

***Through the Eyes of School Leaders:
A Discussion of the Outcomes of a Leadership Development Training Programme***

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Abstract

Citizen Leader Lab, a non-profit organisation, facilitates the Partners for Possibility (PfP) programme that provides leadership development and support to school leaders serving under-resourced communities in South Africa to ensure effective environments of learning. This is done by creating partnerships (dyads) between principals and private-sector business leaders over a 12-month period. This article describes principals' perceptions of their leadership capacities and changes at their schools after being exposed to a year-long leadership development training programme. A descriptive mixed-method study was conducted with 131 school leaders who had participated in the year-long leadership training and were exposed to workshops, group coaching, peer learning and experiential learning. Participants completed a post-programme questionnaire consisting of structured and unstructured questions. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with them and their business leaders. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using analytic software. Principals found the programme interesting and rewarding. They gained new leadership capacities such as resilience, improved confidence, communication and conflict resolution skills - catalysing into improved cultures of collaborative decision-making and environments for enhanced teaching and learning. New networks resulted in tangible outcomes (upgrades to school infrastructure, water and sanitation, nutrition) and/or intangible outcomes such as skills for members of school management teams (SMTs). Collaborative leadership led to SMTs being more aligned, efficient, and cohesive; teachers being more engaged and motivated; and parents being more involved in the schools and in their children's education. The PfP programme has the potential to lead to improved teaching and learning and new resources for schools.

Keywords: Collaborative Decision-Making, Collaborative Leadership, Community Involvement

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Introduction

The success of every school depends on effective management and leadership by school principals (Kirori & Dickinson, 2020). Effective leadership contributes to an improved education system, in which principals are key change agents (Acton, 2021; Ertem, 2021).

With the advent of the South African democratic government in 1994, the role and activities of principals changed, requiring them to have a combination of leadership and management capacities, including fundraising and human resource management (Kirori & Dickinson, 2020). According to the changes in the new education system, principals must lead, manage the school and ensure that the policies and programmes of the schools are executed in accordance with the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE)'s governance structures (Mazibuko, 2009). This has increased the principals' workload. In addition, difficulties from the Apartheid regime, such as lack of resources at schools attended by Black students, made school leadership in the post-Apartheid era a difficult task (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). Unfortunately, the changes in the education system have resulted in school principals not being fully prepared for their new role.

Although the Department of Basic Education made attempts to change this by introducing the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) programme, there are no mandatory programmes to prepare principals for this very important leadership role (Bush et al., 2011). In addition, while most principals have been outstanding teachers, many have not had access to transformational leadership development that is innovative, adaptive and collaborative to assist them with developing and motivating staff members, as well as increasing parental and community involvement in the school. Furthermore, principals have not had adequate support that empowers them to operate effectively in extremely challenging circumstances arising from poverty, social ills, inadequate facilities, child hunger and limited access to social capital (Mazibuko, 2009). According to researchers, South African principals require support to meet the demands of their new roles as 'Chief Executives' and in the development of supportive networks (Bush et al., 2011; Mahlangu, 2015; Romanowski, 2022). Therefore, leadership development programmes should aim to improve principals' leadership capacities, abilities and effectiveness to ensure school improvement (Bush & Glover, 2012; Bush, 2012).

It is well-known that a capacitated and supported principal can lead positive change within a school and create an environment that supports quality teaching and learning (Ertem, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Day and Sammons (2014) has shown that such an environment consists of teachers who are energised to engage with students, lead their own professional development and ensure that all students have the best opportunity to be successful. Kwatubana and Molaodi (2021) mentioned that principals must engage in active listening to understand what teachers need to ensure quality teaching and learning. Principals should be willing to delegate authority in order to capitalise on expertise within the school (Karimi, 2021; Kwatubana & Molaodi, 2021). Additionally, principals must be empowered to create pathways to health and wellbeing for all teachers and should mobilise others to lead through collective engagement, resulting in joint practice (Harris & Jones, 2020; Kwatubana & Molaodi, 2021).

Communities also play a crucial role in supporting schools as they have assets, skills and capacities, and in turn, schools have a major impact on communities (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Schleicher, 2018). Greater community engagement offers several opportunities. Research has shown that increased parental involvement in children's school and learning is

key to improving a child's morale, attitude and academic outcomes (Crosby, 2021; Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Lara & Saracostti, 2019). Parents and communities are more likely to get involved in their children's learning and in the school when they know what principals expect from them and what role they can play (Maluleke, 2014; Mbokazi, 2013; Chiuri, 2020). Harris and Jones (2020) is of the view that principals need skills to partner with parents and community groups as they (communities) have a wealth of expertise, knowledge and capacities that can be leveraged to improve teaching and learning.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership in schools is pivotal and is associated with setting the vision and direction of the school (Day & Sammons, 2014). Transformational leaders are change-orientated; form collaborations; build relationships; inspire others; foster mutual support; are good communicators and listeners; are considerate, supportive and participatory in their leadership; and have a high regard for teamwork (Day & Sammons, 2014; Ndiga et al., 2014). All of these are important for forming positive relationships with teachers, students and parents and achieving school improvement (Day & Sammons, 2014; Ertem, 2021; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lin, 2022; Sun & Leithwood, 2012; Yang, 2014).

Day and Sammons (2014) suggest that transformational leadership is less likely to result in student learning achievements as it mainly focuses on teacher relationships. However, other studies indicate that transformational leadership has positive effects on the principals' leadership (Marzano et al., 2005; Sun et al., 2017). Transformational leadership is known to be the "preferable environment for the leader and organization" (Adhikari, 2019, p.149) as characteristics such as mutual respect, empathy and trust are essential when implementing changes in schools (Sun et al., 2017).

To address the needs that principals in South Africa are facing, Citizen Leader Lab facilitates the Partners for Possibility (PfP) programme to provide transformational leadership development and support to school principals serving under-resourced communities in South Africa.

The Partners for Possibility Programme

The Partners for Possibility programme was initiated in 2010 to provide transformational leadership development and support to principals. Members of the business community are invited to partner with a principal over a 12-month period and are supported through the experience of applying new skills and knowledge in their individual schools.

Underpinning the PfP programme is Asset Based Community Development, (Kretzmann & McKnigh, 1993), which empowers community leaders - namely principals - to drive the work needed to transform schools. The PfP programme is an effective framework wherein the principal brings his/her deep knowledge of education and the specific challenges of the surrounding community, and experienced business leaders lend their skills, social capital and hands-on input to develop and support schools in tackling these challenges.

Partnerships (dyads consisting of a school principal and a business leader) are grouped into clusters of 8-10 schools to allow for peer and co-learning. Unlike many leadership development programmes, the PfP programme offers peer learning as opposed to mentoring,

which is normally a one-way learning process (Bush et al., 2011). The peer learning enables principals to learn from each other as well as from business partners in the cluster.

Each cluster is supported by an experienced Learning Process Facilitator (a trained and experienced coach), who facilitates regular meetings in which both partners share knowledge, experiences and good practice. Learning Process Facilitators (LPFs) support the growth of each individual and partnership through professional coaching. The LPFs help principals to unlock new possibilities and allow them to find their own solutions, rather than being told what to do. Studies of coaching and leadership development have shown that it can play a significant role as it echoes the adult learning process (O’Flaherty & Everson, 2005). Furthermore, coaching has been shown to be a significant element of continuing professional development for principals and teachers (Simkins et al., 2006).

The Pfp programme design is based on the 70:20:10 model¹, where about 10% of learning comes from formal training in the form of three workshops with transformational leadership elements. Twenty percent of learning takes place through social learning – whereby participants gain new knowledge and insights through their engagement with other leaders from their cluster. Most of the learning that occurs (around 70%) is experiential learning, which happens as the participants work together to identify, prioritise and tackle challenges in their respective schools. It is well-known that people learn best from experiences. Gunter & Ribbins (2002) argue that leadership and leadership development is best when gaining professional experiences from a contextualised setting. Principals and their business partners implement projects that generate tangible and intangible benefits such as infrastructure and equipment upgrades, as well as staff development.

Objective and Methodology

The objective of this study was to understand and describe principals’ perceptions of their leadership capacities and changes at their schools after being exposed to the year-long leadership development programme. A descriptive mixed-method study was conducted with 131 principals who had completed the year-long leadership development training between September 2020 and December 2021, exposing them to workshops, group coaching, peer learning and experiential learning.

Participants completed a post-programme questionnaire consisting of structured and unstructured questions focusing on their perceived leadership learning experiences, and the impact that the Pfp programme had on them and their school community (teachers, learners, school leadership teams and parents). In-depth qualitative interviews were also conducted with the principals. The interviews consisted of unstructured questions, with additional questions arising depending on each participant’s response. All the interviews were conducted online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Thematic content analysis was undertaken as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The analysis was inductive and emerging themes were identified. A code list was generated using a data analysis software called Dedoose. The quantitative data gathered from surveys was aggregated and analysed using Excel.

¹The 70-20-10 model for learning and development describes the optimal sources of learning. It holds that individuals obtain 70% of their knowledge from job-related experiences, 20% from interactions with others, and 10% from formal educational events. See <https://trainingindustry.com/wiki/content-development/the-702010-model-for-learning-and-development/>.

Findings

Demographic details of principals

Of the 131 principals in the sample, there were 83 males (63%) and 48 females (37%). A total of 83 principals (63%) were between the ages of 50 – 59 years old. The youngest principal was 31 years old, and the oldest principal was 61 years old. The average age of the principals was 51.3 years and the median age was 52 years.

The PfP programme envisions getting parents involved in their children's education as early as the Foundation Phase, i.e. Grade R to Grade 3². Bearing this in mind, 102(78%) out of the 131 schools in the sample were primary schools, while 22 schools (17%) were secondary schools. The remaining seven schools were classified as either combined schools (n=2), special needs schools (n=2) or middle schools (n=3).

School principals' enhanced leadership skills

Significant improvements were shown in school principals' leadership capacities, particularly in the areas of:

- Personal confidence
- Improved culture within the school, leading to increased effectiveness of the senior management team (SMT) and motivated teachers
- Increased community involvement, enabling a stronger partnership between teachers and parents in support of learning
- Context-driven school improvement

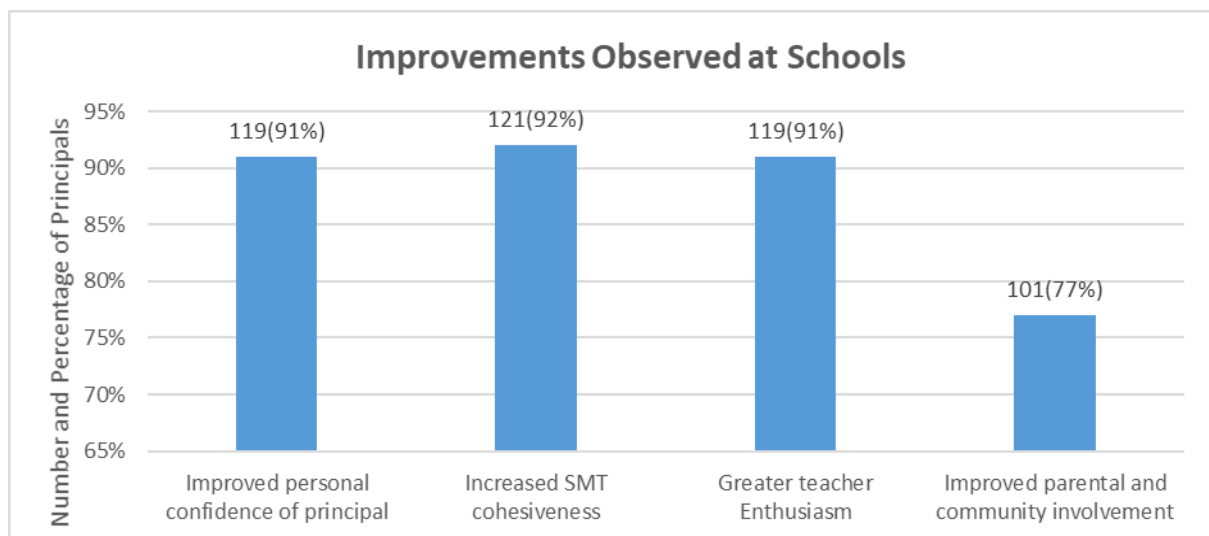


Figure 1: Improvements observed at schools

² The Foundation Phase focuses on literacy, numeracy and life skills. Children in this phase are generally between the ages of 6 – 9 years old.

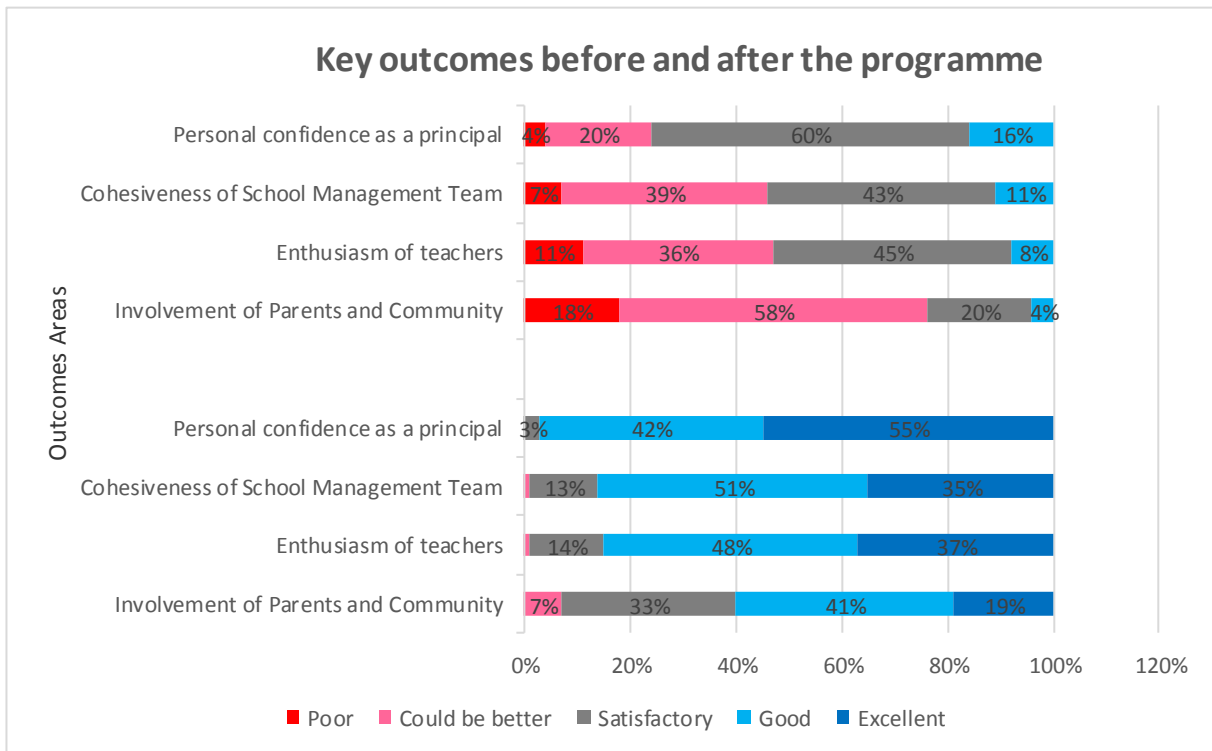


Figure 2: Key outcomes before and after the Pfp programme

Enhanced Confidence of the School Principal

Ninety-one percent (91%) of principals indicated that their confidence had increased substantially after the 12-month programme (see Figure 1). Before joining the Pfp programme, these principals had rated their confidence level as ‘poor’. By the end of the programme, they felt more confident and rated it as ‘excellent’ (see Figure 2).

Principals’ increased level of confidence since being part of the Pfp programme is evidenced by their increased willingness to confront difficult situations, be assertive, resilient, and communicate their needs and desires while also being mindful of the needs of others. They listen more attentively without interrupting the speaker, and support and appreciate staff members. They are more open to possibilities and allow staff members to come up with their own solutions to problems by creating empathic, judgement-free thinking environments. A culture of collaborative decision-making has taken root in the schools of Pfp principals. They cultivate an environment for success by increasingly delegating tasks, thereby promoting efficiency while fostering trust and ownership. They also focus on values that allow for a unified vision in their schools.

Now my management style is [an] open, participative management style because of Pfp. I can accommodate everybody, I can listen more, I can think more, I can support more and I can be more assertive. (Primary School Principal in Free State)

Teamwork and appreciation are the two things that I am stuck with and that are beautiful things that I have learned through Pfp. (Primary School Principal in Eastern Cape)

Improved Culture Within the School

Due to the principals' increased confidence and the implementation of leadership practices learned through PfP workshops and from their PfP partners, 92% of the principals noted that their SMT cohesiveness has changed from 'satisfactory' to 'good'. The SMTs are now more aligned and cohesive.

Ninety-one percent (91%) of principals indicated that there is a significant change in the morale and enthusiasm of teachers. They mentioned that before joining the programme, the teachers at their schools were not enthusiastic to teach – 45% felt the teachers' enthusiasm was satisfactory. However, this changed after they joined the PfP programme. Principals have also changed the way they lead and communicate with teachers. By the end of the programme, 48% rated their teachers' enthusiasm levels as 'good' and 37% rated it as 'excellent.'

The principals' continuous encouragement, trust and teamwork contributes to teachers feeling more valued, inspired, supported and understood. Principals reported having better working relationships with the teachers because of changes in their communication style and overall leadership practices. Teachers and SMTs have also become more cohesive. This in turn has led to harmony within the school and a renewed enthusiasm and commitment to teaching and learning among staff members.

I have benefitted as a person and also as a manager of a school. The school is under capable leadership - one that consults, requests for help, has a network of other leaders... Teamwork forms the backbone of this leadership – 'we' instead of 'I'... Our meetings have always been [a] full house but after implementing my skills from PfP and interacting with all stakeholders there, our meetings overflow. The school governing body (SGB) is trained to check their audience needs and address them accordingly. (Primary School Principal in Mpumalanga)

I am very proud of the kind of a person that I've developed [into], so the school has now been enjoying the new leader who has now been developed through PfP. Now I am a leader who is very patient. I've learned to be patient with people, I've learned to listen, I've learned to hear people and be compassionate with them. I've also learned to share the responsibilities and begin to trust and believe that people are capable of delivering. (Primary School Principal in Gauteng)

Principals reported that students also benefit from being taught by more enthusiastic, skilled and motivated teachers. The health, safety and wellbeing of learners is prioritised (for instance through projects like feeding schemes, health and wellness days, upgrading classrooms, building safer playgrounds, additional academic support, safety talks, better equipment for extramural activities, etc.). Additionally, learners get to play an active role in the betterment of the school by helping to clean the school yard, planting vegetable gardens and recycling, among other activities.

Increased Community Involvement in Schools

Principals mentioned using the tenets of PfP's Community Building training to invite, encourage and support parents to play a more active role in their children's education. More than half of the principals (77%) indicated that there had been an increase in parental and

community involvement at their school during the PfP year. At the end of the programme, 41% felt that parental and community involvement was ‘good’ and 19% felt that it was ‘excellent.’

Notable positive changes at the school inspire community members to become more actively involved in the school. Examples of increased community engagement in the schools include:

- Higher levels of attendance at school meetings and more active participation during these meetings
- Support in maintaining the interior and exterior of the school
- Local businesses donating food for students during weekend and holiday classes
- Youth from the community volunteering to assist with tutoring and office management tasks

Context-driven School Improvement

The PfP programme is much more than a leadership development programme. It engages citizens and communities to partner with principals and teachers in the education of children and mobilises additional support around every school so that the school becomes both a well-functioning place of learning and the centre of its community.

The partnership projects implemented to address school needs, together with access to expanded networks, generate tangible and intangible new or improved resources for schools. The study found that principals become more confident to engage with the school community and other stakeholders. Consequently, they are better networked and can mobilise important new resources for their schools with the support of their business partners, other principals in the cluster and community members. Table 1 below provides examples of the school initiatives enabled by increased networking.

Tangible and intangible initiatives	Examples
Donations	School uniforms, shoes, toiletries, books, electronics, groceries.
Renovations and construction	Building and renovating classrooms, offices, libraries, school kitchens, science labs and staff rooms.
Nutrition	Vegetable gardens, food parcels and feeding schemes.
Motivational talks, training and teambuilding sessions	Motivational talks for learners and staff members, teambuilding retreats and skills development training for staff members.
Academic support	Tutoring and after-school academic programmes
Water and sanitation	Building new toilets and boreholes, providing jo-jo tanks, educational talks about sanitation and responsible water usage.
Job creation and volunteering	Creating employment opportunities and internship programmes at the school for unemployed parents and youth, parents volunteering to maintain the school premises, and partnering with small business owners/entrepreneurs to supply services to the school.
Awareness campaigns and events	Hosting awareness campaigns about health, safety, substance abuse, recycling, etc.

ICT resources and training	Upgrading computer labs, computer training, setting up free internet connection and providing e-learning materials.
Sports facilities and programmes	Upgrading sport facilities, supplying sport uniforms, introducing new extramural activities at the school, sponsoring sport events

Table 1: Partnership initiatives at schools

Discussion

The findings of this study support the notion that investing in principals is a catalytic endeavor as one principal impacts an entire community of teachers, learners and parents (Ertem, 2021; Hauseman et al., 2017).

The PfP programme builds leadership capacity in school principals through experiential and peer learning. According to Constructivist theories, learning occurs through active engagement and collaboration when solving meaningful problems. Furthermore, Paulo Freire (Freire, 2000) posits that learning is situated within one's lived experience. Researchers have also found that leadership requires a 'hands-on' approach (Fullan, 2009). Based on the study results, it is clear that the active engagement and hands-on peer learning approach of the PfP programme, coupled with the principals' deep knowledge of education, has enabled them to learn and use what they have learned to improve their school environment.

The workshop training Time to Think by Nancy Kline, focusing on communication skills, appreciation and encouragement, gave principals the skills to manage, support and engage with teachers and parents more effectively. Coaching has been found to unlock a person's potential to maximize their own performance and focus on future possibilities (Cox, 2006; Whitmore, 2017). Being supported by a professional coach, i.e. the Learning Process Facilitator, and using the skills from the Time to Think workshop helped principals think differently about problems they were facing and find solutions for these problems. This is consistent with findings from other studies that showed the benefits of coaching on principals and school leadership (Bloom et al., 2005; Huggins et al., 2020; Ray, 2017).

Covey (2013) suggested that a change in thinking is likely to lead to a change in results. The PfP principals started to think positively and viewed themselves as change agents. This led to them inspiring their teams (SMTs and teachers) to become more cohesive and motivated to teach, thus improving the school environment. This is also consistent with other literature that showed that transformational leadership styles are related to teacher motivation (Adhikari, 2019; Ertem, 2021; Wulandari, 2022).

Community involvement is central to the success of the school. However, gaining community involvement is a 'two-way street', which means that principals and teachers should invest time in developing and maintaining good relationships with students, parents and the larger community (Prew, 2009). It is evident that principals in the PfP programme used the skills that they gained in workshops - particularly the Time to Think and Community Building workshops - to build positive relationships and engage with parents.

Scholars have argued that the socioeconomic status of communities is important as parental involvement is generally higher in affluent communities than in lower socioeconomic communities (Baquedano-López & Alexander, 2013; Jeter et al., 2007). Many parents and

communities from low socioeconomic groups face barriers such as limited financial resources, lower educational attainment, less time to volunteer and attend parent meetings, and a lack of transportation to be involved in their child's school activities and education (Malone, 2017). Nonetheless, studies by Hamlin & Li (2020) and Maluleke (2014) as well as the findings from this study have shown that despite being from a low socioeconomic class, many parents and communities are involved in local schools. Similar to, other studies Maluleke (2014), Eccles, & Harold (1996), Hamin & Li (2020) and Epstein (2002), parents in our study volunteered at schools by painting classrooms, cutting grass, guarding the school against burglars and assisting teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasingly, parents also showed an interest in their child's education by attending parent-teacher meetings.

Romanowski (2022) has shown that the PfP programme provides opportunities for developing three types of social capital: structural, cognitive and relational. Through the PfP partnership model implemented in schools, new networks as well as tangible and intangible resources are mobilised around every participating school. All these resources add educational and social value to the schools. For instance, where vegetable gardens are established, students receive additional nourishment; where libraries, science and computer labs are created, students have spaces in which to develop critical thinking and other skills required in today's rapidly evolving labour market.

Limitations

The biggest limitation of this study is that only principals were surveyed and interviewed. The results are thus based on principals' self-reporting of their leadership capacities and the changes at the schools. Future studies must include interviews with teachers, parents and community members to provide valuable insights about changes at the schools and the effects of the PfP programme on school leadership practices. Nevertheless, this study offers valuable insight into PfP's contribution to principals' leadership development and how this affects the school community as a whole.

Conclusion

The findings of this study point to rich principal experiences which are of immense value to future leadership development programmes aimed at principals. The PfP programme contributes positively to the leadership development of South African school principals. It indeed assists to fill the gap in the absence of a formal compulsory leadership development programme for school principals. This is evident in the skills that principals acquire from the PfP programme. These skills are precisely the knowledge and skills that the South African Department of Basic Education wants principals to have in order to develop and empower themselves and others (Policy of the South African Standard for Principalship, 2015).

Drawing on the leadership capacities, networks and resources of the business sector, the PfP programme leverages the power of partnership to effect positive change at schools in under-resourced communities. The programme also supports principals in providing quality teaching and learning. This is evident in principals' strengthened leadership capacities to make positive changes at the schools, ensuring that students are supported by their parents and communities, as well as making sure that the schools are safe and have adequate resources and facilities. The programme connects resourced individuals with less resourced communities, thus making sure that there is an improved distribution of opportunities, knowledge, experience and assets in under-resourced schools and communities.

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