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# EFFECTIVE AND EMPOWERING COMMUNICATION AS AN ASPECT OF THE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT OF PRINCIPALS

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## ABSTRACT

*A school manager (principal, administrator, leader) should be keenly aware of the power relations and structures in a school, and also able to apply several communication skills effectively in a range of management contexts for the school to prosper. This article reports on a theoretical investigation into effective communication as well as an empirical study of educators' views regarding the effectiveness of the communication skills of their school principals. The findings are of such a nature that principals should consider applying a similar survey instrument among their staff and other parties involved in their schools to helping them gauge the effectiveness of their communication skills. It is also recommended that principals consider the use of certain types of social media in their communication with other stakeholder parties.*

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## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

There is a plethora of literature on school management in general, and on (effective) communication between school managers (principals, administrators, leaders) and others involved in their schools. There seems to be consensus that principals should be able to communicate well. This is especially important in the execution of complex policy directives, such as has been the case in South African since 1994 in the process of dismantling 50 years of apartheid education.

Our investigations led us to conclude that while much has been written about the task, skills and competencies of school managers (principals, vice-principals, etc.) in general in South Africa and elsewhere. Not much has however been forthcoming about the special communication skills – particularly in the form of using the available social media – which specifically South African school principals have to display in order for their schools to function effectively. We therefore set ourselves the task of investigating what South African (and other) principals have to keep in mind when communicating with their co-workers and other parties involved in their schools. Based on these investigations, we contend in this article that school managers should periodically make use of an instrument such as the one that we have developed for determining the effectiveness of principals' communication with other parties in and around the school. They should also consider the use of certain social media for communicating with other parties. The purpose of this article is to present evidence in support of this contention. We present two sets of evidence: firstly, a framework in which we conceptually and theoretically argue the importance of effective professional communication by principals as well as the importance of taking power relations into consideration (Grayling 2010: 39), and secondly, a discussion of the results of an empirical investigation.

## **ON A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE**

The work of Tagliaferri (1989), Clark (1997) and Manning (2001) provided us with the theoretical guideposts for establishing what is critical with regard to the special communication skills that (South African) principals have to display in order for their schools to function effectively. The leadership epistemology of Sergiovanni (2000), the conceptual narratives of Feigenbaum, (1996) and the constructivist catalogue offered by Puth (1994) helped us understand the integrated nature of communication skills while, amongst others, the critical-interpretive work on leadership-communication training by Johnson and Redmond (1998) and Nieuwenhuis and Mokoena (2001) provided us with the conceptual tools for interpreting the results of the empirical data.

Put differently, we used an interpretivist-constructivist methodology in developing our conceptual-theoretical framework. We first identified the key concepts of the project, namely (*effective*) *communication*, and *training and development of principals*, and then processed these terms interpretively in view of our understanding of how power relationships work in a school, and how they can be restructured, amongst others, by invoking certain social media to be empowered and oriented to human emancipation and social change (Ashley & Orenstein 2005: 480; Nieuwenhuis 2010: 9, 12). As will emerge in our discussion of the terms, we constructed meanings that made sense to us in the context of the project, and then employed them as key concepts in the questionnaire.

## CONCEPTUAL-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### **(Effective) communication**

The term *communication* has several meanings. According to Tagliaferri (1989: 34), communication is the process in which two or more humans interact through the exchange of meanings in terms of a common system of symbols. Clark (1997) sees communication as a process that also involves the context, as well as the content of messages sent and received. Manning (2001: 85) adds that communication can create space for polite (dis-)agreement, heated exchanges, as well as for a serious testing of assumptions, opinions and ideas, also in connection with the power relations in a particular setting as they are experienced by the parties concerned.

According to Smit, Smit and Cronjé (1993: 354), communication is the primary method that managers use to influence groups and individuals and persuade them to give their best to the organisation. Communication can be used by managers to allocate tasks to employees who in turn (can) provide information on which further management decisions can be based. Social communication, particularly language and bodily expressions (body language), and in the form of certain social media, can be employed to problematise and thematise the power structures in, for instance, a school.

Language and communication comes naturally to almost all human beings. Communication is a two-way process between the sender and the receiver of a message that can create a specific and controlled task-oriented relationship, and may signal a certain power relationship. Managers communicate with their co-workers to influence the latter's behaviour, or to coerce them into doing the managers' will, as the case may be. They communicate plans, organise tasks, lead and control. Managers can communicate for the purpose of eliciting the best from their co-workers. Conversely, ineffective communication may lead to misunderstandings, incorrect perceptions, unbalanced power relations, and conflict.

In the context of an organisation such as a school, the manager (i.e. the principal) communicates with his or her co-workers on the basis of task-orientation, a well-defined value system as well as commitment. This form of communication can therefore be referred to as professional communication. For such communication to be effective, an approach is required that will motivate all stakeholders to pursue the goals of the school. In less favourable conditions, principals may tend to resort to top-down methods based on their actual or perceived power over their underlings. While professional communication depends on both task and people-orientation for its success, the latter should arguably receive the greater emphasis in a people-oriented and pedagogical institution such as a school.

Effective communication avoids a top-down, authoritarian approach which may be a result of the principal being impressed by his or her personal or official power, or due to an inadequate grasp of what a democratic approach to school management entails. Effective and empowering management favours instead an accommodating and inclusive orientation. According to Norris (2002: 85), the latter approach results in effective leadership, i.e. leadership that allows co-workers/followers to emerge as leaders in their own right. A principal who communicates effectively becomes both leader and follower, and also allows the followers to become leaders in their own right and realm. Sergiovanni (2000: 165) supports this form of leadership in stating that when followership is combined with leadership there is no longer a bureaucratic hierarchy with a powerful leader at the top.

Puth (1994: 41) offers a catalogue of effective communication skills: Firstly, technical communication skills, which include methods, processes, techniques, and procedures related to effective teaching and learning. This category refers to skills associated with instructional leadership: communication of high expectations, clear academic goals, and an effective system for monitoring learner progress. The effective instructional leader possesses listening skills that enable him/her to pay attention and to reflect on feedback.

Secondly, social or human skills, i.e. skills that involve the ability to work with others: the ability to create an atmosphere conducive to democratic participation by learners, educators and the community (Blasé & Anderson 1995: 21); the ability to empower people, i.e. provide people with the authority, information and motivation to make decisions in the best interests of the school (Johnson & Redmond 1998: 6); fairness and transparency when appraising educators and learners as part of their development; and the ability to reflect on the achievement of the school's goals to assess its level of accomplishment. In sum, the principal should be able to apply his or her power as manager towards the empowerment of the other role-players in the school.

Thirdly, conceptual skills, i.e. the skill to identify and analyse problems and to implement effective decisions, skills that assist the school in achieving its goals and engage stakeholders in democratic decision-making, and create an empowering atmosphere (Feigenbaum 1996: 10).

Although effective communication requires all of these skills, the emphasis should be on the development and appropriate application of social and human skills. Communicating is what school managers do; it lies at the heart of their work.

### **Training and development of principals (for effective communication)**

The leadership and communication skills discussed in the previous section do not as a rule come naturally to (novice) principals. It is therefore essential that principals be trained and developed so that they acquire the necessary skills. They have to be trained (educated) to understand that effective communicators are able to get people interested in their own as well as others' jobs and problems, and that they can share information and find solutions to problems (Johnson & Redmond 1998: 64; Nieuwenhuis & Mokoena 2001: 113).

Training institutions should have a clear understanding of the needs of principals and of the power structures in schools so that their training programmes can be appropriately designed. Training and development programmes should furthermore be linked to the functions and activities that principals must communicate to their co-workers. A principal should, for example, be able to communicate unambiguous guidelines regarding formal procedures.

A number of preliminary conclusions can be drawn from the preceding conceptual-theoretical discussion. Firstly, the effective execution of the four "standard" management tasks of planning, organising, leading and controlling depends on effective communication based on the principal's ability to use his or her authority and power towards the empowerment of all the other stakeholders in the school. Secondly, a principal's communication with others only becomes effective when his or her co-workers feel inspired to pursue the goals of the school despite difficulties that may arise. Thirdly, effective communication in a people and education-oriented institution such as a school requires emphasis on people-orientation, democratic participation, development and empowerment, reflectivity during communication, fairness and democratic learner involvement in decisions that affect the students. Fourthly, communicating is what school managers do. Finally, effective professional communication requires the mastery of technical, conceptual, human and social skills.

The authors launched an empirical investigation to find an answer to the question whether currently serving principals in South Africa had indeed mastered all of these skills, and whether they had enjoyed the relevant training prior to, and during their headship.

## **EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

### **Research design**

A quantitative *ex post facto* research design was used for investigating the perceptions of classroom educators regarding the communication skills of their principals.

### **Aim**

The aim of the project was to investigate how educators viewed the communication skills of their principals.

### **Sampling**

A random sample of 250 schools was drawn from all the departmental school regions in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Four respondents were then randomly drawn from each of the schools in the school sample. This provided a sample of  $n=1\ 000$  respondents to whom the questionnaire was handed out. The return of 78% of the questionnaires (i.e. 780 usable for statistical analysis) was regarded as statistically acceptable.

### **Research instrument**

We based the items in a self-constructed questionnaire on our theoretical findings with regard to effective professional communication, as outlined in our conceptual-framework. Responses had to be made in terms of a Likert type five-point scale, ranging from 1 = totally ineffective to 5 = quite effective, with 3.5 taken as the midway. Below 3.5 was seen as ineffective or tending towards ineffectiveness and above was seen as inclining towards effectiveness.

### **Trustworthiness considerations**

In planning the research and in constructing the questionnaire use was made of content and construct validity (Gilbert 1994: 27; Jaeger 1990: 378, 384; Babbie 1992: 133). The construct validity of the measuring instrument was determined by means of factor analysis (Jaeger 1990:345). The Cronbach-Alpha coefficient of 0.987 registered for the research instrument attests to its reliability. The findings based on it can therefore be used for the derivation of guidelines with respect to the improvement of professional communication in schools.

## Hypotheses

Hypotheses for the single second-order factor, namely effective professional communication, were formulated in respect of all the independent groups. Examples of hypotheses are presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1: HYPOTHESES WITH RESPECT TO THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE “EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION”**

Variable	Symbol	Description	Test
Gender	Hot	The factor mean scores of male and female educators do not differ statistically significantly from one another in respect of effective professional communication	Student t-test
	Hat	The factor mean scores of male and female educators differ statistically significantly from one another in respect of effective professional communication	ANOVA
Level of discipline in the school	HoA	The factor mean scores of the four discipline groups do not differ statistically significantly from one another in respect of effective professional communication	Scheffé or Dunnett T3
	HaA	The factor mean scores of the four discipline groups differ statistically significantly from one another in respect of effective professional communication	
	HoS/D	The factor mean scores of the four discipline groups compared pair-wise do not differ statistically significantly in respect of effective professional communication	
	HaS/D	The factor mean scores of the four discipline groups compared pair-wise do not differ statistically significantly in respect of effective managerial communication	

## Data processing

The Student t-test was used to compare the mean scores of two independent groups. In respect of three or more independent groups, ANOVA (analysis of variance) was used to test for possible statistical differences at the univariate level, and the Scheffé or Dunnett T3 tests were used to compare group-wise differences.

Use was made of factor analysis as an analytical method of discovering the general dimensions represented by a collection of actual variables (Babbie 1992: 458; Borg, Gall & Gall 1993: 269).

In this research, 71 items were designed to secure information from respondents on (their perceptions of) the application of various key communication skills by their principals. In order to reduce the large number of variables to a smaller manageable number, two consecutive factor analytic procedures were performed.

The first-order factor analysis involved a Principal Component Analysis (PCA). The procedure was performed with the SPSS 10.0 programme. According to Jaeger (1990: 378), all the variables analysed in a PCA are assumed to be derived from a set of common factors and none of the variables is presumed to be dependent on underlying factors that are unique. The PCA was followed by a Principal Factor Analysis (PFA). The six factors obtained from the first-order factor analysis were then used as inputs for the second-order procedure consisting of a Principal Component Analysis (2) (PCA2) with varimax rotation and orthogonal axes followed by a Principal Factor Analysis (2) (PFA2) with direct oblimin (oblique) rotation.

### **Ethical considerations**

Permission to approach the respondents in the sample was received from the relevant authorities in the Gauteng Department of Education. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, as well as assured that their responses would remain confidential. They were assured that they could withdraw from the investigation at any point if they felt uncomfortable about anything. The study was also ethically cleared by the university under whose auspices it was done.

### **FINDINGS**

The first round of factor analysis resulted in the following six first-order factors:

- ♦ *Democratic participation* consisting of 31 items with a Cronbach-Alpha-reliability of 0.975 with no items rejected;
- ♦ *Empowerment* consisting of 15 items with a Cronbach-Alpha-reliability of 0.944 with no items rejected;
- ♦ *Developmental communication* consisting of 11 items with a Cronbach-Alpha-reliability of 0.925 with no items rejected;
- ♦ *Reflective communication* consisting of 6 items with a Cronbach-Alpha-reliability of 0.875 with no items rejected;



- ♦ *Fairness* consisting of 4 items with a Cronbach-Alpha-reliability of 0.787 with no items rejected; and
- ♦ *Democratic learner involvement* consisting of 4 items with a Cronbach-Alpha-reliability of 0.860 with no items rejected.

The second round of factor analysis resulted in the six (6) first-order factors being reduced to one factor namely *effective professional communication*. The latter had a Cronbach-Alpha-reliability coefficient of 0.987 with no items being rejected. The 71 items can thus be regarded as one scale with a maximum scale value of  $71 \times 5 = 355$  and a minimum scale value of  $71 \times 1 = 71$ . As both the six first-order factors and the one second-order factor were valid and had high reliability coefficients, they may serve as a basis for providing guidelines for the development and training of principals in effective professional communication.

It was further found that with the Likert type five-point scale many of the respondents opted for the midway value of three (3). Only information for those independent groups whose mean scores with respect to the dependent variables differed statistically significantly from one another is provided in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: FACTOR MEAN SCORES OF THE INDEPENDENT GROUPS IN RESPECT OF THE FACTOR *EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION***

Independent group	Category name	Effective professional communication
		X =
Gender	Male	3.80**
	Female	3.47**
Educator organisation	SADTU	3.47*
	Other	3.66*
School effectiveness	More effective	3.88**
	Less effective	3.22**
Type of school	Primary	3.53*
	Secondary	3.69*
Post levels	Educator	3.45**
	Head of Department and	*3.85**
	Deputy Principal	*4.14**

<b>Independent group</b>	<b>Category name</b>	<b>Effective professional communication</b>
Regions of Gauteng	North Gauteng	*3.88**
	Central Gauteng	3.52**
	South Gauteng	*3.58
Age groups	29 years or less	*3.54
	30 – 34 years	3.46**
	35 – 39 years	3.45**
	40 – 49 years	3.69
	50 years or more	*4.00**
Level of discipline in school	Excellent	4.10**
	Good	3.84**
	Average	3.39**
	Weak	2.93**
Image of the school	Excellent	4.00**
	Good	3.58**
	Average to weak	3.25**
Learner attendance	Excellent	*3.74
	Good	*3.50
	Average to weak	3.49
Educator attendance	Excellent	*3.74**
	Good	*3.53
	Average to weak	*3.23**

\* Statistically significant at the 5% level ( $p \leq 0.01$  but  $p > 0.05$ )

\*\* Statistically significant at the 1% level ( $p < 0.01$ )

The following factor mean scores in Table 2 differ statistically significantly from one another:

## **Gender**

Respondents who served under male principals formed 80.4% of the sample and those who served under female principals made up 19.6 % of the sample. The data in Table 2 indicates that the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) can be rejected ( $p=0.000$ ). Male educators had the perception that their principals' professional communication in their schools was reasonably effective ( $X = 3.80$ ), whereas female educators had the perception that it tended towards ineffectiveness ( $X = 3.47$ ).

## **Educator organisations**

Based on the data in Table 2 there is a statistically significant difference at the 5% level between respondents belonging to the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and other educator unions. Members of SADTU had the perception that professional communication tended towards ineffectiveness ( $X = 3.47$ ), whilst members of other educator organisations believed that their principals' professional communication was reasonably effective.

## **School effectiveness**

The data in Table 2 indicates that the null hypothesis cannot be accepted ( $p=0.000$ ). Educators with the perception that they belonged to more effective schools were of the opinion that professional communication was effective ( $X = 3.88$ ), whilst educators with the perception that they belonged to less effective schools thought that their principals' professional communication tended towards ineffectiveness ( $X = 3.22$ ).

## **Type of school**

The mean scale score of effective professional communication for primary schools ( $X = 3.53$ ) indicates that the perceptions of primary school educators tended towards ineffective communication, whilst secondary school educators ( $X = 3.69$ ) tended towards perceptions of their principals' communication being reasonably effective.

## **Post levels**

Educators at non-management post levels represented 72.7% of the sample whilst management represented 27.3% of the sample. The data in Table 2 suggests that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the three post level groups ( $p = 0.000$ ) in respect of effective professional communication. The null hypothesis  $H_0A$  is thus rejected. Based on the pair-wise comparison the following deductions can be made: There is a statistically significant difference at the 1% and at the 5% level when the various post levels are compared with each other as in Table 2. Non-management educators had the perception that their principals' professional communication leaned towards ineffectiveness ( $X = 3.45$ ), whereas Heads of Department and Deputy Principals were of the opinion that their principals' professional communication was reasonably effective ( $X = 3.85$ ). Principals were, however, of the opinion that their own professional communication was effective ( $X = 4.14$ ).

## **Regions of Gauteng**

The null hypothesis (HoA) cannot be accepted as there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the different regions ( $p = 0.000$ ). At the 1% level of statistical significance Northern Gauteng differed from Central Gauteng, whilst Southern and Central Gauteng differed at the 5% level. Educators in the central and southern regions were of the opinion that their principals' professional communication was reasonably effective. Educators from Northern Gauteng had the highest factor mean score and opined that their principals' professional communication leaned towards effectiveness. It should be noted that the Northern region is socio-economically more affluent than the other two regions.

## **Age groups**

The age group 30 to 39 years formed the majority of the age groups (47.1%). Educators older than 50 years believed that their principals' professional communication was effective, but they constituted only 13.7% of the age groups. The null hypothesis HoA cannot be accepted, as there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the five age groups ( $p = 0.000$ ). Based on a pair-wise comparison the following deductions can be made: There is a statistically significant difference at the 1% level between the 30 – 34 year group and the 50 or older year group and at the 5% level between the youngest age group (< 29 years) and the oldest group (>50 years). Educators in the age groups 30 – 34 ( $X = 3.46$ ) and 35 – 39 ( $X = 3.45$ ) years had the perception that their principals' professional communication tended towards ineffectiveness. These two groups differed statistically significantly from the oldest age group ( $X = 4.00$ ) who had the perception that their principals' professional communication tended to be ineffective.

## **Level of discipline**

The data in Table 2 indicates that there is a statistically significant difference ( $p = 0.000$ ) between the mean scores of the five disciplines in respect of principals' effective professional communication. The null hypothesis HoA therefore cannot be accepted. Based on the pair-wise comparisons of the groups the following was found: There is a statistically significant difference at the 1% level when the discipline groups are compared with one another as in Table 2. The groups that perceived the discipline in their schools to be excellent and good had significantly higher scores than those that considered the discipline in their schools as average to weak. Table 2 shows that the more favourable the perceptions of educators regarding discipline in their schools, the more effective their principals' professional communication was perceived to be ( $X=4.10$ ). The mean score clearly becomes smaller as the perceptions of discipline in schools

became more unfavourable, and the educators who were of the opinion that the discipline in their schools was weak apparently partially blamed ineffective professional communication by their principal for this ( $X=2.93$ ). This is the lowest mean score recorded by this research.

### **School image**

The data in Table 2 suggests that there is a statistically significant difference ( $p = 0.000$ ) between the mean scores of the *image of the school*-groups in respect of effective professional communication by the principal. The null hypothesis HoA is thus rejected. Based on the pair-wise comparisons of the groups the following findings were made: There is a statistically significant difference at the 1% level when the *image of the school*-groups is compared as in Table 2. Educators belonging to schools with an excellent school image had the highest mean score and believed that their principals' professional communication in their schools tended towards being effective. The learners were punctual, respectful and hardworking and showed a keen interest in all educational activities. This positively impacted on the overall performance of learners. All these factors contributed to the perceptions of educators that their schools had an excellent image. School image also had a positive association with discipline; where the discipline was excellent the stakeholders had the perception that the school image was excellent.

### **Attendance of learners**

The data in Table 2 indicates that HoA cannot be accepted as the mean scores of the various learner attendance groups differ statistically significantly from one another. The excellent learner attendance group had the highest mean score and differs at the 5% level from the other attendance groups.

### **Educator attendance**

The data in Table 2 indicates that the null hypothesis HoA cannot be accepted, as there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores at the 1% and 5% levels. The results of the educator attendance groups were very similar to that of the learner attendance groups. When educator attendance was excellent, educators were of the opinion that their principals' professional communication was reasonably effective ( $X = 3.74$ ), whilst educators in schools that had an average to weak educator attendance were of the opinion that their principals' professional communication tended towards ineffectiveness ( $X = 3.23$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The fact that most of the responses revolved around the midway point of 3 on the five-point Likert Scale seems to suggest that these respondents as a group did not entertain strong feelings about the effectiveness of the professional communication in their schools. This finding can be interpreted, on the one hand, as an indictment of the management in the schools (otherwise the group of respondents would have indicated the professional communication in their schools as very good or excellent). On the other hand, it can be construed as an indication of no obvious problems with the professional communication in their schools (otherwise they would have tended towards 1s and 2s in their responses).

We could find no obvious reason for the *female* respondents to deem their principals' communication to be less effective in comparison with their *male* counterparts' responses. Further research should be done in this regard. For the moment, however, it would be prudent for school principals to listen to their female colleagues, because they seem to be more critical of communication processes than the male teachers.

The same applies for the matter of belonging to a particular *teachers' union*. While it is not clear why membership of a particular union would render an educator belonging to one teachers' union more critical of communication by their principal than members of other unions, it would be wise for school managers to determine which group (for instance, the members of a particular teachers' union) seems to be more critical about how the principal communicates with staff.

As far as *school effectiveness* is concerned, school managers should concentrate on making their schools run as effectively as possible. This research has revealed that educators working in an effectively managed school tend to regard the way management communicates with the different school communities (staff, learners, parents, etc.) as effective.

The fact that the principals' professional communication in *secondary schools* seems to be more effective than in *primary schools* can possibly be ascribed to (amongst others) the fact that secondary school learners enjoy representation in governing bodies. This poses a challenge to management in primary schools; they should find ways and means of increasing representation of learners in committees and/or to communicate more effectively with the learners. Empowerment of the learners seems to be key here.

As far as *post level* is concerned, educators at non-management levels perceived their principals' professional communication to tend towards ineffectiveness. This can probably be ascribed to the fact that they found themselves at the proverbial receiving end of management: they were, for all intents and purposes,

“being managed” and therefore tended to be critical of professional practices, which they sometimes might perceive to be unfair. Middle management (HODs and Deputy Principals) are part of management and their perceptions of professional communication may have changed. This finding underscores the fact that school managers and their deputies should not “listen to themselves” or to their colleagues on the same or similar post levels if they wish to determine the effectiveness of their communication with others. They should rather listen to the voices of colleagues who may still find themselves on non-management post levels. Empowerment of lower echelon teachers should be one of the focuses of school managers.

While it is not clear why *affluence* should render respondents in a survey such as this more critical than their counterparts in poorer regions, it would be wise for principals and their deputies to be aware of this fact. Educators in higher socio-economic communities tend to be more critical of principals’ professional communication, probably because of higher levels of education.

As far as *age group* is concerned, principals and their deputies should rather listen to the voices of their younger colleagues, particularly those in the age group 30 – 39. This group is still relatively young but typically have something like ten to 15 years experience as educators behind them. Also, they are on the threshold of progressing themselves to managerial positions. The older educators tend to come from an era where many managerial practices, some of them patently authoritarian, top-down, “managerialistic”, performative and power-based were not questioned and they probably still hold these perceptions. It is also possible that experience has taught them about the frailty of human communication and hence they may have become less critical of their principals’ management and leadership.

Concerning *level of discipline* in a school, principals and their deputies would do well to keep the discipline in their schools at optimal levels. For reasons which are not quite clear at this point in time, principals’ professional communication is regarded as more effective in schools in which good discipline prevails. This finding can arguably be related to the discussion of school effectiveness above. In the normal run of affairs, an effective school would also be one with good discipline, probably based (inter alia) on the principal’s good professional communication. The same applies for the finding with respect to *school image*.

Effective communication is dependent on the *attendance of learners and educators*, as communication requires the presence of both a sender and a receiver for it to be effective. If one of these parties is absent, effective communication cannot occur. It would be reasonable to say that the level of discipline in a school is probably closely associated with learner and educator attendance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The execution of the management tasks of the principal should form part and parcel of a person and people-orientated approach in which empowerment of all stakeholders should form the epicentre. The application of human skills can be observed in the accentuation of democratic participation, empowerment, developmental communication, reflective communication, fairness and democratic learner involvement.

School managers could consider using an instrument, such as the one applied in this study, for determining the effectiveness of their communication with other parties in the school. It can also be used for self-evaluation.

Those in management positions in schools should be aware of the following when reflecting on their communication with other parties in their schools: the level of school effectiveness, the maintenance of good discipline levels, the maintenance of a good school image, the possible impact of affluence/socio-economic status, and the importance of ensuring good educator and learner attendance.

Those in management positions in schools would do well to listen to their female staff, certain educator groups (such as the members of a particular teachers' union), those still in lower (non-management) positions in the school, and their colleagues in the age group 30 to 39.

All the guidelines outlined above should also be included in the pre- and post-appointment training of future principals. Ways and means should also be sought to make current principals aware of these guidelines.

Furthermore it is suggested that skills regarding the use of certain social media be included in the pre- and post-appointment training of principals. The growth in the use of social media is not limited to teenagers only; members of Generation X, now 35 to 44 years old (refer to the observation about colleagues in the age group 30 to 39 above), increasingly populate the ranks of joiners, spectators and critics (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010: 59).

Space constraints prevent a detailed discussion of the possible use of certain social media. A few guidelines can nevertheless be given: Firstly, principals have to inform themselves about the technical advances that have been made in the past 20 years and which now enable a form of virtual content sharing that is fundamentally different from, and more powerful than, the electronic bulletin boards of the 1970s (Asur & Huberman 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010: 60), and also of the fact that communication media have become more *social* and *interactive* of late. They should also be aware of the fact, as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 62) contend, that the concept of self-presentation states that in any type of social interaction people have the desire to control the impressions other people



form of them and, one could add, of the organisation (in this case, the school) of which they are the managers. On the one hand, this might be done with the objective of influencing others to gain rewards (e.g. draw prospective learners or better teachers to the school), or, on the other hand, it is driven by a wish to create an image that is consistent with the principal's personal identity as well as the school's institutional identity (e.g. create a school image that would appeal to good sportsmen or to academic achievers).

It would also be advisable for modern-day principals to be informed about the six types of social media that have been identified by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), namely collaborative projects (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne 2008: 183); blogs; content communities (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010: 63); social networking sites; virtual game worlds; and virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010: 64-65), and to find ways in which they and their schools can efficiently make use of these applications.

It would also be wise for a modern-day school principal to be informed about the ten guidelines offered by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 63-67), five of which are about using media, and five about being social. Regarding the former, they advise as follows: choose carefully; pick the application, or make your own; ensure activity alignment; ensure media plan integration; and provide as far as possible access for all. As far as the social aspect of social media is concerned, they advise: be active; be interesting; be humble; be "unprofessional", i.e. not overly sophisticated; and be honest.

We conclude this recommendation about the application of certain social media in the communication strategy of the principal with a few final observations. Social media allow schools and principals to engage in timely and direct "end-consumer" contact at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency than can be achieved with more traditional communication tools. Using social media is not an easy task and may require new ways of thinking, but the potential gains are far from being negligible.

Principals should be aware of the fact that new media such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) are already laying the groundwork for moving social media applications away from desktop PCs and laptops, toward mobile devices. This will bring new challenges for school managers.

Mobile social media also has a downside. Firstly, principals should distinguish between imparting information, and true communication. Some would argue that while social media enable the detailed following of people half-way across the world, it can foster a society where we do not know the names of our own next-door neighbours. The application of more and more social media will therefore confront principals and their schools with the new challenge of trying

to truly communicate instead of merely disseminating information. Secondly, as Mangold and Faulds (2009) correctly argue, the content, timing, and frequency of social media-based conversations occurring between all the role players in and around a school are outside the principal's direct control. This stands in contrast to the use of more traditional media where a high degree of control is possible. Therefore, the principal must learn to shape discussions in and about the school in a manner that will be consistent with the school's mission and performance goals. Methods by which this can be accomplished include providing the other role players with networking platforms and the use of blogs. In the third place, there is a variance in the quality of the content of the various forms of social media (Agichtein *et al.* 2008: 183).

Further research is required into the following problem areas: It is not yet clear why female educators and members of certain organisations such as a certain teachers' union seem to be more critical of principals' professional communication than males/members of other organisations. It is also not clear how representation of primary school learners could be improved for the sake of more effective communication in their schools. And finally, it is also not clear how affluence and the socio-economic status of the community in which a school is situated can impact on how professional communication is evaluated. As far as methodology is concerned, research should be done to verify the high Cronbach-Alpha-reliability coefficients attained for the instrument used in this study.

## CONCLUSION

We began this article by contending that school managers should from time to time apply an instrument such as the one that we used in this study for determining the effectiveness of their communication with other parties in and around the school. We presented two sets of evidence in support of this contention, namely a conceptual-theoretical framework that reflects the literature on this subject as well as provides an outline of what effective communication is, and how the necessary communication skills can be brought home to (future) principals during their training, and then the results of an empirical investigation that revealed how respondents viewed the effectiveness of their principals' communication skills.

Although the evidence seems to support the above-mentioned contention, several aspects remain unresolved; further research is needed in those areas. As part of the recommendations it was contended that principals and their schools would greatly benefit from the application of certain social media, provided that they took measures to circumvent the downside of the use of such media.

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