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CHALLENGES FOR RURAL SCHOOL LEADERS IN A DEVELOPING CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY ON LEADERSHIP PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE RURAL PRINCIPALS

ABSTRACT

School leaders in all settings require suitable integration of leadership knowledge and skills to respond effectively to the many challenges that beset them in their daily work. However, it is argued that the rural context creates additional and distinctive challenges for school leaders, as rural schools have unique challenges and traits that differentiate them markedly from those in urban areas. To help understand how rural leaders in rural schools deal with the challenges and complexity in their work five schools were selected for the study. A qualitative research paradigm was selected. The selection process involved a purposive sample. Three of the five principals on whom the case studies were based were in their first year and the other two were in their third and fourth year as a permanent teaching principal, respectively. Principals were interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

It was found that the desirability of principals acquiring a rural lens as a strategy for enhancing leadership has important implications for their initial preparation and also for their ongoing professional training.

Keywords: *Principal, development, leadership, challenge, rural school.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study examined the leadership practices of rural school principals who have led their schools to significant improvements in learner academic achievement. It is argued that the rural context creates additional and distinctive challenges for school leaders. These unique challenges, in turn (Arnold, 2004), impede school leaders' attempts to carry out their multifaceted roles effectively. Sustained improvement in learners' academic performance is placed more at risk, with an ever-widening learning outcomes gap between rural and urban learners (Lamkin, 2006). Nobody much cares to talk about the challenge of educating poor rural learners. In reality poverty's effect as a cultural condition does not discriminate on geography; it matters little whether a learner levels in single-wide trailer or in a double-story house. What does matter is this: the challenge of educating our country's poor rural children has not received the attention it deserves (Lamkin, 2006). Most of what we know about effective leadership practice, the type of practice that leads to meaningful (Arnold, 2004) academic reform has been gleaned from studying urban and suburban school leaders. Conversely, the leadership practices of rural school principals have generated little academic interest and even less scholarship. As a result, there exists a significant gap in the knowledge base regarding the work and practice of effective rural school leaders.

In 2006, Waters and Marzano published their meta-analysis of effective school leadership practice. In this authoritative work, Waters and Marzano reviewed hundreds of previous studies on school leadership in order to identify those certain leadership practices that could be directly linked with improving learner achievement. In the end, their research identified six specific leadership responsibilities or correlates that were linked in a statistically significant way, to improved levels of learner achievement. Waters and

Marzano's six correlates now present the current standard for effective school leadership practice. Today's school principals are accountable for learner performance on high stake assessments regardless of disparities in resources (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). To promote and positively influence student success, principals must understand the factors that influence success, and must reflect upon and working towards improving their practice (Starr & White, 2008). Principals must also possess an understanding of the context in which they work in order to meet the needs of the learners and community to which they are accountable (Riley, 2013).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The accountability movement has resulted in increased demands on principal leaders. School principals are expected to serve as instructional leaders for their schools by devoting time and attention to teacher evaluation, curriculum and assessment development and student achievement data analysis (Monk, 2007). At the same time, principals continue to serve as managers of their schools. They create schedules, supervise staff, and in many cases call substitutes. Despite increased responsibility for instruction and student achievement, principals continue to spend more than 60% of their time on managerial tasks (Robinson, Hohepe & Lloyd, 2009).

Rural circumstances create challenges for rural school principals. Rural school districts often are not able to offer learners the same resources offered in suburban, and sometimes urban, school districts (Oakes & Maday, 2009). Although rural school communities are characterised by benefits such as smaller schools, close-knit communities and strong relationships between learners and teachers, rural school, districts and communities face a number of barriers to achieving academic success. These barriers include lack of funding, difficulty in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, outdated facilities, limited technology, and a community culture that does not value higher education (Jimmerson, 2005). Lack of resources and limited advanced course offerings in rural school districts, according to Halsey (2011) have been linked with academic performance deficits.

High-stakes testing creates stress and frustration in schools that are struggling to meet achievement benchmarks. The level of concern is compounded in rural schools, where resources to improve student achievement are not readily available (Starr & White, 2008). Regardless of uncontrollable factors that negatively influence learner achievement, accountability for learner success as measured by standardised tests rests with the school principal.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to examine the leadership practices and challenges of rural school principals. The principals who were the focus of this case study had a track record of academic improvement and increased learner achievement in schools they had previously led. The reason for doing the study will also provide some contextual background to the article. The first is their numerical significance: a large number of schools in the Limpopo province fall into the category of rural schools, led by a principal who has a substantial teaching commitment. According to Southworth (2004), principals of rural schools tend to have more direct influence on the quality of teaching, providing them with powerful opportunities to bring about change and improvement.

Rural schools particularly when they are remote or isolated can be vulnerable if their communities decline in employment opportunities and infrastructure (Pegg, 2007). Thus from a social justice perspective it is vital that principals located in rural and isolated environments are able to take full advantage of powerful opportunities for change and improvement because parents and learners may have little opinion but to accept the

educational provision on offer from the local school. Considering the exigencies of recognising, clarifying and valuing leadership of rural schools, the dearth of research into leadership of these organisations (Southworth, 2004) is surprising and provides another reason for the interest on investigating leadership in this specific context.

4. RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Educational researchers have long sought to establish a correlation between effective principal leadership and student achievement. The assertion that principals impact student achievement is widely accepted; the influence of the principal on student achievement, though indirect, has been found to be second only to the influence of the teacher (Johnson & Strange, 2007). A review of historical research on principal leadership indicated that beliefs and expectations about the role of the principal in South Africa in the last decades were reflective of the nation's political and social conditions at the time, according to Monk (2007). As the importance of student achievement moved to the forefront, the principal's role was redefined with an increasing focus on instructional leadership. However, despite principals increasing accountability for student achievement, management responsibilities continued (Catano & Strange, 2006).

The study was designed to contribute to the body of knowledge on leadership practices of effective rural principals. Studies point to the importance of understanding the influence of context in principal leadership. Though much time and attention have been devoted to the study of principal leadership in urban schools and districts, research on principal leadership for academic success in rural schools and districts is not prevalent (Oakes & Maday, 2009).

In the nation's current accountability system, finding out what principals do to effect student achievement is of prime importance to educational leaders. Johnson and Strange (2007) argued that research was needed that explored how leaders responded flexibly to manage their schools and to create conditions for learner success.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research approach. For the qualitative researcher, the goal is to seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lingam, 2012). This study of leadership practices of effective principals lends itself to the qualitative methods precisely because gaining a better understanding of what constitutes effective leadership practice is by nature a subjective value-laden pursuit.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative research as a broad approach to the study of a social phenomenon. They described the characteristics of qualitative research as: (a) taking place in the natural world, (b) using multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic, (c) focussing on context, (d) being emergent rather than tightly prefigured, and (e) being fundamentally interpretive. The study of leadership practices of effective principals reflects many of these same characteristics. First, principal leadership takes place in the natural or real world and not in a scientific laboratory. Thus it would be appropriate to approach this study of school leadership within that same natural setting. The study of school principal leadership practices within certain Lephalale rural schools in the Limpopo province, where learner academic achievement has improved over the past five years, provides a unique contextual focus.

This study's intent is to gain special insight through first-person accounts of the ways in which individuals experience school leadership in rural schools where learner achievement is on the rise. In this fashion, this study views the question of effective leadership practices through the experiences of both school principals and the people who observe their work. By

studying the phenomenon of effective rural principals who lead schools through a process of rising student achievement and asking them to share their leadership experiences, a case study approach with a phenomenological lens best uncover useful, pragmatic insights into the leadership practices of these successful principals.

According to Stake (2003), the most unique aspect of case study research lies in the selection of the particular cases to be studied. Because the goal is to select those cases that provide the best opportunity to learn, qualitative researchers often use purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007). With purposeful sampling, the researcher purposefully selects those individuals and sites for study that hold the greatest potential for providing a better understanding of a study's research problem and central phenomenon. For this study, the criterion-based methodology was used. The subject pool consisted of all the rural schools in the Lephalale school district in the Limpopo province. Twenty one principals were invited to take part. Through the criterion-based methodology the sample was narrowed to five school principals.

The case study approach to qualitative analysis is a specific way of collecting, organising and analysing data (Stake, 2003). Standardisation, open-ended interviews were the primary source of data collection for this research study. Interviews were conducted on each of the five rural Lephalale school sites with each principal. Additionally, interviews, was conducted with at least one principal, teacher and a school governing body member from each school. Each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes in length, audio taped and transcribed for analytical purposes. According to Horst and Martin (2007), the goal of the case records is to take the reader into the case situation in this instance the working lives of each of the five principals.

Triangulation serves to clarify the meaning of the data collected for the researcher by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen (Stake, 2003; Creswell, 2007). In this regard, the study collected data through multiple sources (principals, teacher and governing body member) and multiple data types (interview, observation and written communication) instead of relying strictly on interviews with the five principals. Data analysis in qualitative research follows a familiar pattern (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Data is collected, analysed, coded and sorted into themes. These themes are then presented in table or figure form and published for discussion (Creswell, 2007). For this study, participant interviews served as the primary source of data. Each participant's interviewed information was transcribed and analysed for citations related to specific leadership practices. Data analysis focussed on examining thematic similarities and differences in leadership practice among the study's five principal subjects. For this study, the thematic focus was on identifying those principal's practices and habits that have helped a select group of rural school leaders improve learner academic performance in their schools.

The interviews transcripts were reviewed and references to specific leadership practices were highlighted and identified. In total, 223 specific citations were identified among the 15 interviews. For data verification and authentication purposes, each leadership practice had to have been cited by at least two interview participants in order to be recognised for this study. The most frequently referenced practices are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 : Most frequently cited principal leadership practices

Practice	Citations
Teaching staff develops school's curriculum	24
Has an open door policy	22
No limitations to principal's authority	21
Encourages professional development for teachers	20

Classroom management and discipline	19
Teaching strategies and delivery	17
Teacher motivation	13
Teacher recruitment	12
Student achievement data is analysed for GAPS	11
Secures money for technology upgrades	9

6. DISCUSSION

The data revealed a few interesting facts regarding leadership practices. Several references to teacher motivation and teacher recruitment were expected, several practices contained in Table 1 were not expected. The practice on the *principal's authority* was cited 21 times – the third highest in the study. Most of the five principals responded in a manner similar to that given by Principal B. “We can make any decision as long as we take responsibility for it. All our actions are based on trust, performance and respect”.

Principal E said that “Although we are going to make mistakes in making decisions, to trust us make a world of difference”. This sentiment is echoed by Steyn (2012) in saying that new conditions and expectations in education can create new challenges and perspectives for the role of the principal. “My principal is a man you can trust at all times and takes responsibility for most things at our school”, one teacher commented.

The highest leadership practice “*Teaching staff develops school's curriculum*” has reference. In order for curriculum planning to be effective, the school curriculum must address the school's needs both at local level and also as articulated in the education policy. School curriculum planning works on developing an awareness of these needs, not only in terms of managing the local environment of the school, but also in terms of the wider needs of the learners as members of society.

Principal C indicated that she aims at the holistic development of learners who attend the school. In order to achieve this aim “I expect proper and systematic planning from teachers including lesson plans and scheme of work”. One teacher at the same school (C) indicated that when “I came to this school I went to class without any written lesson plan, but the principal identified the gaps and expects interactive teaching and full involvement of learners in the teaching learning process”.

Another teacher said that “the principal is actively involved in curriculum planning, and he expects us to take extra responsibilities and leadership roles in developing the curriculum”. The principals in the study, conveyed their expectation regarding curriculum development, to teachers (through planned class visits, staff meetings, individual meetings and planning sessions).

“It is not easy to be the instructional leader” principal D said. He explained that principals often travel to district offices to make administrative arrangements. The more remote the school is, the longer the principal is away from the school, and the less time spent by the principal on supervising curriculum structuring and planning. Mulkeen (2005) indicated that principals might have curriculum structuring and planning problems in rural areas for the above mentioned reason.

“We are not visited by officials from district very often and therefore the principal became the curriculum leader for us” one governing body member said. Teachers indicated that they planned the curriculum according to the needs of the schools. School curriculum planning works on developing an awareness of these needs, not only in terms of managing the local environment of the school but also in terms of the wider needs of the learners.

Principals in the study help teachers to perform as designer and implementer of instruction. Teachers at every level prepare plans that aid in the organisation and delivery of their daily lessons. Regardless of the format, all teachers need to make wise decisions about the strategies and methods they will employ to help learners move systematically toward learner goals. Principal E indicated that “the more organised a teacher is, the more effective the teaching and learning that would take place. Remember I am teaching as well, because of the small school. So I need to be on top of my game as well, regarding curriculum”.

A third cited leadership practice was *has an open door policy*. Principal B said “whether it be a learner, a parent or a teacher, I am always willing to discuss issues they might have. At first people were scared to come to my office but they are not afraid of me anymore, and I think it rubs off on teachers and parents”.

A fourth leadership practice, viz. *Encourage the professional development of teachers*, highly influences the practices and attitude of the teachers. Teachers from all the schools in the study said that a teacher could not be able to develop lesson plans and to teach in an interactive way if he/she lacks pedagogical knowledge. Though some teachers in the schools have pre-service professional qualifications, principals encourage them to further their studies. “Even with a qualification teachers have not developed their required pedagogical skills due to some deficiencies in the curriculum and assessment procedure of the institutions offering these courses (Principal D)”.

“With the limited money we have available for professional development the principal tries hard to send at least two teachers every year for in-service programs” one governing body member commented. Whereas teachers lack updated professional knowledge, school based teacher development activities provide the best opportunity for teachers to develop themselves professionally (Lingam, 2012).

All principals in the study expect that teachers should collaborate with one another and consult the principal if they have teaching and learning issues. The staff meetings, some planning sessions, and sharing expertise at classroom level were the examples of in-house teacher development activities and collaboration given by the principals.

A fifth leadership practice *Classroom management and discipline* in rural areas present additional difficulties for school principals. One concern is that teacher absenteeism, which may be very high in rural areas, could perhaps create serious constraints on effective classroom management and discipline. Medical problems of teachers in isolated areas may also weaken the control and discipline of teachers. A visit to a doctor which might take an hour or two in an urban area, can involve an absence of three days for a rural teacher.

“It will be unfair to see all classroom difficulties in terms of policing, teacher misbehaviour” principal A said. “Systems fail teachers and can undermine teacher morale for example failure to pay teachers on time and a delay in promotion” (Principal E). That is why my “governing body chairperson and I try everything we can to see that teachers get their salary on time and if they are transferred to another school, everything runs smoothly”, according to principal D. Teachers in rural areas often feel neglected by the authorities. Such perceptions may lower morale among rural teachers and deepen management and discipline problems (Burke, Marx & Knowenstein, 2012).

A sixth leadership practice referred to *teacher motivation* and the extent to which teachers are motivated is a significant factor in influencing the delivery of quality education according to Riley (2013). A good working environment according to Herzberg’s two factor theory (motivation and hygiene), will determine the quantity and quality of knowledge children receive, the level of skills to enhance the development of young minds; and the sense of security learners feel. “The difficulties we have in rural schools, make it not easy to motivate teachers and to retain teachers in rural schools. We are trying to make working conditions

as attractive as possible and to keep our staff happy and hope they will stay at our school”, according to Principal B.

Working conditions have continually played a large role in teacher decisions to migrate or leave the profession (Jimmerson, 2005). “We hope by assisting teachers with administrative support, resources if available and with decision-making, it will help to motivate them”, most of the principals echoed.

A seventh leadership practice is *teacher recruitment*. In tough economic times, money, or the lack thereof, can be a key deterrent when enticing quality educators to a rural school. Rural teachers also reportedly feel unprepared to meet the array of unique needs of learners in these communities (Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Strange, 2011).

“Our principal leaves cards with positive notes on our tables in the class room, and even mail some motivating notes to our homes to keep us motivated” one teacher commented. “My principal is a respected person in the community and she listens and respects us”, another teacher said. One governing body member (School B) indicated that they meet with universities to identify final year students that will fit into rural schools and communities.

An eighth leadership practice *student achievement data is analysed for gaps*. All principals indicated that they now use test results data to improve on teaching and learning. They encourage teachers to use the data from assessment tasks and tests or examinations to set new targets for their respective subjects.

The ninth leadership practice is to *secure money for technology upgrades*. Teachers should be able to utilize information-communication technology (ICT) as teaching and learning tools (Monk, 2007). However, this is still not feasible in many of the rural schools where basic amenities such as electricity supply are still inaccessible.

“We do not have many computers, but we try and keep up with technology in sending our teachers for computer training. The ideal is to have more computers and teaching programmes so that learners can benefit as well” (Principal E, teacher). “It is not easy because we do not have the money to support us in improving technology” (governing body member from school C).

It is imperative that appreciable numbers of new teaching positions - many of which will be in rural areas, need to be filled and equipped with modern facilities that will make rural teachers teach with ease (Clarke & Wildy, 2004).

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

As education in the accountability era continues to evolve, rural school principals will be expected to ensure that all learners demonstrate academic achievement at increasing levels of proficiency. Distinguished levels of leadership will be required in order for rural educational leaders to meet the rigorous demands placed upon them. Rural school principals will need to balance leadership responsibilities and priorities, while at the same time building staff trust and relationships, to sustain educational outcomes for all learners. A good plan has to address poverty and sustainable development, as well as promoting social cohesion – that is, the need to work together to solve problems (Oakes & Maday, 2009).

In order to improve a rural school coupled with the motivation of teachers, both the principal and the teachers need further professional and pedagogical skills to perform their expected roles more effectively. The study demonstrated that the specific leadership practices presented in Table 1 provided a comprehensive foundation for evaluating rural school leadership. This framework of leadership practices should be considered by educational

leaders as a foundation for professional assessment, self-assessment and for planning professional growth for building rural school principals.

Professional development for school leaders at both the local school district and university levels should focus on both the learning-centred leadership framework and on change principles. If education systems as a whole are to embrace a constructive approach (Lewis, 2003) to succession planning in rural and remote districts, it is helpful to refer to the notion of the rural lens. Policy makers and administrators who examine the implications of succession planning through a rural lens must be more inclined to consider the distinctiveness of rural and remote communities in order to rethink ways in which appropriate educational leadership can be nurtured with these environments. These strategies should include a re-examination of how rural principals are currently prepared, developed and supported to work in rural communities, so they are more likely to find such postings appealing and are better equipped to make a difference to the performance and vitality of the schools they serve.

There must be provision for job-embedded and real-time opportunities for teachers to improve their practice and connect professionally, observing and co-teaching with others, sharing successful strategies and lessons learned, and visiting other schools. Leaders need to find effective, rural-specific responses to address them.

8. CONCLUSION

The study investigated the challenges for rural school principals and the leadership practices they implement for effective schooling. Rural schools face many challenges that do not exist in urban areas, such as geographic isolation, poor working conditions of teachers, lack of resources and poor community involvement.

Given that the school leaders have highlighted the challenges they face in their work, the authorities concerned cannot be complacent; they must try to take constructive steps to make rural education as attractive and effective as possible.

Provision of teaching resources and supply of well-qualified teachers together with adequate funding would make a significant contribution to facilitating the work of rural school leaders and in achieving school effectiveness and improvement.

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