

FAILING SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA: A SYMPTOM OF DEFEATISM IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

This paper draws on a multiple case study on school leadership in seven schools in South Africa. The views and experiences of principals of so called failing schools were elicited and analysed to try and answer the research question: Why could these schools not achieve more than a 20% pass rate in the National Examination for the last five years amongst their grade 12 pupils? The most striking finding was that in all the cases one essential element of leadership was missing namely resilience: leading irrespective of the circumstances and changing problems into challenges. In their acceptance of a managerialist leadership style and curriculum changes that, amongst others, marginalised design/art education, school leaders surrendered to defeatism, a finding validated by interview data. This paper recommends suggestions which principals could use to turn defeatism into resilience in their professional lives.

Keywords: Leadership, Principals, Resilience/Defeatism

Introduction

In an effort to contextualise the content of this paper, I endeavoured to unpack the notion of design/design education. Acts and Policies chose *arts education* as a term to unify the multifaceted *Arts and Culture* sectors which include design, and following this approach, 'arts education' used in this paper subsumes 'design education'. To me the concept *design* embodies three interconnected ideas namely to imagine (think/conceive), design and create.

This study is delimited in the sense that the focus is not on design education/thinking in Higher Education (HE), but the perceived lack of resilience in school leaders/principals and the influence of this behaviour on students' performance, development and choices at school that impacts on career choices and studies in HE.

The focus of this paper is the perceived lack of resilience in school leaders. It infers that a culture of defeatism in our school system is a product of the post 1994 South African Schools Act (84/1996) (SASA), the National Education Policy Act (27/1996) (NEPA) and a diminished capacity in principals as school leaders to think and lead creatively. The paper implies that, although the resourceful and innovative value of arts education is recognised in industry, it is marginalised in the national curriculum, linking directly to poor school leadership. It suggests that, in accepting the existing status quo, principals and school management teams (SMTs) relinquish their spirit and resilience to feelings of gloom and hopelessness due to government pressure.

It assumes that principals' despondency, perceived lack of support and unwillingness to change challenges into opportunities, relate to the top-down enforcement of these rather obsolete policies, demand-and-control managerialist leadership styles and a lack of autonomy. Inclusively these create a rather morbid education situation that shackles creative leadership development potential and limits pupils' immediate career choices and subsequent future successes.

To obtain data for this research, a literature study was done and principals from failing schools were interviewed. Their experiences served to support and validate the claims made in this paper. An alternative to the managerialist discourse is suggested and the impact of defeatism versus resilience on school leadership is considered. Suggestions are made as to how resilience in leadership could turn failing schools around.

Background

In 1996, both SASA (84/1996) and NEPA (27/1996) were promulgated. Together these Acts were to form the basis of a high performing post-apartheid education system that should steer the education and transformational requirements of the country and be considered accessible and equitable. In an effort to move away from the content-based apartheid curriculum, the education system was radically reformed to focus on an outcomes-based learner-centred acquisition of skills, knowledge and values for development, equality and social justice. Reality shows that actual progress in education has been sketchy since then. SASA (84/1996) addresses mainly funding and governance, skimping on key issues such as teaching, pupil outcomes and leadership/management. This oversight in legislation resulted in a troubling, failing education system. Curriculum 2005, implemented in 1997, was replaced by a watered-down version, the Revised National Curriculum Statement in 2004 which was amended to Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements in 2012 (Western Cape Education Department 2013). Such rapid changes could only have been necessitated by intrinsic and deep-rooted flaws in the system, culminating in a feeling of despair among educators, pupils and parents nationally.

Arts education was primarily offered in urban white schools in the historical four provinces until the late 1980's. It is accepted that creative activities simultaneously stimulate both sides of the brain maximising learning and information retention. Rural schools' education was underfunded, in bad physical shape and qualified art teachers were scarce. This is still the case. Current arts education is further undermined by changes to the curriculum with a shift in focus to maths and sciences. This shift towards the sciences is believed to augment global competitiveness and economic growth. Unfortunately, arts education does not lend itself to quantifiable measurements and is all too easily considered dispensable and unworthy of the same attention bestowed on so-called higher-order thinking subjects such as maths and science. Principals accepted these changes and arts classes are frequently the first to erode from a crowded curriculum. Aspects that are considered peripheral in education are actually those that commonly lend value and credence to an education system and its practitioners.

As stated in the Arts and Culture Policy Review (2007), despite SASA's commitment to a balanced curriculum, arts education remains largely neglected in the school curriculum. Echoing 1996, most schools still lack the basic infrastructure and *trained* human resources to offer arts and culture. Barriers to information access and educator development opportunities that require the integration of multidisciplinary knowledge and skills/multiple arts disciplines mean that access to and investment in *certified, accredited* arts education remain unavailable to the majority of South Africans. Local sources are inadequate to meet the capacity building demands of a fragmented, growing arts and design sector.

Since the promulgation and subsequent amendments of the Green and White Papers, Bills and Acts, meaningful changes in curricula remain conspicuously invisible in schools. Despite the emphasis on maths and science teaching, the World Economic Forum's Global Information Technology Report (2013) positions South Africa's maths and science education second last worldwide, ranking 143/144. These ratings rank the quality of South Africa's education system as amongst the poorest performing in the world: 140/144. This dismal situation is directly related to the fact that SASA and NEPA were largely results of ideological, emotional and political compromise, and not aimed at enriching and transforming our education system. Regardless of the

rankings and notwithstanding the fact that business globally values a culture of arts and design, the South African school system still advances maths and science while arts education remains irrelevant in most schools' curricula.

South Africa (SA) is globally considered a manufacturing country of others' ideas (GEF 2013). This status quo will remain unchallenged and unchanged unless consumer markets nationally challenge education and industry to expand the level of innovation and design to generate quality services and products. Education does not happen where policies are made, it happens in schools between and amongst teachers and pupils. Education is not about pupils conforming to or about comparing their performance rates on a very narrow achievement continuum; it is about the diverse human nature and the holistic development of pupils.

The recent history of school improvement in SA has been written with references to Parliamentary Acts and Provincial Regulations (Cross et al. 2010; Bisschoff 2009). It is generally assumed that politicians steer educational improvement in SA. The truth is entirely different (Bisschoff 2009). For generations educational progress in SA was driven by teachers and especially principals. Teachers pioneered and redefined excellence in education (Moloi 2010; Moloi et al. 2009). The reformers who consistently raised our expectations of what education can achieve were mostly principals (Moloi 2005). This perspective clearly indicates that government should actively strive to make a difference in schools - and pupils' lives - by granting 'autonomy' to competent principals. The present managerialist discourse (Mabey & Finch-Lees 2008:189) holds interested parties hostage in thinking in a hierarchical top-down, command-and-control frame. SASA shaped the policy and attempted to bring greater autonomy to schools and principals, but evidence of this remains undetectable at the majority of schools.

Evidence from other countries (Canada: Bosetti 2011; USA: Hill 2006; Singapore: Mok 2003) proves that empowered principals can indeed exceed their own expectations and that of the system. The highest-performing education systems are those where the government knows when to step back and let principals manage their schools.

Ken Robinson, well-known advocate for transformation in the culture of education, argues that 'the real role of leadership in education... is not and should not be command and control. The real role in leadership is climate control, creating a climate of possibility' (online:2013). The education system impacts directly on students' teaching and learning experiences, their development and future. In SA, students from affluent schools will still prosper while those from struggling schools continue to be subjected to insufficient choices, limited curricula, infrastructure shortage, menial teaching and learning experiences. Until the notion of *defeatism* is supplanted by *resilience* and *autonomy* in school leadership, giving principals and their SMTs a voice to be respected and reckoned with, equitable and fair teaching and learning activities in schools could remain a paper exercise.

This study is important precisely because of the pivotal role principals play in learner and school success. The questions asked in this paper are why these seven schools' grade 12 pupils could not achieve more than a 20% pass rate in the National Examination for the last five years and how this problem can be addressed?

Literature review

The literature subsumes the elements explored in this study: leadership, resilience and defeatism. Apart from Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) very little empirical research directly links resilience to leadership. These researchers argue that the development of resilience as component of authentic leadership increases the effectiveness of organisations. Leaders feel inadequate and stressed because of the difference between their ideal persona, who they are and what they achieve. Bass (1996:45) maintains

resilient leaders would transform emergencies into developmental challenges by treating challenges as surmountable and by providing 'intellectual stimulation' to promote thoughtful, creative rather than flimsy, untrustworthy solutions to stressful conditions.

Resilience: a necessary condition for effective leadership

According to Henderson (2003) and Davies (2013) people's unique innate capacity to overcome adversity is shaped and fortified over time by talent/internal strengths and undesirable environmental conditions. Stressful factors seem to boost the manifestation of resilience, a characteristic that varies between individuals and fluctuates over time.

For the purpose of this research the concept *defeatism* was chosen as antonym for resilience, as 'a lack of resilience' does not emphasise forcefully enough the urgent need for resilience as a theme in school leadership development. The definitions below contribute to a fuller understanding of resilience in school leadership with defeatism labelled as its counterpoint:

According to Richardson (2002:313) 'resilience means growth or adaptation through disruption rather than just to recover or bounce back', while Youssef & Luthans (2007:6) infer that 'resilience allows for not only reactive recovery but also proactive learning and growth through conquering challenges'. Van der Kleij et al. (2011:1) argue that '...resilience is the ability ...to respond to sudden, unanticipated demands for performance quickly and with minimum decrement of performance.'

School leadership

Literature on leadership is abundant, wide-ranging and highly fragmented. There is no overarching theory of school leadership and relatively limited empirical work has been done to date. Given the paucity of an evidence base, it is challenging to know where to begin when attempting to explain the 'why' and 'how' in the research question for this paper. Although it is argued that leadership theory is fragmented and atomised, the influence of 'managerialism' over leadership theory and practice is widely recognised in the form of transactional leadership (Clarke & Newman 1997, Clegg 1990). Unfortunately, managerialist discourses do not provide the conceptual frame for the leadership competencies required to combat a lack of resilience within leadership of place. Leadership of place that fosters the development of resilience (Bennis & Nanus 1997, Trickett 2011; Riley 2013) promotes co-operation built on trust-based networks where trust embraces inclusivity, openness and equitability to generate and share knowledge.

Studies on failing schools (Murphy 2009, Grobler et al. 2012) mention a number of leadership features within failing schools, but very little empirical data is available to assist principals in turning their schools around. Conceptual misunderstanding and an alarming number of quick-fix solutions abound, many which leap from the problem (reasons for failure) straight into solutions which are not thought through thus not exploring the variables and conditions within failing schools.

Available literature clearly indicates that the influence that principals have on pupil outcomes (the core function of schools) is largely mediated through factors such as work done by teachers, involvement of parents and the community and governance. Shared leadership is considered more likely to have an effect on the positive achievement of pupil outcomes than leadership which is largely, or exclusively, top-down. Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins (2008) investigated the impact of school leadership on pupil learning outcomes and coined seven strong claims about successful school leadership which support the message of this paper. This study clearly examined the last claim 'a small handful of personal traits explain a high proportion of the variation in

leadership effectiveness' and concluded that resilience is a fundamental trait for principals to succeed in challenging circumstances.

Research design

The study followed a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research design in the humanistic tradition (Gunter & Ribbins 2001) but with a specific modern day pragmatic slant (Biesta and Burbules 2003, Cherryholmes 1992, Rorty 1982). The study was undertaken within an interpretative framework, emphasising experiences and interpretations. From a list of 100 secondary schools received from a district manager in a specific school district, ten schools which consistently performed the poorest over the last five years were identified for the purpose of this research. The project leader received documentary evidence and permission to interview the ten principals. Only seven principals agreed to be individually interviewed by eight researchers working in pairs. The aim of the personal, in-depth interviews was to elicit principals' experiences and views on the linkage between governance/leadership/management and pupil achievement. The interview protocol was developed using existing knowledge about failing schools which focussed on school improvement via structural and school related factors instead of principals' characteristics. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the transcribed interviews.

Validation strategies used included first investigator triangulation and rich, thick descriptions that allow the reader to make decisions regarding the transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation of data ensured trustworthiness. The main categories were recorded with specific quotes from the transcribed interviews to substantiate the claims made.

Interview questions (IQ) were developed to obtain principals' views on why they think their schools are failing. It was difficult to develop questions that would illicit direct and honest answers and give principals ample time to elaborate on their answers. These questions may look like questions on the school and its structure, but the way in which principals answered these questions gave researchers opportunity to glean characteristics of the principals themselves.

The interview protocol consisted of the following IQs:

IQ1: Tell me about any successes your school has achieved in the last five years. (Encourage academic successes; listen to other achievements such as sport/culture)

IQ2: Tell me more about your School Governing Body (SGB) and what it does for you as principal and your SMT. (How does the SGB contribute to enhance learner performance/effective teaching and learning in your school?)

IQ3: Would you like to see other people in the community become involved in the governance of your school? (If the participant is in favour of more involvement try to find out what role s/he would like others to play)

IQ4: If you could advise the minister of education on SGBs, who would you like to see represented on it and what would you like them to do? (Try to find out how participants would like to restructure the SGB if they had the power)

Findings and discussion

First level of analysis

This section highlights what was said relative to the four interview questions:

IQ: school successes

Principals painted a picture of optimism and highlighted some of the good things in their schools. The principals were aware of the increased importance of pupil well-being in general as part of school success and mentioned achievements such as reduction in drug abuse and teenage pregnancies. One school excelled when pupils built a model car sponsored by a car manufacturer. Understandably very little was said about pupils' academic achievement although one principal mentioned that there was a significant improvement in the results in the grade 12 examination; this was true but the school still fell within the sample category.

IQ2: the role of the SGB

SASA (1996) makes provision for five constituencies (categories of people to vote democratically for their representatives) on the SGB. The principals only referred to three of these constituencies: educators, parents and learner representatives.

On the role of educators they emphasised that teacher unions undermine the authority of the school principal and support unprofessional behaviour of educators. They fatalistically stated that nothing could be done about this status quo. One principal said that *as long as Union A exists my school will not be able to perform successfully*.

Principals agreed that parents are not involved and could play a much more constructive role in sport activities and fundraising. Again a feeling of defeatism suggested that very little can be done about it because *parents are illiterate; parents work all day and parents don't see the importance of education*.

The principals felt that the contribution of the learner representatives are not constructive and national student politics sometimes undermine the constructive work done by SMTs. The perceived inability to do something about it was evident in the comment *We are told by Student Association A when to go on strike even if no reason for the strike exists*.

IQ3: other representatives on the SGB

The principals were unanimous in their wish to have more knowledgeable people on the SGB especially in the fields of finance and legal matters. They agreed that the present co-option avenue is unsatisfactory because it does not guarantee commitment from members. SASA (1996) allows for any person to be co-opted onto the SGB but in the majority of cases without voting rights or the possibility to chair a subcommittee of the SGB.

IQ4: please mister minister

All the principals agreed poverty is rife within their school communities. They dejectedly accepted poverty as a given about which nothing could be done, using it as an excuse why their pupils can never achieve as well as or better than the district average. They referred to perks SGBs of successful schools pay their principals to justify why they should get more money for working under difficult circumstances beyond their control. The principals blamed their teachers for the weak performance of their pupils. One principal even emphasised that he wanted his teachers replaced by a new hardworking group of teachers *otherwise I can see no improvement*.

Second level of analysis

A brief summary is provided denoting a set of patterns that emerged from the second or deep level of analysis. These could be seen as components or even counterpoint components of resilience in leadership. It was during this analysis that the theme of lack of resilience emerged from the data.

Declining job satisfaction and detachment in an unsupportive environment

One principal came from a historically white school where he served as a deputy; he has been with his current school for five years. He felt that his experience and knowledge gained at a white school could add value amongst his own where he could, ideologically, increase the opportunities of children from a poor socio-economic context. Having experienced some unpleasant incidents with parents and teachers, he admitted that he felt a little depressed because of the lack of parental and teacher support. He felt it was unfair that he put in so much energy into the school while nobody else seemed to pull their weight: *I work late and do not find enough time for shopping, washing, etc while the staff take a half day on payday to do their shopping because as they say it is a tradition in that school.* The other principals indicated that *they were not happy with the job as principal... but would never give up the job because it pays well.*

Support and recognition – shoots of optimism

The principals viewed the involvement of the Department as intrusive and judgmental. One principal indicated that when his school won a private sector initiated project he at last experienced some recognition and that made him more optimistic about the future of the school. His optimism was short lived because peers criticised this as a *non-academic achievement* heavily funded from outside. The other principals felt that they received very little support and recognition for their hard work done under challenging circumstances. The transcripts are full of statements like the following:

We are known as the poor school with lazy teachers and parents take their children to the town school. The department blames me for the poor performance but one man cannot improve the results of the whole school.

Thriving or expiring against all odds

One principal indicated that he has seen some improvement from the day he arrived at the school. However, the majority felt that the teachers were all in their comfort zones and satisfied that the poor pupil performance was due to the low socio-economic context the pupils come from. Low pupil expectations are evident in the fact that the principals did not feel accountable for the pupils' performance, and the fact that their children attended school was good enough for the parents. The principals blamed the appalling pupil behaviour on parents not doing their job: *Why must we teach them good, manners if it is the responsibility of the parents?* They did not see how pupils and schools could ever thrive and perform well in such challenging situations.

Variations in resilience across own professional life

From the information provided by the principals there was no indication that there were any variations in resilience. They agreed that they have to accept what was given to them and although it would affect their professional lives detrimentally they couldn't do anything about it. They were happy with the security attached to their positions as principals but wanted more money.

Meeting the challenge of the environment and utilising leadership of place

In this study, changing expectations about schools and the composition of the pupil population are key environmental factors that challenge principals' sense of effectiveness and well-being. All the principals come from limiting socio-economic working class backgrounds. According to Henderson's research (2003) under adverse circumstances the principals should have been well prepared to unequivocally deal with challenging situations in their professional lives. It appears that this is not the case, as seen in the following verbatim comment made by one of the principals when he voiced what they all concurred on:

I went to university to get a degree so that I can have a well paid work that did not demand hard work because it is uneducated people that must work hard not those that have studied, why would one then go to all the effort to study?

During the interviews and the analysis of interview data, very little evidence was found to show that the principals' immediate environmental conditions and stressors contributed to shifting the balance of their responses from one of resignation and defeatism to resiliency.

Managerialism and resilience

The principals all felt that they were doing their best as managers and leaders, but that they did not know how to turn their schools around because their teachers and communities neither acknowledged nor supported their efforts; they appeared to be functioning in a void. It seems that the managerialist discourse on leadership no longer adequately provides a framework for understanding the lack of resilience in a leadership of place. Grint (2005) talks about the complexity of organisations/schools and label them 'wicket issues' that are intangible and too complicated for bureaucratic leaderships to grapple with because of the difficulty in identifying the root causes of unfamiliar complexities. Only by moving beyond this dominant command-and-control leadership discourse and by embracing the principles of place-based leadership, may leaders become empowered to move out of a role of defeatism into a role of resilience. Schools function within the knowledge-based economy where the production and dissemination of **knowledge** are drivers of productivity and growth and performance depends on how intangible assets such as skills, creativity and collective intellectual capital are applied to add value, reduce workplace barriers, create an entrepreneurial spirit and become a source of competitive advantage, pride and enriched human endeavour.

Conclusion

As is evident from this research, SASA and NEPA must be revisited in order to address the role of learner outcomes, teaching and greater autonomy in school leadership/management. The shift in the curriculum towards maths and science indicates a skewed managerial decision, emphasising the shortfall in school leaders' performance capacity. It is these shortfalls that risk further eradication of arts education from the curriculum.

The rate of change in education and the demands faced by principals are not slowing down, affording the ideal opportunity to change the current managerialist discourse to a place-based discourse where principals could lead with confidence and authority.

The information gleaned from the interviews with the principals confirmed that they felt disempowered to transform their failing schools into success stories. Without the support from the Department, parents and teachers they believed that they were set up for failure.

The above clearly underscores the need for resilience training to empower principals to *imagine* risks as successes, *design* challenges into opportunities and *create* order out of chaos, effectively leading schools from failure to success. It is high time that government addresses the deficits apparent in school leaders' leadership/management knowledge and skills and train and empower them to lead authoritatively and resiliently.

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