

Functional Urban Schools Amidst Dysfunctional Settings: Lessons from South Africa

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Abstract

Similar to Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, this research study is about a tale of two schools. The first type of school is a dysfunctional school. Dysfunctional schools are schools in a state of chaos (Shipengrower & Conway, 1998). The second school is that of order. The researchers refer to this school as a functional school. In 2003, the functional school in this research project scored a 100% pass rate in the Senior Certificate Examination (SCE), whereas the dysfunctional school scored 57.35%. Dysfunctional schools, known as "failing schools" are usually found in the poorest neighborhood, where children are mostly Black or immigrants who are not proficient in English. One of the casualties of the apartheid era has been the diminishing authority of the school principal. The aim of this research is to investigate the role of the leader in managing a functional school situated in a dysfunctional environment in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The research study is also directed at predicting the characteristics of dysfunctional /functional schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

Keywords

accountability, educational policy, educational reform, school improvement, principals

Introduction

School administrators of urban schools need to understand that effective schools have important functions to perform. In the United States, Congress has made an effort to make schools effective by mandating state testing. The failure of students in U.S. urban schools to perform satisfactorily on state mandated tests can result in penalties being imposed on schools and the possibility of students being able to transfer to other schools.

The options available to students in ineffective urban schools in South Africa are virtually nonexistent. Effective schools in South Africa depend on the leadership in the school to

effect meaningful changes. This article explores how the quality of South African urban schools depends on effective administrative leadership.

The U.S. Approach to Addressing Functionality Under the NCLB

South Africa has adopted an approach to determining functional schools different from that in the United States under the (NCLB) .The NCLB was designed to “hold schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students, and identifying and turning around low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students.” (§ 6301(4)). Each state is required to submit a plan demonstrating “that the State has developed and is implementing a single, statewide State accountability system that will be effective in ensuring that all local educational agencies, public elementary schools, and public secondary schools make adequate yearly progress.” (§ 6311(b)(2)A)).

The NCLB requires that each school district create annual standardized tests in literacy and mathematics (and, subsequently, science) in grades three through twelve that are aligned with standards in the school plans (NCLB, § 6311(b)(3)); report the results of performance on these tests and other valid indicators for individual schools and for all relevant ethnic and socioeconomic subpopulations within those schools (§ 6311(b)(3); set goals for “annual yearly progress” (“AYP”) so that students in all the relevant subpopulations can be expected to meet the state standard of adequacy within twelve years § (6311))(2)(c) (5)); require local education authorities (LEAs) to present annual “report cards” ranking the performance of each of the relevant subpopulations at all of their schools on the state's tests (§ 6311(c)(1) and(h)); integrate these activities into a broader accountability system for assuring that schools and school districts meet these obligations to provide an adequate education to all subpopulations; (§ 6311((b)(2)) along with LEAs, provide technical assistance premised “on scientifically based research” to schools that have persistently failed to meet their AYPs, including through state-organized peer-support teams of master teachers(§§ 6311(c)(3), 6311(c)(4), 6316(b)(4), 6317); and provide academic achievement awards for schools that “significantly closed the achievement gap” between students from different ethnic groups (§ 6311 (b)(1)(B)(i)).

However, the NCLB's insistence that schools set goals for annual yearly progress and use tests to monitor school improvement has raised concerns as to whether the NCLB “is a Trojan horse for nefarious political designs.” (Liebman, p. 1725). In many U.S. states, NCLB-mandated tests, in addition to measuring student progress, are often also used as exit exams to meet state statutory requirements for high school graduation, an application that affects over 70% of all high school students, a process that has raised concerns as to whether schools develop strategies to exclude students, likely to fail tests, from taking those tests altogether. (Pullin, p. 2).

The challenge presented by what one author refers to as the “testing trap” is that, if meaningful change is to occur, “school personnel must share a coherent, explicit set of norms and expectations about what a good school looks like before they can use signals from the outside to improve student learning.” (Liebman, p. 7131). In an insightful article, Thomas Risberg highlighted the three major flaws of the NCLB. First, “states are allowed to create their own standards and tests and determine what score makes a student proficient,” allowing for what the author refers to as “perverse incentives for states to adopt easy standards, develop simple tests, and use low thresholds for proficiency.” (Risberg, p. 891) Second, because each state bears the financial burden of creating its own tests and standards, the tests and standard instead of being the same “differ from state to state.” (*Id.*) Third, since the tests administered to students in different states differ significantly, “scores of students from different states cannot be quickly or accurately compared.” (*Id.*). The result is “comparing students from different states is like comparing apples and oranges.” (*Id.*).

The weakness of the NCLB is reflected in another important the provision that affects largely disadvantaged students, primarily in urban schools. Where students attend a school identified for school improvement under the NCLB, “the local educational agency shall ... provide all students enrolled in the school with the option to transfer to another public school served by the local educational agency” (§ 6316(b)(1)E(i)). The NCLB functions under “an implicit theory of learning that mandated external accountability and clear expectations for schools that motivates teachers and their students to be better will work,” but “the current law does little to enhance the capacity of schools to improve themselves.” (Pullin, p. 14).

The combination of racial and economic segregation in U.S. schools presents a series of significant barriers to providing students with a high-quality education. In *Abbott v. Burke*

(1997), the Supreme Court of New Jersey observed that in poor, predominately minority schools, “obstacles to a thorough and efficient education are present not only in the schools themselves, but also in the neighborhoods and family conditions of poor urban children ... [including] drug abuse, crime, hunger, poor health, illness, and unstable family situations.” (*Id.* p. 433). Poor students often face significant challenges in their home environments, such as poor health, malnutrition, neighborhood violence, and unstable family situations, which can serve as serious impediments to student attendance and learning. As a result, they are more likely to miss out on the various informal education and socialization opportunities that researchers have identified as just as important to making students “school ready.”(Wilson, p. 647). Poor minority students also often face pressure from their peers to not succeed academically because achievement is otherwise equated with “acting white.”(*Id.*).

While schools with disadvantaged and minority students face a myriad of obstacles, they typically spend significantly less money per pupil than school districts with lower poverty rates, “even when one accounts for federal grant money given to schools with large percentages of poor students.” (*Id.* at 648). Consequently, they are more likely to have teachers who are not credentialed in the subject areas in which they teach, offer fewer honors or advanced placement courses, and have high teacher turnover rates.(*Parents*, Brief, p. 30). Predictably, students who attend such schools score lower on standardized achievement tests and are more likely to drop out. (*Id.*).

The U.S. is unique in its effort to seek equity in public schools by means of comprehensive legislation, such as NCLB. Countries such as South Africa have severely limited resources and must seek other methods for assessing success in addressing the needs of disadvantaged students. The challenge in South Africa is difficult because the disadvantaged students represent a significant percentage of the total student population who reside in urban and rural areas populated by disadvantaged adults and students. and because the disadvantaged students reside largely in rural, rather than urban, areas.

However, the U.S. and South Africa share a common interest as to whether disadvantaged students would perform more successfully in a school with more resources, better qualified teachers, and a more diverse student population. In other words, to express the issue differently, would performance by students in rural schools in South Africa improve if they were

placed in high-performing non-urban schools? South Africa has no counterpoint to the NCLB's provision that students in poor performing schools have an opportunity to select a higher achieving school in the same school district. Such a choice option exists only in a rare situation, such as *Head of Department, Mpumalanga Department of Education v. Hoerskool Ermelo* (2010), where a largely white, Afrikaans-speaking school with empty rooms is ordered to enroll English-speaking disadvantaged students from an overly crowded nearby township school.

In effect, success in South African urban schools will need to be examined from a different perspective. Since a change for most disadvantaged South African students is unlikely to occur through a transfer to a school with adequate resources, a different criteria for assessing success needs to be considered. This article will examine school success in preparing students for South Africa's high stakes matriculation exam, relying on the concept of functionality. In essence, this approach will examine high achieving schools in a dysfunctional urban township where success in student achievement may not demonstrate a one-size-fits-all viewpoint of functionality, but, instead, may reveal that each successful school bears its own individual imprint of functionality.

The purpose of this article is to examine a successful secondary school in South Africa and determine the factors that make this school functional. For purposes of this article, a functional school is defined as one that has at least a 90% pass rate students who take the annual Matriculation Exam (ME). This article will examine research done in South Africa that explored an effective school in a dysfunctional setting with an ineffective school in a similar setting.

The Approach to Functionality in Post-Apartheid South Africa

An Historical Background to Functionality/Dysfunctionality in Schools

Apartheid officially ended in South Africa with the first general elections in 1994. However, the end of apartheid has not marked the end of discriminatory inequalities in South African schools, especially those located in the disadvantaged urban and township settings populated almost completely with disadvantaged black students. Thrupp observed that post-apartheid black schools faced "savagely inequalities" because these schools, located in areas with high levels of unemployment and crime as well as poor housing and health conditions, were required to take on a significant caring role if academic goals were to be achieved. (1999, p.3).

The absolute inadequacy of black schooling was reflected in the privilege of white education, which despite constituting less than 10% of the number of students, consumed 30% of the education budget and a White-Black spending ratio of 3:1 (NEPI, 1993, 0. 15). Despite efforts at reform, education in South Africa remains unequal along racial lines with grossly inferior black institutions (where the overwhelming majority of black students attend) demonstrating a decline in the ME pass rate. (Booyse, History, p. 281). In the former white schools in the Western Cape, 62.5% of Grade 3 students in 2008 could read and write at appropriate levels while the corresponding figure in the black townships was 0.1%. (*Id.*). As reflected above, desegregation of educational institutions has been very much a one-way process with students of black families seeking to move to the better historically white institutions. Thus, virtually all white students still attend formerly all-white institutions while most black students continue to attend historically black institutions. (*Id.*, p. 282).

Historically black schools face other challenges. Although on any given day, 1.7% of teachers in historically white schools are absent, the number for black schools varies from 15.5% to 25.5 %. (*Id.*). Even an increase in per-student government funds from R6300 in 2005/06 to R9160 in 2008/09 has seen the number of students passing the ME drop from 351,503 in 2006 to 344, 794 in 2008. (*Id.*, p. 283).

Despite South Africa Constitution's acknowledgement of a linguistic multiculturalism with eleven official languages (Const., ch.1(6)(1)), English has become the language of preference. No progress has been made concerning the development of African languages beyond Grade 4 and the number of Afrikaans single-medium schools has declined from 1396 in 1993 to 667 in 2009. (Booyse, History, p. 281).

Measuring Functionality and Dysfunctionality in South Africa Schools

The purposes of this study were to identify the characteristics of a dysfunctional school and a functional school in the Gauteng province of South Africa and to explore and describe the effective management of a functional school in a dysfunctional area. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed to principals in differing schools based on the pass rate of the ME. One hundred questionnaires were distributed to the principals of schools that had a pass rate of 80%-100% on the ME (also known as the Senior Certificate Examination (SCE)) and one hundred questionnaires to schools that scored a past rate of less than 40%. One hundred eighty-

one questionnaires were returned with the principals responding to eleven areas: school background; principal's background information; staffing issues; school facilities; health, safety and security; school finance; school governance and management; school inspection and supervision; attendance rates and functional school days; school management; teaching practice; and, discipline, safety, and learning atmosphere. (Bipath, pp. 300-310). These eleven categories constituted eleven independent variables which were examined in terms of their impact on the dependent variable, namely whether the school achieved a pass rate of 80 -100% or whether the pass rate was below 40%.

Functional schools were identified as having strong leadership, high expectations for children's achievement, an orderly atmosphere conducive to learning, an emphasis on basic skill acquisition, and frequent monitoring of student progress which is used as feedback. (Earley and Weindling, 2004, p.156). In terms of the independent variables, functional schools were characterized as having zero defect in discipline among teachers, students and school support staff; excellence in student academic achievement; quality involvement in the co-curricular activities; creative and innovative teaching and learning process and administration; cleanliness and a cheerful environment; active involvement and valuable contribution by members of the school in community work; high percentage of students pursuing higher education; good interpersonal relationships among school citizens; efficient management of school finance; esprit de corps and dedication among management, teachers and support staff; and, strong leadership. (Bipath, p. 59).

Conducting the Study

The researcher conducted a field study of 4-weeks each in a functional school and a dysfunctional school in a low socio-economic area seeking responses to three open questions: What can you tell me about your school? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your school? How can you improve your school? In addition, the learners in the classes, the administrative clerks, teachers, parents, school governing body (SGB) members, Representative Council of Learners (RCL), which are the learners in secondary schools who are elected by all learners to represent them on the SGB and even the cleaners in the two schools being investigated were interviewed as well. The documents analyzed in this study were the following: minutes of the staff meetings; minutes of the SGB meetings; minutes of the RCL meetings; school

developmental plans; the school policy; and, newsletters, memos to parents. (Bipath, pp. 226-227).

The researcher used the qualitative methods of observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis with all stakeholders in the functional as well as dysfunctional school in the dysfunctional area to triangulate the findings of the qualitative research. (*Id.*, p. 217). By investigating two schools in a poor socio-economic area the investigator ensured that the contextual variables for both would be the same.

The research revealed that the role of the principal in creating a functional or dysfunctional school was critical. Principals in functional schools tended to accept responsibility for the management of teaching practices in their schools. Principals in dysfunctional schools appeared not to accept the same amount of responsibility as principals in functional schools for the management of teaching practices in their schools. This could lead to “finger pointing” at others with a concomitant shifting of blame for poor management on to others such as the Department of Education. (*Id.*, p. 170). The study revealed that a serious need exists for training urban school principals in how to function effectively. More importantly, though, the study is hopeful in that dysfunctionality does not have to be the *modus operandi* for a school simply because it is located in a dysfunctional area.

Effective Leadership Traits Ascertained from the Study

Leading and managing the learning school

Effective school administrators require emotional intelligence, which consists of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. A leader who demonstrates emotional intelligence will first be aware of his or her own emotions and will not allow them to cloud his or her judgment. Second, the leader will be able to motivate himself or herself to complete a given task. Third, the leader will be able to accurately sense others’ emotions. (Goldman, 1997). The principal in the functional school possessed all the emotional intelligence competencies necessary to lead and manage the school. He had the ability to recognize how his emotions affected his performance and the performance of others. The vision and mission of the school was consistently communicated to all staff members by the principal. He communicated

the vision of the school to learners by setting goals for them at the first assembly of the school year.

He organised programmes to ensure that the developmental plans were implemented. The batho pele (People First) principles that emphasize consultation, service standards, increased access, courtesy, openness and transparency, redress and value for money are posted outside his door. (<http://www.dpsa.gov.za/batho-pele/Principles.asp>). He required that the treasurer deliver a monthly budget report at SGB meetings so that all stakeholders were aware of how and why money is spent and that changes in the budget would not occur without consultation with them. Minutes of all meetings are meticulously filed in the office and are easily accessible to anyone.

Shaping the direction and development of the school

The principal is aware of the poverty and hunger of his students is continuously looking for sponsors to provide free meals for learners during the school day. He is aware that learners have no study space in their homes so he keeps his school open till late hours.

In addressing the organizational culture of his school the principal paid attention to the punctuality and attendance of teachers and learners, the management by the Heads of Departments (HODs), the empowerment of the deputy principals, and the functional role of the SGB. He also ensured that the parents were educated on their roles and responsibilities regarding their learners.

The learners were considered as high priority in this school and the principal made time to individually motivate each learner to study. When students did well he arranged bursaries to assist them. For the chosen few learners who needed enrichment in passing the ME with a distinction, he selected high-performing students to assist in teaching as part of the Role Model Intervention Programme (RMIP).

The principal of the functional school measured the performance of all learners by setting dates for monthly cycle tests for grade 8 to 12 learners. Students were selected as pace setters in specific subjects and the work was controlled by being divided into manageable portions and assessed monthly. The school was open every Saturday beginning with the new school year in January for extra lessons if teachers were falling behind in the syllabus.

The principal also controlled the attendance of teachers and learners by having a register that was signed by the teacher and controlled by the class representative. The time that the teacher entered the class, and left the class was also recorded. The principal also briefed all teachers on these attendance registers and collected and checked them every Friday. If misdemeanours were noticed they were immediately dealt with. Charge sheets were drawn up by the School Management Team (SMT) for misdemeanours.

Part of the principal's commitment to excellent results in his school was to work in uplifting the dysfunctional community in which the school was located. He did not blame apartheid for the low standard of teaching and learning and was proactive in drawing up programmes and setting appropriate targets for monitoring the performance of learners. He was not afraid to visit high-performing schools to find out how excellent results were achieved and was rewarded with 100% ME pass rate from 2003 - 2010.

Assuring quality and securing accountability

When asked about the excellent matriculation exam results of his school, the functional school principal complimented the work of his school management team in ensuring that the ME preparation study outlines were completed on time. The principal saw his role as merely the watchdog who called in all matriculants in the beginning of the year and explained the importance of achieving an excellent pass to complete a tertiary education. The RCL complemented their principal, saying that he was the reason for the good pass rates as he had called in parents, explaining the need for learners to study and be kept away from household chores. The principal was well aware that, in economically disadvantaged urban and township schools, children were generally given many chores to do and that parents did not always understand the importance of time for concentrated studying. He was also responsible for ensuring that learners who had no electricity in their home could study after hours at the school. To assure that students have the maximum possibility of assistance in preparing for the ME, he comes to school at 6:45 and leaves at 21:00. In addition, to minimize damage to, or theft of, school property or materials, he drives past the school at night to see if everything is safe.

Developing and empowering self and others

The principal displayed service orientation competencies in that he took personal responsibility for achieving the learners' desired outcome. He had a genuine understanding of the learners needs and a strong desire to meet them. The result was the learners trusted the principal and were committed to achieving excellent results. During his interview, he affirmed that he "makes time" and speaks to each matriculant individually.

He was confident of his management skills and had distributed his responsibilities to his school management team. He encouraged his teachers to attend cluster meetings at the district office by budgeting for the costs of travel to and from the district office. He ensured that there was a positive learning atmosphere in his school by purchasing the most recent textbooks and teaching guides.

Managing the school as an organization

During the four weeks of observation at the functional school, teachers arrived punctually for lessons and were prepared to teach their classes. Despite the noise outside the classrooms at the beginning of the school year, because 700 grade 8 learners had not yet been placed in classes, the teachers in their classrooms continued with their lessons. After the 700 students were allocated to their classrooms, the principal and deputies walked around monitoring the teaching and learning. Students were neatly dressed in school uniforms and carried the necessary study materials. Administrative clerks were using the office equipment to type or duplicate worksheets. Classrooms were neat and tidy and teachers and students exhibited a mutual respect by greeting each other politely.

Working with and for the community

The principal of the functional school displayed social awareness and emotional self control in his interaction with the community. He had the ability to keep his emotions under control and to restrain negative actions even when faced with opposition. During an SGB meeting, his opinion on teenage pregnancy was opposed by parent and teacher members. Although he was passionate about not accommodating pregnant learners in the school, he controlled his emotions and listened to parent and teacher opinions. He made arrangements to call over the Educational Support Services (ESS) unit from GDE (Gauteng Department of

Education) to the next SGB meeting where they would explain the policies and procedures concerning teenage pregnancies. He was able to control the stress. When some of the boys drank alcohol and smoked on school grounds during Youth Day, the principal confronted the boys, confiscated the contraband, met with the parents of the students involved regarding the discipline of their children.

Implications of the Study for Urban School Change

The study reinforces the National Department of Education's (DOE's) concern as to the need for effective leadership preparation that resulted in developing a package of measures linking the South African Standard for School Leadership (SASSL, 2005) to its Policy framework for Education Leadership and Management Development (DoE, August 2005). The purpose of this linkage was to clarify the functions of the principal in the education system. These documents identified the six key areas of the principalship identified above that were considered to be a necessary part of the leadership function of every principal: (1) leading and managing the learning school; (2) shaping the direction and development of the school; (3) assuring quality and securing accountability; (4) developing and empowering self and others; (5) managing the school as an organization; and, (6) working with and for the community.

However, the study underlying this article reveals that the goals of the DOE have not been achieved. Mloi (2007) states that it is clear that the Department of Education (DoE, October 2004, August 2005) intended to place the emphasis for transformation of all government schools on the professionalisation of existing and aspiring principals, but, even if that has occurred in formerly all-white school, such does not seem to have been the case in black urban and township schools. The DOE responded in 2007 to the need to train school principals to a national professional standard by introducing a National Qualification for school leadership in the form of an Advanced Certificate of Education (ACE). A two-year ACE program developed at the University of Pretoria was designed to be practice-based, meaning that participants were required not only to read and write but also to apply what was learnt, to reflect on the success or failure of the application and to learn from their mistakes. (<http://web.up.ac.za/default.asp?ipkCategoryID=13636&sub=1&parentid=43&subid=13332&ipklookid=6>).

However, while, arguably, the DOE's development of the advanced principal license qualification (ACE: School Leadership) is indicative of the department's renewed commitment to capacity building in leadership and management and "to advance teaching and learning" (DoE, October 2004), the persistence of undesirable leadership characteristics in dysfunctional schools raises serious questions as to whether the DOE has made the serious commitment necessary to achieve its goals. The experimental effort by the University of Pretoria to inaugurate an advanced principal license (ACE) reflected a general weakness that efforts to improve the management skills of principals, namely that most information was communicated at central sites and lacked on-site interactions with effective principals. [Find some kind of reference for this statement that is more recent than 2007].

Nonetheless, the fact that one principal has been able to create an effective, functional school in a dysfunctional setting demonstrates that it can be done. However, the persistence of ineffective school principals in dysfunctional areas indicates that the DOE school authorities either are incapable of identifying the necessary characteristics of an effective principal or are unable to communicate those characteristics to future and existing principals.

Students in dysfunctional South African schools have virtually no opportunity to transfer to functional schools, but, then, the same lack of opportunity can exist as well for U.S. students under the NCLB. What is important for South Africa, because of the great distances to effective schools and the grinding poverty that exists in urban and township settings, is the imperative of effective leadership as the most important mechanism for effecting change in the school setting. Data from the study in this article concerning a dysfunctional and a dysfunctional principal in dysfunctional school settings, as well as similar data from past studies, reflect that school authorities seem to know how an effective administrator should act. What is sorely needed, though, is on-site interaction with functional principals. The challenge for the future of effective education in South Africa is that the country is trying to build its airplane of successful principals while the plane is in the air. Can South Africa's urban education system afford to take the few functional principals out of the classroom to serve as on-site mentors to dysfunctional principals without having the entire educational system collapse into dysfunctionality?

Conclusion

The findings in the above themes display that leaders must have most of the competencies in emotional intelligence in order to be able to embed a strong culture in his/her school. If the organisational culture of a school is strong, the school will perform well. Thus, the role of the leader in changing the culture of a school ensures the functionality of the school. Leadership and organisational culture are two sides of the same coin which is linked to whether a school is functional or not.

Schools do make a difference to learners. Leaders in the school need to realise their role and responsibility in creating a culture of teaching and learning. This research project proves that the role of the principal in creating a culture of the school is essential in a functional school. Children from dysfunctional areas come from dysfunctional cultures and it is up to the leader of the school to change the culture to ensure a better future for the learner. The principal needs to be self aware and socially aware in order to be able to detect and correct the deficiencies in the community culture. The principal can only create a functional culture if he possesses the competencies of emotional intelligence.

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