

FACTORS WHICH AFFECT THE LEADERSHIP EFFICACY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN THE FREE STATE PROVINCE

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Abstract

This study investigated personal as well as contextual factors which affect the leadership efficacy of Free State secondary school principals and, consequently, their leadership practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 secondary school principals as a follow-up to a bigger study which assessed leadership efficacy of school principals in different dimensions of their leadership roles. The participants included sixteen (16) male principals and four (4) female principals selected from the five districts of the Free State province. Personal factors which were found to affect leadership efficacy of school principals positively included: years of experience as a principal, suitable qualifications and training in educational management; commitment and dedication towards one's work. Personal factors which had a negative effect on leadership efficacy included lack of confidence and skills in certain aspects of management. The contextual factors that were identified were categorized into teacher-related problems, learner-related problems, school conditions, and factors outside the school such as the influence of the Department of Education officials as well as teacher unions. Some factors had a positive effect on the leadership efficacy of school principals while others had a negative effect. The identified factors are discussed in line with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory as well as sources of efficacy which have been identified in literature. The study has shed some light into the role efficacy beliefs play in determining the leadership efficacy of school principals and consequently their leadership practices. The study will make a contribution towards the implementation of the key leadership roles that have been prescribed for school principals and published by the South African Department of Education in 2016. In this regard the study is relevant and timely in a South African context.

Keywords: Leadership efficacy, Leadership practices, Personal factors, Contextual factors, South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

Efficacy is an important factor influencing people in the performance of their duties. Self-efficacy is defined as the beliefs in one's capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments. These beliefs are important because they are predictive of human behaviour (Nye, 2008:2). Self-efficacy is a central concept in Bandura's Theory of Social Learning. Research on self-efficacy indicates that individuals with high self-efficacy set more challenging goals for themselves than do individuals with lower self-efficacy.

This paper focuses on leadership efficacy. Leadership efficacy of school principals has a major effect on how school principals perform their duties as school leaders. Leadership self-efficacy is a person's belief that he or she can exercise headship successfully and set a direction for teamwork and build relations with followers to gain their commitment to changing the goals (Paglis & Green in Villanueva & Sanches, 2007:350). There is a number of factors according to literature which can affect self-efficacy or leadership efficacy school principals. This paper identifies personal, contextual and external factors affecting the leadership efficacy of school principals.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Leadership efficacy is a specific form of efficacy associated with the level of confidence in the knowledge, skills and abilities associated with leading others. It can be clearly differentiated from confidence in the knowledge, skills and abilities associated with other social roles such as a teacher, that is, teacher efficacy, or a statesman, that is, political efficacy (Hannah *et al.*, 2008:669). The aim of leadership is the achievement of goals; a strong and healthy sense of efficacy is necessary to sustain the productive attention to goals. Leadership self-efficacy has been related to direction-setting and to gaining followers' commitment, as well as in overcoming obstacles to change. Leaders' self-efficacy has been found to mediate employees' engagement with their work. Worker engagement occurs when the worker is cognitively vigilant and is emotionally connected to others to find meaning in his or her work (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007:574). Research outside the educational field stresses the relationship between cognitive characteristics of the leader and effectiveness of the organization (Fiedler and Garcia in Imants and Brabander, 2005:181). Wood *et. al.* presented empirical evidence of the contribution of managers self-efficacy to effective decision-making in industrial settings. These researchers found that perceived self-efficacy was positively related to effective use of analytic strategies for discovering optimal managerial rules. Both sense of efficacy and the use of analytic strategies contributed to managerial success in raising organizational performance (Imants and Brabander, 2005:182). These findings suggest that principal's perceived self-efficacy might be an important factor in school effectiveness and school improvement.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study originates from Bandura's theory of Social Cognitive Theory (Gist, 2010). Bandura's social cognitive theory holds that beliefs about personal agency are the foundation for action. Personal efficacy affects behaviour directly and by impacting goals, outcome expectations, affective states and perceptions of socio-structural impediments and opportunities. Individuals who feel that they will be successful on a given task are more likely to be so, because they adopt challenging goals, they try harder to achieve them, persist despite setbacks, and develop coping mechanisms for managing their emotional state (Ross and Gray, 2006:7). The social cognitive theory, used in psychology, education and communication, holds that portions of an individual's knowledge acquisition can be directly linked to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences and outside influences. The theory states that when people observe a model performing certain behaviour and see the consequences of that behaviour, they remember the sequence of events and use this information to guide subsequent behaviour. Observing a model can also prompt the viewer to engage in a behaviour they have already learned. In other words, people do not learn new behaviour solely by trying it and either succeeding or failing, but rather, the survival of humanity is dependent upon the replication of the actions of others. Depending on whether people are rewarded or punished for their behaviour and the outcome of the behaviour, the observer may choose to replicate the behaviour modelled (Pajares, 2002:1). The following section focuses on the external, contextual and personal factors affecting the leadership-efficacy of school principals. These factors are discussed at both the international and the South African perspective.

2.1 Contextual challenges or in-school challenges

Atieno and Simatwa (2012:390) identify challenges faced by schools principals, especially newly appointed principals. They indicate that principals face challenges characterised by issues such as inadequate teaching and learning resources, student absenteeism, non-committed staff, financial constraints, and teacher shortages. They further categorise these challenges as support staff management-based challenges, teacher management-based challenges, student management-based challenges, challenges that arise from parent involvement in school activities. In addition to the factors identified by Atieno and Simatwa, Scott (2010:68) highlight the dysfunctional school culture, lack of discipline as other challenges affecting the school principals.

Staff management-based challenges

Staff management-based challenges include incompetence, shortage of staff, poor morale, absenteeism and negative attitudes, insubordination, uncooperative staff, absenteeism and shortage of teachers (Atieno & Simatwa, 2012:391). Lack of support from the members of the school management team is considered as an enormous loss of in-school support for the school principal. In these conditions the school leader often feels isolated, overwhelmed and powerless to accomplish the job (Phillips & Remihan, 2003:29). Teacher support is strongly correlated with the principal's sense of self-efficacy, because leaders rely on subordinates to help accomplish goals. The support principals receive from school personnel, learners and parents play a significant role in shaping the principal's sense of efficacy (Sindhvad, 2009:23).

Parents' involvement in school activities

Challenges that arise from parents' involvement in school activities include failure to pay school fees, uncooperative parents, a negative attitude, threats to principals, and the failure to attend Parents-Teachers Association meetings (Atieno & Simatwa, 2012:391). Jackson, Tumer and Battle (2015:32) are in agreement with Atieno and Simatwa when they state that another challenge school principals have is the frustration regarding poor parent attendance at school events. School principals also complain of the small number of rude parents, insulting parents, and sometimes violent parents who discourage the school staff from seeking greater parent involvement.

Student management-based challenges

Student management-based challenges are poor performance in national exams, absenteeism, high enrolments and shortage of textbooks (Atieno & Simatwa, 2012:391). Preetika and Priti (2013:39) in their study on challenges faced by school principals in India highlighted lack of discipline, respect and morals as some of the challenges of school principals. They also maintain that absenteeism and bunking the school are other challenges facing school principals.

Dysfunctional school culture

Dysfunctional schools are schools that have no resilience in the sense that they cannot survive or recover from extreme adversity. Common features of dysfunctional schools include disputed and disrupted authority relations between principals, educators and learners (Rampa (in Engelbrecht, 2009:5). This is caused by the absence of school governing bodies and school management teams, as well as principals with no authority – all of which ultimately contribute to the poor functioning of schools and the breakdown of a culture of teaching and learning (Duke *et al.*, 2007:10). The view of the researcher on dysfunctional schools is that this type of culture can be a challenge for principals who want their schools to promote a culture of teaching and learning. If a leader fails to achieve success in a school this can lead to a principal with a negative sense of leadership efficacy.

Lack of discipline

Discipline and the lack of a culture of teaching and learning are challenges experienced in schools and by teachers in their classrooms. The issue of learner discipline is one of the major problems in schools. There is a relationship between the learner learning and an orderly environment (Moloi, 2007:472). The more time teachers and principals spend on discipline, the less time is available for teaching (Duke *et al.*, 2007:10).

Lack of resources

Lack of resources can be a serious obstacle in a leader's path to accomplish improvements in education. A leader's self-efficacy for successfully leading a school may be diminished if resources are viewed as inadequate for supporting his or her efforts (Sindhvad, 2009:22). Lack of resources in the South African context as identified by Scott (2010:68) include lack of basic infrastructure and facilities, limited learning equipment and learning materials, lack of libraries, laboratories and computer centres and lack of sports facilities. Other factors which affect the leadership efficacy are factors external to the schools.

2.2 Factors outside the school

School principals have to deal with issues outside their control, for example trade unions and the Department of Education. These factors are included as they also have a negative effect on the school principals.

Lack of district support

This refers to lack of support for school principals from the district and provincial department officials and the lack of support from the Department of Education (Scott, 2010:11). In a survey conducted in Canada, the

United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia on the role and challenges of school principals, Renihan, Phillips & Raham maintain that although there are exceptions, principals are seldom supported by school districts. School principals are not provided with the support they need. Local provision of support to the principals is a responsibility school districts have not taken seriously (Renihan, Phillips & Raham 2006:29).

Interference by the Department of Education in decision making

Al-Ghefeli *et al.* (2013:81) indicated that in their study the principals claimed that the Ministry of Education desired to have the final word regarding the decision-making process. In research conducted by Scott, principals indicated a lack of power to take decisions regarding labour matters at school level.

Interference by labour unions

In a study conducted in the Eastern Cape by Msila (2014:16), principals highlighted the challenges of leading schools that have a strong union influence. The principals pointed out that labour unions frequently claim a space and frequently the principal's power is taken away, either consciously or unconsciously. Beeka (2008:36) agrees with Msila about the interferences of teacher unions on how principals manage their schools. The principals in Beeka's study complained about their inability to take decisions; they cited fear of reprisal from organised labour unions as the reason for this.

2.3 Personal factors

Financial management-based challenges

Financial management-based challenges, according to Atieno and Simatwa (2012:391), include fee defaulting, incompetence and budgeting. Research conducted in Mpumalanga, show that the Department of Education has provided guidelines for budgeting and financial management. In most cases though the principals have little or no training in financial management, hence they struggle with this aspect. It is further explained that in spite of the efforts of the Mpumalanga Education Department to capacitate principals, this incapacity has not been successfully addressed (Beeka, 2008:37).

Stress

Stress is a major problem for school principals. A study by Al-Ghefeli, Ghani and Muhamad (2013:1) on challenges experienced by principals found that stress in the workplace is initiated by factors such as insufficient funds, a conflict of interest between the school administration and the General Directorate, and the high expectations of teachers.

Insecurity in delegating duties to school management teams and educators

School principals' insecurity to delegate responsibility is due to the lack of ability to delegate responsibilities to the rest of the staff members as followers. The insecure principal is hardly expected to delegate responsibilities (Beeka, 2008:39). The organizational context in which a leader works is an important influence on what he or she can do. The contextual characteristics of an organization can influence the leader's sense of efficacy (Sindhvad, 2009:22).

Low morale and lack of motivation among principals and staff members

Beeka (2008:39) states that principals argue that the pressure from the Departmental bureaucracy on the one hand and the educators on the other has led to demotivation and low morale among principals in most schools. This situation has relegated principals to a position of implementer of policy, without any influence on the formulation of these policies. The contextual, external and personal factors which affect how school principals perform their duties were discussed.

3. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to determine the external, contextual and personal affecting the leadership efficacy of secondary school principals in the Free State Province.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Which factors affect the leadership efficacy of school principals in the Free State Province?
- What is the effect of personal factors on the leadership efficacy of secondary school principals?
- What is the effect of contextual factors on the leadership efficacy of school principals negatively?

- What effect do factors outside the school environment have on the leadership efficacy of school principals?

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research design

This is a descriptive survey. This survey employed a mixed method which was more quantitative than qualitative. Cluster sampling was used to select 100 school principals from the five districts of the Free State province.

5.2 Participants

Participants in this study were 20 secondary schools principals in five districts in the Free State Province (see Table 1 below). The method that was used for selecting the sample is the cluster sampling.

Table 1	Frequency	Percent
Female	4	20%
Male	16	80%
Total	20	100.0

5.3 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used by the researcher to collect qualitative data from the principals.

Ethical issues

Participation in the study was voluntary. The aim of the study was made clear and the participants were assured that their responses would be confidential.

5.4 Data Analysis

Text analysis was used to analyse and interpret qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Biographical data

The participants in were secondary school principals 4 (20%) females and 16 males (80%). Their experience as school principals ranged from less than five years to more than thirty years.

7. DISCUSSION

The research questions addressed in this paper included the following:

- Which factors affect the leadership efficacy of school principals in the Free State Province?
- What is the effect of personal factors on the leadership efficacy of secondary school principals?
- What is the effect of contextual factors on the leadership efficacy of school principals negatively?
- What effect do factors outside the school environment have on the leadership efficacy of school principals?

First question

- Which factors affect the leadership efficacy of school principals in the Free State Province?

The findings of the study show that the leadership efficacy of school principals is influenced by the personal, contextual and external factors.

Second question

- What is the effect of personal factors on the leadership efficacy of secondary school principals?

The findings show that the personal factors may have both a positive and a negative effect on the school principals. The personal factors which affect the leadership efficacy of school principals positively include: A passion for one's job, their leadership styles, qualifications as these lead to competence in the performance of their duties as school principals, and experience.

The principals stated that the personal factors which affected their leadership efficacy negatively included their age, being more people-oriented than task-oriented, and being too democratic. The school principals further stated that because of their age the older teachers took advantage of them and did not perform their duties as expected. The same applied to being people-oriented and too democratic. If a principal is too people-oriented, both teachers and learners take advantage of the principal and do not perform their duties as well as expected. Other personal factors which affected the leadership efficacy of the principals included over-confidence, not delegating work to subordinates, being a perfectionist, impatience, being indecisive, and having difficulty in maintaining a balance between work and family life. All these personal factors affected the school principals negatively in the performances of their duties, which in turn affected their confidence in their work.

Third question

- Which contextual factors affect the leadership efficacy of school principals negatively?

The contextual factors affecting the school principals negatively included a lack of support and interference by the DoE, interference by labour unions in the principals' performance of their duties, a lack of resources, the socio-economic background of learners, unsafe environments, an uncooperative School Governing Body, a negative attitude by some staff members towards work; very low motivation among some staff members the lack of cooperation and support from the teachers, learners and parents, a negative attitude by teachers towards work, absenteeism of teachers, gossips and a tendency of subordinates using management to fight their personal issues, and ill-discipline of both teachers and learners. All these contextual factors made it difficult for the school principals to perform their duties and this had a negative impact on their leadership efficacy.

Fourth question

- Are there factors outside the school environment which affect the leadership efficacy of school principals negatively?

The findings indicate that the external factors affecting the leadership efficacy of the school principals include lack of support from the Department of Education, and interference of both the Department of Education and the Unions on how the school principals perform their duties.

8. CONCLUSION

Leadership efficacy is important for school principals in the performance of their duties. The leadership efficacy may be influenced positively or negatively by the external, contextual and personal factors. It is important to minimise the negative effect of these factors on principals, because a negative effect of these factors on school principals leads to a negative leadership efficacy. We need school principals with a positive self-efficacy to achieve success in schools.

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