SCHOOL LEADERS AND THE PURSUIT OF EFFECTIVENESS: ENVISIONING SCHOOLS THAT ENDURE CHANGE

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Abstract

Several studies in educational leadership and management in South Africa have underscored the importance of the role of the school principals and their management teams. In fact, as other international studies concur, any school’s climate and culture will be largely influenced by the leadership practices of those at the helm. Successful schools will achieve because of their efficient and diligent principals. Two decades after the attainment of democracy and the demise of apartheid education though, some South African schools reflect challenges that characterized apartheid schools. Arguably, in numerous schools, teachers are not ready to create effective working organizations. However, all education’s role-players seek schools that work; the parents and communities are in constant search of high achieving schools that would redeem society from several of its ills. Recently, many critics have emphasized that school principals and their management teams have to be formally prepared for their roles as leaders of high achieving schools.

This paper sought to examine the practices exercised by successful schools in South Africa. Numerous school principals complain about their schools that fail in the face of change. Some have been irked by the absence of the zeal by their staff members to be change agents and agents of change. The realization is that not all principals have the natural disposition to lead high achieving, or successful schools. Many school principals had never been prepared for leadership positions they hold and may have been appointed due to their exquisite teaching skills and classroom management. This study critically examines the results of the impact and experiences of the Advanced Certificate in Education - School Management and Leadership (ACE-SML) Research candidates countrywide. These candidates included school principals, deputies, heads of departments and ordinary teachers who aspired to be in leadership positions in schools. This was to prepare them in some formal preparation for taking up school leadership and management positions.

This ACE-SML program research was sponsored by Zenex Foundations and supported by the Department of Basic Education. Furthermore, this Zenex-ACE School Leadership and Management Research was the first comprehensive longitudinal study conducted over a period of four years in six South African provinces. In this case study three principals who were also part of the ACE-SML pilot intake lead high achieving schools and were interviewed and shadowed. In addition to the recommendations of the ACE-SML Research, they highlighted five factors that are critical to successful schools that would be amenable to change and transformation. Schools for the future require courageous and meticulous leaders who will be able to create schools that endure change. Teacher leadership, moral leadership, turnaround leadership, co-operation as well as the ability to define one’s leadership practices are among the most critical in planning schools that would lead to lasting effectiveness.

Keywords: Cooperation; Moral Leadership; School Leadership; Turnaround Leadership; Ubuntu.

1 INTRODUCTION: THE ZENEX-ACE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP RESEARCH 2007 -2011

There has always the belief that effective schools will be those that are supported by strong leaders. Arguably, schools will be as good as their leaders and the flaws of the leaders will always manifest themselves in the way in which they lead their schools. Many have pointed out the qualities that make effective school leaders. Good principals are key to the success of their schools for the role of the principal is critically important to sustaining school success [1]. Several factors help in making schools successful: “good curriculum, quality teaching, and a strong professional culture” but without a good principal at the helm, these will not be as effective [2]. Furthermore, The Wallace Foundation [3] answers the question, “What makes an Effective Principal” Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards;
Creating a climate hospitable to education so safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;

Cultivating leadership in others so teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;

Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and

Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement. [3]

The Zenex/ACE Research started with a pilot study between 2007 to 2009. Then afterwards there was an Evaluation Report that took place between 2009 to 2011. The study was conducted by the following team members; Tony Bush, Ntombozuko Duku, Derek Glover, Edith Kiggundu, Soraya Kola, Vuyisile Msila and Pontso Moorosi [4]. The study explicated the importance of leadership development of school managers especially those who aspired to be school principals. This presentation is not focusing on the ACE SML results but rather on the responses of the participants as to what was necessary to create working schools. Amongst others, the results demonstrated that there were serious gaps in networking, mentoring, teaching materials in the ACE- SML program. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that amongst others, several principals lacked the necessary professional skills necessary to steer their schools to success due to lack of training, non-involvement of other role-players in school programs as well as poor management skills among school governors.

All these form part of strategies that can change schools around. Effective districts want schools that excel hence programs such as the ACE were introduced. Effective districts will want accomplished principals who in turn would try hard to lead achieving and successful schools. The study sought to establish what other skills are necessary to steer schools to success. The three principals and their management teams selected in this study were part of the first group that piloted the first ACE-SML program intake in 2007. All three are guiding successful schools and this study sought to investigate what are the other factors that help enhance the practice of successful school principals in times of change.

2 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study included three schools in three South African provinces. The sampled schools were successful schools whose pass rate in the external grade 12 class exceeded 88% pass rate in four consecutive years. The sample included three school principal and their deputies as well as six school governing body members from the three schools. Interviews, observation and shadowing of the three principals were part of the tools used to collect data. The schools management brought forth data that demonstrated why the schools experienced high learner achievement and high teacher motivation. Among these factors that these schools showed were teacher leadership, moral purpose, turn around leadership, cooperation and ability for teachers to define their leadership. These qualities differentiate working schools from ineffective schools as identified in studies such as the Zenex-ACE Research. Effective schools need to show the characteristics as practiced by the three schools under study.

Data was collected mainly through individual interviews and focus group interviews. As in qualitative analysis, the data was then coded in categories. Themes were teased from the data and presented at the conclusion of the study. The focus groups in particular highlighted a number of common themes shared by the participants in the sample as to what created succesful schools that ensured that schools would endure change initiatives. It was also critical for the participants to shed light on how they ensured high learners consistently achieved high results throughout the grades including the last class, grade 12.

Below, the focus is on the five aspects that appeared to be shared among the three schools under study and these demonstrate why these schools are braced for the constant changes happening in education today. According to Thorne (2000) in qualitative research, relevant reality is that which takes place in subjective experience in social context and historical time. Furthermore, Thorne points out that qualitative researchers seek to uncover knowledge about way people think and feel about the circumstances in which they find themselves. Constant comparative analysis was done as the researcher compared these with each other. From the comparisons above emerging categories surfaced. Certain categories became more central focus – axial categories and possibly core category. Axial coding involves breaking down core themes relating codes to each other via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking. Scott and Medaugh (2017: 1) contends, “Axial coding
requires researchers to continually modify and reshape their emerging conceptual framework as more data are examined. It results in a coding framework from which to synthesize and organize data into more coherent, hierarchically structured categories and subcategories.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The findings

The three schools under study shared many similarities in culture and in climate. What was striking about the schools is that all of them were quintile 1 schools meaning they served the poor communities and were all not well resourced.

3.2 Teacher Leadership

One of the fundamental values of the South African Constitution is that of Ubuntu but few people acknowledge the power of this philosophy in organizations. Ubuntu is one of the fundamental values of the South African Constitution and has been proven relevant to education. Ubuntu is said to emanate out of the political tumult of the 1990s and peacemakers wanted to ensure that in the process of creating a new framework, they would formulate a sentiment that would become part of the defining vision of the democracy [5]. Furthermore, this publication states that there was a need in South Africa “for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimization” [5]. The importance of the concept of Ubuntu has become prominent under the democratic dispensation in South Africa. It is rooted in African traditional society and philosophy and it means humanness or the quality of being human. It espouses the ideal of interconnectedness among people. In this study, there were various ways that the participants showed how elements of Ubuntu could be utilized and one of them is teacher leadership.

Callie Grant has conducted teacher leadership research widely in South African schools over the past decade. In one study, she concluded that this concept was mainly restricted to the classroom; that the full potential of teacher leadership as a tool to improve schools has not been utilized [6]. Furthermore, Grant [7] defines teacher leadership as “teachers taking up informal and formal leader roles in the classroom and beyond into areas of whole school development and community involvement”. Grant explains that the objective of teacher leadership is change that is guided by a collective vision [7]. Grant [8] also points out that there is no consensus as to what teacher leadership is. Nevertheless, she contends that it can involve more than pedagogical or curriculum leadership. Furthermore, Grant [8] cites Crowther et al. who argue that teacher leadership enables schools to transform themselves.

Bush [9] also contends that teacher leadership is among many models that emerged because of the realization that traditional hierarchical approaches have become ineffective. Yet teacher leadership will not develop without the professional development or necessary professional teacher maturity and this means teachers’ coming to know themselves as professionals. Alexandrou and Swaffield [10] write about the notion of outsidedness, which refers to the process of knowing ourselves better because of developing our understanding of others. Professionally matured teachers will be able to understand others and learn from this difference. Furthermore, Alexandrou and Swaffield find a connection between teacher leadership, which they see as a form of leadership, and professional development, which is a form of learning.

3.3 Moral Purpose

Schools need to break the cultures that support hierarchical organizations as they did in the past and instead promote cultures with moral imperatives and equity. The South African schools need moral leaders who will fight for ethical actions in their schools. School leaders need to understand what is right and what needs to be done for effectiveness. Belcher [11] argues that in the face of transient accountability, moral leadership can prove not to be the right thing to do but it may lead to the outcomes sought by politicians. School leaders deal with a number of people every day and there are many who have built their name as astute leaders over the years. But it takes one small event to destroy all that reputation. An astute leader can misplace R100 and this can cost him all the respect he had earned. Schools today need moral thinkers who will rehumanize schools and be courageous to stand for their learners and their families. Many schools in South Africa are situated in low socio-economic areas where families struggle and it would take effective moral leaders lead change whilst also touching the lives of the learners they teach.
Branson [12] emphasizes the power of the leaders’ personal values in influencing their leadership practice. “The formation of any intuitions, instincts, feelings, and emotions is in response to a given situation are formed within educational leaders from their own personalized values” [12]. Wharton [13] also points out that immoral behaviour persists in organizations because of two things: a failure to see that the essence of leadership is moral behaviour and a misunderstanding of how moral actions arise and are inculcated in the workplace.

This immoral behaviour needs leaders who will be strong and resilient. Steward [14] argues for the need for school leaders to embrace high levels of emotional resilience. He defines resilience as a virtue of having moral purpose, having persistence in the face of difficulty, maintaining hope against odds, being optimistic, courage and having the capacity to recover quickly from setbacks. Furthermore, Kirshenbaum [15] affirmed that morals and values are embodied by character education. Moreover, Kirshenbaum states that character traits and goals of character education include respect, responsibility, compassion, self-discipline and loyalty. Another goal of morality is to produce autonomous individuals who know those moral values and are committed to acting in a manner consistent with them [15].

“Leadership is not about ‘technical’ (or job) knowledge, it is about having followers, those who willingly work their hearts out to get great work done” [13]. Besides, Wharton contends that moral leadership is about engendering respect within the organization top to bottom.

The leaders in the schools under study underscored the role of moral leadership. They also pointed out that without values of morality and ethics few schools could survive. Hoffman and Burrello [16] emphasize morality in effective leadership by arguing for a need for leaders to be moral agents as well. Respect of traditions, equal consideration of all as well as instilling a sense of global citizenship is some aspects that leaders as moral agents would engender. Bilimleri [17] points out that school leaders should adopt values such as professional honour, honesty, courtesy, objective participation and reconcile these values with own standards.

3.4 Turnaround leadership

In his book, *Turnaround Leadership* Michael Fullan [18] demonstrates that school leaders can transform even the worst of situation into an opportunity and reshape the school. He explores how school leaders can focus on long-term goals of the organization as they try to bring sustainable and meaningful reforms. Teachers should be able to change the circumstances in which they work and it takes conscientious leaders to lead transformation of low performing schools. For many schools in South Africa we need leaders who will be able to turn their schools around hence many talk of the need for Turnaround Leadership. School turnaround leaders can create schools that are effective, accountable and responsive. Yet these turnaround leaders need to be prepared as a number of schools can be labelled as failing schools. The district offices should run continuous programs unlike once off workshops to enhance an unending work ethic and commitment in all schools. It may be challenging to prepare school leaders who can lead turnaround leadership but the results are immensely favourable for schools.

As we plan South Africa’s future schools in all principals’ preparatory programs, turnaround leadership should be compulsory and trainees should focus on various cases on how to shape schools that are intent on success. This will need mentors of both the school leaders and managers as well as teachers for turnaround leadership should be a priority for everyone in a school especially if we have to take shared leadership notions seriously. Miles [19] uses the term transformational turnaround approaches which she describes expectations that principals share leadership responsibilities with teachers as well as teacher leaders by developing a shared leadership framework. “The framework allows all staff involved in the turnaround process to clearly identify their own leadership roles, the roles of others and opportunities for collaboration within those roles” [19]. Teachers need to analyse the school’s needs and be committed to learners’ achievement. These are among the cornerstones of turnaround leadership. Miles also speaks of the use of Turnaround Intervention Model, something we may need to adapt for the use of lowest performing schools.

Fullwood [20] argues that there are themes related to leadership responsibilities when it comes to the practice of turnaround leaders and these include trust, communication, learning and shared leadership. School leaders in low performing schools need to be aware of these characteristics. In schools where there is no trust and the principals marginalize people-centeredness, it would be difficult to attain the positive results of turnaround leadership. Many low performing schools in South Africa experience higher failure rates, objectionable cultures, unpredictable climate. Furthermore,
there tends to be an air of suspicion among teachers who might want to avoid being blamed for the school’s failure.

3.5 Cooperation and Competition

An effective school principal will support and nurture cooperation and cooperation among staff members. The participants in the case study reiterated the need for schools with elements of shared leadership and cooperation. The philosophy of Ubuntu as discussed above explicated the value of cooperation in any organization. In the Zenex-ACE Research, it was clear how school managers sought cooperation with other role-players within and outside the school. “Collaboration with partners external to the school is a new leadership dimension that is increasingly recognized as a clear role for school leaders” [21]. This also includes cooperating with surrounding schools and local community for improved policy and practice. Furthermore, there is the need to manage competition that can be very detrimental to school success and effective school leaders will know how to ensure that teachers always collaborate to steer the achievement of learners. In the ACE study, it was clear in several schools that there was less evidence of teacher collaboration in the schools. The hierarchical nature of the apartheid schools pervades, as teachers tend to foster competition among themselves – but this has a potential of killing teamwork, solidarity and teamwork. As discussed above under Ubuntu, the collaborative school culture is more suitable for building successful schools.

Furthermore, Tlusciak-Deliowska [22] claims that school leaders need to build these supportive relationships, which are more likely to ensure that teachers bring forth innovative ideas that would build the school. We should see collaboration moving beyond districts and provinces. Leaders should always read it by understanding that their individual schools will be successful if school around are also successful. Achievement will be more meaningful if more schools are successful. Working together and collaborating within schools means that schools and their leaders can achieve a number of goals and in situations where schools work together:

- Stakeholders have equal voice and authority.
- Stakeholders have common goals, monitor progress, celebrate success.
- Leaders communicate goals, inspire and provide support.
- Teachers work in teams, learn, review, innovate, and enable parents and leaders.
- Parents show interest in their children’s learning, use voice, and are responsive.
- The district provides space and support. [23]

As society, we sometimes forget or tend to ignore in school leadership and management is the relationship between teacher labour unions and school managers. Yet, for sustainable change and meaningful transformation, labour unions need to be roped in as part of the partners in schools. Unions that are propelled by teacher professionalism and principals who are ethical in their approach will build effective schools with other role players. Effective teacher unions can help ‘shock’ schools into becoming organizations that are more effective and offer teachers a greater sense of professionalism and dignity [24].

3.6 Defining Leadership Practices

One of the major flaws in the principals’ practice is the inability to understand and define their own practices. In addition, when principals cannot do this any style can be appropriate in any situation. Principals need to know themselves, know their strengths to be able to understand their staff. Kokemuller [25] points out that one’s leadership styles based on personal preferences combined with the culture and nature of one’s work. There are countless number of leadership styles but usually literature points out that leaders fit in one of the following four styles; Autocratic, Managerial, Participative as well as Coaching. It is very difficult to say which of these is most appropriate because situations and organizations are not the same. For a leadership style to be effective, it needs to meet not only the needs of the school but the needs of the staff as well. Frequently, those who are effective are those who use eclectic approaches and be contingent informed by the circumstances. Usually school principals will talk of untenable situation and bad climate in their schools not knowing that their leadership style impact on the climate in their schools.

The style of leadership has an immense impact on learner achievement and any style selected should be congruent with the principal’s personality. There are several models as there are leadership styles and again here it is critical to choose the more relevant one. Literature spells out four models that
leaders can choose from to create strong leadership and these are transformational, transactional, inspirational and instructional leadership models. How one utilizes any of the strategies discussed in other sections above will also be informed by the kind of models one selects. Knowing oneself is as important as caring and understanding one’s staff. Smith [26] contends:

> It is important that leaders take the time to get to know their staff and show a genuine care and concern for them as people and as professionals. It is also essential to put classroom instruction at the forefront on a daily basis. This can be a challenge because of both time and lack of knowledge in this area. School divisions must provide the necessary support to assist leaders in building up a level of comfort that allows them to truly understand and implement each of the four leadership styles that make up the integrated leadership model.

Perhaps the mistake that many principals do is to choose either leadership or management without understanding the complementary role each of these entail. Arnold [27] highlights the pressures on today’s organization as he points out that it can be detrimental to choose one over the other because each has its strengths and weaknesses. Arnold goes on to state that we need to think of the two as symbiotic if management is the head then leadership is the heart. School principals need to be able to use some of these terms to define who they are and what their envisaged role is in guiding their schools to success. In many ineffective schools, the school managers or leaders do not understand their role as people at the helm; they cannot define whether they are leaders or managers.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the final analysis, effective leaders understand their role as they lead their schools. In today’s schools all over the world, we need schools that would endure change initiatives. Empowered principals will not only define their own management and leadership styles but will also be able to empower others to be agents of change and change agents. There are no ways that disempowered principals will create other leaders among staff members and principals need to be aware at all times that, they are the source of leadership influence in their schools. Few principals will know how to improve their practice if they do not deeply understand their current roles in their schools.

REFERENCES


