A profile of effective leadership in some South African high-poverty schools

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The struggle of high-poverty schools for survival is well documented. Some have overcome poverty-related odds and performed exceptionally well, prompting the following research question: What elements constitute a profile of effective leadership in high-poverty schools? Investigations conducted at six successful high-poverty schools revealed the contribution of invitational leadership to this success. I look at the personal traits and capabilities of effective leaders in high-poverty schools, as presented in a leadership profile.

A tiny band of schools situated in the poorest communities provide some of the highest quality education. They are performing heroic deeds under difficult conditions, and serve as role models for the rest of the system (Taylor, 2006:73).

Introduction
We need to consider how some schools in poor communities effectively overcome severe poverty-related odds, such as hunger, homelessness, illiteracy, unemployment, gangsterism, drug abuse, and a fatalistic mindset (*cf.* Day, 2005; Harris, 2002; Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki & Giles, 2005; Jesse, Davis & Pokorny, 2004; National Commission on Education (NCE), 1996; Revilla & De La Garza Sweeney, 1997; Taylor, 2006:73) and manage to send happy, motivated learners out into the world. Answers to this question are important, not only from an educational perspective and as regards the quality of educational leadership in high-poverty schools, but also for the social and ethical purpose of empowering the school, which in high-poverty settings acts as a catalyst for community development.

Poverty essentially concerns the inability of individuals, households or communities to reach and maintain a socially acceptable minimum standard of living due to a lack of resources (*cf.* May & Govender, 1998:9). Although the phrase 'lack of resources' is mostly understood to mean a lack of food, housing or income, it can also be interpreted in a far wider sense. Payne (2003:16) aptly defines poverty as "the extent to which an individual does without resources". These resources can be financial (money to buy goods and services); emotional (control over emotional responses); cognitive (mental ability and acquired literacy and numeracy skills to deal with everyday life); spiritual (a belief in divine purpose and guidance); physical (physical health and mobility); support structure-related (friends, family and availability of back-up resources); relationship-oriented (access to constructive, nurturing relationships);

and those relating to a knowledge of a group's hidden rules (its unspoken cues and habits) (Payne, 2003:16-17).

The socio-economic and sociological problems relating to poverty imply specific challenges as regards the orderly, effective and equal provision of education. This is because poor learners and poor schools are principally and constitutionally entitled to the provision of quality education and resources. Consequently, South African schools are categorised into five quintiles of 20% each, ranging from the very poor schools to affluent schools, and funded accordingly using a sliding scale (Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), 2003:B52). Schools are identified as poor based on the relative poverty of the community, in terms of average income. Similar criteria apply to determine exemption from school fees and to ensure that poor learners are indeed able to attend the more affluent schools (*ibid.*:B46). The scope of poverty-based school funding is evident from statistics on the percentages of schools per province in the first two quintiles: Eastern Cape (60%); Free State (53%); Gauteng (18%); KwaZulu-Natal (41%); Limpopo (52%); Mpumalanga (37%); Northern Cape (35%); North West Province (39%), and Western Cape (14%) (NAPTOSA, 2003:2). The extent of poverty-related school support is also evident from statistics on the South African School Nutrition Programme: by November 2005, the Department of Education was providing meals to about 5.3 million learners in 17,000 public schools (South African Government Information, 2007:10).

The true impact of poverty on the provision of education is evident from the following synopsis of learner, teacher, parent, and environmental conditions that a principal of a high-poverty school typically confronts. The learners are often hungry and ill; do not have proper clothing; lack study facilities, parental support, study motivation, self-esteem and language proficiency; and move frequently from school to school (Cole-Henderson, 2000:84; Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 2002a:112-117). The teachers are mostly beginners; are often under-qualified; have low self-esteem, low work motivation and low learner expectations; show a lack of respect for learners and their parents; practise "drill and kill teaching" ("poverty pedagogics"); often work in rundown classrooms; and have to cope without proper tuition resources (Cole-Henderson, 2000:86; Haberman, 1999:3-5; 11; Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 2002c: 335-341). Parents are often in need of health or other social care; have low educational qualifications or are illiterate; have an intense distrust, even hatred, of school (resulting from own childhood school experiences); and are often single or act as substitute parents (Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), 2006:10; Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 2002b:271,274; Shanklin, Kozleski, Meagher, Sands, Joseph & Wyman, 2003:368; Jesse *et al.*, 2004:27). The school environment is typically characterised by unkept school premises, rundown buildings, damaged and inadequate furniture, no waste collection facilities, substandard toilet facilities and physical danger points (such as those due to faulty electrical wiring) (Shanklin *et al.*, 2003:357; Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 2002c:335,343).

It is not surprising that "struggling" and "sinking" schools (Stoll & Fink, 1996:86) are found mostly in impoverished areas (Glidden, 1999:21-22; Taylor, 2006). The school leadership challenges which are implied by conditions in high-poverty schools are indeed formidable. Essentially these leadership challenges imply a radical turnabout for the school, embracing a reformation as regards vision, standards, expectations, culture, service delivery, resources and communication, and with quality education as a target and overarching criterion. In practical terms, the leadership challenges can best be phrased as a question: How can the poverty-related backlogs and issues regarding learners, parents, teachers, resources and facilities be overcome, and a happy and effective learning environment be created in a high-poverty school?

Conceptual framework for investigating effective leadership in high-poverty schools

The literature on poverty often quite rightly postulates that the crux of the battle against poverty concerns specific values and principles. In a well-considered and still relevant discussion, Kritzinger (1996:12-19) emphasises the following:

- A new inclination among the privileged: austerity. The privileged cannot continue with their way of life as if poverty does not exist, but will have to narrow the gap between the wealthy and the poor deliberately in the belief that "[we] must live simply, that others may simply live".
- A new understanding of the poor: respect. The dignity of the poor as human beings must be acknowledged and they must be optimally involved in decision-making regarding their future.
- A new radical ideal: transformation. This concerns much more than 'development' (in the economic sense) and 'liberation' (in the political sense). It concerns the total transformation of the individual with respect to his or her life and world view.
- A new strategy: together. Practical experience indicates clearly that a top-down approach (which is more often than not paternalistic and pedantic), as well as its antipole, i.e. a bottom-up approach (relying almost exclusively on local initiatives), does not render the required results. Co-operation between those within and those outside of a particular community has the greatest potential to render meaningful results, but such co-operation must be sought and practised in a spirit of mutual openness and dependency.
- A new method: relationships. Personal relations and mutual trust must be built by identifying with the destitution of the poor at a grassroots level.

These values and principles constitute the ethical and moral framework for poverty alleviation. This framework is also particularly relevant for effective leadership in high-poverty schools.

For the purposes of this study, Stoll and Fink's (1996) exposition of invi-

tational leadership was found to be highly appropriate for studying school leadership in high-poverty contexts, due to the direct link with the already indicated values and principles (with key notions of relationships and respect) in poverty alleviation. They point out how the concept of leadership evolved gradually from managerial approaches (with the focus on results), via transactional approaches (with the focus on staff efficiency) to transformational approaches (with the focus on attitudinal change) (*ibid.*:106), but failed to capture the essence of school leadership, and the type of leadership required in the future (*ibid.*:107):

> Effective school leaders attend to both structure and culture, continuity and change; they are both managers and leaders; they are both transactional and transformational. It would appear that no single leadership model adequately describes the expectations and reality for contemporary school leaders.

In an effort to synthesise existing leadership models, while providing sufficient scope to encourage the imagination and creativity of school leaders, the invitational leadership model was developed. It uses the metaphor of invitation to describe positive self-concept and positive inclinations towards others. "Invitations, therefore, are messages communicated to people which inform them that they are able, responsible and worthwhile" (*ibid.*:109). The four basic premises of invitational leadership are optimism (constituted in the belief that people have untapped potential for growth and development); respect (manifested in courtesy and caring); trust (the cornerstone of "civil society within a school"); and intentional care (intentional provision of growth opportunities) (*ibid.*). Based on their work at 83 schools and with more than 100 school leaders, Stoll and Fink (1996:110-117) continue to describe the four dimensions of invitational leadership, namely, that invitational leaders a) invite themselves personally (key notion: self-confidence); b) invite themselves professionally (key notion: personal growth); c) invite others personally (key notion: relationships); and d) invite others professionally (key notion: meeting the unique challenges and needs of a specific school in a particular position on the continuum of "sinking", "struggling", "strolling", "cruising" or "moving" schools). The main challenges for bringing about change are successively (1) rigorous intervention, (2) problem solving, (3) school development planning, (4) establishing a culture of continuous improvement, and (5) maintaining momentum through shared leadership (*ibid.*).

In brief: The notion of invitation (with its constituent elements of interest in, respect for, care for, and trust in those invited) encapsulates the gist of the already indicated key values and principles (with key notions of relationships and respect) in meeting the challenges of poverty alleviation in a meaningful way. Invitational school leadership theory therefore appears to constitute the ideal conceptual framework for studying the role of school leadership in dealing with the impact of poverty on education.

The findings of a number of case studies on effective leadership in high-poverty schools (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; CDE,

2006; Cole-Henderson, 2000; Day, 2005; Glidden, 1999; Haberman, 1999; Harris, 2002; Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), 1997; Jacobson *et al.*, 2005; Jesse *et al.*, 2004; Mampuru, 2003; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005; NCE, 1996; Revilla & De La Garza Sweeney, 1997; Shanklin *et al.*, 2003; Walker & Dimmock, 2005) indicate convincingly that invitational leadership (with its basic premises of optimism, respect, trust and intentional care, and the four dimensions of invitational leadership relating to inviting oneself and others personally and professionally, as already indicated) is indeed the characteristic leadership style in successful high-poverty schools. The case studies highlight the principals' passion for the upliftment of the poor, and their unshakable belief in the potential of high-poverty learners to excel personally and academically. Consequently, the prominent mechanisms for achieving success in high-poverty schools has to do with the case study principals' "learning centred leadership" (Day, 2005:578); their pastoral care for learners, teachers and parents; and their ability to think and act in a visionary way, to set and maintain high expectations in view of specific standards and norms, to inspire (not only motivate) others, to build team spirit and pride, and to seek and explore every possible opportunity, source and action to provide for meeting the schools' needs.

Empirical investigation
The case studies mentioned above cannot be seen as conclusive for (South) African circumstances of poverty, because they were set mostly in First World poverty contexts where the people are regarded as being poor relative to the general standard of living in society, but do not face acute survival needs (food and shelter) as is often the case in (South) Africa. It is therefore necessary to ask (1) what the most serious challenges facing a typical South African high-poverty school are, and (2) how an effective South African high-poverty school manages to establish a happy and effective learning environment.

An empirical investigation of some schools effective in South African high-poverty settings was undertaken in an attempt to answer these questions, and to determine the requirements for effective leadership in (South) African high-poverty schools.

Research method
Six schools were identified and purposively selected for the empirical investigation. The selection criteria were that the schools (1) operate in circumstances of high to acute poverty, and (2) are acknowledged and renowned beyond their respective communities as being successful schools. In the case of the secondary schools, the schools' reputation was linked to a sustained matriculation pass rate of approximately 90%. On the basis of these criteria, four schools were recommended by fellow academics at three different universities, one by a top official in the South African Department of Education and one by a minister in the researcher's church who could recommend the

particular school, having sent a child to school there and having served on the School Governing Body (SGB).

After prior assurance of confidentiality and ethical accountability, an in-depth interview was conducted with each principal. The interview schedule provided for questions on the school's key values and principles; the most serious poverty-related problems the school had to cope with, and how these were overcome; the specific leadership qualities needed in a high-poverty school; the sustainability of school success; and measures at national, provincial or district level which are needed to continuously improve teaching and learning in high-poverty schools.

The interviews were tape-recorded. Interview summaries were compiled on the basis of these recordings and the researcher's field notes. For the sake of trustworthiness, the summaries were then sent to each principal for verification of correctness and comprehensiveness. No corrections or additions were received from the principals, and the data were subsequently analysed by identification of trends and emphases in the responses.

Additional to the interviews, observation of the school facilities, premises and surroundings was done. Observation data were captured by photographs and field notes.

Findings
School data
The school data are presented in narrative format to capture the gist of the circumstances and achievements of the participating schools.

- School A was officially rated as a Q1 school and served learners from Foundation Phase to Grade 12. The school's establishment in 2001 was a crisis measure, following on a cholera epidemic in the nearby Alexandra township (Gauteng province), and large-scale relocation of people to Diepsloot. Premises had to be found in a hurry. The school buildings were primarily of a temporary nature, consisting of containers and mobiles adapted to serve as classrooms and offices. The school was therefore often referred to as the "school on wheels". Some permanent classrooms had been erected, and the newest addition (thanks to an Australian donor) was a large school hall. Facilities included a kitchen (for the feeding scheme) and sports fields (situated on a former refuse dump, and established through parent and community effort). The learner enrolment at the time of the interview was 1 530, with a teacher:learner ratio of 1:35. The matric pass rate for the last couple of years had increased from 27% in 2002 to 90% in 2004, with a decrease to 72% in 2005. The principal (since 2001) was Mrs A. The school's success was mainly attributed to success in mobilising human and material resources to meet the school's needs, and in channelling and managing these resources in the most effective way.
- School B was situated in the Badplaas district in Mpumalanga, and had been established in 1986. The school served 420 learners from Grade 0

to Grade 7, and the teacher:learner ratio was 1:32. It was officially rated as a very poor school (Q1). The school buildings were of brick construction. Initially the school buildings were without water, electricity and an ablution block. When the interviewee took over as principal in 2001, the school was in a state of disrepair, with a badly leaking roof and in dire need of paint. Later the school was in a better state, thanks to community and sponsor involvement according to a school plan of action for improvement and repair. The interviewee was Mrs B, who served as principal from 2001 to 2003. She attributed the school's success mainly to the creation of a climate and culture of mutual respect.

- School C was situated in Pretoria-West. The school had been established in 1937 as an intermediate school, but since 1946 it had been a primary school with Afrikaans as language of instruction. The school had 750 learners, and the teacher:learner ratio was 1:27. The school was officially rated as a Q3 school, placing it outside the realms of severe poverty. The principal viewed this rating as incorrect, as according to him the department officials regarded all white schools as privileged schools. The school buildings and premises were in a very good condition. The principal (since 1986) was Mr C. He attributed the school's success to (1) the focus on quality teaching and continuous improvement, (2) optimal parent involvement and a sense of parent ownership ("our school"), and (3) the very low level of teacher mobility and the "sense of family" among teaching staff.

- School D served the western part of Evaton township (Gauteng province). It had been established in 1988 and had 1 256 learners, from Grade 1 to Grade 7. The teacher:learner ratio was 1:40. The school was officially rated as a Q4 school. This rating was heavily disputed by the principal, who maintained that officials had given just a cursory glance at the type of housing in the immediate vicinity of the school (which was good in this case), whereas in fact more than 70% of the learner population came from nearby informal settlements. The school buildings were neat and attractive. A borehole provided water to two vegetable gardens. There was a workshop on the premises for the manufacture of paper rolls. The principal (since 1988) was Mr D. He attributed the school's success mainly to (1) parental support, "the cornerstone of our success", a culture of "our school, our children, our future", and (2) a very stable teaching staff component.

- School E was situated in the scenic Ida's Valley in Stellenbosch. It had been established in 1935, served a mainly Afrikaans-speaking community and had 962 learners (Grades 8 to 12), with a teacher:learner ratio of 1:29. The matric pass rate for the last two years had been in excess of 90%. The school was officially rated as a Q2 school. The school buildings were neat, brick structures. The principal (since 1997) was Mr E. He grew up in Ida's Valley, and as a former student of the school he could identify particularly well with the learner circumstances and problems. He attributed the school's success mainly to (1) a highly motivated, dedicated, well-qualified and experienced teaching staff, and (2) extensive networking

with stakeholders (supporters, donors), on the basis of a well-prepared business plan, to secure optimal provision for meeting the school's needs.
• School F was situated in a township near Virginia (Free State province). It was established in 1997 and had 1 320 learners (Grades 8 to 12), with a teacher:learner ratio of 1:29. The matric pass rate over the past three years ranged between 89% and 93%. The school was officially rated as a Q1 school. There were no permanent structures on the school site. The main building, with the principal's office and administrative offices, had been assembled out of asbestos. The classrooms consisted of row upon row of corrugated iron structures. The school premises were clean, but dusty, with no grass, flowers or vegetable garden. The school was affectionately known as the "shack school". The principal (since 1998) was Mr F. He attributed the school's success to (1) the focus on the learner, and (2) the non-negotiable emphasis on learner and teacher punctuality.

The following data presentation and interpretation follow the interview schedule structure, and attention will be given, consecutively, to the schools' key values and principles; the most serious poverty-related problems the schools had to cope with; the schools' measures to ensure effective teaching and learning; specific leadership qualities required in high-poverty schools; the sustainability of school success in high-poverty environments; and national, provincial and district level measures pertaining to high-poverty schools.

Key values and principles
The principals mentioned the following as the foundational values and principles in their schools: *respect* for human dignity and culture (in a reciprocal way — respect for the individual, but also respect for the school); *care* (the well-being of the learner is the primary concern, and all relationships in and with the school are typified by compassion and "*ubuntu*"); *commitment* (going the extra mile by, for example, giving extra classes on Saturdays, as well as during the April and July school holidays); *excellence* (all learners, irrespective of background, deserve the same high-quality of education); *collaboration* (teamwork produces the best results); and *accountability* (educators and learners should always honour their duties).

Noticeably, the principals emphasised the role of Christian values in their schools. For example, the key value in School A was taken from the Bible's Gospel of Matthew (7:12): "So in everything, do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The principal of School F emphatically stated that, notwithstanding the secular nature of public schools, he viewed his school as a Christian school, with daily school assemblies for scripture reading and prayer.

Poverty-related problems
The principals' comments on the most serious poverty-related problems with which their schools had to cope centred around the learners, the parents, the school facilities, and the school finances.

Concerning the learners, the disastrous effect of HIV/Aids on family life

was mentioned. Every school had to cope with the phenomenon of child-headed families, or children living with caregivers. Many learners suffered physically (due to hunger, illness or a lack of proper clothing) and emotionally (as a result of a lack of self-esteem and no vision for the future). They were "physically and emotionally wounded" (School A). Children (especially girls) who had moved from rural areas to urban environments often fell prey to abductions by gangsters.

The parents typically had a very low self-esteem, and a strong negative inclination towards school, due to their own unhappy school experiences. Unemployment was rife in high-poverty areas, and the battle for survival (in an environment of violence and drug abuse) was such that parents often had little interest in school matters.

On school facilities and infrastructure, one principal (School B) related the uphill battle she had to fight to get water and electricity supplied to her school. In another case (School F), a promising vegetable garden project had to be abandoned due to an exorbitant water bill. Every plea to the education district office and the metropolitan authorities to support the school in this matter fell on deaf ears. Initially, School B had to function without any toilet facilities. As mentioned, two schools (A and F) were housed in temporary prefabricated structures.

Not surprisingly, the dearth of school funds was mentioned. In the case of two schools (C and D), this situation was further aggravated by the ill-considered, optimistic Q-rating, which implied a smaller and inadequate state subsidy.

Measures to ensure effective teaching and learning
All principals mentioned the importance of ensuring learner quality of life physically (through the provision of food, clothing and health care), emotion-ally (through counselling, guardianships and the development of self-esteem) and educationally (through improving study methods and reading skills, offering additional tuition, and keeping the school open after school hours to serve as a study centre). Learner support extended to providing for the basic and guidance needs of child-headed families at their homes. Support and sources for providing for the whole spectrum of learner needs were actively (almost aggressively) mobilised from beyond the school and surrounding community, e.g. from supermarkets and schools in affluent suburbs. A sense of dignity and responsibility was instilled in the learners by statements such as the following: "*It is no disgrace for you that you live in a shack now. It will, however, be a disgrace if you still live in a shack five years after you have left school*" (School A). Particularly noteworthy was the role of church denomi-nations in providing spiritual guidance to learners (and in the case of School E, also to the teachers). Both the secondary schools took their incoming Grade 8 learners on a camp where the focus was on raising the learners' self-esteem and orientating them to the culture and expectations of the school. To ensure optimal safeguarding of the latter, School F only took in Grade 8 learners, a measure which had the full support of the community.

School E had measures in place to identify gifted Grade 11 learners, and to provide them with additional academic tuition in order to make them eligible for university bursaries. All schools placed a very high premium on optimal learner participation in cultural and sport activities and on ensuring that the schools participated fully in competing with more affluent schools in the district.

The principals emphasised that the major mindshift regarding the teachers was to lead them to the insight and practice that they were indeed far more than teachers: their roles extended to those of counsellors and caregivers too. Indeed, the true test of teacher excellence in the high-poverty school was the extent to which the learners experienced that the teachers truly cared for them. Home visits were therefore not uncommon. Added to this, the teachers went the proverbial extra mile by providing tuition over weekends and during school holidays. Everything possible was done to ensure that the teachers could teach effectively. The principals spared no efforts to acquire what was needed for good teaching, be it expert support, in-service training or top-quality resources. The personal and professional well-being of the educators was a top priority. The teachers knew their tasks, and accepted that learner progress should be closely monitored by themselves and the principal.

Regarding the parents, all principals emphasised the crucial role of parent involvement in their schools' success. To this end, the first priority was that the school should be an attractive and inviting venue. Against the background of the widespread phenomenon of parent apathy towards school matters in high-poverty communities, the first challenge was to devise measures to attract the parents to the schools. One such measure was the practice of handing out learner reports only to the parents or caregivers, who had to appear in person at the school. In one school (School A) this was done on the first day of every school vacation and teachers knew that they had this extra work day to meet the parents. These opportunities were then utilised to build parent self-esteem as full partners in the school enterprise and to mobilise their skills and support for the school. Parents were assured that it was no disgrace to be unable to pay school fees: they could serve the school in many other ways, such as volunteering to participate in school fund-raising activities. The principals believed very strongly that the school should also work for the parents and the community, for example, in providing adult basic education and training (ABET).

All principals were adamant about networking for the benefit of the school. Every possible effort was made, through advertisements, letters or personal visits, to involve donors and supporters. The principle was that "*it takes a whole village to raise a child*" (School A). The concept of village was viewed as inclusive of everybody who was involved, or could be involved, in the functions and well-being of the school. In this way, significant results were achieved: School D could sink a borehole on its premises for the irrigation of its vegetable garden and School A could accomplish the building of a large school hall with donor funds from Australia.

Balancing the books remained a huge challenge for high-poverty schools. School D was particularly innovative in this respect. Due to its ill-considered Q4 rating, the school had to devise urgent measures to augment the low income from the state subsidy and school fees. Consequently, the school embarked on a vigorous fund-raising campaign based on recycling, and made a considerable success of it. The school had already won the national 'Collect-a-can' competition. Furthermore, a small workshop was erected on the school premises to manufacture toilet paper rolls from recycled paper. A significant market had already been established and the income for the school was substantial.

In summary: The schools managed to successfully beat the poverty-related odds through an unshakable belief in the possibility of success and sheer determination in realising it. In particular, the schools demonstrated conclusively that in South African environments of acute poverty, i.e. poverty as it prevails in deep rural areas and in townships with a high incidence of squatter camps and informal settlements, schools can be successful. But are specific leadership qualities needed to ensure effective teaching and learning in a high-poverty school?

Specific leadership qualities
The participating principals' responses regarding specific leadership qualities, which in their view were essential in high-poverty schools, rendered the key notions of compassion, commitment and support.
- Personal traits that were particularly highlighted were compassion for the poor and passion for their upliftment through quality education. Compassion involves identification with the survival struggle of the poor, respect for human dignity and personal interest in the individual learner, teacher and parent ("*The principal should see a person, not a number*", School A). Consequently, leaders in high-poverty schools should follow a "*soft approach*": "*Never raise your voice*" (School B). Passion for the upliftment of the poor means unconditional availability and willingness to give, to the point of "*getting one's hands dirty*" in solving the relational and survival problems of learners and their parents or caregivers (School E). The principle is that "*you should see the school as your home, and the children as your own*" (School A).
- Related to compassion was the absolute commitment to the tasks at hand en route to educational excellence. The principal should model this commitment through self-discipline ("*first to come, last to leave*", punctuality, neatness of appearance), energy ("*radiating enthusiasm: If the principal is depressed, soon everybody is depressed*", School D), being visible everywhere as "*the personal face of the school*" (School E) and teaching some classes himself/herself. Coping with ill-equipped facilities, insufficient resources and often a lack of support from the education authorities is not for the faint-hearted. Bravery and resilience are therefore crucial leadership qualities.
- The participating principals emphasised that all leadership efforts and

activities are essentially focused on excellence in the classroom. In other words, learner progress is meticulously and individually monitored, with subsequent immediate action to correct problems, while every measure is taken to ensure that teachers are optimally equipped for their tasks. In this sense, school leadership requires essentially a supportive role player, namely, the principal as facilitator of learning. This role implies almost military-like action in identifying and acquiring resources for the school, exploring avenues for the school's involvement in community develop- ment, and building partnerships through ongoing and ever-expanding networking. Furthermore, the supportive role of the principal was evident from the participating principals' emphasis on teamwork — the principal should actually "*lead from the middle*" (School B).

Interestingly, the participating school principals expressed reservations re- garding whether an effective principal of an affluent school would be equally successful in a high-poverty school. It was felt that the demands of suddenly having to work in an ill-equipped environment and coping with the struggle to find even the most basic resources would be too much for those who are used to an affluent environment, and can simply "*manage by chequebook*" (School E). Yet, making the shift successfully was not impossible as long as the key requirements were met, namely, respect for the high-poverty commu- nity and a strong feeling for its upliftment.

In summary: The crucial leadership consideration in high-poverty schools appeared to be that respect for the school leadership must be earned (School E) through the school's demonstrated compassion for the needs of learners, teachers and parents/caregivers, its involvement in community upliftment, and its reputation for educational achievement.

Sustainability of school success
When asked about the sustainability of their schools' success in the event of their leaving the school, the participating principals were all convinced that school success would indeed continue due to the strong culture of teacher leadership in the schools, whereby teachers were empowered to take decisions and were given enough opportunities to exercise leadership, such as in chair- ing meetings. Other reasons for sustained school success were a strong team spirit among teachers, well-established networks with school stakeholders (donors and supporters), and the "*branding*" of the school as an invitational institution, founded on mutual respect. The participants accepted that every leader has his/her own "*presence*", and that a new leader should have the freedom to be innovative. Innovation and reform should, however, take place with respect for what exists and works well.

National, provincial and district level measures
When questioned about measures which should be taken at the national, provincial and district levels of education provision to continuously improve teaching and learning in high-poverty schools, it was disconcerting to find that the participating principals expressed serious concern about problems

they experienced from the side of their respective education departments. The mentioned problems were:

- The many changes in education, which often had financial and other implications with which high-poverty schools could not easily cope. Study fields such as catering were out of the question for high-poverty schools due to the resource implications.
- Ineffective or non-functional school-feeding schemes.
- Discrepancies in the poverty grading of schools, with this grading often being not based on factual family-income data, but merely on superficial observation of school surroundings. It was felt that, in general, education departments were not sufficiently knowledgeable about grassroots conditions in high-poverty schools, and not supportive either. One of the participating schools (not identified here in the interests of the school) was graded as a Q1 school but did not receive the state subsidy it was entitled to, because in the opinion of the provincial education department the school had been sufficiently successful in acquiring its own funds: a cynical measure which actually penalised leadership initiative.
- The need for education district officials to engage in closer interaction with the schools, for example, by training SGB members, assisting principals to draw up school business plans and assisting schools to acquire what was urgently needed. According to the participating principals, these officials were often slow to react to enquiries and were merely interested in exercising control, or in devising measures which smothered the financial management of the school (e.g. forbidding more than one school account). Yet the district offices were prone to "*bask in the glory*" if a school attained success.

It therefore seems that high-poverty schools often fight a lonely battle without meaningful support from the education authorities. Ironically it appears that, in fact, a significant part of the high-poverty schools' battle is actually against the authorities. Education authorities should make far more effort to assist high-poverty schools in ensuring that teachers have what they need, learners' basic needs are met (particularly in child-headed families), and schools are safe and invitational places of learning.

Conclusions

In terms of the two questions that prompted the empirical investigation, the findings revealed that:

- A typical South African high-poverty school appears to be heavily challenged by acute survival problems (relating to a lack of food and clothing, and the presence specifically of HIV/Aids), abject socio-economic circumstances (characterised by unemployment, violence and crime) and a lack of provisions from the educational authorities regarding facilities, textbooks and meaningful support from the education district offices.
- Notwithstanding their severity, poverty-related challenges can be overcome, to a significant extent, in South African high-poverty schools through energetic, compassionate, innovative and empowering leadership.

The key ingredients of school success appear to be the principal's passion for upliftment, the teachers' commitment and care, the parents' involvement and the learners' positive life-view and happiness.

The leadership style in successful high-poverty schools in South Africa corresponds with the invitational leadership style (with its basic premises of optimism, respect, trust and intentional care — see Stoll & Fink, 1996:109) identified in other, mostly non-African case studies (*cf.* Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; CDE, 2006; Cole-Henderson, 2000; Day, 2005; Haberman, 1999; Jacobson *et al.*, 2005; Jesse *et al.*, 2004; Mampuru, 2003; NCE, 1996; Shanklin *et al.*, 2003; Walker & Dimmock, 2005). In view of the severity of the poverty challenges, it appears that an extra amount of sheer courage and tenacity is needed to lead a South African high-poverty school to success.

Profile of the requirements for effective leadership in (South) African high-poverty schools

On the basis of (a) the key notions of relationships and respect in poverty alleviation, (b) the conceptual framework of invitational leadership, (c) the findings from the above case studies, and (d) the empirical investigation, the following schematic profile of the requirements for effective leadership in high-poverty schools is presented, with particular focus on the key leadership role of the principal (Prew, 2007:457). The profile serves as a summative account of the findings, and should be taken into account in the selection and evaluation of principals of high-poverty schools.

The personal profile
The principal of a high-poverty school:
- has a strong social conscience and is passionate about the upliftment of the poor;
- has respect for the human dignity of the poor;
- is knowledgeable about the poverty situation and poverty alleviation measures in South Africa, and identifies fully with the survival struggle of the poor;
- adheres to a 'can do' ethos and believes strongly in the potential and capabilities of each learner, whatever his/her home background, to excel academically, as well as in the potential of the school to provide high-quality teaching, and in own capabilities of leading the school to sustained success;
- avoids all forms of labelling and views every learner as an asset to the school;
- accepts no compromise regarding high expectations, learner achievement goals and standards of excellence;
- believes that every learner, teacher and parent deserves to have growth opportunities and accepts that the school is essentially a learning organisation where everybody, from the principal to the illiterate parent, has ongoing opportunities to learn;

- is committed to empowering teachers to engage in excellent teaching, learners to achieve optimal success, and parents to participate as much as they can;
- accepts the school's role as a support, care and upliftment centre for the community;
- believes that school success depends very strongly on teamwork and collaboration;
- trusts others with decision-making;
- models an invitational disposition, commitment, hard work, punctuality, accountability, neat personal appearance, and effective classroom teaching;
- is strong and articulate in religious belief;
- is innovative and courageous in tackling seemingly insurmountable problems; and
- is energetic and radiates enthusiasm and bravery for the tasks at hand.

The capability profile
The principal of a high-poverty school must in particular be able to:
- think and act like a visionary;
- establish an inviting and safe school environment;
- tirelessly acquire what the school needs for effective caregiving and quality tuition by opportunistically exploring every possible source and by establishing a support network for the school;
- inspire teachers both as educators and in their roles as counsellors and caregivers;
- delegate decision-making through the establishment of a culture of teacher leadership;
- allow teachers to be innovative and even take risks;
- monitor learner progress meticulously, constructively and individually, in close consultation with the teachers;
- create a sense of family in the school;
- build a team spirit and pride in the school;
- mobilise parents for school involvement and support; and
- overcome feelings of desolation and self-pity in the event of a lack of support from, or even smothering measures on the part of, provincial and district education authorities.

This profile is not all-encompassing, and not ideally formatted for checklist purposes. It is merely intended as a guideline regarding the formidable leadership challenges of which cognisance needs to be taken, in order to achieve success in a high-poverty school.

Closing comments
"The bad news in South Africa is that nearly 80% of schools provide education of such poor quality that they constitute a very significant obstacle to social and economic development, while denying the majority of poor children full citizenship" (Taylor, 2006:73). This is one of the statements in Money and

Morality, a transformation audit report of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) (2006). The report caused widespread debate in the media and the education domain. Despite subsequent denials from the education authorities, the report sounded yet another alarm bell over the general state of education in South Africa. It observed that decades of effort and billions of rands spent on school improvement programmes by the government or the non-government sectors have had very little effect in ameliorating the bad conditions in high-poverty schools. It suggests that "[i]n many schools in this condition, the first thing to be done is to remove the principal" (*ibid.*).

This is indeed a radical suggestion, but illuminating in the sense that the essential solution to the plight of high-poverty schools lies in effective school leadership. The research findings presented in this article indicated clearly that a particular kind of person, with an invitational leadership style, can make a success of a high-poverty school. Consequently the selection of new principals for high-poverty schools, as well as the evaluation (and possible removal) of principals presently serving such schools, should be based on the invitational leadership profile as discussed and schematically summarised.

The empirical research conducted at six successful high-poverty schools also identified problems which require urgent attention by the education authorities. These problems particularly concern the apparent lack of support from district and provincial authorities. The deficient support is not surprising in view of Taylor's (2006:69) observation: "Not only are the provincial and district bureaucracies extremely weak — characterised by large numbers of vacant posts, poorly developed management systems and a paucity of essential resources, such as vehicles to visit schools — but many are in an on-going state of instability due to frequent restructuring and personnel changes". This situation cannot be allowed to continue. Another problem concerns the educational authorities' lack of real understanding of grassroots circumstances in high-poverty schools. This lack of insight is particularly frustrating for dedicated principals of these schools and undoubtedly the main reason for the failure of so many school improvement programmes in such schools.

A final comment from a broader perspective: Improving the level of leadership in high-poverty schools is of significant importance within the bigger picture of poverty alleviation in South Africa. As is evident from the findings, successful principals of high-poverty schools generally emphasised the important role that their schools played in community upliftment. Consequently the positive effects of a successful high-poverty school extend far beyond school boundaries, and are of real significance in alleviating poverty in South Africa.

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