Portfolio Assessment as a means of evaluating the professional development of school managers

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ABSTRACT

The main reasons cited for the poor matric results and declining culture of teaching and learning in many South African schools are poorly qualified principals and their lack of leadership. Principals and other school managers, who wish to improve their qualifications and consequently improve their practice, may register for a two-year course in Advance Certificate in Education for Principalship (ACE) at specific institutions of higher learning. In order to progress from the first year of study to the second year, students are assessed on a number of assignments and problem-solving activities completed in each of the coursework modules. Students are also assessed on a project plan developed in collaboration with all role-players in their schools.

In the second year, the student is assessed on a number of assignments and problem-solving activities in the different modules and also on a portfolio. The portfolio is the collection of evidence that the student will compile in order to make claims of competence in the implementation of the project undertaken. The lecturers assess the completed portfolios and external site-based evaluators are appointed to verify the evidence provided by the students.

This paper will focus on portfolio assessments (which include the project plan and commentary) as a means of evaluating school managers studying for a course in Principalship.

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1 Introduction

Prior to 1996, the various departments of education appointed principals to schools under their jurisdiction based on a specific process. The inspectors of education would inspect prospective applicants for a particular vacant post, using predetermined criteria to assess their management performance and competency at that school. The inspectors would then select the one who has the highest rating.

With the introduction of the South African Schools Act (SA, 1996), there is has no stringent criteria for appointing principals of public schools. For example, a post level one teacher who only holds a teacher's diploma with five years teaching experience may on the recommendation of the school governing body (SGB) be appointed as principal. The SGB selects the successful candidate only through interviews and some SGBs may do a profile check on the applicants. It is for this reason that many public schools have appointed principals who either lack the necessary managerial experience or are under qualified and this has serious consequences for the effective management of schools.

Furthermore, the Schools Act (SA, 1996) has no stringent criterion for the election of members on to the governing body, except that the selected member should be a parent or legal guardian of a child enrolled at the school and that he/she must not have a criminal record. Many members of SGBs serving on the selection panel to recommend the appointment of a principal for the school are not competent. Research conducted by Bush (2004) found that:

- there are members in many governing bodies that are illiterate; and
- there are members on the interviewing panel that have very little or no skills to conduct interviews.
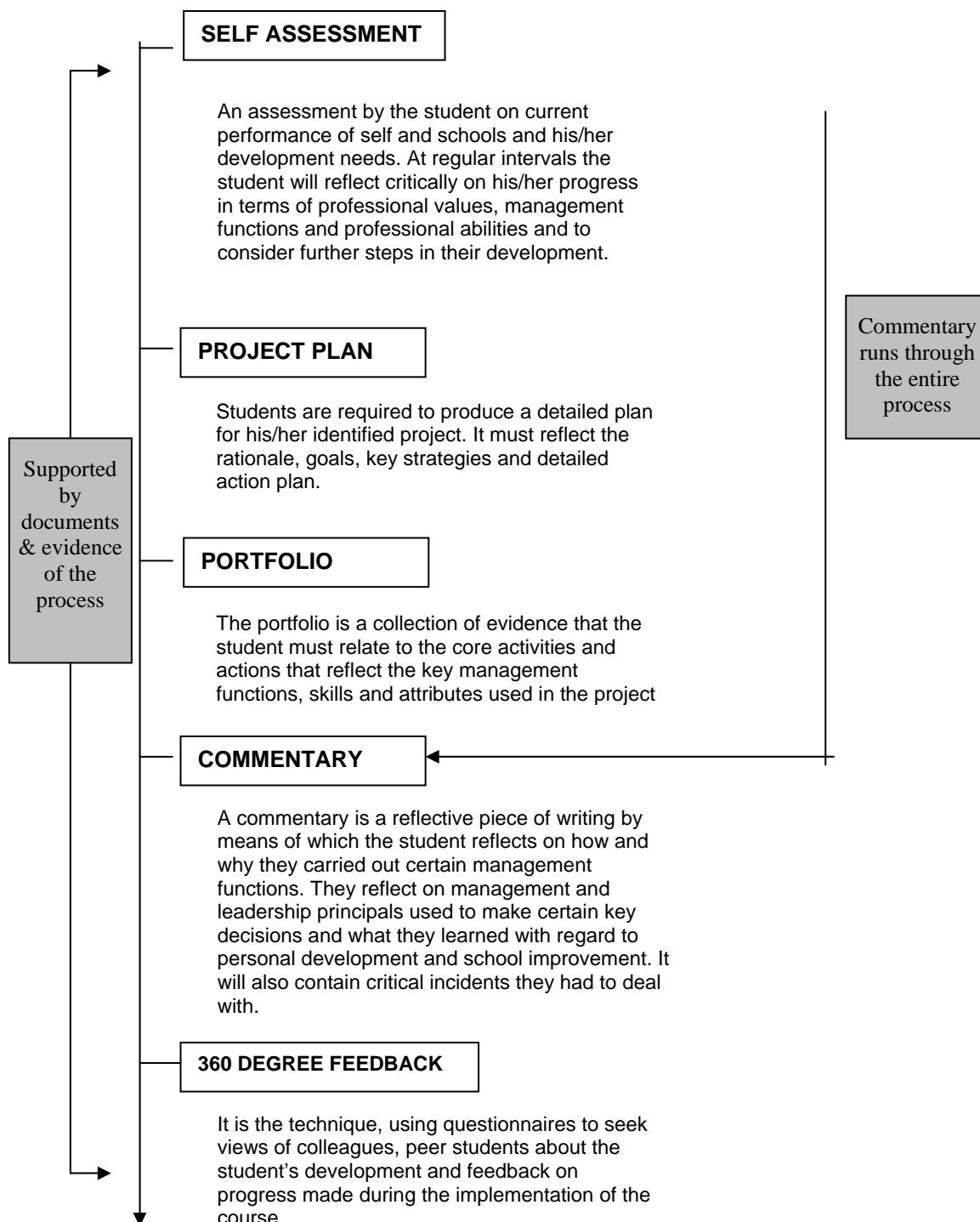
The Department of National Education is responsible for developing and implementing in-service training for principals. The poor matric results over the past five years and the absence of a strong culture of teaching and learning in many South African schools have prompted the Department to introduce a new qualification called an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) for Principalship which will in the near future be a prerequisite for any educator to be appointed as principal of a public school.

Since 2004, the Matthew Goniwe School for Leadership and Governance (a non-profitable organisation) in collaboration with the University of Johannesburg has piloted a practiced-based two-year course in the ACE for Principalship. The cohort comprises school managers (principals, deputy principals and heads of department) who have to undergo in-service training by enrolling for the ACE qualification. This qualification is designed to develop an institutional ethos that promotes professional and lifelong learners. These school managers (hereafter referred to as students) are required to undergo formal in-service training through contact sessions and cohort meetings. In the first year, the students study an introductory module on Leadership from a South African perspective. Four other key areas of management, namely Managing Teaching and Learning, Managing Finances and Physical Resources, Managing People and Leadership and Managing Education Law and Policy, are studied in the first and second year of study.

The University uses different assessment methods to assess these students.

2 Assessment methods

After lengthy debates with various role-players, it was unanimously agreed that examinations as a form of assessment will not be applied. The following diagram indicates the different assessment methods that are used by the University to evaluate the professional development of school managers studying the ACE course. The issue of reliability and validity in these assessment methods had to be considered and care exercised so that these methods should not be perceived as unfair and invalid.

SELF ASSESSMENT

An assessment by the student on current performance of self and schools and his/her development needs. At regular intervals the student will reflect critically on his/her progress in terms of professional values, management functions and professional abilities and to consider further steps in their development.

PROJECT PLAN

Students are required to produce a detailed plan for his/her identified project. It must reflect the rationale, goals, key strategies and detailed action plan.

PORTFOLIO

The portfolio is a collection of evidence that the student must relate to the core activities and actions that reflect the key management functions, skills and attributes used in the project

COMMENTARY

A commentary is a reflective piece of writing by means of which the student reflects on how and why they carried out certain management functions. They reflect on management and leadership principals used to make certain key decisions and what they learned with regard to personal development and school improvement. It will also contain critical incidents they had to deal with.

360 DEGREE FEEDBACK

It is the technique, using questionnaires to seek views of colleagues, peer students about the student's development and feedback on progress made during the implementation of the course.

Commentary runs through the entire process

Supported by documents & evidence of the process

Figure 1: Assessment diagram (adapted from Matthew Goniwe School for Leadership and Governance, 2004:4)

This paper will focus on the portfolio assessment which includes students' project plans, the commentary and portfolios.

In the first year, students are assessed on specific tasks undertaken such as assignments, activities and self-evaluation. Towards the end of the first year, the student is required to identify a project, and in collaboration with all the relevant stakeholders, develop a detailed plan that will reflect the rationale, the goals, key strategies and a detailed action plan of the project.

The project plan is assessed and returned to the student. Students may be asked to revise their project plan and resubmit it for accreditation. The project plan now becomes part of the portfolio.

Secondly, a portfolio is compiled. The project plan is used as a basis to compile a portfolio and the evidence collected must relate to the core activities and actions that reflect the key management functions.

Thirdly, the student must provide a commentary, which is a reflective piece of writing of which the student reflects on how they carried out certain management functions. This commentary must be submitted simultaneously with the project plan and the portfolio to the University for assessment.

Fourthly, once the lecturers assess the portfolio and the commentary, the portfolio is sent to site-based evaluators. The site-based evaluators are required to investigate the project that the student has implemented at his/her school and to see how the process developed. They will seek evidence that supports the student's professional abilities and claims for the success of the project.

2.1   Applied and Integrated Assessment Approach

In compliance with the assessment criteria as described in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and in the Norms and Standards for Educators (SA, 2000) the assessment methods promotes applied and integrated assessment and the integration of theory and practice. The

assessment strategy assesses the extent to which students have the ability to work in authentic and changing South African contexts. School experience is integrated into the programme, rather than a separate "add on" (Matthew Goniwe School, 2004). The assessment strategy assesses the extent to which students have achieved horizontal integration. This implies that the integration of the different roles and the knowledge and skills delivered through the different modules that make up the qualification. The assessment strategy also assesses the extent to which students have achieved the vertical integration of foundational, practical and reflexive competence.

2.2   Assessment of the Project Plan

The project plan is assessed by the University lecturers. A rubric is used and marks allocated for different aspects of the project plan.

According to the Matthew Goniwe School (2004:47) a project plan is the actions and planned actions of the student in the identification of current problems in the school context that are addressed and resolved. The student endeavours to explain, plan and implement actions to render solutions by means of a project.

All the information gathered during the self-assessment and the analysis of the school form the basis for the rationale of the project. The plan includes the methods, people and the actions and its time frames that will be taken to make the project work. The following is assessed in the project plan: the rationale for undertaking this project; a statement of the aims and assumptions on which the project is based; statement of the objectives to be achieved supported by key actions that need to take place; action plans including time scales, which specify the tasks to be done to complete the project; the names of role-players involved in the project; resources required for this project and the monitoring process to be followed during the project

The lecturers use the following criteria to assess the student's project plan:

1   Is the plan presented in a structured and accessible manner?

The programme and plan must be structured and detailed using an efficient and accessible format.

2   Does the plan demonstrate realistic and practical needs of the school?

Planning should be linked to the development of interpersonal professional abilities and to professional values. Areas of knowledge to be developed in the identified need must be specified and strategies for achieving goals listed.

3   Is the rationale and strategy for the proposed project presented clearly?

A variety of strategies are considered to bring about the success of the plan, which matches against each of the core actions of principalship at whole school level.

4   Does the student have the ability to match the activities in the plan to the core actions of principalship.

Detailed planning including goals/aims, strategies, time lines, resources and success criteria must be noted. The student is also assessed on whether the choice of strategies is good, practical and focused on achievement of success.

2.3   Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio assessment has become widely used in educational settings as a way to examine and measure progress, by documenting the process of learning or change as it occurs. For the ACE course portfolio assessment is seen as a tool for professional development. Portfolios extend beyond test scores to include substantive descriptions of examples of what the manager is doing and experiencing. Documenting progress towards higher order goals such as application of skills and synthesis of experience requires obtaining information beyond what can be provided by standardised or norm-based tests. Portfolio assessment provides a practical strategy for systematically collecting and organising such data.

As mentioned previously, every student must compile a portfolio based on the project plan that was drawn up in the latter part of the first year. According to Paulson, Paulson & Meyer (1991) a portfolio is a purposeful collection of

student work that exhibits student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas of the curriculum. Some examples of projects undertaken by students include improving learner discipline, improving skills in reading, managing school finances etc. Two core activities of a school manager, namely, management and leading of people and the management of policies were selected for assessment. This implies that the student had to show an improvement in how he/she managed and led people and how policies are managed in relation to the project, for example, improving learner discipline at school.

Portfolio assessment is the systematic collection of the student's work measured against predetermined scoring criteria. These criteria may include scoring guides, rubrics, or rating scales (O'Mailley & Pierce in Gomez: 2000). "Portfolio assessment provides the student and the evaluator with an opportunity to observe the student in a broader context: taking risks, developing creative solutions and learning to make judgments about their own performances".

It is important for the participant and other role-players to work together to prioritise these criteria that will be used as a basis for assessing and evaluating the participant's progress, both formatively (that is throughout the project time) and summatively (that is, as part of a culminating project, activity, or related assessment to determine the extent to which identified expectancies, indicators, and standards have been achieved.

As with any qualitative assessment method, analysis of portfolio data can pose challenges. Method of analysis varies depending on the purpose of the portfolio, and the types of data collected (Patton, 1990). In this case each student has a project that is unique and the contexts vary from school to school. However, if goals and criteria have been clearly defined, the "evidence" in the portfolio makes it relatively easy to demonstrate that the student has moved from a baseline level of performance to the achievement of particular goals as stipulated in the Project Plan (Barton & Collins, 1997). The portfolio is assessed on the following criteria:

1. The evidence must be organized in a way that makes it accessible and matched to the relevant core activities and tasks. The student should clearly state how the items of evidence relate to the core activity and the key tasks that describe the activity.

2. The evidence should be realistic, valid, sufficient and current. It should relate to the personal work of the student as a leader and manager in relation to each core activity.

3. The student should successfully develop structures for the management and leading of people and the management of planning and policy. Evidence of the success and improvement should be provided and assessment procedures, recording and reporting should be adequately monitored.

4. The student should establish processes to create and maintain the conditions for effective Management of People and Planning and Policy. Evidence may include ways in which incentives may be awarded; behavioural management policies, guidelines and approaches and evidence of improvement.

5. The student should successfully develop teams and individuals to enhance their performance and the school's performance related to the project. Here the student should focus on the motivation and development of staff for the purpose of permanent, short term and coordination initiatives or projects.

6. The student has planned, delegated and evaluated the work carried out by teams and individuals in relation to the project. Possible evidence: Reports of individuals, teams and departments; feedback of discussion with individuals and teams; reports on the action plans and monitoring of work groups; minutes of meetings, guidelines for evaluation.

7. The student has maintained and promoted effective working relationships with staff conforming to School HR policies and procedures. Evidence may include: minutes of staff meetings; notes on informal discussions; testimony and feedback from staff members and departments. Evidence of grievance and disciplinary procedures.

8. The student has successfully developed professional abilities. Evidence of the ability to discuss, make decisions and carry out actions

in a consistent and cooperative manner. Dealing with issues, problem solving and acknowledging and encouraging good work, supporting and leading projects by direct involvement. Focus on development of staff through consultation and involvement. Develop and establish groups to successfully fulfil tasks.

2.4 Commentary

The commentary is a running report of actions and events that have taken place throughout the whole process from self-assessment to the end of the portfolio submission and should be at least five pages long. In the commentary the assessors seek the student's observation solutions and background knowledge that led him/her to make certain decisions in the project. The commentary should include critical incidents that occurred during the project and how it was managed. The student should highlight their own professional and personal abilities in their role as school leader. The commentary is assessed as follows:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of ethical, procedural and valuation issues involved in Managing and Leading of People and Policies.
2. Express consistent and professionally defensible educational values and show how these are put into practice.
3. Demonstrate a critical view on personal professional practice and support in others.
4. Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the central concepts governing the Management and Leading of People and Policy implementation at the school.
5. Present work in a logical and accessible format using structure and appropriate form.

3 Conclusion

Portfolio assessment has become widely used in educational settings as a way to examine and measure progress, by documenting the process of learning or change as it occurs. In a survey of schools, colleges and departments of education. Salzman *et al.* (in Strudler & Wetzel, 2005) found that 89% reported using portfolios for some type of assessment. In South

Africa portfolio assessment is a new concept and the University of Johannesburg has seen merit in using this assessment method. The lecturers evaluate projects that have flexible or individualised goals or outcomes. This implies that each student's portfolio assessment would be geared to his/her individual needs and goals.

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