with a 40% or lower matriculation pass rate), were listed as Category B schools.

The next question raised was whether or not Category A schools with excellent matriculation results necessarily exhibit all the other effectiveness criteria categorised above. For example, do Category A schools that frequently obtain excellent matriculation examination

results necessarily have a strong culture of learning and teaching? As the latter criterion is more difficult to quantify than results in an examination, it was decided to make the following hypothesis in this regard:

There is a good and strong culture of learning and teaching in Category A schools that obtain excellent matriculation examination results (i.e. a 95% or higher matriculation pass rate).

It was furthermore assumed as part of the hypothesis that these schools could be regarded as highly effective, characterised by strong principal leadership and strong, effective participation from stakeholders in SBM, could be typified as “actively restructuring” and were highly successful in aspects such as SBM and school improvement.

The following step in the selection process was to purposefully select two schools from Category A on the above-mentioned GDE list. The two Category A schools selected will be referred to as School A1 and School A2 in this study. Both schools selected had been operating under the SBM system for about eight years and had obtained an excellent matriculation pass rate during this period. One former so-called “white Model C” school from the former Transvaal Education Department (A1) and one former so-called “Indian” school from the former House of Delegates (A2) were identified and purposefully selected from the GDE list as examples of schools that could be typified as Category A schools. Both the schools had obtained an above 95% pass rate for the last few years, and both principals were very experienced. The principal of School A1 (referred to here as P/A1) had been in his post for more than 15 years, whilst the principal of School A2 (referred to here as P/A2) had been in his post for more than eight years. According to the hypothesis stated above, both schools were characterised by strong principal leadership as well as active participation from various stakeholders in the community in aspects such as SBM.

The question was then raised whether or not Category B schools with poor matriculation results necessarily exhibit all the other ineffectiveness criteria categorised above. For example, do Category B schools that frequently obtain very poor matriculation examination results necessarily have a weak or non-existent culture of learning and teaching in their schools? As this is more difficult to quantify than results in an examination, it was decided to make the following hypothesis in this regard:

There is an unsatisfactory culture of learning and teaching in Category B schools that obtained poor matriculation examination results (i.e. a 40% or lower matriculation pass rate).

It was furthermore assumed as part of the hypothesis that these schools could be regarded as ineffective, characterised by weak or non-existent principal leadership and poor participation from stakeholders in SBM, and could be typified as “struggling” with regard to aspects such as principal leadership, SBM initiatives, and school improvement efforts.

The next step in the selection process was to purposefully select two schools from Category B from the GDE list. These two Category B schools will be referred to as School B1 and School B2 in this study. Both schools selected had been operating under the SBM system for about eight years and had obtained a very poor matriculation pass rate of less than 40% during this period. One former so-called “black” school from the former Department of Education and Training (B1) and one former so-called “coloured” school from the former House of Representatives (B2) were identified and purposefully selected from the list as examples of schools that could be typified as Category B schools. One of these schools (B1) had obtained a mere 30% pass rate in the previous year’s matriculation examinations, while the other (B2) had fared

slightly better with a 38% pass rate.

These two schools had both had a number of principals over the last ten years. As a result, both schools currently had very inexperienced principals. The principal of School B1 (referred to here as P/B1) had three years' experience as a principal, whilst the principal of School B2 (referred to here as P/B2) had been in the position for only one year. According to the hypothesis stated above, both schools were characterised by weak principal leadership as well as weak or non-existent participation from various stakeholders in the community in aspects such as SBM.

The qualitative study involved the researcher spending one day in each of the four schools. During this time, the school principal (referred to as P) and two purposefully selected educators (referred to as E1 and E2) from each school were requested to participate in individual, open-ended interviews with the researcher. The educators were purposefully selected according to their willingness to participate in this study. The two educators from School A1 are referred to as E1/A1 and E2/A1, whilst the two educators from School A2 are referred to as E1/A2 and E2/A2.

Similarly, the two educators interviewed from School B1 are referred to as E1/B1 and E2/B1, whilst the two educators from School B2 are referred to as E1/B2 and E2/B2. This in effect meant that three participants per school (P, E1, and E2) were interviewed. As a result, six participants from Category A schools (i.e. two principals: P/A1 and P/A2, four educators: E1/A1; E2/A1; E1/A2 and E2/A2) and six participants from Category B schools (i.e. two principals: P/B1 and P/B2 as well as four educators: E1/B1; E2/B1; E1/B2 and E2/B2) were interviewed, resulting in 12 interviews conducted during the four days.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour each, were tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The researcher decided to limit the number of interview questions to six to enable the participants to focus completely on the research problem. These questions furthermore related to each other and focused on the key concepts being investigated, namely, SBM, school improvement, school leadership, participative decision-making, leadership challenges, and active restructuring. An interview guide with the following six questions was eventually used:

- What is your perception on SBM and school improvement?
- Does the principal have a vision or philosophy for your school? Elaborate on it.
- How are important decisions taken in your school? Who are involved?
- How has the principal's leadership role evolved over the last eight years?
- What are currently your biggest leadership challenges with regard to SBM?
- How do you perceive the principal's leadership role in SBM and school improvement?

Following the period spent in the four schools, the various interview notes were subjected to a data analysis process that relied on various analytical strategies as suggested by Patton (1990) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992).

## **Discussion of research findings**

The importance of principal leadership for effective SBM and school improvement was highlighted in the introduction to this article and, in addition, various literature studies in education management over the last few years have consistently emphasised the importance of the school principal's leadership role in ensuring successful SBM and school improvement (*cf.* Edmonds, 1979; Barth, 1990; Herman & Herman, 1993; Wohlstetter & Briggs, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1995; Mampuru, 1996; Mosoge & Van der Westhuizen, 1998; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Squelch,

1999; Marishane, 2003; Taylor, 2004; Ali & Botha, 2005).

Comments made by both the principals and the educators interviewed on the importance of a principals' leadership abilities in SBM to ensure school improvement were in line and congruent with what is found in the literature on SBM. It became quite clear from the qualitative data analysed that the principal's role in SBM has evolved from that of instructional leader to a broader one of orchestrating decision-making using teams of people. The responses of the respondents and the conclusions drawn by the researcher on each of the questions asked during the interviews will now be discussed briefly.

### What were the participants' perceptions on SBM and school improvement?

The four principals interviewed all had a clear understanding of what was meant by both the concepts of SBM and school improvement and indicated clearly that they maintained there is a link between the two concepts. School improvement for all of them meant solely success with regard to the matriculation pass rate in their schools. No other indicators were mentioned. The two Category A principals, specifically, were overwhelming in their support for SBM as a tool for school improvement. One principal in this category (P/A2) commented in this regard:

*We cannot and will not improve our schools without doing something ourselves. If we must wait for the department or government to improve our schools, we will wait forever. We must take charge of our own destiny. That is what I like; to be in charge of my own destiny and my school. I am not going to sit back and wait for somebody else to determine for me what I should and should not do. The only way to improve our schools is to take charge of what is happening. We can do so in self-managing our schools.*

Although the two principals from Category B schools were both supportive of SBM in principle, they did feel somewhat antagonistic about the issue. They were clearly more negative about SBM than their Category A counterparts. One of the Category B principals (P/B1) commented in this regard: "All the work that the department does not want to do anymore is shifted towards us to do ourselves; I guess that is what is meant by school-based management", whilst the other one (P/B2) explained: "I like to manage myself and my own school, but the responsibility is too much. They [the department] don't tell us exactly what to do, only to manage ourselves, but they are quick to criticize if we do something the wrong way".

Although it was not clear from this study whether or not all of the educators interviewed fully understood, why schools were being asked to be self-managing, all of them came up with suitable explanations for these concepts. SBM was continuously referred to as either "managing or leading ourselves", "self-governing" or "self-managing our school", while school improvement was perceived by all participants in this study as either "bettering our schools", "to improve our school" or "increasing the effectiveness of our school". One educator from a Category B school (E2/B1) explained SBM as follows: "Like the people are governing our towns and cities, our teachers must govern our schools. That is why the government directs us to self-managing schools". This clearly indicated the need for and the rationale behind SBM and school improvement.

Although all four of the educators of the Category B schools understood the importance and relevance of SBM, some of them perceived this issue as being mere delegation. As one of the educators (E2/B1) put it: "My principal is only using this thing about school-based management to dump more work on us". This was an interesting comment, as it echoed what his own principal (P/B1) had said in this regard. This principal (P/B1) perceived SBM as more

work being delegated to her by the department, whilst the educator (E2/B1) perceived SBM as more work being delegated to educators by his principal. Both principals and all four of the educators from the two Category B schools did admit, however, that there is a great need for their schools to improve and that SBM could play a role in this process, thereby again clearly confirming the important link between SBM and school improvement.

**Conclusion:** Although all respondents from both categories of schools had a clear perception and understanding of what was meant by the concepts SBM and school improvement and agreed on the fact that schools need to be improved with effective SBM, some respondents were clearly negative towards the process, perceiving it as more work being added to an already full schedule.

### Does the principal have a vision or philosophy for your school?

An important finding was that both Category A principals perceived a link between principal leadership and the vision or philosophy for their schools. Both Category A schools in the study had principals with driving visions, placing powerful emphasis in their responses during the interviews not only on why things were done, but also on how things were done. It furthermore became clear from their responses that decisions in these two schools were not merely taken because they were practical, but also for reasons of principle. This is summarised in the response from one of the principals (P/A2):

*Our school is continuously aiming to fulfil our vision; by that I mean our philosophy. The emphasis in our vision is not only practical, but also in accordance with our beliefs and values. Decisions are therefore not only taken to reach our goals, but also in accordance with our Christian values and principles, resulting in focusing not only on why we do things the way we are, but also on how we are planning to reach our goals.*

Through their visions, these two principals foresaw for their schools a collective ideology that defines an organisation's identity and purpose. It also became clear from their responses that both principals fulfilled a major leadership role with regard to aspects such as SBM and school improvement, while their schools had a binding vision and philosophy for attaining goals. "The vision for my school is to make it the best school in our province" one principal (P/A1) stated, while the other (P/A2) said in this regard:

*I see my vision as my philosophy; mine is to make my school's environment so learner friendly that teachers want to teach and learners want to learn and the community wants to get involved, thereby improving the effectiveness of my school.*

In contrast to this, both principals from the Category B schools referred to the vision for their schools as merely "goals", indicating clearly that they perceived the vision for their school and reaching goals as being one and the same thing. In response to the question of what the vision for their schools was, one principal (P/B2) said: "Our school's vision is to make everybody happy", while the other principal (P/B1) commented in this regard: "My vision is to reach all my goals". It is clear from both these responses that these principals did not regard vision as a philosophical issue, merely as a practical one in relation to "reaching goals" or even "making someone happy".

The educators from this category echoed the same sentiments about this issue, clearly showing that they had no idea what was meant by either the school's vision or philosophy. Philosophy and vision were referred to as "reaching our targets" or "aiming at goals", while

one of the educators in this category (E2/B2) referred to this issue as “*the way we are planning to reach our set goals*”.

**Conclusion:** Both Category A school principals had well-phrased visions. Decisions in these schools were made for reasons of principle. The principals fulfilled a major leadership role in this regard. Their schools both had a binding vision and philosophy with regard to reaching goals. In contrast, both Category B principals as well as educators indicated clearly that they perceived the vision for their school and reaching goals as being one and the same thing.

**How are important decisions taken in your school and who are involved?**

Again participants had contrasting views on this question. All four educators from Category B schools indicated that the principal takes all the important decisions alone, while they only get an opportunity to participate in routine decisions. One educator in this category (E1/B2) referred to what she called “*fake participation*”, explaining this as decisions that are taken by the principal who then expects the educators to simply endorse them. Another educator (E2/B1) from this category also referred to this problem. These responses correspond with the literature on this issue. Mabaso and Themane (2002:112) indicate that this problem, which they refer to as “*sham stakeholder participation in SBM*”, is by no means unique to developing countries such as South Africa, whilst Jones (1998:329) warns as follows in this regard: “*stakeholders can easily be led to believe that they participate fully in the SBM process, even if they are not*”.

Interestingly enough, both principals from Category B schools agreed that, even within a system of SBM, they were still taking the important decisions themselves “*because staff are not competent enough to do so*”, as one principal (P/B2) replied to the question of why some principals take all the important decisions themselves.

Both principals from Category A schools, however, indicated that they were trying to follow a democratic, participative management style whenever possible by letting their staff become involved in “*almost all the decisions taken each day*”, thereby also admitting that some important decisions are still taken by the principal alone. Although a participative leadership style can be time-consuming, both principals in this category agreed on the importance of shared decision-making and governance. One of the Category A principals (P/A1) observed in this regard:

*With our move to site-based management, decisions had been a little slower in coming, but they were more enduring. Staff reluctant to assume responsibility, who felt “it’s the principal’s problem”, became a part of the process. With the realisation that their inputs are valued, comes a new sense of commitment.*

**Conclusion:** Principals from schools in both categories confirmed that they did take some decisions themselves. The reasons for this, however, differed. Whilst the incompetence of staff was given as reasons by the Category B principals, a lack of time for participative decision-making was given as the reason by the Category A principals. Educators from Category A schools perceived their involvement in shared decision-making as being satisfactory. By contrast, educators from the Category B schools felt misled with regard to their role in decision making.



### How has the principal's leadership role evolved over the last eight years?

This question was set to the principals only. In the interviews they were requested to indicate any changes over the last few years that might have occurred in their leadership roles after the implementation of SBM. Both principals from the two Category B schools indicated that there had been no major changes in their leadership roles after the implementation of SBM apart from *"having more work, sitting in more meetings and taking more decisions than ever before"*, as one principal from a Category B school (P/B2) put it. This is understandable as both these principals had been in their posts for a very short period of time.

In contrast, it became evident from the following responses by the two Category A principals that they had, in the transition to an SBM system of management and governance, begun to take on the following new, additional leadership roles, which clearly differed from their traditional ones:

- innovator: *"I am providing other stakeholders in SBM with ample opportunities and a supportive environment for involvement and participation"* (P/A1);
- motivator: *"I encourage my staff to take risks in participative decision-making and motivate them in the process"* (P/A2);
- coach: *"I teach and train my staff how to participate"* (P/A1);
- mentor: *"I communicate trust and share information with all stakeholders in the process"* (P/A2);
- change agent: *"I try to encourage staff development as an on-going activity"* (P/A1); and
- liaison officer: *"I continuously try to bring into my school new ideas and encourage the community"* (P/A2).

This change in leadership roles, as perceived by the two Category A principals, is in line with what is said in the literature on this issue. Mosoge and Van der Westhuizen (1998:78) state in this regard: *"The collaborative setting of SBM calls upon school principals to exercise leadership in various roles in a school"*.

**Conclusion:** It became clear from the responses to this question that all participants agreed that the role of the principal had changed over the past few years. However, Category A principals perceived this change as positive, whilst Category B principals perceived this change as negative.

### What are currently the biggest leadership challenges for you with regard to SBM?

This question was again set to the principals only. Mixed reactions followed this question. One Category B principal (P/B2) indicated that he had no challenges left. He was merely trying to cope by making *"day-to-day decisions to survive"* and trying to maintain a *"basic level of functioning"*. The other Category B principal (P/B1) maintained that her biggest daily mission was *"to keep out of trouble"*. To enable her to do so, her biggest challenge each day was *"to fly below the radar"* and *"keep my staff happy"*. Both principals in this category admitted during the interviews that they were struggling with leadership issues.

In contrast, both Category A principals indicated clearly that although their schools were functioning very effectively, there were still some challenges left for them. One of the principals (P/A1) indicated that, in conjunction with his school's vision, one big challenge for him was to *"make his school the best in this province"*, while the other principal (P/A2) indicated a *"happier and more involved school community"* as his biggest leadership challenge.

**Conclusion:** Whilst Category A principals had leadership challenges that ranged from “*improving my school*” to “*make my community more involved*” in their sights, Category B principals’ biggest challenges varied from “*keeping out of trouble*” to “*keeping everybody happy*”.

How is the principal’s leadership role in SBM being perceived by participants?

This question (and the responses to it) indicated once again the importance of the leadership role of the school principal in successful SBM and school improvement and served to illustrate the general dependence of a school and its staff on the principal. Participant after participant reiterated quite clearly that for the relationship between SBM and school improvement to be successful, it was imperative that the school principal was a strong, capable and dedicated leader.

Both principals and the four educators from Category A schools emphasised again and again how important the leadership role of the principal was for effective SBM. “*How can you manage or lead any company without a good leader?*”, was one of the responses to this question by one principal (P/A1), while one of the educators (E2/A2) said in this regard: “*Self-managing schools is just what it says; self-managing. To enable us to manage ourselves, we need a strong leader who can direct us in the process. I can’t see how schools can manage themselves without good principal leadership*”. An educator (E1/A2) reinforced the importance of the principal in SBM and school improvement as follows:

*There is a real dependence on the principal and on the leadership of a particular school. If you have a good principal and a good school management team, if you have a person who is aware of all the ins and outs of the school-based management plan and of school improvement initiatives, then you are going to have a school that is well informed. If you have someone who is doubtful or dubious, or who cannot delegate the authority, then you are not going to have a successful school.*

One of the principals (P/A2) in this category admitted, however, that it was not always “*plain sailing*” and that he was very concerned initially about his leadership role in SBM. He stated in this regard: “*I was a bit worried. Isn’t school-based management most often recommended for troubled schools that require major restructuring? After a while, however, I was pleased with the degree of sharing that was established in my school*”.

In contrast to this, both principals from the Category B schools interviewed agreed that good leadership was important in self-managing schools, but perceived their own roles as leaders differently. “*The department must lead us in school-based management; they are sending us all these instructions how to do it, but never come and show us what to do and how to do it*” was a response from one principal (P/B1), making it clear that schools “*were never trained to manage themselves*”. The other principal (P/B2) mentioned something in the line of: “*Nobody in the community wants to be involved; I don’t get any help*” again neglecting the fact that he himself, as principal, is responsible to lead the school in an effective way. One Category B principal (P/B2) made reference to the difficulties experienced by his staff when the principal’s leadership was perceived to be weak, as was the situation in his case:

*If there is one ‘fly in the ointment’ with respect to school-based management and school improvement, it is that there seems to be an over-dependence on the very capable, strong leadership of the principal. It is really a major problem if you have a principal that is not a ‘strong’ leader. Then you have some potential problems because you do not have any-*

*body to pick up the slack for that particular person.*

In sharp contrast to these views by the two principals, the educators from Category B schools interviewed both agreed that the principal was primarily responsible for SBM. As one educator (E1/B1) put it:

*I can't understand why our principal is always standing back. Who is she waiting for to take the lead: For our teachers or for the Department? I really have a big problem with my principal. She is sitting in her office each day for the entire day and does not come out to lead us. I think she is waiting to go on pension.*

One of the educators at one of the Category B schools (E1/B1), who had coincidentally been a school principal at another school previously, held a rather surprising and unorthodox viewpoint of “weak” principals when she explained:

*I tend to think that if you have a weak principal as leader, that weak principal can work more effectively in a school-based management and school improvement relationship because when it comes to planning with regard to these issues, that principal is at least getting some feedback from other teachers. By giving that feedback, teachers have some input and can say: 'Hey, that's part of my plan too. I wanted that and that's what I got' and therefore they can take ownership. I think a weak principal can work better in this situation because there is at least consultation with the other teachers in the school.*

According to this somewhat surprising view, so-called “weak” school principals can also be effective in aspects such as SBM and school improvement initiatives by consulting with other stakeholders in the SBM process, whilst so-called “strong” principals can be ineffective in these aspects by not consulting other stakeholders and taking decisions on their own. On questioning the respondent on this view, he (E1/B1) explained that his view was a result of the fact that he interprets “weak” as non-autocratic (i.e. weak equals democratic). This may be a result of the culture in which the respondent had grown up. According to this view, SBM structures with “weak” leaders can therefore take ownership of their decisions and this can ultimately help the “weak” principal to make the right decisions. This would only be possible, however, if there was also a prevailing “strong” and effective stakeholder participation in SBM and school improvement initiatives.

**Conclusion:** Participants all agreed that the school principal was the most important and essential stakeholder for effective SBM. However, some Category B educators maintained that their principals displayed “weak” principal leadership in SBM and school improvement activities, resulting overall in better decisions being taken by all stakeholders involved in the process. Although all respondents felt very strongly about the fact that leadership was very important for effective SBM, there were differences in opinion on who should be responsible for leading. Opinions differed between the extremes of “ourselves” to “the Department”.

## Conclusions

The influence of the school principal on SBM and school improvement was conceptualised according to two divergent categories of school, based on school effectiveness criteria, namely, highly effective “actively restructuring” Category A and totally ineffective “struggling” Category B schools. The role of the principal in the two categories of school differed considerably. Schools that were most successful in the implementation of SBM and school improvement efforts were those where school principals were not only empowered to make decisions, but

also trained for their new roles and provided with information to guide their decision making.

According to Delaney (1995:26), there are many factors that affect the relationship between SBM and school improvement. According to participants in this study, however, none were as crucial to that relationship as the leadership style of the school principal.

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