Exploring the Leadership Practices of Primary School Principals through Transformational Leadership: A Selected Case in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Despite conflicting findings about the effect of leadership styles on school performance, existing literature indicates that there is a positive relationship between transformational leadership practices and teacher productivity. This study used transformational leadership theory as a lens. Five components of transformational leadership were identified namely shared vision, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and participative decision-making. Qualitative research approach was deployed to find out whether principals exhibit transformational leadership style and in-depth interviews were used as data collection instruments. Purposive sampling was used to select five circuit managers, five principals and five teachers. The main research question pursued in this study was: Do primary school principals in Waterberg District Education demonstrate transformational leadership practices? The purpose of this article was to explore whether primary school principals demonstrate transformational leadership practices in Waterberg Education District in Limpopo. According to

the findings of the study, the views of teachers and principals to a significant extent indicate that principals do demonstrate transformational leadership attributes in all respects. These views are contrary to those of circuit managers who argue that principals do not completely exhibit transformational leadership attributes. The findings of this study have practical implications in the sense that if considered by department of education in Limpopo, it will impact on policy matters and will also add to the current scholarship in educational leadership.

Further, it is recommended that the Department of Basic Education which is responsible for the administration of primary schools encourages primary schools principals to employ the elements of transformational leadership identified in this study.

Introduction

The public sector including schools did not escape the rapid changes that came with the democratisation of South Africa in 1994 and some of these changes contributed to a dramatic increase in the complexity of South African public institutions (Schutte & Barkhuizen, 2016). Since the dawn of democracy and the transformation of the education system in particular, primary schools face massive challenges (Modisaotsile, 2012). These challenges are multifaceted and can be classified as operational, systemic, transformational, technical, and resource-related as well as challenges relating to staff members, and in this case, teachers who are not committed, who are unmotivated, unsatisfied and excluded from various decision making processes (Uis, 2012).

Principals as accounting officers in schools have the responsibility to ensure that teachers perform and to make sure that learning takes place. In doing this, they have to ensure that teachers are motivated, committed, satisfied and are involved in decision making processes. On the other hand, circuit managers as supervisors of principals have the responsibility of not only holding principals accountable, but also to support them to ensure that schools are transformed for better performance. The role of principals and circuit managers are strategic because many schools fail to start on time and their academic activities are abandoned for other trivial engagements (Nuku, 2007). Surprisingly, principals encounter cases of ill-discipline among teachers such as

laziness, frequent absence from school, incitement of learners against authority, drunkenness, financial misconduct, fighting in the staff-room, misuse of school property, threatening behavior and acts of discourtesy (Nuku, 2007). These behaviors illustrate impacts on the quality of education, which is foundational and basic. The former South African cabinet minister in the treasury, Trevor Manuel affirmed in his diagnostic overview that the quality of schooling is substandard, especially in the township schools (Modisaotsile, 2012). In Supporting Manuel's claim, Spaulls (2013) points out that South Africa has the worst education system as compared to other middle-income countries.

There is greater evidence that the leadership style escalates or decreases commitment of subordinates (Asrar-ul-Haqa & Kuchinke, 2016). Olajide and Israel (2016) argue that there is a relationship between the leadership styles and organisational productivity. Good leadership in schools is needed to ensure that teachers attend to their responsibilities diligently and that the importance of education is taken seriously (Modisaotsile, 2012). Schaubroeck, Lam and Peng (2016) posit that transformational leadership theory refers to a leadership style through which leaders stimulate positive change in followers' performances by altering their views about themselves, others and their efforts. The next sections will focus on the problem statement, the theoretical framework used in the study, the methodology, findings and the discussions of the study and finally the conclusion.

Problem statement

The leadership approach deployed by principals can impact the school positively or negatively. There adequate empirical evidence which suggests that transformational leadership practices does a positive influence on organisational performance outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). This study is intended to address the following philosophical assumption: Teachers in Waterberg District Education in Limpopo are generally not provided with opportunities to engage in crafting visions, do not participate in decision making, not committed, demotivated and dissatisfied. As a result of that, these schools experience underperformance. Nuku (2017) argues that the challenges facing primary schools are multifaceted and include: teacher dissatisfaction, non-commitment of teachers, chronic absenteeism by teachers, low morale, poor work ethics by teachers, teacher late coming, overcrowding

in classes and lack of technical resources. This article is premised on the assumption that principals who demonstrate transformational leadership practices can impact schools positively (Para-González, Jiménez-Jiménez & Martínez-Lorente, 2018). The objective of this study was to respond to this main research question: *Do primary school principals' leadership practices demonstrate transformational leadership attributes?*

The transformational leadership theory

The theory of transformational leadership is apposite to the South African education system. As discussed earlier, transformational leadership does have an effect on employee behaviour. According to Homrig (2001), Burns (1978) is credited with developing the theory of transformational leadership. The development of this theory was never intended to focus on educational settings, particularly schools. It only became the subject of systematic empirical inquiry in the school contexts recently (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Since the development of this theory, more leadership scholars such as Leithwood and Jantzi (1999, 2006), Gray and Ross (2006) and Hallinger (2004), elaborated on the transformational leadership theory. Homrig (2001) mentioned that Bass (1985) is regarded as the disciple of Burns because he further studied the theory of transformational leadership. This theory is relevant to this study because principals as leaders are critical in inspiring their subordinates and Burns used this theory to describe the ideal situation between leaders and followers and this study focused on the relationship between the primary school principals as leaders and teachers as subordinates.

Nguni, Sleegers and Denessen (2006), Schaubroeck et al (2016), Hoch, William, Bommer, Dulebohn and Wu (2016), Wang, Qian, Ou, Huang, Xu and Xia (2016) identify transformational leadership with the leaders' focus on ensuring that subordinates are influenced positively to contribute towards organisational performance. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) and Sahin (2004) describe transformational school leadership as the approach that focuses on the school's vision, goals and motivation, offering individual support, symbolising professional practices and values, demonstrating high performance expectations and developing structures to further participation in school decisions.

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Constituent components of transformational leadership

Borrowing from scholars such as Leithwood and Jantzi (1999), Nguni, Sleegers and Denessen (2006), Leithwood and Jantzi (2006:205) and Gray and Ross (2006), the central common elements that constitute transformational leadership are shared vision, commitment, motivation, job satisfaction and participative decision-making processes. Transformational leadership is founded on the principle of empowering and supporting subordinates in order to achieve organisational effectiveness. Taking the plethora of scholarship surveyed in this article into consideration and the dominant constituent components identified, namely shared vision, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and participative decision making, transformational leadership is therefore defined as the leader's ability to develop a shared vision, inspiring commitment through motivation and participative decision-making with an objective of achieving employees' satisfaction. Five identified components of transformational leadership are highlighted as follow:

Shared vision

Shared vision is the essential feature of transformational leadership. Ping (2016) defines shared vision as "a future picture that everyone in the organiation carries in their heads and hearts and is willing to work for". Huffman (2003) proposes that outlining a vision based on shared values is a crucial step that school managers must consider as they lead their schools through transformation efforts. In examining shared vision, Ping (2016) concludes that for an organisation to do well, it has to share a vision that encourages staff members to wish to succeed. It is the responsibility of the principal to initiate the development of a robust shared school vision.

Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) state that included in transformational leadership is building the school vision, developing specific goals and priorities and holding high performance expectations. To be able to achieve the goals and the objectives of the school, thorough planning by the principal and other role players is needed. Ping (2016) further argues that a vision that has been shared outlines the joint values, monitors the behaviour of the colleagues and stimulates the school to progress. Gurley, Peters, Collins and Fifolt (2016) maintain that a shared, well-expressed and articulated vision is characteristic of effective schools, a

vehicle for building more inclusive and equitable schools that can have an impact on school improvement efforts.

The school is governed by various policies that are provided by the department and are internally drafted. In addition, each school is expected to have developed a vision and a mission that direct the school. The majority of teachers in Waterberg district are members of different recognised trade unions and it is very important that principals engage them in crafting schools visions. Isolating these unionised teachers can create problems and they will not be able to share and own the vision because they have not participated in it. The principal as the leader of the school has to lead the processes of policy development in consultation with role players such as teachers, teacher trade union officials and members of the school governing body. When these role players are provided with opportunities by the principal to participate in the crafting of the vision and mission of the school, plans and policies, this demonstrates transformational leadership practices.

Motivation

Motivation refers to the processes of both initiating and sustaining behaviour (Luthans, 2011; Garcia, Patall & Pekrun, 2016). In this article, motivation implies the act of getting someone to act on a situation (Burton, 2012). Teachers face challenges that impact negatively on their motivation levels. Nuku (2007) postulates that amongst the known challenges that teachers face includes curriculum changes, learner misbehavior and interpersonal relations. Teachers in Waterberg district in Limpopo have from time to time to contend with curriculum changes, from Curriculum 2005 to Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement which replaced Curriculum 2005. These curriculum changes negatively affect teachers in the district. Le Roux (2002) is of the view that fear and instability related to restructuring and redeployment policies also threaten job security and promotion prospects. Every year the Department of Education in Limpopo does staff surveys. These surveys check the number of learners per school against the number of teachers. If the enrolment has dropped, the school staff, teachers in particular have to be reduced according to the number of learners. Nguni et al (2006) argue that transformational leaders carry upon their shoulders the responsibility to inspire followers to do more than what was originally expected of them. Supporting Nguni

et al, Perko, Kinnunen, Tolvanen and Feldt (2016) posit that leadership plays an integral part in members' achievement of work tasks through motivation.

Commitment

Teachers have both the contractual and professional responsibility and obligations to deliver on the curriculum expectations. They have to display the willingness to work by upholding high standards of work ethics. They have to ensure that they come to school on time, attend the classes, supervise learners during their entire stay at school, do not depart earlier, control learners' classwork and homework and are continuously present at school unless absent with reasons. Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) comment that all transformational approaches to leadership share the fundamental aim of fostering high levels of commitment from their subordinates.

Studies conducted on motivation and commitment have identified positive relationships between these constructs. Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe (2004) argue that comparing the definitions of motivation and commitment reveals an obvious similarity; both have been described as energising forces with implications for behaviour. At the same time, Boglera and Somech (2004) state that when the leaders of the organisation are perceived as implementing consultative or participative leadership behaviour, where shared decision-making is prevalent, organisational commitment improves. Endorsing this assertion, Gray and Ross (2006) maintain that teachers in schools branded by transformational principal and practices are more likely than teachers in other schools to express satisfaction with their principal, and to exercise extra effort, and they can be more committed to the organisation. Relating this to the case under investigation, teachers appear not to show commitment in their responsibilities. Most of the time, the researcher observed that teachers use teaching time to focus on other things that have negative bearing on teaching and do not promote commitment. Amongst others, these include union meetings that are held during teaching time, attending memorial services of their colleagues during teaching time. In addition, some teachers do not attend their classes and choose to stay in the staffrooms. As a result of that, transformational leadership practice is needed in order to address such challenges.

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Job satisfaction

Nguni et al. (2006) define job satisfaction as a pleasurable or positive emotional state that results from the employees' job experience. There are various factors that make one to either be satisfied or dissatisfied in ones' employment. When the general working conditions are not appealing to the staff members, it results in complaints and frustration. In the district where this study takes place, teachers are confronted with problems which make them not satisfied. Currently a lot of teachers have resigned due to matters related to school safety, school violence and abusive leadership. In addition, there are schools in Limpopo where classes are attended under trees, and pit toilets are dominant and shacks and other dangerous huts are being used as classrooms (Risimati, 2007). Further, Risimati reports that 239 schools collapsed in Limpopo in 2004. From this number, 14 collapsed in one single day.

The benefits that teachers' receive such as salaries do have an impact on them. Le Roux (2002) claims that unattractive conditions of service, inadequate financial remunerations and insufficient fringe benefits contribute towards teachers' dissatisfaction. Kallay (2007) states that the majority of teachers are angry and confused because they are asked to do the impossible for a salary that places them on par with the semi-skilled or untrained workers in the labour market. The principal as the transformational leader should consistently find innovative ways to compensate for the resources that are not available in schools. The principal should also ensure that the resources that are available are shared equally amongst the teachers.

Participative decision-making process

Young, Hill, Morris and Woods (2016) contend that in decision-making, meaningful discussions must occur among groups. Participative decision-making should be based on commitment to sharing information which benefits all role players namely learners, teachers, and the school as a whole (Young, Hill, Morris & Woods, 2016). Transformational leadership is distinct from traditional views of leadership which apply the top-down approach. Hallinger (2004) indicates that the traditional leadership practices of principals were characterised by comparatively little discussion. Hallinger also posits that schools are less in need of control and more in need of both support and capacity development.

Kallay (2007) argues that there is wide agreement on the basis of international research that top-down policy solutions seeking to bypass teachers will not achieve the desired results. In Limpopo, the majority of the teachers are members of trade unions recognised by the Department of Basic Education. At school level, these teachers are represented by site committees and act in the interest of their members. School Governing Bodies are also important role players who must be part of the decision-making processes.

Methodology

The study was framed within a qualitative research approach because how teachers, principals and circuit managers understand how transformational leadership is demonstrated in primary schools in Waterberg district in Limpopo was the focal interest (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). This assertion is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p. 4) and Leedy and Ormrod (2010) who characterised qualitative research as a situated, naturalistic, and interpretative practice, signifying that researchers examine "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". The research took place in the contexts in which participants' work, which are schools and the circuit offices.

Presentation, discussion and analysis of data

The in-depth-interview data collection method was used because the sample is only limited to only five teachers, five principals and five circuit managers. During the interview processes, probing and prompting were done to obtain more information. The rationale for the inclusion of principals as participants was that they have a better understanding of the challenges primary schools face. The inclusion of the circuit managers and teachers was based on the assumption that they were considered to be information-rich participants and will provide the study with much-needed data. Further, the circuit managers were also important role players because principals account to them.

Participants were sampled from Waterberg education district in Limpopo Province. Purposive sampling helped the researcher to select information-rich participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The interview schedule was used guide the interview processes. Efforts were

made to ensure that the interview questions address the main research question and the problem under investigation. The five identified elements of transformational leadership, namely shared vision, commitment; motivation, job satisfaction and participative decision-making were also helpful in designing the interview schedule. All interviews were recorded after permission was granted by the participants. After obtaining permission letter from the Limpopo Education Department,   consent letters were requested from teachers, principals and circuit mangers in writing to participate in the study. All conditions were clearly stated in the letter requesting participation in the study. These included the right to withdraw from the study and confidentiality. In addition, participants were also informed that there will be no reimbursement or any incentives for participation in research. Data will be stored in one drive application in the cloud and also in the researchers' personal external hard drive. All hard copies containing participants' views will be kept in a safe place for a maximum of five years and there after destroyed.

As indicated earlier, interviews were audio-recorded and after listening to the recorded interview several times, the processes of data analysis were employed. Thematic data analysis was used during the process of data analysis and the findings were categorised in accordance with the views of the participants, namely, first the views of circuit managers, then principals and lastly, teachers. To conceal the names of participants, they were identified as follows: Teachers, T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, Principals, P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and Circuit managers, C1, C2, C3, C and C5. The interview questions were designed in accordance to the five identified transformational leadership components. Data analyses and interpretation were categoried into the views of the three groups of participants, firstly the circuit managers, then the principals and finally the teachers. Selected participants views were quoted verbatim.

The views of circuit managers

The circuit managers responded to a variety of interview questions. On the issue of shared vision, C2, C3, C4 and C5 maintained that the majority of primary school principals are not sharing the development of school visions with other role players. For an example, C5 was very vocal and emphatic and expressed his views as follows:

Yah, ehh, currently, I think that principals of primary schools experience a difficulty in sharing the vision of the school with their staff. Ehh, we see this when we visit the schools. When you visit the school in the absence of the principals, the remaining officials, the HOD or the deputy principal are battling to gather the right information to give to you. They are experiencing a bit of a problem in terms of the mission and the vision of the school. So, they need to be work shopped on the delegation of work at school.

Contrary to the popular view, C1 indicated that primary school principals in her circuit involve role players in developing school visions. On the issue of teacher commitment, the views of C3, C4 and C5 indicated that principals are not doing enough to ensure that teachers are committed to their responsibilities. These circuit managers were also not happy with the engagement of teachers in decision-making processes. When responding to the question dealing with teacher motivation despite challenges they face, the perceptions of C3, C4 and C5 suggest that the majority of school principals ensure that teachers are motivated and remain satisfied. The views of circuit managers indicate that primary school principals operate in contradiction to the requirements of their job description as prescribed by the Department of Education (2004) when it indicates that principals should promote consultation when developing the school vision.

The views of principals

Data from in-depth interviews indicated that P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 suggested that they do ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the development of their school visions. According to Korkmaz (2006), sharing a school vision promotes a feeling of cooperation among stakeholders. It can be argued that these principals promote shared vision. Three school principals indicated that the majority of teachers do not show commitment in some areas such as sporting activities. They also identified late coming and absenteeism of teachers as other challenges. Despite these challenges, all the principals interviewed gave the impression that they do put more effort in trying to encourage commitment from teachers.

Despite the findings, principals tended to present positive scenarios that suggested that they do ensure that teachers are and remain motivated to participate in sports, come to work on time and always at work. These principals cited a number of strategies that indicate that they motivate teachers to work despite the challenges. P1, P2, P3 and P4 indicated that they use different strategies such as acknowledging teachers who are particularly committed. In particular, P3, indicated that as part of their motivation strategy, they do have staff lunches together, during which they verbally thank teachers who go the extra mile. Kadalie (2006) notes that leadership needs to develop strategies that will motivate subordinates. P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 noted that they frequently meet with different role players to get their opinions on various issues affecting their schools. They also indicated that they allow debates on matters that affect the school. P5 responded this way *"Yah, you see, I think that when you have an idea, you must share it with others so that you get a broader base. Seek support and consensus. You must also go to the staff and seek ideas on issues. Seek ideas from different committees. Decision–making in our school is two ways. We go to the educators with the proposals and they also come to us with the ideas. Management will come with the suggestions and the staff makes inputs. The SGB will also be involved. That is how we normally decide on issues".* The views of principal participants to a significant degree show that they ensure that teachers remain satisfied in their profession and that stakeholders are engaged in decision-making processes.

The views of teachers

T1, T2, T3 and T4 are of the view that primary school principals involve stakeholders in developing the school visions. They indicated that principals create opportunities and platforms for engagement during vision development. These opportunities and platforms include different structures and meetings where school matters are discussed. They added that the school governing bodies and the school management team members are also part of the developments taking place in their respective schools. In confirming this assertion, T2 posited: *"The school management team (SMT) was also included because in the first place, the principal hold the meeting with the SGB, the SGB went down to the SMT. From there, we got the views of the educators and the principal took the views of educators back to the SGB and the SGB gave us the green light to formulate and develop the school policy".*

T1, T2, T3 and T4 maintain that the majority of teachers show commitment when it comes to school attendance and time observation. They mentioned that teachers are only absent or late due to circumstances beyond their control. With regard to participation in sports, T2, T3 and T4 indicated that in their schools, participation in sports by teachers is not problematic, unlike the views of T1 and T5 who lamented lack of passion and enthusiasm from the teachers. The views of T2, T3 and T4 on the issue of commitment indicated that to a certain extent, primary school principals try their best in trying to ensure that teachers are committed to their responsibilities. In emphasising the role of principals in ensuring that teachers are committed, Sahin (2004) contends that to achieve high performance, leaders have to encourage their staff members to be committed.

The views of the majority of teachers demonstrated that where possible, the principals try their best to keep teachers motivated and satisfied and they also involve them in decision-making processes. To indicate that principals do motivate their teachers, T1, T2, T3 and T4 indicated that their principals praise teachers who work hard, give incentives to committed teachers and send messages of sympathy when teachers are sick.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the following research question: Do primary school principals' leadership practices demonstrate transformational leadership attributes? This study was not intended to establish the perceptions of participants regarding the impact of transformational leadership practices on school effectiveness; its focus was to explore whether the leadership practices in primary schools in Waterberg Education District in Limpopo fit the characteristics of transformational leadership. The findings of the study indicate contradictory views presented by teachers, principals and circuit managers on the following constituent elements of transformational leadership: shared vision, decision making, motivation, commitment and job satisfaction. Principals are daily confronted with situations where decisions have to be taken on matters affecting the schools that they are managing. In taking these decisions, they have to ensure that critical role players such as teachers and the representatives of teacher unions are involved. In determining whether primary school principals do engage

role players, the views of teachers and principals to a significant extent, agree that primary school principals do consult important role players in the school before taking decisions. Crafting of the school visions according to the South African Schools Act indicates that in developing the mission and vision of the school rests with the principal in consultation with the school governing body. In this case, the views of the teachers and principals indicate that principals do consult the school governing bodies in such responsibilities. The teachers are represented in this school governing bodies by those elected.

Circuit managers have identified vision sharing and decision making as the problematic areas in primary schools in their circuits. Their views contradicted those of the teachers and the principals. The views of the circuit managers led the researcher to the conclusion that the overly positive views of the educators and principals should be regarded with some scepticism. The perceptions of the circuit manager should be taken seriously because they closely monitor the progress of the schools they supervise. From time to time, these circuit managers conduct school inspection.

Commitment and motivation are very critical in any organisation including schools. For an example, teachers have to attend classes always prepared and on time. In addition, they also have to ensure that they participate in school sports by supervising and training learners. It is the responsibility of principals to ensure that they persuade teachers to be committed and remain motivated and inspired in their responsibility. In view of this scenario, the views of the majority of participants confirmed that principals take efforts in motivating and inspiring teachers to be committed. The same could be said in the transformational element, job satisfaction. Principals always try to create opportunities that enhance satisfaction at work.

It must be indicated that the inclusion of principals in this investigation as participants limited the study because during the interviews, principals tended to portray themselves in a positive light and flowing from this assertion, the claims made by the principals should be viewed with skepticism. In responding to the research question and based on the views of the circuit managers, the principals and teachers, it can be concluded that primary school principals to a certain degree do exhibit some elements of transformational leadership.

Conclusion

The education system and primary schools in particular face unprecedented and unparalleled challenges that appear to be insurmountable. Literature review analyses indicate that transformational leadership does have the propensity to ensure that teachers share in both vision crafting and decision making, are job satisfied, motivated and committed. The intention of this study was not to investigate the impact of transformational leadership on school performance but to determine how primary school principals exhibit transformational leadership attributes. Transformational leadership was used as theoretical lens and five fundamental and relevant features of transformational leadership were outlined. The features identified are shared vision, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and participative decision-making. The findings indicate that to a certain extent, principals do exhibit transformational leadership attributes. One of the limitations of the study is that only one data collection instrument was used and therefore the researcher recommends that further research on this topic be conducted with more research instruments included.

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