

How Do We Manage? Determinants of Effective Leadership in High-Poverty Schools

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ABSTRACT The paper focused on the challenges facing principals of high-poverty schools in an Education District in South Africa. It sought to determine how some schools in disadvantaged communities excel academically, despite the poor living conditions of their learners and other poverty-related disadvantages. It also set out to establish which elements constitute a profile of effective leadership in high-poverty schools. An empirical investigation using a qualitative research design was carried out and data were gathered through interviews with the principals and focus group discussions with teachers from the three selected schools. Based on the research findings derived from the literature and the views of the participants in the study, it was found that, by employing effective leadership strategies and having a committed staff cohort, it is indeed possible for high-poverty schools to maintain excellent academic standards and achieve consistently high results against all the odds. Strategies for achievement are proposed for principals of high-poverty schools.

INTRODUCTION

It is remarkable that some schools in poor communities manage to overcome severe poverty-related odds such as poor living conditions, hunger, illiteracy, crime, unemployment and a defeatist mind-set, and produce excellent results and well-adapted learners (Taylor and Muller 2014: 245). This has significant implications for the quality of leadership in high-poverty schools, as well as "...for the social and ethical purpose of empowering the school, which in a high-poverty setting, acts as a catalyst for community development" (Kamper 2008:1).

Academic performance has received much attention from researchers in the past, and it still continues to be a very topical issue due to the ever-increasing need for highly skilled people in all sectors of the labour market in all economies (Van der Berg 2008:1; Little and Rolleston 2014:2). The measuring of academic performance of learners is extremely challenging since learner perfor-

mance is a product of socio-economic, psychological and environmental factors. Jukuda (2011: 22) points out that, although school learners' level of performance is, with statistically significant differences, linked to their gender, grade level, school location and school type, socio-economic background (SEB) together with the quality of education play a significant role in achievement.

Research consistently points to the fact that "battling" and "failing" schools are typically found in impoverished areas (Jukuda 2011; Gilmour et al. 2012). The socio-economic and sociological problems associated with poverty give rise to specific challenges concerning the orderly, effective and equal provision of education. Due to its political past, South Africa, like many other counties, is facing considerable challenges brought on by factors such as poverty, unemployment, social inequality and general socio-economic decline. Various studies consistently report on the apparent relationship between academic achievement and a range of socio-economic variables and conditions, which are typically faced by principals of high-poverty schools (Van der Berg 2011; Tomas 2012; Jensen 2013). Accordingly, they are confronted with certain negative conditions on a daily basis as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Learners are often hungry and ill (Bower 2014: 106-126). Furthermore, they do not have proper clothing and are often exposed to phys-

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ical danger (Jensen 2013: 24). In addition, study facilities are often lacking, and they do not have access to informal education through books, newspapers and the Internet and consequently they lack study motivation (Van der Berg 2011: 5). They also seem to have low self-esteem and lack language proficiency. Importantly, learners who live in poverty often attend the lowest performing schools (Badat and Sayed 2014: 127). They start school without early literacy skills; there are high rates of absenteeism and transience and the schools they attend have difficulty attracting experienced teachers (Stiefel et al. 2005: 153). Clofelter et al. (2006: 18) point out that these learners come to school less ready to learn and with weaker educational support at home than those from more advantaged backgrounds.

Parents are in need of health or other societal care, and they normally have low educational qualifications or are even illiterate (Timæus et al. 2013). Importantly, they often have an intense distrust or even hatred towards school (due to their own negative school experiences as children) (Kamper 2008: 2) and are single or act as substitute parents/caregivers. Parental involvement is therefore minimal. According to a study by Mji and Makgato (2006: 263), parents have a distinct advantage over every other caregiver in that they can provide a more stable and continued positive influence that could enhance and complement what the school attempts to foster in their children. The type of parent involvement that impacts most on learner performance at secondary school level is when parents are physically drawn into the school, for example, when they attend school programmes. Due to their distrust of the school and feelings of inferiority, impoverished parents avoid schools (Kamper 2008: 2). They also tend to have low expectations of their children, not caring whether they bring home low grades or not (Mji and Makgato 2006: 263; Little and Rolleston 2014: 4).

Significantly, teachers play a critical role in the performance of learners. They can either help to improve or they can lower learner performance based on their approaches and teaching skills. In high-poverty schools, teachers are frequently inexperienced, often under-qualified and prone to high mobility (better qualified teachers look for more favourable work environments) (Kamper 2008:3). This is corroborated by Dodge

and Van Wyk (2014: 649) who point out that learners attending high-poverty schools have teachers with weaker qualifications than their counterparts attending schools serving more advantaged learners. Cortese and Von Zastrow (2006:1) likewise found that teachers in high-poverty low performing schools are about two-thirds more likely than teachers in other schools to lack certification, and are almost twice as likely to have only a few years of experience. They assert that high-poverty schools fight a constant uphill battle to recruit and retain teachers and principals. They have more trouble attracting enough experienced applicants, they lose staff at a much higher rate (over one in five teachers every year) and must consequently fill vacancies repeatedly with less-qualified candidates.

This cycle of inadequately qualified teachers teaching high-need populations resulting in low learner achievement persists in low-performing schools (Dodge and Wyk 2014: 663). Kamper (2008:3) summarises the teacher-related problems faced by principals of high-poverty schools as follows: They tend to have low self-esteem and low work motivation; lack initiative; are often absent from work; suffer from burnout and have low learner expectations. They often show no respect for learners and their parents; practise inappropriate teaching methods (“poverty pedagogies”); lack loyalty towards their schools; work in poorly-resourced, dilapidated classrooms and experience physical danger due to learner aggression and neighbourhood crime.

In effect, principals of high-poverty schools are confronted by the problem of an uninviting and unpleasant school environment. The school premises (buildings, furniture and other facilities) are neglected, unkept and damaged. There is poor waste collection and the school environment, in general, reflects the poor state of buildings in the community (Kamper 2008: 2). In a study conducted by Legotlo et al. (2002: 115), it is reported that very few secondary schools they visited were well-equipped with electricity, libraries, laboratories and water or toilets. In some schools, learners were accommodated in classrooms without chairs, chalkboards, doors or windows. Due to overcrowding, many schools in impoverished areas have large classes, and there is not much opportunity for individual attention from overworked educators (Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya 2014: 45). Therefore, the situations in these schools leave learners constant-

ly at risk of underachievement. Furthermore, inadequate classrooms lead to congestion and discomfort which hamper academic activity. Undoubtedly, overcrowded classes increase the workload of the teacher, make classroom management difficult, inhibit interaction between the teacher and the learner, and militate against giving learners individual attention (Masitsa 2004: 224; Van der Vyver et al. 2014: 274).

Inadequacies in the education system add to the myriad of challenges faced by principals. Quite a number of researchers note that poor and minority learners often encounter a weaker curriculum and an unconstructive environment (Timæus et al. 2013: 275). According to Lazaro (2005: 66), the structural paradigms within educational institutions affect educational opportunity for low-income learners by creating barriers to upward mobility, causing academic failure and low academic performance. Moreover, Branson et al. (2014: 110) argue that school policies frequently disengage low-income learners. Overall, such learners are marginalised and subject to stigmatisation, which increases the likelihood of poor educational experiences.

Poor attendance has been identified as another factor which exacerbates poor academic performance at disadvantaged schools. Certain factors contribute to absenteeism in schools such as unemployed parents and their resultant poverty. Some children rather prefer to stay at home than going to school hungry. Jensen (2013:24) highlights the importance of school attendance by pointing out that learner interaction with teachers and other learners in class helps to enhance the academic learning experience and provides a basis on which learners can demonstrate mastery of the subject matter.

The above state of affairs highlights the grim circumstances and expectations of learners prone to poverty. It follows that these pose tremendous challenges to the leadership of schools in such poverty-stricken areas. Whilst acknowledging the impact that socio-economic and societal factors might have on the academic performance of learners, there are schools in poor communities, which, despite their circumstances, have managed to raise their performance, thereby setting an example to other underperforming schools. Lessons learned from high-performing, high-poverty schools could bolster efforts by school leaders and educators to strengthen low-performing schools. Many stu-

dies have been conducted on high-poverty schools (Lazaro 2005; Cortese and Von Zastrow 2006; Raffo et al 2010; Jensen 2013; Little and Rolleston 2014). However, these cannot be seen as conclusive for South African circumstances of poverty, because they were set mostly in First World poverty contexts where the people are regarded as being poor relative to the general standard of living in society, and who do not face acute survival needs (food and shelter) as is often the case in Africa. It is against this background that the overarching question of this study is formulated:

Given the overwhelming evidence that confirms the negative effect of poor socio-economic circumstances on the academic success of learners from poverty-stricken areas in South Africa, how do some schools in these areas manage to excel academically despite their poor living conditions?

More specifically, the following secondary research questions guided the study: With which specific management challenges are high-poverty schools confronted?

Which elements constitute a profile of quality leadership in high-poverty schools?

Theoretical Framework for Investigating Effective Leadership in High-Poverty Schools

For the purposes of this study, three important and interrelated educational leadership theories which emerged from traditional leadership models in organisations (such as trait theory, transactional and transformational leadership models) are those pertaining to instructional leadership, distributed instructional leadership and invitational leadership. The combination of the main tenets of each of these three theories formed the basis for interpreting the empirical findings of the study and encapsulates the crux of the challenges of poverty alleviation in a meaningful way.

The international literature is in general agreement about the contribution of instructional leadership to school improvement (Lee et al. 2012:588). Even though researchers do not agree on a definition or the characteristics that embody instructional leadership, they do agree that the principal must be a strong instructional leader who must exhibit a series of behaviours that are designed to affect classrooms by being responsible for informing teachers about new educa-

tional strategies, technologies and tools that apply to effective instruction (Bush 2014:164a). The leader of the institution is therefore expected to play a leading and supportive role with regard to teachers. In short, Jones (2010:41) sums up the essence of instructional leadership as “developing a common vision of good instruction, building relationships, and empowering staff to innovate.”

Leithwood and Louis (2012:29-30) note that in the educational setting the principal is expected to understand the canons of quality instruction and to have sufficient knowledge of the curriculum to ensure that appropriate content is being delivered to all students. Their presumption here is that either the principal is capable of providing constructive feedback to improve teaching or can design a system in which others can provide this support. The fact is that principals face increasing pressure to deliver or at least, to provide better support for instruction and research shows that consistent, well-informed support from principals makes a difference (Sebastian and Allensworth 2012: 627). For Andrew and Sorder, as cited by Quinn (2012:448), an effective instructional leader performs at high levels by performing certain roles. In this regard, he/she acts as:

- ♦ *A resource provider:* The principal takes action to marshal personnel and resources within the building, district, and community to achieve the school’s vision and goals. These resources may be seen as materials, information, or opportunities, with the principal acting as a broker.
- ♦ *An instructional resource:* The principal sets expectations for continual improvement of the instructional programme and actively engages in staff development.
- ♦ *A communicator:* The principal models commitment to schools goals, articulates a vision toward instructional goals and means for integrating instructional planning and goal attainment, and sets and adheres to clear performance standards for instruction and teacher behaviour.
- ♦ *A visible presence in the school:* The principal is out and around in the school, visiting classrooms, attending departmental or grade-level meetings, walking the hallways, and holding spontaneous conversations with staff and students.

Likewise, Blase and Blase (as cited in Little and Rolleston 2014:2) devised an effective instructional leadership model, which consist of two themes. The first involves engaging with teachers to promote reflection. They found that effective principals valued dialogue that encouraged teachers to reflect critically on their lessons and professional practice. These consist of strategies such as making suggestions, giving feedback and modelling. The second theme focusses on promoting professional growth, where the principal uses various strategies to promote teachers’ professional growth. These include emphasising the study of teaching and learning, supporting collaboration efforts among educators and developing teaching relationship among educators.

Instructional leadership remains, however, overwhelmingly centred on the principal despite the role of the teacher leaders and instructional coaches in improving teaching (Neumerski 2012:312). Mitgang (2012:40) points out that leadership works best when it is shared (distributed) in the school community and leadership only succeeds if the leader shares his/her vision with subordinates in an environment of collaboration and trust. The idea behind distributed or shared leadership is that not only top executives lead, but that leadership can also be exercised throughout an organisation. Distributed leadership can be conceived less as a set of personal attributes or style and more as a practice enacted by people at many levels (James et al. 2007:79).

Barnes et al. (2010:242) argue that meeting the challenge of improving instruction and achievement in schools (especially in rural schools where students are often disadvantaged by economic and other circumstances) will depend, in part, on school leaders that can lead improvements effectively. These leadership imperatives are vested in teachers in the school. Klar (2012:175) cites research that has highlighted the positive influence of leadership on student achievement and organisational improvement when it is exercised by multiple agents. The emphasis on distributed leaders is believed by some schools to be a simple recognition of the collaborative effect of numerous formal and informal leaders found in the school (Klar 2012:177).

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL 2006:22) has proposed five pillars of distributed leadership in schools. These pillars are:

- ♦ Self-confident and self-effacing headship – a desire to make an impact upon the world without a strong need for personal status.
- ♦ Clarity of structure and accountability – defining responsibilities to create ‘permission to act.’
- ♦ Investment in leadership capability – to build the value, beliefs and attributes of effective leadership in all members of staff.
- ♦ A culture of trust – to facilitate boldness, debate and co-operation.
- ♦ A turning point – specific actions and events in a school’s history that lend momentum to the evolution of distributed leadership.

Bush (2014b:5) concludes that in an educational context characterised by complexity, diversity and pressures on teachers and students for improved academic and social outcomes, a model of leadership focusing primarily on the principal is not desirable or sustainable. The real challenge is to find ways of encouraging more teachers to become leaders and to provide them with the support and resources necessary to change current individualistic pedagogical and teaching and learning practices. This notion of encouraging teachers to become leaders and to provide them with support to change and improve their practices resonates with the ‘invitations’ metaphor of Purkey and Novak (as cited in Bhengu and Mkhize 2013:41). It refers to messages that are communicated to people (intentional or unintentional), which inform them that they are able, responsible and worthwhile. These “invitations” are communicated through the leader’s interactions with staff and other people, and through policies, programmes and practices in the school, as well as the physical environment in the school (Purkey and Novak in Bhengu and Mkhize 2013:41).

According to the invitational leadership theory, the way a leader interacts with others will display either invitations or disinvitations. The “disinvitations” comparison refers to messages to people (intentional or unintentional), which are uncaring, demeaning, devaluing, intolerant, discriminatory and hurtful (Kamper 2008). Therefore, the way in which people respond to the leader is usually influenced by the extent to which they feel welcome or unwelcome. As leaders, principals are expected to communicate invitational messages to the people around them as a way of showing them that they are welcome

to participate in a range of school activities. The four basic premises of invitational leadership, as outlined by Stoll and Fink (Mathipa et al. 2014:312) are optimism (constituted in the belief that people have untapped potential for growth and development); respect (manifested in courtesy and caring); trust (the cornerstone of “civil society within a school”); and intentional care (intentional provision of growth opportunities).

The main challenges associated with bringing about change are rigorous intervention, problem solving, school development planning, establishing a culture of continuous improvement, and maintaining momentum through shared leadership.

In brief, then, the notion of instruction (with its strategic elements of effective instruction and educational strategies), distribution (with key notions of shared leadership) and invitation (with its focus on care and trust) appear to constitute the ideal conceptual framework for studying the role of school leadership in dealing with the impact of poverty on education. An empirical investigation of some schools effective in South African high-poverty settings was undertaken in an attempt to answer the research questions, and to determine the requirements for effective leadership in South African high-poverty schools.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology followed in this study was qualitative in nature. This was considered the most suitable approach for investigating the managerial implications and leadership challenges faced by principals of high-poverty schools. Hinckley (2005:297) states that from an interpretivist, phenomenological perspective, the typical characteristics of a qualitative research design is that it strives toward a holistic understanding of how participants relate, interact with and create meaning with regard to a phenomenon. In the case of the present study, respondents gave a clear indication of the extent of the challenges they faced as high-poverty teachers and the management strategies followed to address these challenges. In this study, three secondary school principals of purposefully selected high-poverty, high-achieving schools and five post level one teachers from each school were engaged and their individual and group discussions were recorded. After transcribing the data, the researchers identified meaningful analytical units as de-

scribed by Creswell (2012:185-188) and assigned codes to signify each particular segment. The process of *in vivo* coding was followed, where the same codes were reapplied to similar segments of data. The data were then structured by identifying the main themes and categories, according to which the data were interpreted.

The principals had to have been:

- ♦ In the position of principal of the same school for at least five years.
- ♦ Willing participants wishing to provide valuable data necessary for the research honestly.
- ♦ Willing to give the researchers access to documents and other relative data if needed.

Table 1 presents a synoptic view of the characteristics of principals who participated in the study.

Table 1: Principal data

Principals	School A	School B	School C
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Age	54	58	53
Academic qualifications	BCom Ed(Hons)	BAEd; B.Ed (Hons)	BA;HED; B.Ed (Hons)
Acquisition of leadership and management qualification	Yes	Yes	Yes
Experience as a principal	14 years	7 years	8 years

Table 2: Participating schools

Schools	School A	School B	School C
Location	Urban(surrounded by informal settlement)	Urban (surrounded by informal settlement)	Urban (surrounded by an informal settlement)
Enrolment 2013	1562	1400	940
Number of teachers	63	57	38
Financial Status of school	Fully subsidised	Fully subsidised	Fully subsidised
Functionality of laboratories	Functional	Functional	Functional
Functionality of school library	Functional, fairly well-resourced	Functional and well resourced	Functional and fairly well resourced
Availability of computer centre(s)	Available - one centre	Available - one centre	Available - two centres
Frequency of School Management Team meetings	Very irregular	Regular	Regular
Recent (2013) Grade 12 performance	97.04%	94.75%	97.14%

Table 1 reveals that all three principals were well-qualified. They had all been appointed for more than seven years in a principal's position, indicating vast experience in their positions as school leaders. They had all acquired an Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership and Management on top of the instructional leadership training courses they attended annually. This training was offered by the various education districts as a way of developing the school leadership and reminding them of the district targets for each academic year.

The post level one (junior) teachers had to have been:

- ♦ At the identified schools for more than three years.
- ♦ Willing to provide information freely and honestly through focus group discussions.

The three schools were all urban, surrounded by informal settlements, with a history of consistently high to excellent academic results over a period of five consecutive years. The characteristics of the participant schools are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that the schools catered mainly for learners from the very low socio-economic backgrounds, but all were well resourced. The researchers conducted three semi-structured focus group interviews respectively with the post level one teachers of the selected schools as well as three individual interviews with the principal of each school. Questions focused on the specific management challenges faced by the schools and the leadership qualities and strategies employed by the principals in inspiring their schools to such heights, given

their disadvantaged environment. Pre-testing was conducted with the focus group interview to ascertain whether it was necessary to effect any changes or if more clarity was needed.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the researchers employed member checking. After data analysis and before conclusions were drawn, participants were furnished with the interpreted results to verify the correctness of the interpretations. To achieve and interpret the raw data, a qualitative data analysis process was conducted where the information was coded and categorised (Creswell 2012:185). This process coincided with the aim of the study which guided the development of the main themes and which subsequently assisted in content analysis and interpretation (Wiersma and Jurs 2005:216). The researchers strived to produce findings that were convincing and which included presenting inconsistent and negative findings in order to add to the credibility of the study.

The ethical measures included permission from both the provincial Department of Education and the school principals before collecting data, since obtaining permission from organisational personnel requires contacting them before the study commences (Cresswell 2012:160). Likewise, informed consent from all the prospective participants (principals and teachers) to participate in the study was obtained, after having informed them of its purpose, the procedures to be followed, the risks, benefits, alternative procedures and the measures implemented to ensure confidentiality (Singh and Steyn 2013; Johnson and Christensen 2011:107).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis process described in the previous section revealed the following main themes:

- ♦ Managerial challenges facing principals of high-poverty schools.
- ♦ Strategies to deal with these challenges.
- ♦ Qualities of principals of high-performing, high-poverty schools.

Managerial Challenges Facing Principals of High-Poverty Schools

Since schools are regarded as both closed and open systems, they are influenced by external and internal factors, which affect their daily administration and management by school prin-

cipals. As mentioned in the introduction, problems that emanate from society can have a direct influence on the performance of learners and how school principals manage schools. Marla et al. (2010:1) report that "...schools with high concentrations of children living in poverty face significant school improvement challenges...", and they conclude that leading high-poverty schools requires a particular set of knowledge and skills, as the challenges faced at these schools differ considerably from those experienced at more affluent schools.

The interviews conducted with both the teachers (in focus groups) and principals confirm the impact of societal and socio-economic factors on effective management. All three principals cited gangsterism and crime as serious challenges faced by their schools. This is in accordance with findings of a study conducted by Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya (2014: 43-50) in which gangster activities in six provinces in South Africa was investigated. Since all the schools studied in this paper were located within informal settlements, gang activities were commonplace. This problem has persisted for many years without successful interventions from the authorities. Teachers in the focus groups also unanimously voiced their concern about gangsterism and crime. The rife nature of this problem was evident in the following comment by a teacher from School A: *"You know, our school is located in a community infested with many gang-related cases which spill over to the school. Gangsterism and crime render the school ineffective and it impacts negatively on the performance of learners...and teachers alike. It leads to absenteeism and poor discipline and this is chaotic for the institution."*

The focus group from school B also noted various societal challenges that they faced on a regular basis at their school. They highlighted the impact of aspects such as teenage pregnancy, child-headed families, sexual abuse and unprotected sexual practices on learning and which eventually pose a huge challenge to the management of the school. One female teacher from the focus group from school C was a member of the school based support team (SBST) and revealed that, at times, they handled serious cases where female learners, because of their poor backgrounds, fell victim to sexual abuse in the township as older people took advantage of their conditions. She commented:

“We had an incident where one female learner who was very brilliant while in Grade 11 registered a sharp drop in performance during the first quarter of her Grade 12 studies. After several contact sessions with her, it was discovered that she has been abused by a close relative who assisted the family with some cash and groceries on a regular basis. Even though the mother of this learner knew about the incident, she kept quiet for fear of losing the support from that close relative until the child could not take it anymore and disclosed to us, and we had to intervene and assist her.”

The focus group from school C further related that the high incidence of teenage pregnancy at the school and broader community were fuelled by poverty, as girls sometimes became pregnant in order to qualify for state grants.

“During open discussions in Life Orientation classes, some girls will reveal that they depended on the grant to make end meets, therefore, pregnancy was a part of the bigger plan to get the support from the state. They engage in unprotected sexual practices being aware of the results. There is more that needs to be done to help these children.” This plight resonates with McLeod and Tiffany’s (2014:545) view that adolescent pregnancy, especially in poor communities, is increasingly taking on serious proportions in South Africa.

The principal from school C experienced challenges mostly because of the high rate of learner absenteeism that he believed stemmed from problems both at home and in the broader society. Since his school was located in the middle of an informal settlement, most of the parents were unemployed and unable to meet the educational needs of their children. These learners were, therefore, easily caught up in other activities that disrupted their regular school attendance.

As to be expected, the focus group from school C alluded to the *effects of poverty*, the main challenge affecting the majority of their learners, which impacted on their academic performance. One teacher mentioned that *“they [learners] come in [a] shabby state in terms of appearance, and, as a result, when they are confronted by other learners, their confidence become so low that they have a negative connotation as far as the results are concerned.”*

The lack of parental involvement emerged as a major factor that could *“...make or break*

our children” (Principal of School B). Research shows that parents of secondary school pupils are no longer motivated to participate in school activities such as meetings, sports and fundraising (Timæus et al. 2013: 276). The situation is exacerbated by the fact that some pupils do not live with their parents, while others live with a single parent. As a result of parental apathy, schools are prevented from discussing matters essential to the education of their children with parents or from enlisting their support in combating the truancy and neglect of schoolwork which are rife in schools and cause underachievement and failure.

Principals from all three schools indicated that a lack of parental involvement at school also posed a great challenge to the school. *“Parents and guardians need to play a major role if society is to get rid of drugs and gangsterism at school. Some parents...some of them think that it is enough to send a child to school without their involvement. The child’s education starts at home before it is formalised at school.”*

Teachers from school A explained that, although parents showed up for parents’ meetings, their involvement outside that domain was minimal. Parents typically came to school at the end of the year to enquire regarding why their children had failed, whereas they never bothered to get involved with their children’s’ performance throughout the year. The focus group of teachers from School B highlighted issues such as overcrowding, pregnancy, lack of discipline and worn out school buildings as some internal factors that needed serious attention. One of them voiced their concerns as follows:

“There is a problem of overcrowding at our school.... learner discipline goes down as a result of teachers not being able to reach all learners. Ill-discipline leads to poor performance in class. Overcrowding has affected allocation of furniture and LTSM [Learning and Teaching Subject Material]. Every year, we have to buy desks because learner enrolment keeps going up. There have to be special desks or tables since too many learners in the class make it impossible to use conventional seating. Teaching materials cannot reach everyone and learners have to share books. Money allocated to schools does not come as expected, and, as a result, we cannot spend for everyone.”

In summary, it transpired that the main challenges at the participant schools included

gangsterism and crime, teenage pregnancy, child-headed families, sexual abuse, learner absenteeism, lack of parental involvement, overcrowding, ill-discipline and neglected resources. These findings are consistent with a myriad of research carried out on poverty-related issues in education (Jukuda 2011; Gilmour et al. 2012; Bower 2014; Dodge and Van Wyk 2014; Little and Rolleston 2014).

Strategies to Deal with Challenges Confronting Principals

According to Van der Vyver et al. (2014: 62), high-performing schools seem to exhibit a number of common traits that differ significantly from practices in lower-performing schools. These include school wide ethic of high expectations: caring, respectful relations between stakeholders, a strong academic and instructional focus, and regular assessment of individual learners. Further qualities exhibited by high-performing schools are collaborative decision-making structures and a non-authoritarian principal, strong faculty morale and work ethics and coordinated staffing strategies (Van der Vyver et al. 2014: 62).

Researchers further agree that high-performing schools engage in a number of different activities or factors that cause them to remain outstanding in their performances. Clofelter et al. (2006:19) refers to these factors as “sustained focus on multiple factors,” that is, schools do not achieve high performance by doing one or two things differently. They must do a number of things differently, and all at the same time, to begin to achieve the critical mass that will make a difference in learner outcomes. In other words, high-poverty schools that achieve gains in learner performance engage in systemic change.

In line with the pillars of distributed leadership as discussed by Bush (2014b: 5), the principal from school A highlighted the significance of involving all stakeholders in an attempt to address the challenges facing the school:

“All stakeholders have been involved in trying to put heads together to find solutions to issues like gangsterism. There are on-going discussions and engagement with these stakeholders. We have adopted a cop who visits the school on a regular basis. We invite correctional services and the SAPS [police service] to address learners on the danger of drugs and gangsterism.”

Teachers from school A confirmed the above sentiments by pointing out that a safe learning

environment is maintained so that learners can feel at ease when coming to school knowing that the police are visible and dealing with gang-related incidents that may disturb regular attendance by other learners.

Engaging learners in extramural activities was also mentioned by most participants as an effective measure to combat the ills in the community. Sporting and cultural activities enjoy high priority. As one teacher explained: *“We keep them busy, busy busy! It is good for them and they don’t have time and energy to do bad things”*.

In addressing the issue of learners who cannot afford to buy necessities such as proper school uniforms, it transpired that the school-based support teams at the different schools played a significant role. One teacher from School C explained:

“The school-based support team (SBST) has a list of learners whose poverty status is severe, and as a result, cannot afford to put on proper school uniforms. Those learners are allowed to come to school and are, therefore, beneficiaries of donated old school uniforms from former learners, and are given whatever is left from the feeding scheme at the end of school day so that they could eat something when they get home and be able to study as studying on an empty stomach is difficult.”

The principal of School B shared the following management strategies employed at his school:

- ♦ A bursary scheme was established by teachers to assist poor, but performing Grade 12 learners. This is meant to assist these learners to register at tertiary institutions. Community organisations were often involved in this endeavour and it provides a good example of Kamper’s (2008: 1) view about the social and ethical purpose of empowering the school, which in a high-poverty setting, acts as a catalyst for community development.
- ♦ The school had a functional school based support team (SBST). The SBST, amongst others, identified struggling learners and provide needed support to them. Moreover, the SBST also identified the parents of struggling learners who were not working. In such cases, these parents were enlisted to work as food handlers in the school’s nutrition programme and were given a stipend of R840

per month over a period of six months, thus helping to alleviate poverty at home.

- ♦ Learners were asked to donate R1 a week towards a programme meant to assist extremely needy learners at school.

Whilst discussing effective monitoring systems to ensure effective teaching and learning, the principal of school B indicated that “(t)here are definitely proper control and monitoring systems and effective period monitoring systems at school used by all managers.” According to him, a ‘block system’ was utilised. Each block was under the supervision of a head of department (HOD), also referred to as a block supervisor, who monitored all period registers in his block and gave a weekly summary of attendance in the block. If there were culprits, found to be guilty of non-attendance on the part of teachers or learners, the block supervisor intervened. If the trend was persistent, the culprit, if it was a teacher, was referred to the principal, and if it was a learner, parents were called to attend a meeting at the school in an effort to discourage the behaviour of the learner.

Teachers from school C reported other measures taken to address the challenges at school. One of the teachers explained:

“In the case of overcrowding, the department has provided mobile classes. For the learners who are heading the families, the school provides food parcels, and some get food after school from the school kitchen [feeding scheme]. The school organises trips to correctional services for boys to see the life in prison. The correctional officers, police, nurses and social workers are invited to school to address learners on important issues.”

Another strategy that was used effectively, was the principle of “management by wandering around” (Principal of School C), which is in line with the performances of instructional leaders as described by Quinn (2012:448). “In that way you quickly detect any situation where teaching and learning might not be taking place, and correct the situation on the spot.” The focus group of teachers from school C applauded the effectiveness of the principal’s moving around the school as a good strategy, which helped to deal with situations promptly. Moreover, the school adopted a system where learners’ progress reports were issued directly to the parents at a meeting. In addition, this allowed the principal and the teachers to discuss other

obstacles with parents, such as the high rate of absenteeism, which, as a result, had dropped significantly.

To inspire learners, participants from Schools B and C indicated that regular motivational sessions were conducted by involving former learners from the same school who had achieved success and who shared similar socio-economic backgrounds - thereby reminding the learners that it was possible to rise above one’s circumstances.

In keeping with the tenets of distributed leadership (Little and Rolleston 2014:2), the majority of participants agreed that close collaboration between colleagues and the extra effort and time invested in learners were characteristic of staff members at their schools. A hunger for knowledge and continuous professional development were also cited as the characteristics of high quality teaching. A participant from School C stated: “*I want to become a better teacher every year. I want to improve my knowledge, and if I have money, I want to further my studies. That would make me so happy!*”

Qualities of Principals of High-performing, High-poverty Schools

According to Gulbin (2008:2), actions of leaders determine the success or failure of an organisation. At the school level, the principal’s actions determine whether or not effective change happens. This premise by Gulbin (2008) clearly indicates that the success of the school lies mostly with the leadership qualities of the principal as the head of the institution, and whether or not the principal effectively utilises the skills of individuals in his school. The significance of establishing the quality and effectiveness of both competent school principals and qualified educators in all schools implies that no school should be left in the care and guidance of poor performing principals and teachers without providing support and training. This will have a bearing on the type of education to which the learners are exposed as well as the output of such learners and their competency in the job market.

Principals from all three schools agreed that principals of high-poverty schools should possess specific leadership qualities in order to be effective in their jobs. Of these, an inclusive, democratic leadership style is imperative. The

principal from school C highlighted the importance of being empathetic and a compassionate leader in order to function well in a high-poverty school, noting that "... we need to put ourselves in the shoes of those needy learners and assist them." This finding is in accordance with the premises of invitational leadership (Mathipa et al. 2014:312) as discussed in the theoretical framework of this paper. The focus group of school B and C told the researcher that a quality evident in their respective principals was that of being motivators. One teacher observed:

"He is a motivator who always believes in extra work. Always putting learners' needs first, and personally being there during extra classes to help in monitoring the whole process."

The focus group from school B added that the principal was *collaborative* and a team player as he included everybody in the decision-making processes. The principal explained his leadership philosophy as follows:

".....constantly selling the vision of the school to all stakeholders, involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making, at all levels, true and genuine transparency including finances. Providing teachers with the relevant tools of trade for all the subjects."

This philosophy presents the beliefs underpinning distributed leadership (Bush 2014b:5) and invitational leadership (Bhengu and Mkhize 2013:41). Other leadership qualities that were found to be outstanding in these high-poverty schools are the key values and principles that form the foundations of the principals' leadership philosophy. The principals of all three schools mentioned the following key values and principles as foundations at their respective schools: dedication, diligence, accountability and being results-driven. Teachers showed considerable dedication to their work, and this was shown through lesson planning and continuous assessment of learners to evaluate the content taught. The principal of school A commented:

"Emphasis is put on spending quality time with learners. I have dedicated staff who go the extra mile in reaching out to children's educational needs."

A teacher from school A, like the principal of school B, added:

"Results - our school is results-orientated as our Grade 12 learners perform remarkably well. Culture - the culture of our school pro-

notes a conducive atmosphere for learners to perform optimally in Grade 12."

The principals also emphasised the importance of academic accountability and proper financial management. Teachers and learners were held accountable for the poor performance of the school. The teachers had to account to the principal if they failed to reach the benchmark during tests or examinations. Learners were also held accountable by the principals for having failed. They too had to commit themselves to improving their own performance. In addition, principals accounted to the staff and parents how the funds were allocated and spent. All three principals emphasised the importance of financial expertise on the school management team and the school governing body alike. Despite the fact that participant schools were fully subsidised by the Department of Education, the subsidy was limited and responsible management of funds was essential.

It seems that, in order to bring about the much anticipated changes in high-poverty schools, principals are bound to develop practical, feasible strategies to meet the expected levels of performance. They need to possess specific qualities of leadership that will help them to transform their schools. It seems that poor socio-economic circumstances do not necessarily exclude excellent performance.

CONCLUSION

In terms of the research question that prompted the empirical investigation, the findings revealed that principals in high-performing, high-poverty schools understand the significance of establishing a safe learning environment as it plays a pivotal role in creating a conducive teaching and learning atmosphere. This was confirmed in the empirical investigation. It further transpired that learners in the three schools investigated were holistically engaged to ensure that they remained focused at all times, and they avoided disruptive activities that could hamper their performance. These schools ensured that most learners were engaged in extra-mural activities during their spare time to keep them from getting involved in crime-related activities. One outstanding characteristic of the participant schools was effective leadership. It was evident that the principals had a vision for the school, and they articulated this vision to staff, parents

and learners. The philosophy, structures and activities of the school are geared towards the achievement of this shared vision. They also adhered to key values and principles such as dedication, diligence, trust and accountability. It also emerged that accountable financial management was essential. Participant principals ensured that the financial expertise was available and utilised. Wise distribution of finances received from fundraising activities and departmental subsidies are essential. The empirical investigation has revealed that the principals of the participating schools were highly-motivated and were, therefore, able to motivate others, teachers and learners alike. Collaboration played a critical role in these schools. The teachers were inspired to provide leadership in the areas of their expertise and become leaders in their own right. Leaders, therefore, build collaborative structures and cultures of trust. When teachers and learners realise that they are trusted and supported to produce excellent results, it serves as a motivation to do exceptionally well. The paper has shown that successful high-poverty schools have teachers who are committed to personal and professional development. This is viewed as an ingredient for promoting the delivery of education and training as well as improving learners' performance. It became clear that the staff of these schools were driven by a common purpose, which made them strive for the same goal, namely, excellent learner achievement. These schools ensured that learners from low-income backgrounds received the same standard of education as other learners. Therefore, in these schools, it is clear that a learner's background and prior academic performance do not necessarily pass as reasons for lower expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to determine how some schools in disadvantaged communities excel academically, despite the poor living conditions of their learners. It also set out to establish which elements constitute a profile of effective leadership in high-poverty schools. Based on the research findings derived from the literature consulted and the views of the participants in the study, the following strategies may prove to be useful to principals of high-poverty schools – not only in South Africa, but in disadvantaged

schools worldwide where socio-economic and societal circumstances pose serious challenges to effective leadership.

1. There must be continuous and sustained support for the principals, staff and learners of high-poverty schools by all sections within the local education districts and community organisations so that relevant sustenance is readily available. This support can be financial, by supplying resources or in the form of training.
2. The training of principals should be focused on the strengths of various leadership styles and how these can be implemented to achieve optimal success. These styles should have elements of both task orientation (academic achievement) and people orientation (trust, cooperation), with an emphasis on effectiveness, competence, caring and sharing, as embodied in the instructional, distributed and invitational leadership models.
3. Principals should ensure that schools become community centres and that the gap that exists between schools and the communities be narrowed. Therefore, principals should be part of the communities in which they operate so that the community itself could "own" the school and protect it from social ills such as gangsterism and other crime-related activities.
4. It is recommended that principals of high-poverty schools should build a network with principals of other high-performing schools to foster the exchange of ideas and sharing of best-practices. Constant support and guidance from other successful schools will be to the benefit of all.

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