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Policy and practice on school principal recruitment and professional development in South Africa and Poland

Abstract: This paper aims to compare policy and practice on school principal recruitment and professional development in South Africa and Poland. Common challenges and different responses are discussed, focusing on the following: (i) the requirements to become a school principal; and (ii) preparation and professional development of school principals. The analysis is based on a review of the law in the field of education and accompanying executive regulations in South Africa and Poland and a literature review on school principal education. We focused on the link between school leadership and school principal education. A comparison of national policies on recruitment and education of school principals in these two countries revealed common challenges in the two contexts, which directed our attention to the following questions: (1) How can principals' professional development be understood on a continuum of static to dynamic practice? (2) What is the influence of context on principals' professional dilemma of being an isolated practice to allowing for contextual influence? (3) How is a balance struck between individual and collaborative professional development of principals to improve quality education for all learners? Lastly, conclusions – which are of relevance to policy, practice and further research on school principal recruitment and

education – are drawn. This study underscores the professionalisation of school principal development.

Keywords: school policies, school principal recruitment, preparation and development, school leadership, South Africa and Poland, quality of education, comparative study.

Introduction

Globally, it is increasingly recognised that having high-quality teachers and school principals at schools is key to improving student learning, and the countries with the highest-achieving education systems make substantial investments in the quality of teaching staff and school leaders (OECD, 2005, 2019). Key features of high-quality education systems include “multiple, coherent and complementary components associated with recruiting, developing, and retaining talented individuals to support the overall goal of ensuring that each school is populated by the effective teachers” (Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 294). There is broad scientific evidence of the importance of school leadership for school quality (Hallinger and Huber, 2012). In times of uncertainty and risk, the expectations of society towards school’s change. Therefore, school leaders are confronted with a more complex, wider range of tasks. Furthermore, recruitment, preparation and professional development of school leaders have increasingly become a concern in many countries. Hence, critical studies on policies and practices on school principal recruitment, preparation and professional development are needed to contribute to the academic knowledge base and to make recommendations for policy formulation and implementation in the education system. Identifying aspects of the requirements for prospective school principals and the procedures of principal recruitment, preparation and professional development that can affect the quality of education are crucial steps in finding ways towards school improvement.

This paper aims to compare policy and practice on school principal recruitment and education in South Africa and Poland. It focuses on the requirements to become a school principal and the preparation and professional development of school principals in both countries. The analysis is based on a review of the legislation and policies in the field of education and accompanying executive regulations in South Africa and Poland and a review of current literature on school principal education. A comparison of South African and Polish national policies on school principal recruitment and education revealed common challenges in the two contexts.

These challenges directed our attention to the following complex questions: (1) How can principals' professional development be understood on a continuum of static to dynamic practice? (2) What is the influence of context on principals' professional dilemma of being an isolated practice to allowing for contextual influence? and (3) How is a balance struck between individual and collaborative professional development of principals to improve quality education for all learners?

Requirements for the role of school principal

South Africa and Poland have made attempts towards “double democratisation” – that is, the simultaneous democratisation of both education and society (Davies, 2002). These changes created a space for nurturing qualities such as participation, innovation, co-operation, autonomy and initiative in learners and staff (Madalińska-Michalak, 2023; Naicker and Mestry, 2016). Political expectations to delegate more responsibility to individual schools in both countries direct the attention to the quality of school management and leadership and, therefore, the issues of school policy development for the recruitment, preparation and professional development of school principals.

The requirements and procedures to become a school principal in South Africa show that from a legal perspective, the status of a school principal in the country is currently determined by, among others:

- National Education Policy Act, No 27 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 2016a).
- The South African Schools Act, No 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996).
- The Employment of Educators Act, No 76 of 1998 (Republic of South Africa, 1998).
- The Labour Relations Act, No 66 of 1995 (Republic of South Africa, 1995).
- The Policy on the South African Standard for Principals, No 323 of 2016 (Republic of South Africa, 2016c).
- The Personnel Administration Measures (PAM) in terms of the Employment of Educators Act, No 27 of 1998 (Republic of South Africa, 2016b).

In Poland, the status of a school principal is currently determined by the following:

- Law of December 14, 2016 Education Law (Education Law, 2016).

- Law of January 26, 1982 Teacher's Charter (Teacher's Charter, 2019).
- Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 11 August 2017 on the requirements to be met by a person occupying the position of director and other managerial positions in a public kindergarten, public primary school, public secondary school, and public institution (Minister of National Education, 2017).

In addition to the above-listed legislation, the status of school principal in both countries is determined by many other legislation, counting only the Acts in the field of educational law.

According to the current education legislation in both countries, a school is managed by a teacher who has been entrusted with the position of school principal by the leading authority. This entrustment follows an appointment process that is based on principles of competition. The law in both countries also requires that the person who accepts the position of school principal must be a registered teacher. In South Africa, the requirements to be appointed as a principal is a four-year teacher qualification, seven years of actual teaching experience, and being registered with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) as professional educator (Republic of South Africa, 1998; Republic of South Africa, 2016b, p. 65). Moreover, in South Africa, for professional development, different university-based qualifications have been required to be a school principal – for example, an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) Management and Leadership. An Advanced Diploma (AD) in Education Management and Leadership replaced latter qualification. Although the national Department of Basic Education (DBE) indicated that they wanted this qualification to become an official requirement to be appointed as a principal, so far, this has not realised. The expectation of the national and the provincial departments is that the programme must empower students (principals and other leaders in the school context) to have a direct influence on the improvement of the examination results at their schools.

In Poland, the post of school principal must be filled by a teacher with a professional advancement degree (nominated teacher or certified teacher). The requirements to be a school principal seem to be more complex than in South Africa, as the person who aspires to the post of school principal should meet the following cumulative requirements:

- They should have completed a master's degree, pedagogical preparation, and qualifications to occupy a teaching position in a kindergarten, school, or institution.
- They should have at least five years' teaching experience as a teacher, or five years' teaching experience as an academic teacher.
- They should have completed higher education or postgraduate studies in the field of management or a qualifying course in the field of education management conducted in accordance with provisions of in-service teacher training establishments.
- They should have received at least a good evaluation of their work or a favourable assessment of their professional experience.
- They should have satisfied the health conditions necessary for the performance of a managerial post.
- They should have full legal capacity and should enjoy full public rights.
- They should not have been validly punished by means of a disciplinary penalty and is not subject to disciplinary proceedings.
- They should not have been convicted of a premeditated criminal offence or a premeditated fiscal offence.
- They should not be the subject of criminal proceedings in a court of law (Madalińska-Michalak, 2019).

The *sine qua non* conditions are thus numerous for being appointed as a school principal in both countries. However, there is a clear difference between the issue of formal requirements in the context of qualifications and the form of appointment. In Poland, future school principals must complete higher education or postgraduate studies in the field of management or a qualifying course in the field of educational management conducted in line with provisions of in-service teacher training establishments, whereas in South Africa, there is no such a need. In addition, in South Africa, the appointment as principal is permanent, with no restrictions on the number of years of appointment. In Poland, the post of school principal is awarded for only five years. However, there are no legal provisions limiting the number of terms of office a school principal can serve in a school in Poland. It may be the case that a school principal is in the position at one school and for the next five years, in the position at another school.

Responsibilities and professional development of school principals

In South African and Polish legislation on education (and in the other legislation not directly focusing on education), details are provided on varied tasks to be performed by the school principal. However, attempting to define what lies behind the term of school principal solely through the competencies with which such a person is equipped, the tasks they must carry out and the powers they may exercise, is a difficult undertaking, not always leading to a condensed, clear, precise and applicable understanding in diverse contexts. The principal's primary task is broadly understood as the management of a school, and this applies to both countries in this comparative study. The principal is the external representative of a school, responsible for all staff. An important additional task is the chairperson of the board of education in Poland, and only a member of the school governing body (not the chair, who must be a parent) in South Africa. Moreover, in both countries, the school principal is not only responsible for the administration of the school but also performs a thorough pedagogical function, fostering the development of teachers, pupils, parents and the school environment. School principals must conduct all these functions and responsibilities within the broad context of school democratisation and competitive new public management.

Considering the similarities in the main responsibilities and tasks of school principals, the issue of professional development of school principals in both countries arises. Preparation and professional development of school principals are international phenomena (Brauckmann et al., 2023). The emphasis is on professional development of school principals, with specific academic programmes designed for them, which may be significant for school quality and the functioning of the principal as a professional (Tingle et al., 2019).

In South Africa, PAM provides the official responsibilities and requirements for the work of the principal. PAM and the South African Standard for Principalship do not mention any requirements for professional development of principals; they only refer to the principal's responsibility to develop teachers. On the other hand, there is a legislated process – continuous professional teacher development (CPTD) – for teachers, including principals, managed by the South African Council for Educators (2011). This system is supposed to record the development of teachers and school principals, but it is not functioning properly. Therefore, it is not a motivational factor for professional development at any stage of a principal's career. It was supposed to make development in this instance more dynamic and continuous but seems not have achieved this (Moteetee, 2019; Xaso et al., 2017).

The existing development pre-service and in-service opportunities for school principals and academic (university) qualifications (Mestry & Singh, 2007), opportunities provided by NGOs (Kirori & Dickinson, 2020) and teacher unions are not fully used by school principals in South Africa. Different university-based qualifications – for example, an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) Management and Leadership (Bush, 2011) – have been replaced with an Advanced Diploma (AD) in Education Management and Leadership, presented by universities mostly on contact basis to specific selected cohorts. Although the national DBE has indicated that it wants these qualifications to be an official requirement for the appointed as principal, so far, this has not realised. This seemingly ad-hoc approach to principal development (Bush, 2013) suggests a static approach to principal development.

Naidoo and Petersen (2015) confirmed the challenges of professional development. According to them, principals who have completed an official university-based qualification are still not sure about their role as instructional leaders, which emphasises the challenge to make development a dynamic process (implying continuous development). Sepuru and Mohlakwana (2020) found that new principals were not developed specifically for the management and leadership role and found it challenging to live up to expectations.

As professional development is not compulsory in South Africa, the rate of participation in professional development activities is low. Akin to the South African context, from a Nigerian perspective, Ibara (2014) reported that although there are no professional leadership and management development requirements before or once being appointed as a principal, the need and expectation are for continuous professional development of principals. Mestry (2017) concurs with Ibara that continuous professional development is essential to improve the quality of education in most schools in South Africa.

In 2022, in Poland, a new performance appraisal was introduced for school principals, which undoubtedly considers their professional development. Several strictly managerial criteria are listed among 16 evaluation criteria: organising the work of the school in accordance with the law; planning and organising the work of the educational council and pedagogical council; and implementing tasks in line with the resolutions of the constitutive pedagogical council and the school council. The school council is responsible for the following: organising the work of the school in accordance with the law; planning and organising the work of the board of education; carrying out tasks in accordance with the resolutions of the board of education and the school council; cooperating with other school organs, ensuring effective

co-operation with other school bodies, and ensuring effective flow of information between these bodies; correctness of keeping and storing the documentation of the course of teaching; creating conditions for the implementation of teaching, educational and caring tasks; and ensuring the safety of students and teachers during classes organised by the school; exercising pedagogical supervision; supporting teachers in their development and professional improvement of teachers; improving own managerial competence; correct management of budgetary resources allocated to the school; and correct performance of activities in matters of labour law in relation to school employees, among others. At each appraisal, the level of performance is established, but no reference is made to previous evaluation.

To summarise, in Poland, the school principal is obliged to develop personally and professionally but should do this on their own. Evaluation of these activities is static in nature. It is worth adding that in some environments, mutual support groups of principals are created who exchange their own experiences supplemented, for example, by training delivered by experts.

Challenges of school principal professional development: towards professionalisation

The analysis presented so far directs our attention to the shared challenges of school principal recruitment and their education in two different contexts (South Africa and Poland). Responses to such challenges vary considerably. Drawing on the work of Madalinska-Michalak et al. (2023), we argue that at least three complex questions should be addressed to discuss the professionalisation of school principal development in South Africa and Poland. The following subsections address the above-stated question on professional development as a static or dynamic practice, an isolated or embedded practice, and an individual and collaborative professional development practice.

A static or dynamic practice

The complexities associated with education and schools show that professional development of school principals must be a part of lifelong learning, and it should be perceived as a dynamic process and driven by context (Hallinger, 2018).

Appointment to the position of school principal in South Africa shows that it might be a lifelong position, with no restrictions on the number of years of appointment. In addition, there are no formal requirements for any professional development. As indicated above, school policy solutions in

this regard have their own implications for the practice of school principal professional development, and this can influence expectations for the professional development of school principals. The concept seems to be perceived as a static rather than a dynamic process, since it is not required of principals to do any development and, therefore, they are static in their post and position. Proper incentives may motivate school principals to be engaged in continuous professional development for the sake of school quality.

In Poland, on the other hand, appointment to the position of school principal is made due to competition held by the local governing body. The post of school principal is awarded for only five years. The period of entrustment as school principal is, therefore, short – the adaptation time of a newly appointed school principal and the acquisition of some management practice generally coincide with the end of the entrustment period. As the candidates in competition are generally teachers at the school in question, it appears that the legislature, in construing legislation, has included another implicit criterion for the selection of school principals for the next five years. If, apart from the incumbent school principal, none of the school staff enter the competition, it can be assumed that the entire teaching staff accept this person (at least not negated). It is worth noting that this procedure can be repeated in specific circumstances several times every five years.

A new performance appraisal of school principals, which has been introduced in 2022, undoubtedly directs our attention to the continuous professional development of Polish school principals. The recruitment process of school principals and new regulations on their professional development are based on what we can expect novice and experienced school principals to be able to do while they perform their roles. At the heart of the introduced school policies is a solid logic for focusing on the notion of quality in performing the role of school principal. However, the school principal is obliged to develop personally and professionally, but they should do this on their own, which indicates an isolated approach to professional development. In some environments, mutual support groups of principals are created that exchange their own experiences supplemented, for example, by training delivered by experts. The evaluation of these activities is static in nature. According to the new law, the level of performance of school principals in different aspects is established, but there is no indication that reference should be made to previous evaluation. Research on school principals shows that professional development of school principals should be perceived as dynamic rather than static to accelerate professional learning among principals, anchored

in building educationally rich everyday practices (Day et al., 2014; Goldring et al., 2012).

An isolated or embedded practice

The expectations of principals are contextual and would, therefore, differ from country to country. In the case of South Africa and Poland, the emphasis is different with regard to the development requirements and expectations regarding what principals must do and achieve. In the South African context, the political influence of the dominant political party and the dominant teacher union plays a key role in policy for and development of principals. The lack of compulsory development before appointment and during their period as principal does not put any pressure on principals for further professional development.

Principals as leaders of schools in high socio-economic contexts may have different professional development needs compared to those in low socio-economic contexts or deprived areas. Similarly, context can also change – for example, the influence Covid-19 had, and war, for instance, in Syria and Ukraine – which emphasises the contextually embedded professional development need expected to achieve quality education for all.

Gabrielle (2019) indicated that in the quintile one, two and three schools in South Africa (which are the poorest; more than 60% of schools), attrition of principals and specifically succession planning have a negative influence on the performance of these schools. The embedded context of schools in poorer socio-economic contexts is also associated with limited development opportunities for these principals. It seems to be a contributing factor to why principals are either leaving for better possibilities or retiring early from these challenging contexts.

Naidoo (2019) emphasises the embeddedness of professional development in challenging circumstances of schools. Although there are challenges as regards the Advanced Certificate in Education university qualification, this programme has some advantages, especially as there are no official requirements for the appointment of principals. Naidoo argued that professional development must be embedded in the South African school context, which may have a positive influence on the quality of education as argued elsewhere.

Mosoge and Mataboge (2021) emphasised the responsibility of principals to develop school management teams (SMTs). There are many challenges, among others, that principals do not understand their own instructional leadership roles and therefore find it difficult to develop SMTs. These challenges are embedded in most schools in South Africa, since many principals

still follow the more autocratic leadership approach, which was part of the country's history before the adoption of a full democratic society in 1994. They find it difficult to change to a more participative and instructional leadership role. This article argues that this can be changed through a dynamic process of professional development that is grounded in collaborative development initiated by principals. As the changing curriculum and technology during the Covid-19 pandemic have indicated, development must be dynamic and contextual, otherwise principals' knowledge and competencies may become outdated, which may have an influence on their ability to lead towards change and improvement.

The South African Democratic Teacher Union (SADTU) – an affiliate of the governing party's tripartite alliance – plays a significant role in the recruitment, appointment and development of principals, while there is not such a strong influence in Poland. This is an example of external contextual factors that need to be considered in the development of policies on principal appointment and development.

In Poland, for the post of school principal, the law determines the composition of a competition committee whose aim is to balance the various groups of influence (e.g., parents, teachers, local government, school superintendents, trade union organisation). As regards the selection of the school principal, the composition of this committee shows the potential greater influence of local government representatives and school superintendents compared to other representatives on the committee.

During the tenure of the school principal, the political composition of both the local and governmental authorities may change, which is reflected in subsequent editions of competition. At the same time, potential "new" politicians must accept the choices made by the previous political composition. Representatives of the teacher's council and parents' council reflect the intra-school social differentiation. They are the entities that interact most closely with the principal – therefore, their interests are not overlooked at this stage of their selection. Finally, the interests of trade unions, expressed by their representatives on the selection board, may strengthen or weaken the voices of teacher representatives but also express the views of union headquarters.

It can be concluded that the position of school principal of a Polish public school is firmly embedded in a political and environmental context – these factors must be taken into account by candidates for the position of school principal, and incumbent school principals should show flexibility during their tenure, depending on the national and local political turmoil

surrounding the school they direct. At the same time, the law stabilises their position and requires continuous professional development of them.

An individual or collaborative practice

Shared, delegated or participative leadership are accepted as a preferred leadership approach; therefore, principals' professional development cannot be an individual activity only focusing on individuals' personal development. Shava and Heystek (2019) noted that principals' own professional development must have an influence on the collaborative effort of teachers, learners, parents and other role players to improve the quality of education. They reported that at well-performing schools, principals play a key role in the development of staff members, which leads to quality education. An important aspect of providing quality education is to create a positive culture at the school, which also emphasises collaborative effort.

Bush (2018) argued that principals need to be socialised through a process of professional development to grow into the post and responsibilities of a principal. This is aligned with the collaborative process of the principal's leadership to be accepted as the leader of the school towards improvement and quality education. Principal development cannot be an individual activity for the principal as agent only; it must be a collaborative process where the individual, school staff and role players outside the school, including the provincial legislator, collaborate to ensure consistent and continuous development opportunities.

In the South African context, Makgato and Mudzanani (2019) and Msila and Mtshali (2011) highlighted the importance of the development of principals. However, they emphasised that not only principals must be developed; collaborative and shared leadership must also be part of principals' development. The official expectations and measurement of principals are conducted annually with the quality measurement system (QMS). According to the QMS, there are only two references to self-development on which principals are assessed: they attend and participate in departmental, union and other professional activities aimed at enhancing their professional skills; and professional conduct, with reference to punctuality, presentable appearance, and respect towards others (Education Labour Relations Council, 2020). However, the unofficial measurement and the publicly displayed assessment is the Grade 12 school-leaving examination results, which is published annually as a public document on the Department of Basic Education web page (Department of Basic Education, 2023). These official responsibilities, and specially the unofficial assessment, must be seen in the

context of the complex socio-economic situation of the country, which has a significant influence on examination results, and principals have limited power to take responsibility for this influence. Collaborative principal and teacher professional development may have an important influence on the improvement and positive academic achievement of schools. This emphasises the need for not only an individual approach to professional development but also a collaborative approach.

In Poland, there is a lack of adequate analysis at the level of the national ministry on how school principals' roles are performed. Some activities were undertaken by the Centre for the Development of Education, which, through its own identification of the needs of the environment, conducted training, conferences and prepared publications to support school principals. A few activities were also undertaken by the Institute of Educational Research (which is directly connected to the national ministry), but these have been abandoned since 2016 after the latest education reforms. One gets the impression that politicians have no idea how to support school principals institutionally, neither do they have the courage to cede this task, too, for example, local teacher training centres. Local initiatives in the form of the creation of so-called school principal networks are incidental and are often abandoned after one or two meetings due to a lack of public funds allocated for this purpose. Action is also hampered by the need for certification of non-public centres of excellence. This is not an easy undertaking and is not always financially successful. In contrast, public centres are generally focused on providing teachers with at least part-time methodological advisors while a management advisor/consultant in many settings is not feasible. One also senses a strange attitude from the superintendents' representatives on this issue: as the principal is appointed by the local authority, it is in the local authority's interest to ensure that they perform the best possible accepted roles. This is a strange view, since of the 16 criteria for assessing school principals' performance, only three or four involve finance and "pure" management; the others involve pedagogical supervision, which is also the responsibility of the school superintendent, that is, a representative of the State.

Summary and conclusions

We explored the policies on recruitment, appointment and professional development of school principals in South Africa and Poland through a literature review and document analysis (formal documents and legal sources). The comparative lenses we used allowed us to provide a perspective on the identified issues from the two countries; it was not a direct comparison

between the two countries. Context, implementation and challenges were the main focus and therefore, the purpose of the study was not to compare specific issues in detail but rather to focus on how context influences these identified issues for principals. This is a similar approach to what Lumby (2008) did in the *International handbook on the preparation and development of school leaders* and Derring et al.'s (2005) study, who used their research on educational leadership development in Finland, the Netherlands, and France.

This study underscores the professionalisation of school principal development. It is important to acknowledge that the professional development of school principals is not an isolated activity for the sake of personal development, which would only benefit the individual, and, therefore, also not a static activity. School principal professional development must be part of lifelong learning, embedded in context, which is a dynamic process. The dynamism must be reflected in the requirements and change in which the principal is acting but should also be an actor of change. The context demands and requires professional development of school principals to ensure change, improvement and quality performance.

The presented findings inform policy and practice and simultaneously contribute to further research on the socio-professional status of school principals in South Africa and Poland and on working conditions and school leaders' preparation and development. This study can serve as the foundation for further empirical work to provide a deeper understanding of how context influences the implementation of policy as well as the practice of principals. Moreover, the presented analysis encourages research on school principal development in the context of the presented challenges. A question for further research can be as follows: How does school policy on school principal recruitment, preparation and professional development affect their practices and efforts to develop school quality? Empirical investigations could follow a qualitative approach. Focus group interviews with successful school principals on the development of school policy on principal recruitment, preparation and professional development may be used as a research method in further research.

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