“Resistance to change in schools: perceptions of principals and teachers in a South African province”

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Resistance to change in schools: perceptions of principals and teachers in a South African province

Abstract

Changes are taken place in the South African society, especially in education, to address the previous discriminatory practices in favor of a free and democratic dispensation. Literature shows that change always goes hand in hand with resistance to it. However, literature pertaining to the perceptions of principals and teachers about resistance to change in education is limited, hence the rationale for this research. The purpose of this article is to report on the differences and the extent of the differences between teachers' and principals' perceptions regarding resistance to change in impoverished schools of a South African province. A quantitative approach is followed. The d-values and t-tests indicate significant differences between the perceptions of principals and teachers about resistance to change in their respective schools. Teachers' reactions to change in schools are generally overloaded with resisting forces while principals' experiences of change are more optimistic with fewer resisting forces.

Keywords: resistance, change, management, school culture, climate.
JEL Classification: I21.

Introduction

During the past two decades, changes have taken place in the education sphere in South Africa. To effect changes seems to be a general tendency in South Africa in order to improve existing practices in education (Elstad, 2008). However, these changes brought with them challenges to the existing problem of shortage of financial resources, especially in impoverished schools, and thus cause different levels of frustrations for principals and teachers (Fleisch & Christie, 2004).

1. Statement of the problem

The changes and their effects are reflected in the following: Firstly, a Bill of Rights came into effect, which resulted in the desegregation of schools (SA, 1996). As a result, the scenario of school governance has changed from the limited governance of the principal to inclusive governance of the School Governing Body (SGB), consisting of teachers, parents and learners (Van Wyk, 2012). The adaptation to the new school dispensation led to the implementation of a new uniform curriculum, which brought challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and multigrade classes with learners from different language groups, and caused, amongst others, an overload of demand on teachers' capabilities (Mentz, 2002). Moreover, since the inception of the new curriculum in 2005, frequent changes in the curriculum have occurred and have had a negative effect on the budget of Treasury which, in turn, had a ripple effect on the allocation of funds to schools (Van Wyk, 2012). It has become a daunting task for SGBs to appoint additional teachers and purchase additional resource material to implement the curriculum, all of which puts pressure on principals to manage their schools effectively.

Secondly, improvement of the existing poor infrastructure of impoverished schools places a liability on the limited budget of schools (Mestry & Grobler, 2006). Further challenges for principals and teachers are the involvement of parents in school matters such as the discipline of learners (Van Wyk, 2012). The abolishment of corporal punishment without other disciplinary measures in place led to the deterioration of learner discipline. The discipline of learners is quite challenging – to the extent that additional effort from teachers is necessary to maintain discipline (Masitsa, Van Staden, De Wee, Niemann, Heyns, Marishane & Botha, 2004). The low literacy levels of parents are further challenges for principals and teachers since parents are ill equipped to help learners with homework activities and/or support principals with the governance and finances of schools (Van Wyk, 2012). All of the above has become a challenge to principals and teachers to maintain a learning environment which is conducive to teaching and learning (Mestry & Grobler, 2006).

Lastly, trade unions are good insofar as they protect teachers against unfair labor practices (Oosthuizen, 2003). However, it becomes a challenge to principals when they interfere with the monitoring, evaluating and appointment of teachers. This interference could be seen as an impediment on the effectiveness of teaching staff to deliver quality education (Joubert, 2013). It can be deduced from the above that the challenges for principals and teachers alike have become enormous (Van Wyk, 2012). The challenges have brought frustrations for teachers as well as principals, a situation which could understandably lead to resistance to the new dispensation in schools

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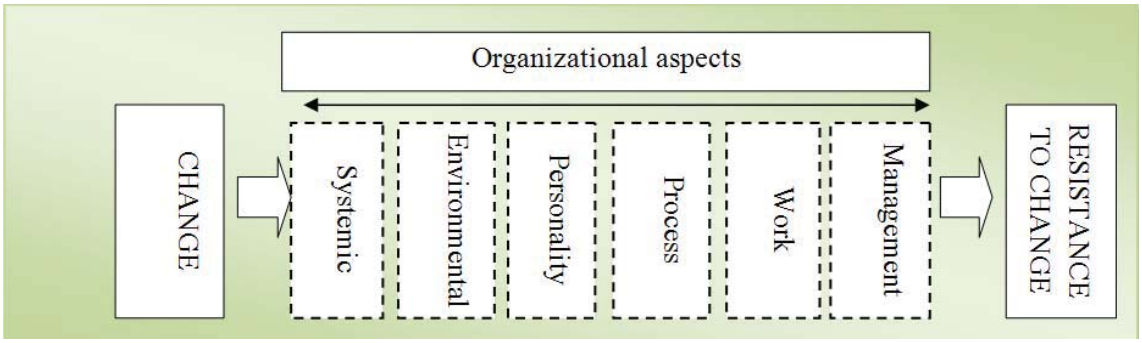
and are met with different levels and types of resistance by teachers and principals. The aim of this research was to investigate the differences and the extent of the differences between the experiences of principals and teachers with regard to resistance to change in schools in a South African province. The purpose of this article is to report on an investigation into the differences between the principals' own evaluations of resistance to change and teachers' experiences and/or perceptions thereof, and to what extent such differences existed. In order to reach this aim, the remainder of the article is structured as follows. The section 2 contains the conceptional and theoretical framework on which the empirical research was based. The section 3 contains a report of the empirical investigation that was done. Section 4 presents the outline of the findings, the discussion thereof, a number of recommendations and final section concluds the study.

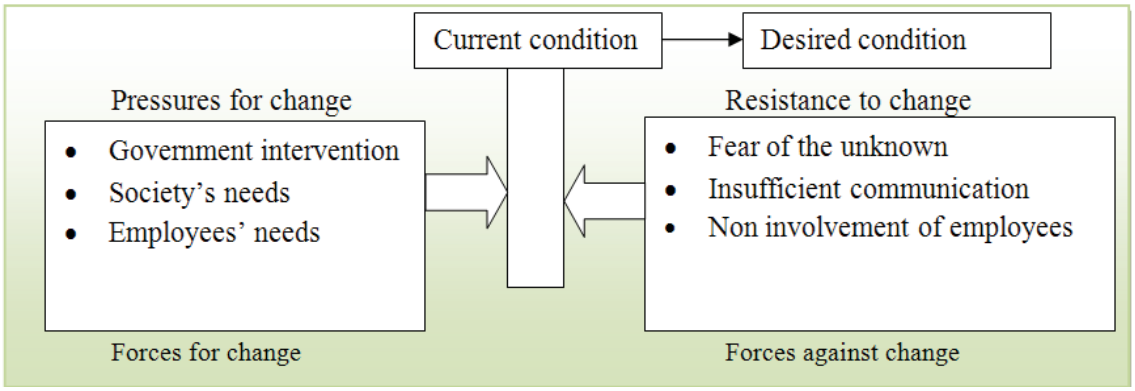
2. Conceptional and theoretical framework

Certain organizational aspects were identified that play a role in resistance to change as illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: Van Wyk, 2012.

Fig. 1. Organizational aspects that play a role in resistance to change in organizations



Source: Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1993 as cited by Van der Westhuizen, 2013.

Fig. 2. Forces for change and resistance to change

It was decided to interpret these organizational aspects (Figure 1) that might play a role in resistance to change against the backdrop of Lewin's theory regarding change field forces as illustrated above by Lunenburg and Ornstein (1993) in Figure 2.

2.1. Lewin's change management model and the organizational aspects that play a role in resistance to change. *2.1.1. Unfreezing – systemic, environmental, personality, process, work and management aspects – change and resisting forces.* The first stage, unfreezing, has to do with the 'what' and the 'why' questions of change, and serves to prepare the organization for the change by emphasizing and convincing people in the organization that the current way of doing things is counterproductive and does not work (Inandi, Tunc & Gilic, 2013). Careful planning of this stage is important in order to show that the status quo that is followed is no longer relevant and must change, which in turn will influence the working environment and the value and norm systems in the organization. Care must also be taken of psychological aspects such as emotions, since the current situation is challenged, and people must now find new ways to do things (Newstrom & Davis, 1993). People are forced and become prepared to see things in a different light. However, this commitment to change is a fragile one, and people could easily revert to the old dispensation. Therefore, it is critical that the change agent handles the next phase, change, correctly, to avoid resistance to the proposed change.

2.1.2. Change – systemic, environmental, personality, process, work and management aspects – change and resisting forces. This change stage means that a process is set in motion that changes the established practices in favor of new procedures and behaviors (Lewin, 1947). Van der Westhuizen (2013), referencing Zaltman and Duncan (1977) and Corbett, Firestone and Rossman, (1987), state that resistance to change is the most common response to change and is more often encountered than acceptance of change. During this stage, there are driving forces to change the status quo, and opposing forces to maintain it in the organization (Van der Westhuizen & Theron, 1993). These forces could come from authorities and/or from employees as a result of dissatisfaction with the status quo.

In order to minimalize the resisting forces in the organization, careful planning and organization of the work of teachers is important to avoid unfair job demands and work overload which could cause unhealthy levels of conflict among teachers (De Villiers, 1995). Further change forces are the caring and less controlling roles of principals which must be evident in the way they keep the communication channels in their schools open and accessible for teachers to familiarize themselves with the new change initiatives. Insufficient communication channels as resisting forces are often the reason why people do not always understand the importance of change (Newstrom & Davis, 1993). Therefore, change forces such as open communication channels to instill trust amongst teachers must be put in place (Van der Westhuizen, 2013).

In terms of support to teachers and principals, the South African Schools Act (SASA) stipulates that the SGB must support the principal, teachers and other staff of the school in the performance of their professional functions (SA, 1996). Other support structures could be obtained from neighboring principals, colleagues, parents and the Department of Education (Van Wyk, 2012). However, according to Masitsa et al. (2004) and Brown (2006), the resisting forces increase in respect of support from parents especially in impoverished schools. Additionally, Van Wyk (2012), states that there is also doubt whether support such as resources and infrastructure was available when the new curriculum was introduced in South African schools. This could also be seen as an increase in resisting forces. The way principals deal with the systemic matters depends on how teachers feel about and experience their school environment (Newstrom & Davis, 1993).

The change process also influences the values, norms and customs of teachers and principals (Newstrom & Davis, 1993). According to Lewin's theory, every care must be taken to increase and nurture the change forces in order to build affection and relationships with one another (Van Huyssteen, 2000). However, relationships, value systems and customs could be disturbed, and as a result, increase the resisting forces, particularly when unpopular decisions must be taken by principals regarding changes in the curriculum. Teachers might experience negative feelings pertaining to the school environment (Van der Westhuizen, 2013). Curriculum changes are mostly top-down over which principals have less control; yet they must at school level diminish the effect of the resisting forces thereof. Teachers might also feel less comfortable with new technology to supplement traditional teaching methods, especially when they have not been trained in their application (Van Sciver, 2007). The way the systemic and environmental aspects are experienced by teachers will depend on how teachers with their different personalities react to the change process (Van Wyk, 2012).

The different personalities of principals and teachers are an important aspect to consider during a change period (Lewin, 1947; Van Wyk, 2012). Since change means something new, resisting forces, such as fear of the new dispensation, could mean job losses and invalidating of existing work. Fears of being unacceptable to others, especially seniors, are common among teachers; they may develop an inability to control their emotions, and it becomes important for them to protect their own interest (Shapira, Arar & Azaiza, 2011). In an attempt to do so, there is an increase in resisting forces, as sceptism by teachers is common and the tolerancy levels of principals in schools are low (Newstrom & Davis, 1993). These reactions could be seen as barriers to the management of change (Van der Westhuizen & Theron, 1993).

Experiences of teachers regarding the process and work aspects of the organization will depend on the way the change agent increases the change forces pertaining to teachers' work.

According to Lewin's theory, the smooth running of the change process per se depends on change forces such as sound relationships, support, and the availability of information as well as the necessary skills and knowledge to drive the change. Equally important are the necessary infrastructure and budgetary issues to enable and capacitate principals to make a success of the intended change (Van der Westhuizen & Theron, 1993). Other work related aspects such as compensation, benefits and the workload of teachers, are also influenced by the change process and must be handled positively to

decrease the resisting forces (Van der Westhuizen & Theron, 1993). However, the way these aspects are dealt with by principals will determine how teachers experience their respective working environments (Van Wyk, 2012).

Lastly, according to Lewin's theory, it is important how the change is managed by principals and how teachers experience the management thereof (Struthers, 2009). Crucial change forces revolve around the involvement and participation of teachers and could serve to eliminate resisting forces such as the loss of power and loss of authority (Van Wyk, 2012). By decreasing the resisting forces, teachers should realize that the change is helpful and beneficial for the school as well as teachers (Denton, 2011). In fact, an inappropriate bureaucratic way of managing change may lead to irregular communication between role players, and teachers might perceive principals as poor listeners with hidden agendas which do not have their interest at heart (Van Wyk, 2012). Teachers might then conclude that the change process is managed poorly and could resort to the increasing of resisting forces (Shapira et al., 2011).

From the above, it is clear that change is entangled with change and resisting forces, and the skilful management of these aspects is crucial to avoid frustrations, fears and thus resistance to change by some teachers (Van Wyk, 2012). Since the various aspects also include sectors outside education, the occurrence of these aspects in education in particular is a matter of uncertainty and serves as a rationale for an empirical investigation in a selection of South African schools to determine the experiences and perspectives of principals and teachers in relation to resistance to change (Van Wyk, 2012).

2.1.3. Refreezing – systemic, environmental, personality, process, work and management aspects – change and resisting forces. The last stage of Lewin's theory, *refreezing,* has to do with stabilizing the new change process (Lewin, 1947; Van der Westhuizen, 2013). The employees have accepted the change and received new roles and responsibilities, and everything that was learned during the previous steps is now stabilized (Newstrom & Davis, 1993). However, critics are of the opinion that, since change is everlasting, there is no time to consolidate and refreeze the new changes (Newstrom & Davis, 1993). In the light of this, it could be postulated that in order for refreezing to take effect, the previous two stages have to be managed successfully by the change agent. However, it seems to be difficult for change agents to refreeze the change if the resisting forces outweigh the change forces. Possible reasons for such a state of affairs lie within the ambit of insufficient support, inappropriate knowledge and training in the field of leadership and management practices.

3. Empirical investigation

In order to get data from different teachers and principals at a specific time, a quantitative research approach, embedded in the post-positivistic paradigm, was followed (Creswell, 2012).

3.1. Research orientation and design. The post-positivistic paradigm has the feature that the relationship between variables could be influenced by various factors and attributed to the fact that the results of the data from this investigation need not necessarily agree with perspectives expressed in the theoretical framework. A survey was used for practical and economical purposes, not to influence the data from the participants about the research on hand (Creswell, 2012).

3.2. Purpose of the investigation. An investigation in schools was necessary to determine the organizational aspects, the differences and the extent of the differences in the organizational aspects between teachers' and principals' perceptions regarding resistance to change in schools.

3.3. Study population and sampling. The study population consisted of principals and teachers and for reasons of delimitation, the study was conducted in 125 schools of which sixty per cent (60%) were in impoverished areas in a South African province (Van Wyk, 2012). Most of the principals (75.8%) and teachers (79.4%) were experienced and well educated (62.1% and 86.4% respectively). For reasons of representivity, only schools of 500 and more learners were part of the study population of which a systematic sample was drawn from every second school that appeared on the Education Management Information System list of schools. As a result, 67 schools from the sample were selected and questionnaires were distributed by post and hand delivered to 67 principals and 884 teachers.

3.4. Instrument. A structured four-point Likert type questionnaire was used to obtain data via mail and by hand (McMillan, 2012). This method was chosen for the sake of objectivity of the data. The questionnaire was language edited by a language expert. Thirty principals and teachers who were not part of the research, participated in a pilot study of ten minutes to verify the correctness of the questionnaire. The items on the questionnaire were arranged numerically to enable participants to firstly complete biographical data and lastly provide data about resistance to change, with the following

response options to consider: "no extent; a little extent; some extent and a large extent". The content of the questionnaire was identical for both principal and teacher, except in cases where the question was specifically posed to the principal or teacher, for example, question to the teacher: Do you receive support from your principal? Question to the principal: Do you provide support to your teachers? (Van Wyk, 2012).

3.5. Validity and reliability. The content of the questionnaire was validated from the literature on resistance to change, a pilot investigation with thirty principals and teachers, as well as by the statistical service of the South African University. According to Creswell (2012), Cronbach's alpha coefficient must be near or 1 to declare the questionnaire reliable. The same construct was measured by 58 items and there was a medium to high concurrence (Cronbach alpha, 0.6 – 0.86).

3.6. Ethical issues. Ethical clearance was obtained from the South African University under whose auspices the study was done, and permission was granted by the Department of Basic Education to conduct the research in schools. Privacy, integrity, professional dignity as well as trustworthiness of the information and the anonymity of the participants were all part of the ethical aspects explicated on the front page of the questionnaire. Participants could at any time withdraw from the investigation.

3.7. Data collection. Consent was granted to distribute the questionnaires to participants by the head of Basic Education in the province. To avoid confusion, questionnaires of principals and teachers were printed on different color paper and a cover letter at the front of the questionnaire served to inform participants about the aim of the research as well as to bring the ethical issues under their attention. Principals of schools were requested and informed beforehand telephonically what had to be done. The same collection methods, by post or hand delivered, were used to receive the questionnaires back and there was a percentage returned rate of 98.5% for principals and 83.5% for teachers.

3.8. Processing procedures. The completed questionnaires were given to the statistical service at a South African university for processing and analysis of the data. Statistical methods such as the paired t-test and Cohen's d-values were used to process the data in order to determine the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding resistance to change in schools. According to Maree and Pietersen (2011), the following guidelines are applicable to Cohen's effect sizes, namely, 0.2 – practically no significance or small difference; 0.5 – practically visible or medium difference, and 0.8 – practically significant or big difference. Only d-values of ≥ 0.50 (medium to large differences) were interpreted as of practical significance.

4. Results and discussion

According to the empirical investigation aspects were mentioned in the theoretical framework where significant to large differences between the responses of principals and teachers were found. This suggests that there was a lack of consensus among principals and teachers regarding school related matters and also regarding resistance to change in schools in this particular province:

4.1. Differences in systemic aspects between responses of principals and teachers. Firstly, concerning the systemic aspects, practically visible differences were found between the responses of principals and teachers regarding the following items:

Table 1. Systemic aspects

Item no.	Description	Averages		Standard deviation		*d*-value
		Principal	Teacher	Principal	Teacher	
11	Support of principals	3.61	3.22	0.56	0.43	0.67**
16	Communication channels	3.24	2.82	0.75	0.38	0.57**
19	Management style	3.30	2.97	0.66	0.45	0.51**
22	Previous change initiatives	2.94	2.62	0.61	0.34	0.53**

Note: 0.5 = practically visible difference**.

The results indicated that teachers were of the view that principals gave inadequate support to them, while principals thought that they supported teachers sufficiently. Considering that more support is crucial in impoverished schools, Learning Teaching and Support materials (LTSM) and the expertise of the principal are essential for teachers. If some part of the support is missing, there is an increase in resisting forces, which suggests that principals did not support teachers. Lewin's theory says that change and resisting forces must be in equilibrium with one another, and it seems that this was not the case in respect of support to teachers (Van Wyk, 2012). This could be attributed to limited support from stakeholders to principals as well as to a lack of dedicated training in principalship to support teachers (Van der Westhuizen, 2013).

Furthermore, the results indicated that teachers considered the communication channels at their schools and the management style of their principals to be inadequate, and that previous change initiatives were not handled well by principals, while principals expressed the view that all three items were in place and handled well by them. These three items revolve mainly around the work of principals and teachers' experiences thereof (Van Wyk, 2012). It was stated that during the unfreezing and change stages, principals must communicate with teachers continuously and effectively. It seems that it was not the case and this contributed to assertions of teachers that principals' management styles were not in order. Reasons for this could be as said in the previous section, the lack of support for principals, and their inadequate training in principalship. Regarding the handling of previous change initiatives, it is clear that teachers developed psychological resistance to the change process, seemingly because the previous Outcomes Based Education (OBE) program was frustrating and not managed well by principals (Van Wyk, 2012).

4.2. Differences in environmental aspects between responses of principals and teachers. Secondly, regarding the environmental aspects, practical significant differences were found between the responses of principals and teachers regarding two aspects, namely:

Table 2. Environmental aspects

Item no.	Description	Averages		Standard deviation		*d*-value
		Principal	Teacher	Principal	Teacher	
25	Fears of principals	3.60	2.82	0.59	0.37	1.28***
24	Fears of teachers	1.40	2.08	0.72	0.44	0.98***

Note: 0.8 = practically significant difference***.

The fears of principals relate to unpopular decisions (resisting forces) principals sometimes have to make during change and the associated disturbance of relationships in schools (Van Wyk, 2012). These resisting forces within principals themselves could again be attributed to the lack of training in principalship regarding relationships and management styles. It has had the effect of limited support to teachers in school matters such as access to and training in new technology. Teachers might experience their school environment negatively, which puts pressure on the social relations and increases the resisting forces in schools (Newstrom & Davis, 1993; Van Wyk, 2012).

4.3. Differences in personality aspects between responses of principals and teachers. Thirdly, pertaining to the personality aspects, three practical visible differences and one significant difference were found between the responses of principals and teachers.

Table 3. Personality aspects

Item no.	Description	Averages		Standard deviation		*d*-value
		Principal	Teacher	Principal	Teacher	
30	Emotions	1.94	2.45	0.99	0.39	0.51**
32	Scepticism	1.42	1.95	0.79	0.42	0.56**
35	Fear of the unknown	1.60	1.98	0.79	0.44	0.52**
33	Intolerance	3.49	1.96	0.79	0.39	1.94***

Note: 0.5 = practically visible difference**; 0.8 = practically significant difference***.

Teachers were more afraid of the unknown and more sceptical about the change than principals. Both items have to do with the state of mind of teachers which seems not to be a good state. As change entails something new, the uncertainty creates anxiety and increases the resisting forces of fear of job losses (Lewin, 1947; Arul, 2007). As a result, the prevalence of scepticism is significant, especially when previous changes have failed when handled in an inefficient manner by the same person (Evans, Whitehouse, & Gooch, 2012). All the above could also be attributed to a lack of effective communication by principals to decrease the resisting forces as stated in previous sections. Moreover, it was also indicated by the results that principals were more emotional and intolerant than teachers and increased the resisting forces when they became annoyed if teachers did not want to collaborate (Andle, 2010). Considering the lack of training in principalship, it is understandable that principals act in this way when teachers increase the resisting forces (Lewin, 1947; Cervon, 2007). The increase of resisting forces such as intolerance with teachers led to a deterioration of relationships in schools (Kanter, 2007).

4.4. Differences in process aspects between responses of principals and teachers. Fourthly, a practical visible difference occurred between principals and teachers regarding skills for change.

Table 4. Process aspects

Item no.	Description	Averages		Standard deviation		*d*-value
		Principal	Teacher	Principal	Teacher	
47	Skills	3.27	2.91	0.67	0.34	0.54**

Note: 0.5 = practically visible difference**.

In fact, the results showed that teachers were less sure if their skills are sufficient for the change than principals, and could also testify to less exposure to training opportunities for their jobs. It is indicative of the presence of resisting forces. Additionally, work overload of teachers and lack of an incentive structure further increase the resisting forces and play a role in the fact that teachers are not motivated to improve their skills (Curzon, 2006).

4.5. Differences in work aspects between responses of principals and teachers. Fifthly, there were no significant differences (d-values were less than 0.50) between the principals' and teachers' views regarding the work aspects which played a role in resistance to change (Van Wyk, 2012).

The work aspects are mainly the working conditions such as remuneration and teachers' status in schools, etc. Teachers' and principals' experience in teaching ranged from none to twenty years while their ages ranged from between 31 to fifty years. Changes in education only started after 1994 and it could be deduced that they had not been exposed to the previous education dispensation and only know the current education system. In the light of this, it was impossible for them to give different views regarding the abovementioned aspects; therefore it seems that they accepted the status quo in respect of work aspects.

4.6. Differences in management aspects between responses of principals and teachers. Lastly, regarding the management aspects, practically visible differences were found between the responses of principals and teachers regarding three items, namely:

Table 5. Management aspects

Item no.	Description	Averages		Standard deviation		*d*-value
		Principal	Teacher	Principal	Teacher	
65	Hidden agenda	1.31	1.76	0.66	0.48	0.68**
66	Participation of teachers	3.32	2.71	0.91	0.42	0.66**
68	Listening skills	3.49	2.95	0.79	0.44	0.69**

Note: 0.5 = practically visible difference**.

It is indicated by the results that teachers felt that principals did not allow them to take part in the change process and did not listen to them. They held the view that principals had a hidden agenda with the change process, while principals felt just the opposite. It is clear that principals did not adhere to principles of Lewin's theory, to firstly spell out the reasons for change, and secondly to support teachers by listening attentively to them and letting them participate in the change endeavors of schools. As a result of this dissatisfaction among teachers was prevalent and the resisting forces increased (Van der Westhuizen & Theron, 1993; Curzon, 2006).

From the above it is clear that, on the one hand, Lewin's theory is helpful for understanding the change process while on the other it doesn't seem to consider community and school specific contextual factors caused by the apartheid legislation such as poverty, literacy levels of school parents, weak school infrastructure as well as the level of training of principals in leadership and management issues. Without taking into account the presence and existence of the latter mentioned factors, Lewin's theory will be difficult to apply in especially impoverished schools in South Africa.

Recommendations

It was clear that the differences in the perceptions of principals and teachers are an indication that there are still many resisting forces in the education system that prevent the change process from taking root, and that more change forces should be utilized to stabilize the change process. The disadvantaged circumstances in impoverished schools are stumbling blocks on the way to effecting changes. Lewin's refreezing stage will only be applicable when these stumbling blocks have been accounted for. Additionally, in order for principals to support teachers, support by the Department of Basic Education as well as the investment of the private sector in schools is fundamental. The private sector could assist in continuing training of the SGBs, and of teachers with technology training in their schools.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial if additional criteria, such as qualifications in principalship together with a psychometric test, set by legislation to appoint principals. Moreover, the professional training of principals as well as support in managerial issues is fundamental to decrease the resisting forces amongst teachers. Further criteria by legislation, such as project management and financial skills could be set to elect SGB members and computer literacy skills for teachers, to be appointed. These additional criteria would enhance the change forces and set the tone for selecting and appointing suitable individuals for their tasks.

Conclusion

This research illuminated the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding resistance to change in impoverished schools in one of South Africa's provinces. It became clear that principals and teachers were in disagreement with one another about the change and implementation thereof in their schools. This is indicative of the presence of resisting forces in their schools. The change process became complicated due to the bad history of the apartheid education and it will be difficult, without taking into account this history, to give effect to changes, especially in impoverished schools. The Department of Basic Education released a draft report for standards of principalship where imperatives were set of what the South African education system expects of those who entrusted with the leadership and management of schools (SA, 2014). It is hoped that the document will bring finality to the matter of the inappropriate management of schools and the presence of resisting forces in changes in schools.

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