School principals' leadership in managing low and high performing teachers: a South African case study[1]

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ABSTRACT

There is a plethora of literature on what makes schools high performing, on what reduces the performance of schools, and on the causes of teacher ineffectiveness. However, little is known about how school principals manage low- and high-performing teachers to ensure and sustain high learner performance. In this paper, I focus on the role played by the principal in leading and managing low- and high-performing teachers. I draw from the findings of a study on eight primary school principals from Limpopo Province in South Africa. This multiple-site, case study design used semi-structured interviews to generate data. The analysis of the findings shows the 'hands-on' and 'hands-off' approaches of the principals in managing low-performing teachers, while high-performing teachers were recognised, motivated and encouraged to both develop leadership skills and work collaboratively to improve the performance of low-performing teachers. The paper argues that school principals need to develop transformational leadership characteristics, as is evident in this study, to lead and manage low- as well as high-performing teachers, and it concludes by suggesting a collaborative, professional development relationship between principals and teachers.

Keywords: transformational leadership, low-performing teachers, high-performing teachers, professional development, accountability, collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Internationally, there is increasing concern among educational stakeholders about the quality of education and accountability. Quality education is related to both high and low performance. The concept of high- and low-performing schools is used internationally to categorise schools based on the performance of their learners (Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Wilcox & Angelis, 2012). Some of the common characteristics of high-performing schools identified in the literature include (i) creating a culture that supports a shared vision of high academic achievement, (ii) relationships based on respect and trust among the stakeholders, (iii) teacher motivation and (iv) common expectations (Wilcox & Angelis, 2012). In a South African study, Aploon-Zokufa (2013) highlighted that certain pedagogical strategies encouraged by the school principal can have a positive impact on

learner achievement and the performance of the school. Likewise, Kondakci and Sivri (2014) affirm the crucial role of the leadership of the principal in ensuring high school performance. School principals in high-performing schools are often friendlier, and more approachable and open to input from teachers as compared to their counterparts in low-performing schools (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Such literature suggests a distinctive difference in the relationship between the principals and the teachers in high- and low-performing schools.

Low performance is a concept that is perceived in different ways based on factors such as social interactions, the context in which the school exists and the expectations of its stakeholders (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003). Weak pedagogies, such as poor lesson plans, weak teaching pace, low cognitive demands on the learner and a lack of effective evaluation criteria, are factors that result in poor learner performance in low-performing schools (Aploon-Zokufa, 2013). In Amsterdam, The Netherlands, De Witte and Van Klaveren (2014) describe low-performing schools as schools that have mismanaged funds, low-quality education, and poor student performance. Wilson (2011) is of the opinion that successful educational leadership can transform low-performing schools to high-performing schools and that leadership is an art that can be learned from past experiences that have proven to work well.

In this paper, I agree with Wilson (2011) by highlighting the leadership role of the principal, and I further state that low-performing schools can be uplifted by the leadership of the principal in improving the performance of teachers. The principal can also sustain and motivate the high-performing teachers through certain leadership characteristics. I am interested in the role played by the principal in leading and managing low- and high-performing teachers and the influence the principal has on the performance of teachers. I begin with the discussion of low- and high-performing teachers followed by transformational leadership as the theoretical framework underpinning this study. I then explain the research methodology and discuss the findings of the study, which are based on (i) how principals identify low- and high-performing teachers, (ii) how the principals help low-performing teachers, and (iii) how they work with high-performing teachers. I conclude the paper by discussing the implications of the role that the principal plays in transforming the performance of the school through leading and managing low- and high-performing teachers. I argue that transformational leadership characteristics play a role in managing low- and high-performing teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The process of identifying low- and high-performing teachers is complex and not straightforward. In an earlier study by Jacob and Lefgren (2008), school principals identified effective and less effective teachers using learner achievement as a standard measure. In a more recent study, Stronge, Ward and Grant (2011) clarify that, although learner achievement is often used to determine the effectiveness of a teacher, it is but one educational outcome, among others. There are indeed other criteria that can be used to measure high or low teacher performance. In their study, Stronge et al. (2011) did not find a significant difference between effective and less effective teachers in instructional delivery, assessment and years of experience. Elsewhere in the literature, low teacher performance is perceived as (i) the inability to manage disruptive learner behaviour and establish a positive relationship, which includes teamwork; (ii) poor learner examination results; (iii) complaints from parents and other teachers; and (iv) poor results from teacher appraisal and counterproductive behaviour of the teacher (Ouweland, Vanhoof & Van den Bossche, 2019; Stronge et. al, 2011). The next section shows how selected school principals in South African schools identify low-performing teachers.

Low-performing schools and low-performing teachers

The concepts 'low-performing' or 'poor performance' are perceived from different perspectives based on the school environment and the expectations of the stakeholders (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003). This means

that poor performance can be abstracted in different ways in different school contexts, and that there is no single criterion that defines the concepts. Teacher performance is one element that contributes to school performance. It is, therefore, crucial in determining the causes of poor teacher performance in order to provide effective support strategies in terms of relevant training to address the identified problems and uplift the performance of the school (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003).

From the literature, it appears that the causes of the low performance of teachers can be categorised as the ability of the individual teacher and the leadership of the school principal. For example, a lack of classroom management skills, poor relationships with learners, and an inability to prepare and implement lesson plans have been identified as causes of low performance of the teacher (Torff & Sessions, 2005; Jacob & Lefgren, 2008; Aploon-Zokufa, 2013). Stronge et al. (2011) also found that, although teacher preparation programmes focus more on content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge proves itself to be more problematic as it poses challenges, such as instructional and classroom management skills, resulting in low teacher performance. In another study, principals ascribed the low performance of teachers to a misalignment between teacher competency and teaching demands (Donaldson & Mavrogordato, 2018). It means that the causes of the low performance of teachers are multiple and intricate – some of which are individual, while others are caused by contextual issues.

Apart from the individual characteristics of low-performing teachers, the leadership of the principal may also contribute to the low performance of teachers. In a study by Orr et al. (2008), the principals did not portray the characteristics of instructional leadership such as classroom observation, curriculum delivery, and improvement of teaching and learning. Their performance was based on avoiding penalties and non-compliance. The principals had limited capacity and were able neither to articulate the vision of their schools nor to establish a collaborative school culture that supports teaching and learning (Orr et al., 2008). Such principals were not able to improve the performance of their teachers, unlike the principals in the study by Torff and Sessions (2005) who identified lesson planning and implementation, classroom management skills, and teacher-student interaction as what makes teachers ineffective. The principals in the study were involved in helping their teachers make effective lesson plans followed by class visits to observe the participation and interaction of the learners and teachers during the lesson (Torff & Sessions, 2005). In a more recent study, Donaldson and Mavrogordato (2018) found that teachers were of the opinion that the principal has a legal as well as a moral obligation to work meticulously with low-performing teachers, through supervision, to improve their practice. In this paper, I provide insight into how principals identify and help low-performing teachers, which is an identified gap in the literature that I reviewed for this paper.

The participants in the study by Kondakci and Sivri (2014) affirmed the crucial role of leadership in ensuring school effectiveness in general. Elsewhere in the literature, Donaldson and Mavrogordato (2018) found that principals as instructional leaders can transform low-performing schools by motivating low-performing teachers, establishing a trust relationship, and supporting the teachers. Transforming low-performing schools into high-performing schools through the work done by the teachers requires attention and certain attributes of the principal, such as being patient, persistent, and dedicated to instructional matters, as well as having optimism, honesty, and the ability to celebrate the achievement of goals (Wilson, 2011). In a study of the leadership of principals in transforming low-performing elementary schools in Chicago, Finnigan and Stewart (2009) found that setting goals, developing teachers' knowledge and skills, and articulating high expectations for learner achievement were the strategies used to turn schools around. This means that the principal ought to have specific knowledge and skills to be able to lead the school towards high performance. This implies that the leadership capacities of the principals need to be developed so that they can create a productive and enabling school culture for students and staff through their instructional leadership (Orr et al., 2008). This means that principals also require professional development so that they can effectively communicate their vision and expectations, thereby establishing

a culture of trust and respect, as well as one of support (Finnigan, 2012). There are principals who involve other teachers to monitor the work done by low-performing teachers in the teaching of subject content and assessing learners for whole-school improvement (Ouweland et al., 2019). In addition to the whole-school improvement discussed in the literature, this paper contributes towards rethinking the role of the principal in South African schools in transforming the performance of individual teachers.

High-performing schools and high-performing teachers

Studies show that high-performing schools share high expectations among the stakeholders where relationships are based on trust, respect, and collaborative support in curriculum delivery (Wilcox & Angelis, 2012). In Turkey, Kondakci and Sivri (2014) identified multiple characteristics of high-achieving elementary schools, which included effective instructional leadership, positive school climate, monitoring of learner behaviour and academic progress, physical and educational resources, and parental engagement and support. In South Africa, Aploon-Zokufa (2013) found that pedagogical practices that include a certain pace of curriculum delivery, well-planned lessons, high expectations, and effective feedback contribute to the high performance of the school despite a deprived context. Trust among stakeholders seems to facilitate collaboration, a shared vision, and an interpersonal relationship that is based on respect, which contributes to success in high-performing schools (Wilcox & Angelis, 2012). In high-performing schools, there are also effective teachers, who are better able to manage their classrooms in terms of the use of time, making learning materials available, managing learner behaviour, and creating routine (Stronge et al., 2011). Such teachers are often emotionally involved in their students' work and have a passion for excellent teaching, which could increase the risk of burnout if not monitored (Barber, 2015). It, therefore, means that support structures for the capacity building of the high-performing teachers and the ability to deal with the workload should be part of the responsibility of the leadership role played by the principal (Wilcox & Angelis, 2012).

The leadership of the principal necessarily plays a role in high-performing schools because successful educational leaders are change agents who know what should be done to ensure high academic achievement of every learner (Wilson, 2011). A study that investigated how teachers in high-performing schools in Malaysia perceived the trust relationship with their principals revealed that their principals were open to suggestions, shared information, and enjoyed mutual interaction, which contributed to achieving the vision and objectives of the school (Tahir et al., 2015). The principals whose leadership styles are open, and who communicate expectations and can engage in the instructional programmes are able to create conducive conditions for teaching and learning (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Another aspect of the success of principals in high-performing schools is that they empower their teachers by giving them an opportunity to grow and take initiative in doing their work (Wilcox & Angelis, 2012). Such principals have high expectations from teachers, encourage effective instruction, and establish a variety of support systems for teachers with the aim of enhancing learner performance (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In the study by Tahir et al. (2015), teachers in high-performing schools expected their principals to be reliable in terms of encouraging and supporting them. Such expectations show mutual performance expectations from the principals as well as from the teachers.

In this paper, I present the literature that highlights the important role played by the school principals in the process of turning around low-performing schools through effective leadership. Although there are several studies that have explored the causes of low-performing teachers and schools, as well as the characteristics of high-performing teachers and schools, I have identified a gap in the literature regarding how principals lead and manage low- and high-performing teachers, especially in the South African context. How do the principals influence the behaviour of low- as well as high-performing teachers? This paper presents the findings and discussion of what the principals in this case study did to help low-performing teachers and how they managed high-performing teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper, I used transformational leadership style as a lens to explain how the principals in this study influenced the behaviour of their low- and high-performing teachers to improve the achievement of learners. The transformational leadership framework is about building capacity that leads to change. Transformational leadership focuses on the relationship between a leader and their followers in terms of empowering, inspiring, intellectually stimulating, motivating, and individualising consideration, which, individually as well as collectively, facilitate change (Bass, 1999; Arokiasamya et al., 2016). Transformational leaders are concerned with the growth and development of their followers in general and as individuals (Arokiasamya et al., 2016). The leader has consideration for the individual differences of their followers and treats them in ways that takes their strengths and weaknesses into consideration. New learning opportunities can be created successfully when an individual's strengths and weaknesses are taken into consideration. Transformational leaders appreciate individual differences and listen to the needs of the individual follower (Arokiasamya et al., 2016). Transformational leaders also change the goals of the organisation through the beliefs that they have of individual employees (Bass, 1985).

The leader who adopts a transformational leadership style enables and encourages their followers to be innovative and creative. Such influence is grounded in the personal values and beliefs of the leader, which may include justice and integrity (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987; Bass, 1985). According to Kuhnert and Lewis (1987), a successful transformational leader articulates organisational goals, demonstrates confidence as a leader and motivates followers to achieve set goals. It shows that transformational leaders are able to inspire and motivate the behaviour of their followers as well as build a team spirit through clear communication, and that they are committed to achieving the goals of the institution (Arokiasamya et al., 2016). This means that transformational leadership is not only about the influence that the leader has in changing their followers, but also about the ability of the leader to develop knowledge and skills that influence change.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research was to provide in-depth knowledge and understanding of the leadership style of principals in influencing the behaviour of teachers with different levels of performance. In this paper, I specifically explored how primary school principals identify low- and high-performing teachers, and how the leadership of principals influences the behaviour of low- as well as high-performing teachers in rural primary schools. Primary school is the entry level of education, and exploring the leadership influence of the school principal on teacher competency is crucial in establishing high-quality teaching and learning from grassroot level. The motivation for focusing on primary schools is based on my assumption that principals are in a position to play a dynamic leadership role in laying a foundation that focuses on teacher competency for high-quality education. I acknowledge, however, the fact that there is room for exploring the experiences of secondary-school principals as research participants to establish the role they play at this education level. The research design was a multiple-site case study, which enabled me to obtain rich, in-depth data on the real-life context of the phenomenon (Yin, 2009; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2012). I purposefully selected a homogeneous sample of eight school principals, four male and four female, with the capacity to provide rich information relevant to the study. The sample size enabled a deep, case-orientated analysis, which produced data that provided in-depth understanding that furthers knowledge about principals as transformational leaders. Convenient and purposive sampling strategies were used to select the participants who had at least three years' experience as school principals. Newly appointed principals were excluded from the study because of a possible inability to provide in-depth information based on their limited experience as principals. I gained access to the eight schools and their principals through the assistance of the circuit managers who were the gatekeepers. The circuit managers gave me access to the schools by giving me permission as well as by notifying the principals that I would be visiting their schools to collect data. The selected schools were

within a 100 km radius of the Pretoria Central Business District (Gauteng Province). Although reference is made to Gauteng Province, the schools are near the boundary of the Gauteng and Limpopo Provinces (Bela-Bela Municipality, Limpopo Province).

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data from the schools' principals in Limpopo Province in South Africa. The research questions that guided the study were:

- How do primary school principals identify low- and high-performing teachers?
- How do the principals help low-performing teachers in their school?
- How do the principals manage high-performing teachers in their schools?

During the data-collection process, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). I also recorded field notes and journal entries during the data-collection process. I sorted the data, and I coded, categorised and identified themes that were related to the three research questions that I asked during the interviews. I was able to triangulate the different experiences of the participants (Yin, 2009) in order to obtain knowledge about leadership and management of low- and high-performing teachers. The participants were given the opportunity to read the transcripts to ensure accuracy of the data (Creswell, 2012).

I obtained ethical clearance to do the research from the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee, after which I obtained permission from the Limpopo Department of Education. I established rapport with the principals by visiting them and telling them about the study before making appointments for the interviews. The participants are identified as Principal A to Principal H so as to ensure anonymity. I treated the information that the participants shared with me as anonymous. All the other ethical protocols, such as informed consent and participants' right to withdraw from the study if the participants choose to do so, were observed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). I obtained consent from the participants to record their interviews. The interview duration was about 45 minutes and the interviews were held after school hours, and the venues were in the offices of the principals.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first research question in this study sought to determine *how the principals in the study identified low- and high-performing teachers*. This study found that one of the indicators used by the principals to identify low- and high-performing teachers was examination results. One of the principals noted:

> We discuss the performance in a meeting like analysing the results per subject. We do it per subject and they ask questions like you have 40 learners rating 2 why are they not performing and what are you doing about it? I have to address this with the teacher. I ask them to put up their work – check the question paper where did most of the learners fail? And how can we assist the low performing teachers? (Principal A)

This finding is consistent with literature that identified learner achievement as one of the indicators for teacher effectiveness and a criterion for determining low- and high-performing teachers (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003; Jacob & Lefgren, 2008; Stronge, et al., 2011). In the current study, some principals also used classroom visits to identify low- and high-performing teachers, based on their interaction with the learners during the lesson. The principals explained:

> I talk with the HoD and bring members of the SMTs[3] when I do class visits. This is how we identify the problems and the teachers who need training. (Principal C)

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3 SMT: school management team

> My SMT identifies the teachers who need professional development in certain areas during class visits and then we help them to develop. (Principal D)

> After class visit, I demonstrate to the teachers who are struggling on how to deal with the content. I sometimes outsource to seek help from other experts to help the teacher in subject matter. (Principal B)

It seems that, in this study, while some principals used end products (test scores or examination results), or a summative evaluation technique, to identify high- and low-performing teachers, other principals used formative strategies, which involved directly observing the actual process of teaching and learning. This finding means that the principals also evaluated the content-based knowledge of the teachers and the ability of the teacher to manage learner behaviour during the class visits. It is consistent with Torff and Sessions (2005), who also reported that principals regarded lesson planning and implementation, classroom management skills, and teacher-learner interaction as factors that can be used to identify ineffective teachers.

Apart from test scores or examination results and class visits, the principals in this study identified low- and high-performing teachers through their ability to perform 'other' tasks that the principal delegated to them.

> You look at the core business of the school and you say, 'I cannot leave this work on dead hands', then you look at the next teacher and you say again that 'I cannot leave this work on dead hands.' So where do you take the work? You take the work to the teachers at the top, those who are doing well. (Principal C)

> When you ask them to help you with other tasks, they start looking on the floor, when nobody volunteers it is the same people who volunteer, then they say that it is that one all the time, while you provide them with opportunity and they do not take it. (Principal F)

It appears that the principals expected the teachers' duties to go beyond their formal responsibility of classroom instruction. The principals identified low-performing teachers by their inability to perform the delegated task. This finding is unique in that most studies distinguish between high- and low-performing teachers using learner performance as a reflection of the competency of the teacher (Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Wilcox & Angelis, 2012). The willingness or ability of the teacher to perform the task delegated by the principal is not a commonly used criterion for identifying high- and low-performing teachers. This finding also implies a lack of trust in teachers who are unable or unwilling to perform the delegated tasks, and greater confidence and trust in the teachers who can perform the delegated task. This finding is of importance and relates to the findings that highlight trust as well as respectful and collaborative relationships as factors that make schools successful (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003; Wilcox & Angelis 2012). This finding on teachers' ability to perform other tasks adds another evaluation criterion to that of previous studies identifying the characteristics of poor performance (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003; Torff & Sessions, 2005; Jacob & Lefgren, 2008; Stronge et al. 2011).

The second research question was about how principals help low-performing teachers
I analysed the principals' responses to this question and identified two different approaches they used to transform low-performing teachers. While some principals used more direct approaches, others helped the teachers indirectly. Some of the principals used a 'hands-on' approach, which included direct involvement in the school-based development of low-performing teachers. In this approach, the principals worked collaboratively with the SMTs to identify the developmental needs of low-performing teachers and trained the teachers based on the identified needs. The principals said:

I work with the SMT to determine where the teachers need improvement and then we agree to help the teachers in terms of the development plan. We draw a year plan, but quarterly we identify teachers who need to be assisted and I take part in helping them. (Principal D)

… if, at this stage, I experience it as a discipline problem, then I get involved myself and go to the class and discipline the children. When it's a problem with the subject, then I ask the subject head to assist this specific teacher and also look at the subject meeting… I help them in the subject meetings. (Principal E)

We focus on the problematic areas. What we do is that we meet every Monday 10 o' clock to go over the challenges in their departments. We interact because there are certain things that they have to do as HoDs and there are some things that I can assist in like in some areas. (Principal A)

The quotations above show some aspects of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders pay attention to the needs of an individual, which leads to growth and development (Bass et al., 2003). The current study found that the change of teachers from low-performing to high-performing involves professional development that is based on targeted needs that are relevant to the individual teacher. The 'hands-on' approach of the principals strives to address the identified needs. The individualised consideration that is evident in this finding is one of the elements of transformational leadership (Bass, 1999; Arokiasamya et al., 2016). It means that identifying the individual needs of low-performing teachers is crucial for their professional growth, and for improving their professional effectiveness. The role of managers ought to be empowering the performance of the employee through providing constructive feedback (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003). Principals in this study seem to have provided such feedback in the 'hands-on' approach. In this study, it also seems that there was a collaborative effort in conducting the analysis of the developmental needs and planning for how to improve the performance of the teachers as in the quotations above. This finding affirms the conclusion made in an earlier study (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003), which states that collaborative relationships based on trust are important in identifying the support needs of low-performing teachers and in implementing strategies to uplift these teachers.

Other principals used a 'hands-off' approach to transform low-performing teachers. Such principals indirectly influenced the performance of the teachers using structures such as policies or by delegating the responsibility of developing the teachers to Heads of Department (HoDs). The principals said:

… if the teacher is struggling as an individual, I will bring the teacher in my office and give him the policies. You see, at first you must provide the teacher with the tools to work with. When the HoD gets to class he or she must get all these things and the HoD will tick them. (Principal B)

There are heads of departments, there are subject heads… so very practically, if I do experience an educator struggling with the content of a specific subject, I ask the subject head to give guidance… so I am not trying to solve these problems on my own, I will only interfere or I will get involved if I have the time… (Principal F)

Another principal added:

I also advise them to go to other schools to get information if possible. Yeah, we talk and try to assist them in their work by involving other people. We have Curriculum Implementers who we involve in helping the teachers. (Principal H)

The 'hands-off' approach suggests empowering the teacher through self-development by using policy documents to guide the teachers on what is expected of them. This approach can be interpreted as

intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985) in which the principal gives the low-performing teacher the space to be creative and innovative in self-development, as observed in this study. The 'hands-off' approach also suggests a detached relationship between the principal and the low-performing teachers. In the 'hands-off' approach, the principal also delegates the responsibility of developing teachers based on the identified needs. In this study, some of the principals seem to involve HoDs to support teachers in the form of guidance or mentorship. The reason for this could be that HoDs are regarded as middle managers who are responsible for curriculum implementation in schools. HoDs can act as mentors in guiding the low-performing teachers on instructional matters since they are more experienced in pedagogy and subject content (Nel & Luneta, 2017). Such support strategies from the principals are indirect – hence, the 'hands-off' approach –, which could result in empowering both the HoDs and the teachers. It implies that, for such delegation of the responsibility of developing teachers to be successful, the HoDs as mentors and supporters of low-performing teachers need to be committed to taking up such responsibilities. This finding is consistent with the study by Taylor and Tyler (2012), which shows that teachers responded more positively to peer evaluation, feedback and support when compared to assessment done by the principal.

Although the principals in this study shared various strategies that they use to transform low-performing teachers, they also highlight some challenges that they experienced, such as the low-performing teachers' denial of the need for professional development and these teachers resisting change in their performance. One principal commented:

> … weak teachers would say – why pick on me? I do class visits casually on occasion to help them and I ask them don't you have this page, I just want them to get use of me going to their class to observe what they are doing. (Principal C)

This excerpt shows that the process of identifying and communicating the need for professional development of low-performing teachers is challenging, especially in cases where the teachers perceive the intention of the process as victimisation, and do not understand it to be part of professional development. The quotation above suggests that some teachers perceive being identified as low-performing teachers as lowering their self-esteem. Such attitudes towards professional development work against the strength of the principal as a transformational leader and change agent in the performance of the teachers.

In this study, I also found that some principals attempt to use external structures to develop low-performing teachers. The principals said:

> In the first place you must find out where the problems lie… if it's a problem with the subject, then I as the principal send the teacher to specialist meetings to assist and help them with the subject problems. (Principal F)

> … I can't develop them and I can't be part of their development if I am not aware of areas in which they must be developed, so for me is very important that I am not doing this alone… the system of the school includes… the structure… the deputy principal, the heads of departments are all working together with the teachers who also attend workshops organized by the Department. (Principal C)

> Nowadays since the new government and because of democracy, I have to say 'there is a workshop this afternoon on this and that and I was thinking that you two should go. There is a need for you because this is where you are lacking most.' (Principal B)

The quotations above suggest the use of internal as well as external support systems to develop low-performing teachers. What was surprising in this study is that the principal perceived Democratic Leadership as an ineffective approach to managing the performance of the teachers because this leadership style

seems to reduce the power and authority of the principal in facilitating the development of low-performing teachers.

Apart from the attitude of the individual teachers, it seems that there are also external forces, such as teacher unions, that have an influence on the professional conduct of the teacher and their performance as alluded to in the following quotations.

> When you ask them to go for training… Now is when they will say that 'my union says that I must be given a three weeks' notice or my family comes first, I am sorry, I cannot'. I have to negotiate and consult with the teachers. (Principal D)

> Schools can perform better if teacher unions can be scrapped in interfering with teaching and learning in schools as well as professional development. Poor learner performance and teacher performance is attributed to interference by unions. Literally, teacher unions run schools in Limpopo province. Job ethics of teacher unions members is questionable. (Principal A)

The quotations above imply that teachers have the power to refuse to go for professional development programmes based on the support from their union. This finding also implies that there could be a power struggle between the role of the principal and the role of the union regarding the professional development of teachers and their performance. The behaviour of the teachers also shows a lack of positive and self-driven initiative for professional development. This finding also suggests a lack of motivation for as well as an appreciation and understanding of the need for professional development. Such a gap in managing teacher performance could be the result of an absence of clear, set performance standards, or the lack of ability to strengthen the professional development of teachers. It is important for the SMTs to set a commonly agreed-upon, clear and acceptable standard of performance, as well as to provide the support needed by teachers to achieve the set standards (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). All these strategies can only work well if there is buy-in from teachers themselves.

The third question was about how principals work with high-performing teachers

The approach that the principals used in their engagement with high-performing teachers was recognising and empowering the teachers through delegated leadership responsibilities, which included the professional development of other teachers. This study found that the work done by high-performing teachers was appreciated collaboratively in a public space as well as in an individual, private space. The principals said:

> We acknowledge the good teachers in our staff meeting and when we have parents' meetings… If it is good results sometimes all the staff members are called for a cup of coffee for their hard work. That is how we deal with the performance of the teachers so that they feel acknowledged. (Principal A)

> I write them a letter saying well done, you have done this work wonderfully so thank you keep the good work. I would go around and say good work, keep it up. (Principal B)

It is likely that the acknowledgement of the work done by high-performing teachers could contribute to a feeling of being appreciated and may also encourage the teachers to continue to strive for high performance. The recognition also seems inspirational and could create an opportunity for high-performing teachers to demonstrate commitment to develop themselves and others. This finding is consistent with the characteristics of transformational leadership, which highlights the ability of the leader to inspire and motivate others through working as a team (Arokiasamya et al., 2016).

Apart from recognising and appreciating high-performing teachers, other principals empowered the teachers by giving them extra work, which seems to have both positive and negative effect on the high-performing teachers.

> I motivate them highly. I give them extra work. They contribute to the success of the school and they are happy to be leaders in the school. (Principal D)

> The ones who are doing well are overworked, because they carry the burden of others. The point is that it boils down to abuse of the good teachers. (Principal C)

Although the recognition of the work done by high-performing teachers could be motivating and inspiring, giving the teachers additional work to do if the workload is not well monitored and balanced could have negative effects on the performance of the high-performing teachers. A study done in Korea showed that the administrative workload carried by teachers limits their teaching and instructional duties (Kyung-Njun, 2019). Likewise, an increase in teacher workload as a result of an inadequate number of teachers to perform certain tasks has negative effects on instruction and learner performance (Ayeni & Amanekwe, 2018). Given the potential risk of overloading teachers, it seems that the strengths and weaknesses of high-performing teachers ought to be taken into consideration while allocating additional tasks.

High-performing teachers are also involved in transforming the low-performing teachers through professional development.

> They have helped me to build these ones they have workshop them. (Principal C)

> I want them to assist other educators with learner discipline for effective teaching and learning to take place. (Principal H)

This finding shows that the knowledge and skills of high-performing teachers are used by the principals to improve curriculum delivery and the environment in which teaching and learning takes place. High-performing teachers are also involved in cultivating teacher effectiveness when they are mentors for low-performing teachers. Mentorship in this discussion includes the guidance and support that high-performing teachers give to low-performing teachers on subject content, pedagogy and classroom management as suggested in the quotation above. This strategy suggests two-way, personalised interaction between the low- and high-performing teachers, which aligns with transformational leadership abilities (Arokiasamya et al., 2016). The interaction between high- and low-performing teachers creates opportunities for empowering and inspiring each other as well as motivating and paying attention to individual consideration aimed at improving the performance of the teachers, which are the characteristics of transformational leadership as indicated by Bass (1999).

Other principals seem to boost the morale of high-performing teachers by giving them the opportunity to be leaders and develop their own leadership skills.

> I put them in a leadership position, whether it's as subject head or phase head or organiser of activities, but you must give that person the opportunity to expand their positive… positive-ness towards the school. (Principal E)

> … I will make use of their skills and knowledge… I am going to be very practical – I am so privileged to have the head of the department for the foundation phase and the head of department for the senior phase are two excellent, excellent ladies, and regarding curriculum matters. (Principal F)

Delegating leadership responsibilities to high-performing teachers gives them an opportunity to grow as individuals and to contribute to the growth of the school. In another study, Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) found that shared leadership and distribution of responsibilities among the teachers result in instructional improvement. The delegation of tasks is also an example of the individual consideration approach used by transformational leaders (Bass et al., 2003). The importance of individual consideration is that it focuses on developing the person based on their unique needs, meaning that the principal needs to be able to identify such needs, and be accountable for the professional development of teachers under their aegis.

In this study, the principals used both 'hands-on' and 'hands-off' approaches to develop low-performing teachers. All the principals in this study strove to identify specific developmental needs of the individual teachers. They were also accountable in the approach they chose to use. This finding is in accordance with an earlier study by Rhodes and Beneicke (2003), which showed that one of the key considerations in improving the poor performance of teachers is to establish the cause of poor performance, and to provide relevant training to address the identified problem.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this study only focused on the views of a few primary school principals regarding how they lead and manage low- and high-performing teachers, the findings of this study provide some insights that can stimulate more interest in exploring both the role of the principal in transforming low- and high-performance teachers in secondary schools and the perspectives of other stakeholders. I suggest that future studies explore how secondary school principals address the issue of high- and low-performing teachers in their school to identify common trends as well as the different leadership styles at the two levels of education. Some of the findings reported in this paper could also be applicable to secondary schools. Furthermore, it is evident from the context of this study that primary school principals have a transformational leadership role to play in leading and managing low- and high-performing teachers. The two distinct leadership approaches of principals identified in this study for the professional development of low-performing teachers are 'hands-on' and 'hands-off'. Both approaches embrace some of the key characteristics of transformational leadership. The high-performing teachers are recognised as well as encouraged to develop leadership skills and to work collaboratively to improve the performance of the other teachers. The low- as well as high-performing teachers are intellectually stimulated, inspired, motivated, and their individual needs and abilities are taken into consideration.

I recommend that more research be done to incorporate the views and the experiences of other stakeholders regarding the ways in which the principal can lead and manage low- and high-performing teachers. The voices of the teachers, and their ideas on how to improve the pedagogical practices of low-performing teachers and how to sustain and further develop high-performing teachers, ought to be heard and recognised. Research on the strategies for creating a school culture that encourages positive teacher attitudes towards professional development can ease some of the challenges identified by the principals in this study.

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