

# “FROM THE WORST TO THE BEST”: AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL CHANGE AT A SOUTH AFRICAN SECONDARY SCHOOL

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## ABSTRACT

The primary aim of the study is to describe an initiative to effect organisational change at a previously disadvantaged school in South Africa's Gauteng Province. Qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse data on the social process of change in the school. Essays of role players in the change process on their experiences led to important insights. This exploratory study points to a process that was effective in bringing about change at a school and holds promise for constructing a theoretical model of how change could be effected in ineffective schools.

## OPSOMMING

Die primêre doel van die studie is die beskrywing van 'n organisatoriese verandering by 'n voorheen benadeelde skool in Suid-Afrika se Gauteng Provinsie. Kwalitatiewe metodes is gebruik om data oor die sosiale proses te genereer en te analiseer. Opstelle van betrokkenes by die veranderingsproses oor hulle ervarings het tot belangrike insigte gelei. Hierdie verkennende studie dui op 'n proses wat suksesvol gewerk het om verandering te weeg te bring en hou belofte in vir die ontwikkeling van 'n teoretiese model van hoe verandering in oneffektiewe skole bewerkstellig kan word.

As South Africa moves from the industrial age into the information age, all aspects of the socio-cultural, technological and political environment are changing. Therefore it is not surprising that the extensive legislative, societal and cultural changes that have characterised the educational environment since the late 1980s have significantly affected both the operational and developmental activities of previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa.

Since the historic advent of a full democratic government in South Africa in 1994 education policies have been drastically restructured. The South Africa Schools Act 84 of 1996 brought changes in the school environment especially in as far as funding and school governance are concerned. The aim of this Act was to eradicate all disparities of the apartheid years. Prior to 1994 the country's educational policy consisted of two main streams: white education and bantu education. The budget allocation ratio for white to bantu education was 4:1. This coupled with other racial policies led to the provision of inadequate resources and infrastructure and poorly qualified teachers, and resulted in a mass of disadvantaged and poorly educated South Africans.

Previously disadvantaged schools, mostly situated in townships and on farms in South Africa, not only have to catch up technologically but also have to become centres of excellence where learners prepare for the global village and conform to the standards set internationally by employers (see the European IRDAC report (1993) and the USA SCANS report (1992)). According to Gray and Wilcox (1995, p. 6), education internationally and in South Africa is driven by common concerns: the spiraling costs of mass education and the consequent emphasis on value for money, the belief that education is an essential condition for achieving a competitive edge in the global economy, the need to meet the greater educational expectations of parents, and the growing awareness that the school remains the only institution for moral socialisation.

Over \$100 million is estimated to have been spent on school improvement initiatives in South Africa since 1994. Despite this substantial investment, little is known about the impact or

effectiveness of such initiatives on changing teaching practices and ultimately improving student achievement (Fleisch 2002).

The transformation of schools in most parts of the world generally focuses on preparing children to live productive lives in the 21st century (Murphy & Louis 1994). Schools are increasingly being held accountable for every aspect of the education they provide. They are obliged to submit themselves to public scrutiny through the publication of test and examination results (Brown & Rutherford 1999). In South Africa the matric examination is still the yardstick for excellence and schools strive for a 100% pass rate on the Higher Grade.

This study focuses on the transformational changes that occurred over a ten-month period (November 2001 to September 2002) at a dysfunctional township school in South Africa's Gauteng Province. Qualitative methods were used to generate data, from which insights were gained about different aspects of school life that changed, the "how" and "why" of these changes, and their sustainability. Valuable information was also gathered on some important aspects of the school environment that still require attention.

## THE RESEARCH SETTING

The school that was analysed for the purpose of this study was a previously disadvantaged black secondary school situated in a township in South Africa's Gauteng Province. The economic circumstances in the feeding area of the school range from desperately poor people to relatively affluent. The school was established in 1988 and during the time of political unrest until 1994 had excellent matric (currently Grade 12) results. After the 1994 democratic election the situation deteriorated due to school management changes and the uncertainties caused by the political and organisational transformation of the education department.

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Against the backdrop of the research setting given above, the aim of this article is to describe an initiative embarked upon when a new principal was appointed in November 2001 to effect

organisational change at the school. More specifically, this article has the following four objectives:

- To describe the endeavour to implement changes at the school over the ten-month period;
- To establish whether the process actually resulted in changes at the school;
- To describe the most important of these changes, if any; and
- To deduce the key implications of the findings for future local studies in this field.

### Social change in education and management

During the past two decades, international trends in school improvement have been towards bottom-up strategies that incorporate concepts such as “learning organisation”, “whole-school development”, “school-based reform”, “site-based management” and “total quality management”. Improvement programmes that rely on these concepts are coming in for increasing criticism. For example, a number of researchers believe that only systemic policies could drive large-scale reform (cf. Fleisch 2002 & Fuhrman 1995).

The South African literature on school improvement is thin, but in recent years a few important studies were undertaken. For example, the effectiveness of mandated or bureaucratic improvement strategies was explored by Grobler (2001); Christie (1999) provided a theoretical framework for thinking about state-directed tight-control intervention; and the Education Action Zone intervention designed by the Gauteng Province legislature was reported to have been effective although more research was needed to verify if the improvements would be sustainable (Fleisch 2002).

As very little scientific information is available in this area, primary educational research should be undertaken to explore and illuminate the dynamics and management of social change in local schools. This will require empirical research that produces the basics for generating theory, rather than research that provides information to verify some speculative ideas. “As pressure mounts on the public education system to improve the quality of its products so, too, is the need to deliver robust research on school improvement models that work” (Fleisch 2002). Differently put, a research methodology should be implemented that will provide some contextual insight and consequently an understanding or appreciation of the various forces effecting social change in the school context, through highlighting the “how” and “why” of organisational and individual action. More specifically, research on change management at schools should

- lead to the process of social change being examined within its social context;
- lead to this process being examined holistically or contextually, i.e. explaining the various aspects or dimensions thereof comprehensively; and
- enable research that is done in close collaboration with research participants.

These requisites can be met through the adoption of what has become known as “qualitative research” (cf. Denzin & Lincoln 1994, Schurink 1986, 1997). This research essentially follows an inductive approach to theory generation. The focus tends to be on dynamic processes with the aim of explaining rather than predicting phenomena.

### Towards qualitative research in management and educational studies

“Qualitative research” is described by Van Maanen (1988) as an umbrella term covering an array of interpretative techniques that seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning (and not the frequency) of certain more or less naturally occurring social phenomena.

Qualitative researchers assert that the social world can only be understood if its social context is taken into consideration (cf.

Bogdan & Biklen 1998, p. 5). Therefore the main objective of such research is to understand the dynamics of human meaning in its habitat or natural setting, with minimal interference from the researcher.

In order to unravel the details of social life, qualitative researchers typically gather data in the form of interview transcripts, field notes, photographs, videotapes, personal documents, memoranda and other official records (Schurink 2002, p. 20). They take special care to unravel the details of social life and are concerned with social process and sequence. “Qualitative researchers look at the sequence of events and pay attention to what happens first, second, and so on. Because qualitative researchers examine the same case or set of cases over time, they can see an issue evolve, a conflict emerge, or a social relationship develop” (Neuman 1997, p. 335).

Finally, as indicated implicitly in the above exposition, “meaning” is of crucial importance to qualitative researchers (Schurink 2002, p. 24). This results in exponents of this research style being concerned with the ways people make sense of their circumstances and daily experiences.

Qualitative research methods in general and case studies in particular have a long and distinguished history in the social sciences and beyond. Qualitative analysis was the primary means by which virtually all social research was conducted up to the middle of the twentieth century. This is certainly true for management research, which until the early 1960s was tightly linked to a case study approach. Qualitative studies have led to a good deal of empirical and theoretical advancement as well as critical and useful interventions into organisational functioning. Statistical analysis and the prominence (if not dominance) of quantitative research developed later.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, qualitative work is resurging across disciplines and applied domains, as many of the promises associated with quantitative research have come up empty. Counting and classifying can take one up to a certain point.

*Meaning and interpretation are required to attach significance to counts and classifications and these are fundamentally qualitative matters. The two approaches are then bound together, neither capturing truth alone nor trumping the other (Van Maanen 1988, pp. ix-x). This view is inter alia supported by Schurink and Schurink (2001).*

In the field of education, qualitative research has become quite popular since the late 1970s and mid-1980s, although it has not attained the same status as quantitative research. An important proponent of qualitative research in the field of education has been Robert Burgess of the United Kingdom, who has used essays for data collection much as this study does. With regard to local empirical educational studies, a brief computer scan revealed that qualitative research has not been widely used in the educational field in South Africa.

### Theoretical perspectives underpinning qualitative research

Various scholars (cf. Schurink, 1997; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) discuss theoretical perspectives, which are associated with qualitative research, and are used by its exponents.

One such perspective is phenomenology. The “phenomenological tradition” within social science holds that social reality is a perceptual construct, in other words a generally agreed-upon consensus amongst ordinary people in particular situations as to what events and interactions mean. Qualitative researchers using phenomenology as a research framework attend to unravelling and understanding the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in specific everyday situations.

Another theoretical perspective that is often used in qualitative research is symbolic interactionism. This perspective holds that

the social world is not intrinsically meaningful (cf. Burton 2000). Meaning is created as human beings relate to each other, taking into account past and anticipated future experience. "In constructing or defining self, people attempt to see themselves as others see them by interpreting gestures and actions directed toward them and by placing themselves in the role of the other person" (Bogdan & Biklen 1998, p. 37).

When symbolic interactionism is applied to qualitative research the theory that emerges is "grounded" in the data. Through inductive processes, conceptualisation and operationalisation occur typically simultaneously with data collection and preliminary analysis. A widely used form of this inductive process, called "grounded theory", enables flexibility and facilitates interaction between data and theory. The main purpose of grounded theory studies is to generate new theory and conceptual propositions, while its techniques have been mainly applied in the exploration and description of phenomena or aspects of social reality for which little if any scientific knowledge exists.

The methodology and its analytic process in this study were guided by certain assumptions of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory.

#### Collecting and analysing data on changes occurring at the school

In line with this study's aim and objectives, qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse data on the social process of change at this South African school.

The data, which provided a "sea" of rich information, consisted of the following:

- Field notes, particularly during participant observation;
- Unsolicited documents such as minutes of meetings, workshop flipchart notes, and letters of learners and parents; and
- Essays solicited from different role players.

Berendien van Aswegen, one of the authors of this article and the principal of the school, was an active participant in the research and as such had the opportunity to closely observe her own as well as the other role players' experiences of the process and its outcomes. The essays that the respective participants in the change process were requested to compile are what is known as "narratives" (Denzin 1989). The narratives or essays in this study relate events in a temporal, causal sequence. Every narrative describes a sequence of events, and all the participants tried to reconstruct meaning through their essays.

Data were also collected through two focus group interviews. Kritzinger (1994) defines a focus group as "a group discussion organized to explore a specific set of issues". The first focus group involved teachers only for the strategic reason that they were regarded as the most important change agents in the school. At this workshop the culture of learning and teaching that had to be re-established was the key focus. The second focus group consisted of representatives of all role players: teachers, school management team, clerks, parents, SGB and learners. The reflections emerging from this workshop gave evidence of the successful re-establishment of discipline at all levels in the school. As should be clear by now, the data collected in the study were analysed inductively. First, the most salient categories that emerged from the data were identified, and then the concepts and categories were developed. The themes centred mainly around the environment, physical improvements, teaching and learning, management, involvement of the school governing body (SGB), attitudes of the different role players, the future of the school, the sustainability of the changes and the aspects that still had to change. Second, further analysis was done to identify additional patterns and meanings. Third, grounded theory (cf. Strauss & Corbin 1990) was used to discover, develop and provisionally verify patterns and concepts by means of systematic data collection and data analysis.

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE SCHOOL

The field notes, solicited essays and focus group interviews generated extensive "soft" data. The detailed descriptions of the experiences, attitudes, beliefs and thoughts of the teachers and other role players were broken down into manageable units and classified according to concepts and interpretations they themselves used.

In what follows the data are mainly presented in terms of these "indigenous" or concrete constructions. Excerpts from the essays, field notes and transcriptions of the focus group interviews are used as illustrative material and the status of the role players is acknowledged. Only the clearest and most representative excerpts are presented. In certain cases, however, the excerpts were edited or paraphrased for the sake of brevity.

#### Material and insights obtained from participant observation

During the first days of the research at the school Berendien and the school management team (SMT) identified problems in the following key areas: management, the environment, human relations, financial management, learning and teaching, and governance.

Change at organisational level can only be effected, sustained and managed through individuals and organisational teams (Clarke 1994; McLagen 2001). Organisational development models are founded upon the principle of achieving consensus and participation between individuals in an organisation (Appelbaum, St-Pierre & Glavas 1998). Thus teachers were identified as the most important change agents at the research site. They had to own the change process through democratic decision making in order for the organisation to start moving in the right direction.

To create a shared vision, ensure participation and sustain momentum in the change process the SMT decided to hold a strategic development workshop. It was a strategic management decision not to involve all the role players in this workshop as the relationships among some of them were strained.

According to Stevenson (2001), organisations tend to resist change unless the change is critical to the organization's future existence. Some change management authors have suggested that senior management needs to articulate a crisis situation in order to lessen the resistance to organisational change (cf. Elrod & Tippett 2002). This school was in a crisis and Berendien did not have to shout fire to start the change process. The staff as a whole expressed very little resistance to change processes. After years of being part of a chaotic situation they were willing to participate in effecting change.

The first workshop followed three basic steps, which are considered the bedrock of organisational change (see Clarke 1994):

- Determining where the school was;
- Deciding where to go; and
- Mapping out key steps to get to the envisioned future.

During the ten months of research Berendien consciously used change management theory and practices to sustain the momentum of change. More particularly, she took stock daily of where the school was, and how much more the teachers could take. From this stocktaking it was clear that the teachers reconciled themselves with the stages of change to a greater or lesser degree. As the stages through which people go in reacting to a significant organisational or personal change can be predicted, it was possible to guide them through the change. Lewin's (1951) influential "unfreezing, moving and refreezing model", which has been the framework of change management theory for most of the second half of the twentieth century, was playing itself out at the school. Teachers went through the expected fear, loss, discomfort and stress stages associated with

change, and the principal helped management and the teachers by sensitising them to the fact that the emotions they were experiencing were "normal". The new assumption in change literature is that resistance and emotional responses to change are not bad. "They are a signal to pay attention" (McLagan 2001, p. 11). Being in daily contact with the teachers and learners and going through the emotions with them were valuable scientific experiences.

After ten months a development workshop was held with all the role players to determine the successes and failures of the past ten months, the results of which are also part of the data used for this study. This workshop shed light on the role played by Berendien in particular.

#### Material and insights obtained from the solicited essays and workshops

The solicited essays, which were carefully analysed and of which the results are presented in the next section, give a clear account of what the situation was and how the initial situation changed.

**Overall changes:** All the research subjects had to identify the most important overall change at the school. The biggest change areas identified were effective teaching, cleaning of the environment, and change in the school atmosphere.

**Effective teaching:** All the subjects felt that the biggest change was that the culture of learning and teaching was re-established. From the excerpts it is clear that the teachers effected the change and the learners followed, emphasising the importance of the change agent roles of the teachers. The following excerpts capture the views reasonably well:

- *Educators are attending to their classes.* (Clerk.)
- *Teaching takes place on a more regular and more consistent basis.* (Parent.)
- *Teachers show an interest in their work.* (SMT member.)
- *The key area: learning and teaching has changed.* (District official.)
- *Teaching is good because there is lots of work every day.* (Learner.)

The chairperson of the SGB formulated the most important change differently and stated bluntly: *The biggest change is educator and learner discipline.*

**Clean environment:** The cleaning of the school premises (classrooms, toilets and passages) and the painting and renovations at the school were listed as major improvements. The learner component in particular placed great emphasis on the improved conditions of the toilets and the cleanliness of the classrooms. However, in the same breath they mentioned the persistent problem of littering. The following excerpts demonstrate the widely held views on changes in the environment:

- *The school premises are clean and the factotums are working.* (Clerk.)
- *The toilets of our school were disgusting ... but are now clean.* (Learner.)
- *Walls used to be dirty and full of vulgar words but now they are clean and toilets are also clean.* (Learner.)
- *The changed school is evident on entering due to the newly painted staff room and other areas.* (District official.)

Two of the subjects mentioned the problem of persistent littering:

- *Cleanliness can come under control if ownership is developed.* (SMT member.)
- *After lunch the littering is bad.* (Learner.)

**Change in school atmosphere:** The third most important change was seen to be the atmosphere that was *conducive to teaching and learning* (SMT member) or the peace and *harmony* (teacher) that was reigning in the school.

#### Performance change among the teachers

All the subjects testified to the dramatic change in teachers as far as their primary teaching duties were concerned, but the resistance of a number of teachers to certain changes was also mentioned.

**Mindset of teachers:** Most of the subjects compared the present behaviour of the teachers directly with their previous unacceptable behaviour.

- *Teachers have changed, especially those who were often absent without an excuse and bunked periods.* (Teacher.)
- *Educators are now ready to teach and they prepare their lessons on time.* (Clerk.)
- *Our teachers are now showing the way.* (Learner.)

**Change in attitude:** One school management team member noted that all the teachers were not happy with the changes and that certain aspects were resisted (e.g. the locking of the gates, which is a provincial directive).

- *Some teachers' attitudes towards the changes need to be changed. Not every teacher has the safety of learners at heart.* (SMT member.)
- *They have to change their attitude towards the learners as they blame learners for almost each and everything.* (Clerk.)
- *There are still negative teachers who don't work together.* (Teacher.)

**Training workshops and support systems:** Half the subjects mentioned the need for training workshops and support systems so that they could understand and negotiate meaning in the new changed education system. The following quotes are relevant:

- *Teachers need support systems to cope with a lot of the changes that are introduced.* (Teacher.)
- *Most teachers are having a problem with OBE - they need workshops.* (Clerk.)

#### Performance of school management team

The SMT was previously regarded as ineffective and incapable of managing the school due to professional jealousy and incapacity. Some of the subjects regarded the SMT as effective, whereas one subject believed the new principal was not supported by the deputy principals.

**Trying to pull together:** The clerk felt that *the management team is trying to pull together and are holding meetings regularly.* This sentiment was shared by two teachers.

**Involvement in management:** Members of the SMT believed that they were *all involved in the management of the school.* *There is consultation and discussions on various issues.* However, one teacher added that all management team members were not exemplary and that some management team members misused their positions.

**Direction:** Two teachers asserted that the new positive direction of the school emanated from the SMT. *It used to be chaotic. There used to be no direction and systematic planning in the running of the school.*

**Hell breaks loose:** One teacher observed the following: *The principal works alone, e.g. if the principal is absent, hell gets loose; there is nobody in charge.*

#### Changes among the learners

The learners followed where teachers led and reacted positively to the changes by attending classes and being disciplined. However, there was a lack of ownership, and this led to the continuation of vandalism and littering.

**Learner commitment:** A substantial number of the subjects felt that the learners were more committed to the education process:

- *Learners show their commitment and respect to their school.* (Learner.)

- *Learners are more respectful.* (Teacher.)
- *Learners are doing homework the first time in years.* (Teacher.)
- *We are writing cycle tests and have to study regularly.* (Learner.)
- *Learners are proud of being learners at this institution and they are fired-up to perform better at the end of the year.* (Parent.)

**Ownership:** A number of learners did not have a sense of ownership in the school. *They do not consider school property as their own* (SMT member.) Two learners emphasised this:

- *Some learners want to vandalise and take the school back to what it was.* (Learner.)
- *As soon as something is fixed, others want to break it again.* (Learner.)

**Punctuality:** The majority of the subjects regarded late coming and non-punctuality under learners and teachers as persistent problems.

- *Punctuality is generally a problem, albeit affecting a small, but unacceptable percentage of both learners and educators.* (Parent.)
- *Learners should respect teachers and come to school on time.* (Learner.)

### School governing body

According to the South Africa Schools Act 84 of 1996, school governance is placed in the hands of the SGB. The two main responsibilities of this body are recommending the appointment of personnel and financial management. This school's governing body was non-functional and the basic responsibilities were not executed. The subjects responded in a mixed way to this issue. About half the subjects felt there was an improvement, while others saw no change.

**Operational situation:** Some subjects felt the SGB was at least operational:

- *At least there is one in existence and it is operational.* (Teacher.)
- *At least there is a core that really does its best.* (Parent.)
- *We can at least see that the finances of the school are in good hands.* (Teacher.)

A school management member did not want to comment much as there was *not any noticeable thing that has been done by them*. Others believed the SGB members *represent themselves and not their constituents*.

**Fundraising:** All the subjects regarded the SGB's inability to raise funds as a major problem and area for improvement.

- They (SGB) must be involved in the activities of the school, e.g. fundraising functions. (Teacher.)
- Encourage other parents to be active participants. (Teachers.)

**Empowerment:** A parent felt strongly that the parent and learner component of the SGB had to be empowered so that they could perform their duties. According to the SGB chairperson (a parent), *some parent and learner members need to be provided with more skills that will enable them to participate more effectively, informed, robustly and regularly in meetings*.

### Physical changes

All the subjects commented on the physical improvements at the school and the changed image these reflected to the community.

- Absence of offensive and eye-sore graffiti on outside and inside walls. (Parent.)
- We have nice flower beds and we must plant more flowers. (Learner.)
- The school has become a home from home. (SMT member.)

A teacher made the most important comment: *A lot of people are noticing the changes and are discussing it on taxis* (Teacher.)

### Future of the school

All the subjects wanted to see the school as the best in the district:

- *One would be thrilled to see the school as an icon or one of the best in the district.* (Parent.)

- *We want the best school in the township.* (Learner.)

The following improvements still had to be effected:

- Team work amongst teachers, late coming improved, electricity everywhere. (Teachers.)
- A computer centre, more sport, more opportunities. (Learners.)

### Why did the school change?

This question was answered at the second strategic workshop and the subjects wrote about it in their essays. Some of the subjects regarded the teachers as important change agents; others saw organisational planning and structure as the important aspects; and still others emphasised the role of the principal and SMT in the change process. The following comments summarise the main themes:

**The principal is very strict:** A teacher commented:

- *The new principal just wanted one thing: work and she was very strict.*

All the learners regarded the strict principal as a factor and also commented on the changed attitude of most of the teachers. The following comment sums up this sentiment accurately:

- *The principal allows no nonsense, but she has changed many things, e.g. she bought us new chairs.* (Learner.)

**Our vision worked:** At the initial change management workshop the teachers designed a new vision. Ten months later the teachers said:

- *The new vision gave clear direction to us.*
- *It was "our vision" because we designed it together.* (Deputy principal.)

Learners, teachers, managers and the governing body all testified to the focused sense of direction of the school during the past ten months.

- *We know what quality education is and our vision was driving us towards constant improvement.* (Teacher.)

It was hard work: The teachers felt that they worked very hard, driven by the vision. All the subjects, i.e. management, clerks and parents, agreed that the hard work made the difference.

**We are now a team with values:** The majority of teachers believed that the new team spirit helped them through the change process.

- *Gone are the days when teachers didn't talk to one another. We share our ideas.*
- *There is mutual trust.*

A small number of teachers believed that human relations still had to improve.

- *There are still teachers teaching the same subject in the same grade that do not share.*

**We only needed the right environment:** At the second workshop, teachers, learners, cleaners, clerks and parents testified to the following:

- We changed because there was direction. (Teacher.)
- The changes are an affirmation of the confidence that the parents and the broader community have always had in their (the teachers') potential. (SGB chairperson.)

**New threshold:** The SGB chairperson believed that the school was *...on the threshold of becoming the best school in the township. The community is watching the school and wondering if the improvements will last and grow*. The other role players shared this idea as can be seen from their responses:

- We can be the best. (Learner.)
- We will again be the best. (Teacher.) (This is a reference to twelve years ago when the school had the best results in the township.)

**DISCUSSION**

**The change process**

In retrospect the change process can be summarized by means of the following diagram.

**The steps involved in the process**

- Step 1: Acknowledging that the environment demands effective schools with good results
- Step 2: Developing a shared vision and strategy
- Step 3: Implementing organizational change initiatives
- Step 4: The change process
- Step 5: Giving feedback on organizational performance and new goal setting

The steps that guided the school's actions during the ten months show a fluid process, with constant environmental input and system analysis (steps 1 and 5) feeding information back into the process, thus keeping the model alive and adaptable.

Change is messy (cf. Clarke 1994), and although a step-by-step approach is sensible it pays to remember that the envisaged change process is modified as you go along and also that there are many feedback loops in the process. The execution and follow-through of the steps demanded discipline from all role players and commitment from management. This discipline was translated into specific actions to internalize the new school image.

Management followed a back-to-basics approach in their control functions. It was illustrated by management being responsible for certain sections of the school and seeing to it that learners go to class on time after breaks, checking on teachers attending to classes, controlling teachers' preparation files and checking learners' work books.

The change process at this school reflects the present dialogue in the school improvement debate. Bringing all role players on board calls for a bottom-up approach. Management stepping up their control functions testifies to a top-down approach.

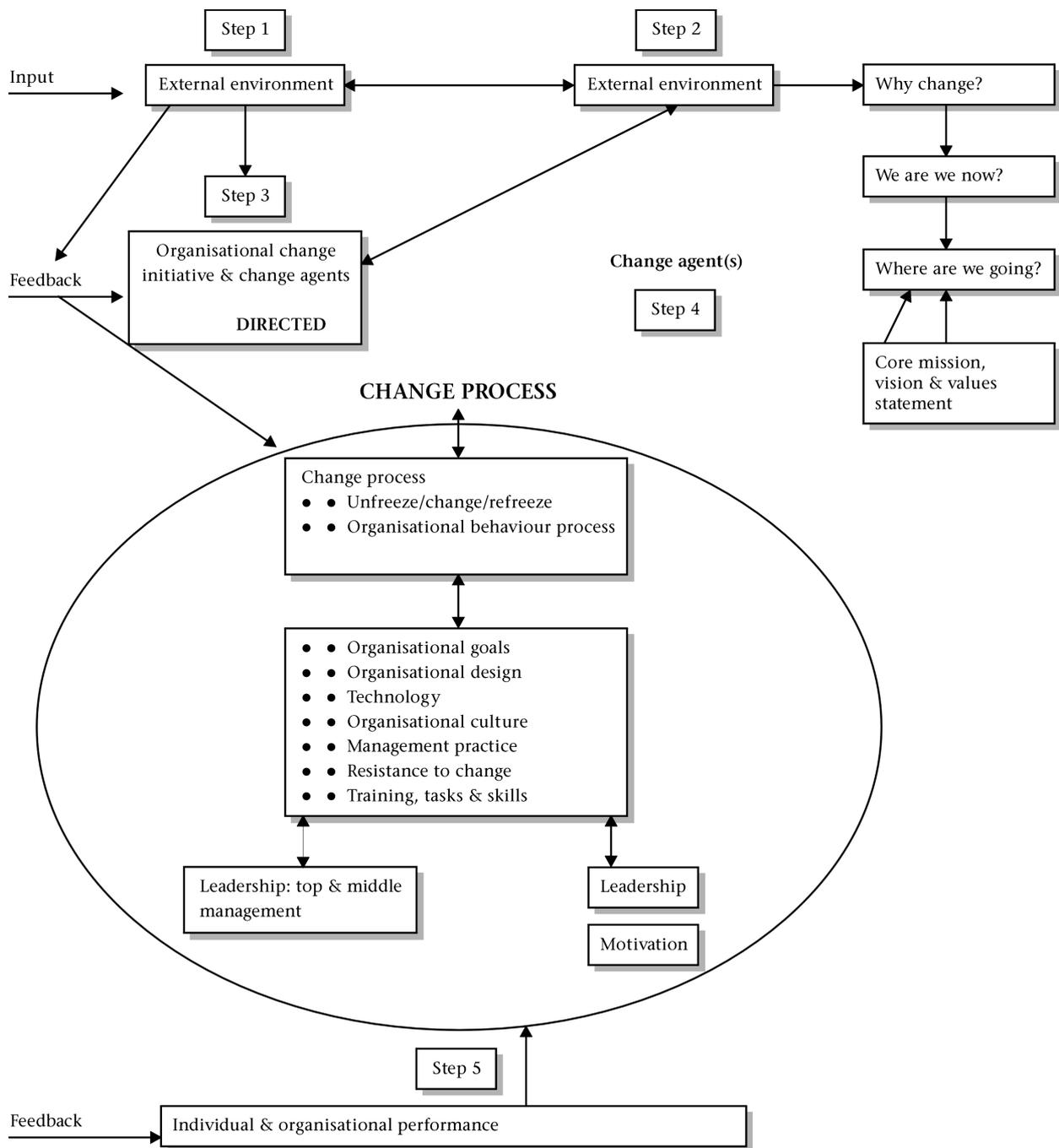


Figure 1: Determinants of change

Fleisch (2002) reports that the binary relation between top-down and bottom-up is problematic, and that strategies for change require both.

A number of new concepts have contributed to an emerging theory of action in school improvement. Barber and Phillips (2000), for example, argue that much of the existing school improvement literature contains a fallacy, namely that changes in beliefs are required before changes can occur. He argues that it is often necessary to mandate (impose from the outside) the change, implement it thoroughly, and in the process transform the prevailing culture of institutions. Fullan (2001) suggests that for low-performing systems there may be a need to move from more control-orientated approaches for dysfunctional schools to more open approaches as these schools begin to improve. The implementation of this approach in South African schools needs to be researched.

In South Africa, democratic decision-making has become very much a "buzz" concept. The key to the successful change at the school in this study was consensus building and participation of all the role players. Strong, conscious leadership steered the process, without the principal dictating from above.

The need for change in schools throughout South Africa is getting more critical as the environment demands that they become more accountable. Although this study can at best be regarded as exploratory and preliminary, it illuminated various dimensions of the multifaceted process that changed a particular South African school from an ineffective to an effective school.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research process was transparent as the subjects were not only willing participants but saw their participation as an opportunity to share their experiences of the year of change at the school. Although logistical realities such as time did not allow the generation of "thick descriptions" of all dimensions of the social change process and/or constructions of everyone involved in it, the authors believe that everything reasonable was done to ensure that the outcome of the research could be regarded as valid and credible. The involvement and consensus building of all the role players contributed in large measure to the changes. Parents and clerks who were asked to participate in this study were from previously marginalised groups. Their opinions were not considered to be important in the past. Teachers have always occupied centre stage.

The qualitative methodology utilised provided contextual insight and some initial understanding of a number of aspects affecting social change in a school context, such as that team building, consistent rule application, ownership and a shared vision are crucial to bring about change. In the light of its role in unpacking people's perceptions and everyday experiences, qualitative methodology deserves a more prominent place in both organisational studies and educational research, next to the mainstream methodological approach, quantitative methodology.

The symbolic interactionist perspective used in this study illustrated that change management centres primarily around the meanings and everyday experiences of the various role players. Therefore participant observation, human documents (particularly solicited essays) and focus group interviews are all appropriate means of revealing personal perspectives and experiences of the changes brought about at the school.

This exploratory study points to a successful process of change at a school and holds promise for building a theoretical model of how change should be effected in previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa.

From the present study it appears that the principal played a crucial leadership role and that robust leadership is required during change in educational institutions. The study also emphasises the importance of consensus building.

The effectiveness of a change process is measured by its sustainability. Only time will tell if the changes effected at this school will become internalised. The process is less prescriptive than the school improvement model described by the Gauteng Department of Education, but the back-to-basics approach is similar. Where strong management and leadership are present the five-step process described in this study could apply. The school improvement model of the Gauteng Department of Education does not rely on internal motivation but on external pressure and control (Fleisch 2002).

In conclusion, the following recommendations must be noted:

- More qualitative research is required to better illuminate the social construction of educational change processes.
- Quantitative research (e.g. social surveys) should be launched to measure the magnitude of the key perceptions of the role players.
- Participatory action research and evaluation research need to be executed in local studies of educational change processes.
- Change management principles are well entrenched in the corporate world. The application of these principles in the education sector, specifically schools, need to be investigated on a continuous bases.
- The link between continuous change management principles in education and "quality education" need to be established. Gurus like Juran and Deming introduced the concept of the spiral of continuous improvement into the industrial world. The application of the spiral of continuous improvement in education needs to be researched.
- While valuable insight was obtained from the present study of one school, it must be noted that the basic principles should be tested in the different kind of schools in South Africa.
- The education scenario in South Africa is complex and research has to take cognizance of the fact that rural schools, township schools, farm schools, former model C schools and private schools function differently. Disparities will only disappear if we face the realities of the different kinds of schools in this country and how change management principles can be applied.
- This present study only looks at the change over a one-year period at one school. Research in the ongoing process of change to entrench quality education in this school could make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on the topic.

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