

LEADING A ONCE UNDERPERFORMING SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL IN A CHALLENGING COMMUNITY TO A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL

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Abstract

This article outlines the findings from a case study that explored how a female principal in a South African primary school in a challenging context succeeded to improve and raise the school's academic achievement. Being part of a national study which focuses on leadership of South African schools in challenging contexts, this primary school was purposefully selected in Gauteng that succeeded to improve their academic performance under the leadership of the same principal. This study was inspired by the five dimensions of Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe's framework (2008); leadership effect on academic success. A qualitative method of inquiry was employed in the study where data were collected with an individual interview with the principal and focus group interviews with the school management team and teachers. The findings indicate how the female principal succeeded to built and set direction in the once underachieving school, how she empowered staff to improve their classroom practices, and how she redesigned and strengthened the school's organisation to create a supportive and well-organised caring school environment. The study concluded by suggesting while women principals in challenging contexts can raise teacher and student performance, the particular characteristics of female principals and the challenging contexts of schools remain an important factor to improve schools.

Keywords: *leadership of female principal; improving an underperforming South African primary school; Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe's framework; challenging context*

Introduction

Contemporary studies on improving schools in disadvantaged contexts show how external factors that are not usually present in normal school contexts adversely influence their ability to perform satisfactorily (Geier, 2016; Harris, 2009). Although effective leadership in such schools is considered to be one of the major forces for ensuing school success and student performance (Bouchamma, 2012; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta 2009; Harris, 2009; Jarchow, 2016; Marsh, 2012; Thielman, 2012; Woulfin & Weiner 2017), the challenges facing this prospective resource for improving schools have become more complex (Gillett, Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2016; Marsh, 2012; Marsh, Waniganayake & Gibson, 2014). Moreover, school leaders are increasingly becoming accountable for improving student performance (Marsh, 2012). Day et al. (2016) and Marsh (2012) assert that efforts to

improve student achievement have shown an increasing emphasis on accountability with an increasing focus on assessment and evaluation.

The focus on improving low performing schools has in recent years received considerable attention (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; De la Torre, Allensworth, Jagesic, Sebastian, & Salmonowicz, 2013). Welch (2015) asserts that an ever-shifting environment of opportunities and challenges in schools makes leadership as a catalyst for change to improve schools very complex. For Jarchow (2016), effective school leadership is a tough proposition even for the most competent leaders, yet it is desperately required to support student performance in the most challenging schools in America. Benghu and Myende (2016) and Chikoko, Naicker and Mthiyane (2015) share their view that school leadership is critical for South African dysfunctional schools.

Leadership studies have generated a plethora of theories to address the challenges in schools and those in leadership positions (Benghu & Myende, 2016; Bouchamma, 2012; Geier, 2016). Day et al., Sammons (2016:224) and Hallinger (2011) consider the most commonly researched leadership models that resulted in schools as instructional and transformational leadership models. Kaparou and Bush (2016:896) confirm that instructional leadership has recently developed in a comprehensive phenomenon in the form of “leadership for learning”, which is considered to be a shared and/or more distributed school leadership paradigm for current school contexts, in contrast to previous notions which predominantly focused on a solo model of instructional leadership (Day et al., 2001). The collective approach to improve student performance is central to the notion of leadership for learning (Marsh et al., 2014). Studies also show that the most effective school leaders in challenging contexts distribute leadership widely and recognise the importance of connecting the school to the wider community (Harris, 2009:4; Harris, Chapman, Muijs, Russ & Stoll, 2006; Marsh et al., 2014,476; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008).

As such, the idea of leadership is considered to be essentially relational and interactive, while learning is enhanced through a diverse network of interactions in which teams and individuals support, encourage, challenge and positively affect each other (Marsh et al., 2014).

The majority of South African schools is considered to be dysfunctional after the apartheid regime (Bush & Glover, 2016; Chikoko et al., 2015; Republic of South Africa, 2015; Spaul, 2013) and even seen as in a “state of crisis” according to the Minister of Basic Education (Nkosi, 2016). Studies show that schools in informal settlements, townships and rural areas experience numerous challenges, such as under-resourced infrastructures and socio-economic challenges and poverty (Bush & Glover, 2016; Mbokazi, 2015). A number of studies in South Africa focused on schools and school leadership in challenging conditions (Benghu & Myende, 2016; Chikoko et al., 2015; Mbokazi, 2015; Mestry, 2016; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016; Naicker, Chikoko

& Mthiyane, 2013; Naicker, Grant & Pillay, 2016; Seobi & Wood, 2016), while few of them focused on female principals. Smit's studies (2013; 2015) focused on relational female leadership from a feminist approach; Van der Merwe's study (2017) revealed the challenges female school leaders faced and the solutions they employed despite the ongoing prejudice within a multitude of deprived contexts; while Themane, Mabasa and Mathedimosa's study (2017) reports on how female leadership managed curriculum implementation in secondary schools. Mohapi and Netshitangani (2017) explored the experiences of South African primary school principals in managing and implementing the curriculum. Little is, however known of how a female principal in a challenging context was able to change a once poor performing primary school to a high performing school under her leadership. Although successful school leadership in poor performing schools is viewed as one of the key forces to ensure school success (Day et al., 2016; Jarchow, 2016; Marsh, 2012), the challenges confronting school leadership to improve schools have become more complicated (Gillett et al., 2016; Marsh et al., 2014). In this regard, Benghu and Myende (2016) and Chikoko et al. (2015) state that school leadership is critical for South African dysfunctional schools. Bouchamma (2012) postulates the positive outcome of effective leadership on student performance is a recognised fact, but the way in which such leadership does influence student improvement, the degree of its influence and the main components of effective leadership still require more exploration. Jarchow (2016) therefore calls for more studies that focus on school leadership, in particular successful leadership to reculture a school in becoming successful.

The research question that guided this study: How did a once poor performing South African primary school under the leadership of the same female principal succeed to improve the school to become a high performing school within a challenging context? The study focused on the specific characteristics the female principal had and the strategies she employed to lead the school towards success (cf Flintham, 2015).

Theoretical framework and literature review

The lens, the leadership effect on academic success, used for this study was inspired by the study from Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008). They identified the following five dimensions that were also supported by various other scholars:

(1) Dimension 1: Establishing goals and expectations (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Successful leaders determine appropriate school goals, clearly communicate them to staff members, and count on their commitment to attain these goals. Harris (2009:6) states that alignment and cooperation of role players to a vision and shared values are of critical importance for all leaders in schools, particularly for those in poor and challenging school environments. Once such leaders succeed to develop a shared understanding of the school's goals and a belief in a culture of improvement, their understanding becomes the foundation for their vision and also assists staff members to make sense of their work (Jarchow 2016; Leithwood, 2009; Seobi & Wood 2016). Jarchow (2016) believes that core values, a vision and mission are the accelerators in

turning schools around. Moreover, Flintham's study (2015) also shows that principals of schools in challenging contexts have a strong confidence in the ability of all students to learn and are energised and driven by the challenge "to make a difference to both their schools and their communities". They are aware of the necessity to understand the negative forces in the community and need to engage with the community and regularly communicate with parents to engender their trust by showing sincere care for their children (Harris, 2009). Moreover, these principals strongly believe in the school's potential to counterbalance the negative impact of the community's disadvantage on students' performance (Harris, 2009) and do not accept challenging circumstances as explanations for low expectations (Flintham, 2015)

(2) Dimension 2: Strategic resourcing (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe 2008).According to (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008), the concept "strategic" refers to the leadership activity to secure resources that are linked to instructional purposes, such as staffing and teaching resources. Although principals are limited as regards the selection and hiring of staff members, they strive to secure the most appropriate candidates (Bouchamma, 2012). Successful principals continuously keep staff well-informed, empower them to cope with their responsibilities, assist them to acquire professional knowledge, and acknowledge and appreciate the quality of teachers' work(Bouchamma 2012).

(3) Dimension 3: Curriculum management (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Successful leaders are personally involved in planning, coordinating and evaluating the school curriculum (Bouchamma, 2012). It means that they need to focus on building the capacity for improving the quality of teaching and learning (Harris, 2009). The four interconnected sub-dimensions in this factor refer to the principal's (1) active involvement in debates that are linked to education-related issues, (2) cooperation with staff in improving and reviewing the quality of teaching, (3) involvement in class observations and the required follow-up, and (4) commitment to ensure that teachers systematically assess and evaluate their students' performance (Bouchamma, 2012; Gillett et al., 2016).Moreover, Harris (2009) asserts that distributed leadership is required to address complex problems in schools in deprived communities because the leadership task cannot be the sole responsibility of an individual. Working in teams though a collaborative approach is an effective way to manage change in such challenging contexts (Day et al., 2016; Harris, 2009; Marsh et al., 2014; Seobi & Wood, 2016).

(4) Dimension 4: Teacher supervision and mentoring (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe 2008:663).Successful principals are committed to staff's professional development and not only encourage their development, but also participate in such activities in both informal and formal debates. In doing so, principals are more likely to be recognised by their staff as a source of professional knowledge and skills (Bouchamma, 2014; Day et al., 2016;Geier, 2016; McCarley, Peters & Decman, 2016).Studies show the necessity for schools to be engaged in continuous improvement initiatives by employing both

school-based and out-of-school initiatives rather than to depend on government initiatives (Harris et al., 2006:416). Harris (2009) states the necessity for principals to invest in teachers' professional development. Maintaining teachers' motivation and morale is considered to be a main concern for the principals in challenging school contexts. As such, successful principals seek suitable solutions to address the inadequacies in the school environment to improve students' performance (Bouchamma, 2014).

(5) Dimension 5: Ensuring order and support (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Successful principals create a supportive, well-organised, nurturing school environment, where staff feel safe and appreciated (Mbokazi, 2015). They provide clear rules about student and teacher behaviour and set high expectations for all role players for the sake of improving the quality of teaching and learning (Gillett et al., 2016). Teachers are also encouraged to identify their professional needs and communicate them to the principal who then assists them in addressing these needs (Bouchamma, 2014; Seobi & Wood, 2016). Flintham's study (2015) shows that principals in successful, but challenging school contexts are people-centred and focus on promoting teacher collaboration. They reveal professional characteristics focused on respect for people and a tenacity in promoting and supporting students (Flintham, 2015). However, together with these qualities, it may be necessary for principals to be firm as regards standards and values and even take tough decisions when teachers are under-performing (Harris, 2009). In this regard, Harris' study (2009:6) study revealed: "The principals did not gently cajole staff and students towards success but provided both pressure and support while concurrently building positive relationships."

Research design and background of the school

This study forms part of a National Research Foundation grant project that focuses on previously underperforming schools in challenging formerly deprived contexts in South Africa that have succeeded to improve their students' academic performance. Although four provinces have been involved in the national study from 2017, this study was conducted in the Ekurhuleni district of Gauteng. Criteria for selection of schools *inter alia* required that a school's improved performance had to be consistent for five years under the leadership of the same principal within a challenging and deprived school context. Consequently, with the assistance of an official in the Ekurhuleni district, a primary school was purposively selected that was rated as an underperforming school in 2009, but succeeded to significantly improve and maintain their student's performance since then (Chikoko et al., 2015).

The Annual National Assessment (ANA) scores for schools was one way for determining the academic performance of schools. The primary school in this study showed the following results for 2012 to 2014 (table 1). Take note that there were no national assessment data in the school for 2015 since the teacher unions were discontent with the ANA system (Department of Basic Education, 2016). They recommended a two-tier model of assessment (1) Universal National Assessment model where students

in Grade 3, 6 and 9 are annually assessed; and (2) a Systematic Assessment that bi-annually assess a sample of Grade 3, 6 and 9 students (Department of Basic Education, 2016).The Universal Assessment model was piloted during 2016 in Grade 6.The school’s scores *inter alia* revealed that students obtained the following percentages: Maths 67%; Home language 97%.Table 2 and table 3 respectively reveals the results of Grade 3 and Grade 6’s performance of the various school subjects in term 4 in 2017.

Table 1: Annual National Assessment scores for the primary school

2012	2013	2014
Maths grade 3 = 63%	Maths grade 3 = 70.4%	Maths grade 3 = 69.2%
Home language = 58.7%	Home language = 70.2%	Home language = 74%
Maths grade 6 = 62.0%	Maths grade 6 = 60.7%	Maths grade 6 = 59%
First additional language = 70.8%	First additional language = 74.9%	First additional language = 66.2%

Table 2: An excerpt of Grade 3 results of subjects passed in 2017 of term 4

Subject	Students’ passed %	Average %
English first language	92	65.38
IsiXhosa Home Language	97	69.46
Life Skills	100	70.13
Mathematics	98	69.67
Sesotho Home Language	95	69.19

Table 3: An excerpt of Grade 6 results of subjects passed in 2017of term 4

Subject	Students’ passed %	Average %
English additional language	97	64.37
IsiXhosa Home Language	97	64.17
Life Skills	100	70.58
Mathematics	95	51.99
Natural Science and Technology	97	58.18
Sesotho Home Language	99	57.93
Social Sciences	92	56.37

The urban primary school in Ekurhuleni is surrounded by squatter camps and informal settlements. The school community is characterised by high levels of unemployment, families with a low income, poverty and crime. The school community had numerous single-parent families and many grandmothers who took care of children. Academic expectations in this community were predictably low and the school previously struggled with low student performance, bad student behaviour and a poor reputation in the school district and community. It was a no-fee-paying school and had 1 278 students, five school management team members and 33 teachers at the time of the study. The school offers a wide range of sports and cultural activities and even without sports grounds excelled in many of these activities. In 2016, district officials in Ekurhuleni identified this school, its leadership and its performance as “outstanding”. Table 1 also reveals the school’s transformed academic performance measured by the Annual National Assessment (2012–2014) and an excerpt of results as certified by the

Gauteng Department of Education. At the time of the study, the principal of the school had 38 years of teaching experience and acted for 20 years as principal of the same school.

In determining the role of the female principal to turn the school around in the challenging context, a qualitative approach, in particular a case study design, deemed most appropriate (Pan, Nyeu & Cheng, 2017:171). As in the case of the study of Woulfin and Weiner (2017:9), the principal acted as “an instigator of change”. Apart from the principal’s experiences, it was also necessary to understand role players’ “lived experiences” and their personal experiences concerning the role of leadership, which explains why the study was approached from a social constructivist paradigm (Gillett et al., 2016:599). The collection of data was taken from face-to-face and semi-structured individual interviews with the principal and two district officials of Ekurhuleni and focus group interviews with both school management team members (a deputy head and one head of department) and six teachers. The open-ended questions that guided these interviews focused on the ways and means in which the school’s principal and the involvement of role players succeeded to improve and sustain its improved performance. This type of interviews allowed interviewees to voice their feelings, emotions and opinions of the process, while probing questions were often used to clarify responses (Jarchow, 2016). The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The principal also provided additional electronic information on request to clarify certain issues.

The transcribed interviews were analysed and coded considering the theoretical framework used for the study, that is the leadership effect on academic success (cf Bouchamma, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). The following steps were taken in the data analysis: (1) the transcriptions were read and reread for the sake of familiarisation and to provide an outline of the data; (2) a preliminary thematic framework was constructed to identify the topics that were refined into themes; (3) indexing and rearranging sections of the data that belonged together, and (4) reviewing these data selections to refine them and to make sure that they indeed cover the same aspects (Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O’Connor & Barnard, 2014). Moreover, the deductive analysis also made use of a priori codes (Chenail, 2012) to attain the second level of understanding. These codes were clustered around the major themes of the turnaround phenomenon and the theory of action. To respect participants’ own views, *in vivo* coding was used in the categorisation (Chenail, 2012). Credibility of the juxtaposition in this study was shown by using *in vivo* codes from transcriptions and *a priori codes* from turnaround leadership and the theory of action (Chenail, 2012; Jarchow, 2016). The school’s name and that of participants are protected in this study for the sake of confidentiality (Bhenghu & Myende, 2016).

Triangulation of data collection methods, which included face-to-face, in-depth, personal and focus group interviews and electronic responses of the principal ensured trustworthiness of the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the

North-West for the entire project and the Gauteng Department of Education for the study in the Ekurhuleni district. Moreover, participants in the study were briefed about the aim of the study who then gave their consent to participate in this study. The name of the school and its participants are protected for the sake of confidentiality (Bhenghu & Myende, 2016).

Findings

The following three themes emerged from the study: (1) Building vision and setting direction: “I stopped the bus, everything must change”; (2) Empowering people: “I am able to instil a sense of ‘ubuntu’ in our teachers to make sure they look at these kids as their own”; and (3) Redesigning the school’s organisation: It became “a culture and the norm of the school to perform work with efforts”.

Building vision and setting direction: “I stopped the bus, everything must change”

In 2009, the principal was called to the district office to account for the school’s poor performance. It meant that the level of teaching and learning was low and that all aspects that contributed to a school’s underperformance had to be checked in order to “change things around”. According to a SMT member, to be “axed” in the position of an underperforming school was “not a good thing”. Being labelled as a teacher in an underperforming school was “demoralising” and made some teachers to feel like a “failure in life” and a “disgrace”. The principal said that she “felt like dying” and told the district officials this would be the last time to account for the school’s underachievement. She said: “I am attached to the school, like I am too jealous about anything that goes wrong in our school.”

This was the principal’s wake-up call and she realised the only way to improve the school’s performance was “to stop the bus, everything must change” in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. She explained that she needed to “be hard”: “I made sure each and every teacher knows why she is here. She [the teacher] is not visiting, but has to teach learners and that is what she must do... I told them, either you follow me, or you change.”

The whole school went to a “bush deliberation” for a weekend where staff members started to “change things around”. Participants indicated that the vision of their school was “strive for success” even when facing challenges. One SMT member said that they first started to look at what went wrong. From there they revisited and revised some policies. For example, the school started at 07:30 and not as 08:00 as before. The teachers also had to set their own student performance targets at least five percent above the national results for a subject at that time. The school started to set realistic, attainable goals and internally put their plans in place to achieve those goals. That implied that all role players had to be accountable: A deputy had to hold all the HoDs accountable, the HoDs had to hold the teachers accountable, and the teachers had to hold the learners accountable. “So everybody was accounting somewhere, everybody had to pull up their socks.” Parent meeting were held to inform parents about the

school's approach and they had to become involved in their children's work by checking and signing their work. According to one SMT member, the school "didn't have much resistance from parents."

The principal's initial approach as she confirmed was authoritarian and she managed the school by walking around to see what was happening in the school. For the principal, it was important to give the "whole" of herself in everything during this process and to encourage teachers and students by the example she set. With her 38 years of experience in teaching, she felt confident to put "whatever new system in place... There is nothing that I don't know when it comes to a learner,,, I can do wonders." Other participants agreed that they had "a strong principal". For example, she observed all classes from Grade 1 to 7 to see if teachers were doing their work and if their marking was up to date. She even took the Maths books of a whole class, about 45, to determine if students were making progress and if teachers work were up to standard. She nevertheless offered her assistance when they needed it.

McCarley et al., (2016:325) believe that no other "single actor in a school other than the principal has the combination of authority and potential for influence". Moreover, school leaders who have a strong sense of direction have the greatest impact on their schools (Leithwood, 2009). The principal in the study revealed strong values and a sincere desire to raise students' performance in this disadvantaged community with a clear emphasis on high expectations for teacher and student performance (Bouchamma, 2012; Dayet et al., 2016). If leaders guide role players to develop a shared understanding of the school's goals, this understanding becomes the foundation for a school's vision, as was supported by this study. The necessity of a clear and shared vision is one of the accelerators for leadership to improve performance and achieve set goals (Gillett et al., 2016; Jarchow, 2016; Kaparou & Bush, 2016; Mbokazi, 2015; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Effective leaders know that if they involve staff members in identifying goals, such goals are more likely to be met (Leithwood, 2009). This school focused on teaching and learning, which according to Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam and Brown (2013:449) is considered to be "the singularly most important factor in raising achievement". Nevertheless, school improvement plans are required to set direction in achieving the set goals (Leithwood, 2009) as was done in the school.

As also shown in this study, a strong authoritarian leadership style of the principal where she played an active hands-on approach in teaching and learning was initially required to change the underachieving performance of students in this school (Dayet et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2005). As in the case of Masevics and Vogel's study (2014), the school principal acted as a "tenacious leader" in ensuring the turnaround of the school. She was "unrelenting" in her focus and "uncompromising" in attending to improve student performance within the poverty stricken community, because these students deserve quality education (Masevics & Vogel, 2014). Nevertheless, scholars show that the principal alone cannot provide the leadership that creates conducive conditions for

ensuring quality teaching and learning (Bouchamma, 2012; Hallinger, 2011; Masevics & Vogel, 2014; Mbokazi, 2015; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008).

Empowering people: "I am able to instil a sense of 'ubuntu' in our teachers to make sure they look at these kids as their own"

The notion of leadership is essentially viewed as interactive and relational, where learning is promoted through a wide-ranging network of interactions in which groups and individuals motivate, support, challenge and positively influence one another (Geier, 2016; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). The principal played a key role in initiating the change and empowering all staff members. Although each staff member had the responsibility to contribute to the success of the school, she as principal had to ensure that this could be realised. She believed that she was able to instil a sense of 'ubuntu' in the teachers to make sure they looked at these kids as their own. The principal had numerous face-to-face conversations with teachers to clearly explain her expectations and also to provide feedback on their performance. She explained:

I told them that this is part of my duty. I am here to do exactly what I am doing as a principal. So it is either you follow me or I charge you. At times you need to be hard. You can't smile every day. There were those that were difficult but I sat on their neck, and concentrates on their school work... When you fight me you must know what is it that you fighting for. You are here to teach these learners. I want work, and that is it... Get use to me being the principal. So the day you are a principal, you do things your way.

As can be expected, the principal's approach was initially met with resistance, especially among the more experienced teachers. A SMT member mentioned that despite their resistance, there was "a lot of excitement" about the change process. The principal's perseverance paid off when staff realised that this was the way the school had to operate, especially when they saw the positive changes that occurred. The principal nevertheless tried to make staff "happy" and to show her "care" and "love" for them by doing small things such as organising "something to eat for all of them" after school.

The school employed an induction programme for beginner teachers to explicitly inform them about the school's goals and expectations. Furthermore, to ensure the smooth running of the school, it arranged staff meetings twice a term and phase and also SMT meetings once a week. Learning area meetings that occurred weekly or fortnightly according the departmental policy, depended on certain topics in the curriculum. With the school's leadership focus, teachers had to attend official workshops to improve their professional knowledge and skills. To a large extent, the school did not wait for official departmental workshops, but took the initiative to empower their teachers at school level "to make teaching interesting". For example, the school bought laptops, projectors and screens for every teacher and teachers were trained during the school holiday to use the mentioned equipment.

Leithwood's (2009) review on literature shows the willingness and ability of schools leaders to be "tuned in" to staff members as people, which was supported by the principal in this study. She valued professional relationships and interactions as a means to enable substantive change in the school (Woulfin & Weiner 2017). Moreover, the principal set a strong example through her actions and she displayed a "people-centred leadership" to change the low performing status of the school by acknowledging the necessity of involving all role players to improve their performance (Harris, 2009; Duke, 2014). Her actions revealed the following leadership practices: stimulating teachers intellectually, providing individualised support to teachers and being an appropriate role model (Leithwood, 2009). Although the principal supported external professional development programmes, she typically focused on school-based programmes to address the particular needs of teachers (Day et al., 2016:247). As suggested by Hallinger (2011), the principal's support and involvement in teachers' professional learning had the most significant effect on student performance. Teachers in the study also benefitted from debriefing sessions with colleagues, classroom observations and feedback from the principal (Leithwood, 2009.).

Redesigning the school's organisation: It became "a culture and the norm of the school to perform work with efforts"

According to Leithwood (2009), effective school leaders are determined to turn their schools into effective organisations by strengthening the school's culture, change organisational structures and build collaborative practices. As mentioned before, the principal strengthened the school culture by consistently and unambiguously communicating high expectations for staff and all students, especially "struggling" students. According to the principal, "different things" worked for her to improve the school. She explained:

I have different things that works for me... I have to be there all the time, know what is taking place in the school, be an exemplary, check learners' books, encourage teachers, communicate clearly.

One of the school's strategies to improve their academic performance was to introduce extra classes for Mathematics and English in the morning at 07:00 before school, after school and even during weekends and holidays. Moreover, a teacher who was absent from school had to arrange for extra classes to catch up on incomplete schoolwork. Teachers agreed that it was their commitment to improve their own and their students' performance that changed the school to a good performing school. According to one teacher, the school "embraced" the change and that it became "a culture and the norm of the school to perform work with efforts".

The principal started to arrange various vertical and horizontal teacher teams to enhance collaboration. She motivated teachers "to work together, even when they play". According to one teacher, effective teacher collaboration depended on the principal's support and encouragement and she did this by providing ample opportunities for

teachers to work in teams. Participants agreed that the school's good performance was characterised by the teachers' successful collaboration. Teachers, for example, created WhatsApp groups to send professional-related messages and links to appropriate YouTube videos. Within their teams, teachers persistently encouraged each other, which they earnestly valued. It was, in particular, the daily after-school collaborative lesson planning, design of worksheets, discussions on tests and examination papers, and team teaching that helped them "a lot". Moreover, by creating such opportunities, the principal believed that she created the necessary time for teachers to prepare and plan for the next day so that not having enough time would not be an excuse for being ill-prepared. The principal also encouraged teachers to observe other teachers' lessons. The idea was to foster an "element of curiosity" among staff members to see how other teachers conducted lessons and to observe student learning. Should one teacher struggle with a certain topic in the curriculum, there were other teachers who were willing to assist to "deal with the topic". Such events gave teachers the opportunity "to vent about challenges" because they faced numerous challenges daily. It made them realise that others faced similar problems and probably had a solution to them. Being part of a team never made the one teacher feel on her "own". Moreover, a novice teacher who felt that she was "thrown into the deep end" when she started at the school, valued the enquiry and support that she received from her SMT who made an enquiry after three weeks at school. She elaborated:

That [the support] was very important for me... I don't want to work in another school... that makes me want to be part of this team. ... You can come and share your views as you will always have someone that will listen.

Subjects among the different grades, such as in languages and Mathematics, met weekly to ensure that they attain the required results. One SMT member explained that teachers received management plans in their curriculum planning meetings to ensure that they knew precisely what was required from them. Teachers then monitored themselves according to these management plans, which this SMT member believed was the reason for their success "in terms of academics". For teachers not sharing "a common goal", "bad human relations", and not willing to share experiences and skills with others could have a considerable negative impact on successful teacher collaboration. A SMT member expressed the importance of teamwork in management: "If there is no working together in management, if there are cracks within the management, and the principal is doing her own thing, the HoD has his own clicks, the deputies has his own groups, then... the school won't perform."

As part of redesigning the school's organisation, the school introduced monitoring and accounting sessions to ensure that all teachers were on the right track and met their set targets. Teachers were required to set their own targets, which had to be 5% higher than the national results.

The school opted to do their monitoring fortnightly instead of the Department's six-weekly monitoring system. The one SMT member substantiated their "pro-active" decision. The school preferred to "fix things at an early stage" instead of waiting six weeks to discover problems which might have been too late to "fix". During monitoring sessions, the SMTs and HoDs checked students' books and the correlation between the ATP (annual teaching plan) and teachers' performance. As part of the curriculum monitoring model, other staff members, including the HoD, often observed teachers' classes and provided feedback. The school reassured teachers that the curriculum monitoring system was meant to be a "support process" in order to "identify their problems and try to support them" and not a "punitive" system. Should teachers be behind schedule, they had to present a written plan how they intended to "catch up" the lost work. Teachers of underperforming classes were "to put in extra hours". "Some of them at times come to school during school holidays, during the weekends, to catch up with no remuneration... You can come here at school around half past four, five o'clock... You will be amazed... You will find the teachers are still here and nobody is forcing them to be here" (SMT member).

It was in particular HoDs who were responsible to monitor teachers' work, but according to the principal, some of them strived "to be loved by their colleagues". She felt that instead of being "hard" on underperforming teachers, they preferred the friendship of teachers, which hampered the quality of monitoring. For her, the quality of teachers' performance was vital. She explained:

I am not here for anybody but learners, you don't have to love me to work with me... I am the principal here fortunately and to look after you, I am the one who is accountable for each and everything, so get used to that.

In the school's accounting sessions after each term, teachers had to account for students' performance, specify reasons for their performance and indicate whether they met their set targets. The accounting sessions occurred in three groups: Grade 1 to 3, Grade 4 to 6 and Grade 7. Moreover, after these accounting sessions, individual accounting sessions were held with teachers who did not perform satisfactorily. They had to explain their poor performance and also propose ways in which they could be assisted. Having set their performance target, a teacher would then know "to pull up my socks and work" the next term.

Accounting sessions meant that "the deputies had to hold all the HoDs [head of departments] accountable and the HoDs had to hold the teachers accountable, and teachers had to hold the learners accountable. So, everybody was accounting somewhere, everybody had to pull up their socks" (SMT member). Teachers experienced these accountability sessions positively as one of them commented: "They [The accountability sessions] are not punitive, it is a matter of you did not perform well. ... What help do you [as teacher] think you need?"

Although experienced teachers initially revealed a bit of resistance to these systems, they accepted them for the sake of uniformity, and most teachers welcomed the monitoring and accounting systems, because they felt that without them they “will relax... And then we can say goodbye to all our children”. One teacher, however, differed and believed that this would not happen “because we are dedicated... and we will lose the position as the best school” should they not give their very best. Another teacher supported her view by stating that it did not “matter whether we are monitored or not... It [quality] is the culture of our school... it is our identity” and they knew precisely what was required of them.

Apart from the monitoring and accounting systems in the school, the principal wanted to know exactly what went on in classrooms. She personally observed classrooms to see if teachers were doing their work, if the marking of students’ books was up to standard and if teachers needed her support. If the quality of teaching was not to her satisfaction, she would “teach” teachers how to present a lesson. By doing this, she not only empowered teachers, but also acted as their mentor by encouraging them to know what was expected of them.

The principal played an important role to professionally develop staff members by working with them in a collaborative manner (Bouchamma, 2012; Hallinger, 2011; Marsh et al., 2014; Pan et al., 2017; Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011; Thielman, 2012). This was especially evident from the vertical and horizontal school structures where teams of teachers debated teaching issues and shared their classroom experiences (Bouchamma, 2012; Day et al., 2016; Duke, 2014; Marsh et al., 2014; Pan et al., 2017; Sanzo, et al., 2011). In redesigning the school’s organisation from the inside, the principal not only identified and capitalised on the competence of colleagues, but also required and modelled teacher collaboration (Leithwood, 2009). She did this because the school placed a high priority on quality teaching and learning. As such, she put the necessary support systems in place to assist teachers who required assistance, such as supervising teaching classes, assessment of students’ books and progress, and having mentoring, modelling, monitoring and accounting sessions (Day et al., 2016; Kaparou & Bush, 2016; Mbokazi, 2015; Shatzer et al., 2013). The school arranged numerous opportunities for monitoring and accounting in order to improve teachers’ classroom practices and students’ performance as in the case of Thielman’s (2012) and Duke’s (2014) studies. Furthermore, the study revealed that the school’s success could be attributed to the principal’s personal involvement in coordinating and monitoring teachers’ and students’ performance (Bouchamma, 2012). As shown in the study, the principal had faith in what teachers can accomplish and she was bold enough to confront teachers who did not perform satisfactorily (Duke, 2014).

Conclusion

The focus in this study was on a female principal who succeeded to lead her once underperforming school in a challenging context to a successful school. The study which has been confirmed by the five dimensions in the framework of Robinson et al.

(2008), the leadership effect on academic success, showed that the principal employed various strategies to improve both teacher and student performance in their challenging context. Considering the particular context of the school, the principal's strategies succeeded to support the five dimensions of their framework. In dimension 1, the principal established clear goals and expectations to improve the school's performance and was impassioned to "change things around". Having lived in the community for many years, she understood the negative forces in the community, but nevertheless had a strong confidence in the ability of teachers and students to improve their performance. In dimension 2, which refers to strategic resourcing, the principal succeeded to keep teachers well-informed and empowered them through appropriate horizontal and vertical collaborative practices to successfully improve their classroom practices. In dimension 3, which refers to curriculum management, the principal succeeded to be actively involved in teacher debates through collaboration, and was committed to ensure that teachers effectively assessed students' performance. Through the principal's teacher supervision and monitoring as outlined in dimension 4, she revealed her commitment to teachers' continuous professional development by engaging them in school-based and out-of-school developmental activities. She did this to persistently encourage and motivate teachers, which is something that teachers in challenging communities desperately need. In dimension 5, which refers to ensuring order and support, the principal succeeded to create a well-organised, supportive and nurturing school environment where teachers felt safe and respected.

It is not possible to present a "one-size-fits-all" approach when revealing the qualities and characteristics of women in leadership to lead their schools to successful schools. With women underrepresented in all areas of school leadership, more studies are required to see how other female principals in similar contexts succeeded to improve their schools' performance. Conducting these studies could generate a more extensive knowledge base of women in leadership practices in schools facing similar challenges.

Acknowledgement: This project: "Understanding leadership for and during school change and development in challenging formerly deprived South Africa context" is based on research supported wholly / in part by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Numbers 98926).

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