Chapter #24

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP IN REMOTE SOUTH AFRICA: A LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE

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ABSTRACT

To understand the circumstances under which principals in remote areas exercise their leadership and management, an investigation was conducted in the Northern Cape province, South Africa. This province is characterised by small towns with few residents. The infrastructure is not up to par, and in some cases, the socio-economic conditions are extremely poor. Unemployment is a big problem in the villages. The uniqueness of this study lies in the fact that after 1994, with the abolition of apartheid, the farmers withdrew their children from the schools and no longer supported the schools as before. As a result, the principals experienced many more challenges. The study followed a qualitative, phenomenological design from the interpretivist paradigm. The sample consisted of ten principals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals. The inductive data analysis process was used. The required ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the North-West University and the Department of Education of the province. The results reveal that principals in remote areas, in the absence of technology, infrastructure, and support bases, have to use their skills creatively, and they need the support of the community, teachers, school management, and governing body.

Keywords: challenges, communities, educational context, frustration, remote schools, school leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

> Rural [remote] is a composition of human settlements with agriculture production as the main economic activity. Geographically, rural areas are isolated from urban areas. They are remote places found in the countryside, in forests and or mountains. Typically, rural people lack access to socio-economic amenities such as quality education, good health services, transport, marketing facilities, as well as electricity among others. Rural people often live a nomadic life; they are pastoralist and fishermen. (Chakaninka, Sichula, Sumbwa, & Nduna, 2012, p. 8)

South Africa consists of nine provinces. The project reported on in this chapter was carried out in the Northern Cape province. The Northern Cape is known as a vast, dry, and arid region. The villages are usually far apart, and access to the villages is difficult. In many cases, the only road to town is an impassable gravel road. Given the geographical location and demographic composition of the remote schools visited in this study, the background of the schools should be briefly discussed first. Before 1994 (the apartheid era), all the schools consisted of white principals, teachers, and learners. After 1994, the schools were opened to

all population groups. However, Afrikaans remained as the medium of instruction. Most of the schools are located in farming communities. With the transition to a democratic system, the white people withdrew their children from the schools and sent them to larger schools. Predominantly, all these schools then accommodated brown children (Chrisholm, 2012). Du Plessis (2014) postulates that rural contexts create additional and unique challenges for school leaders, as rural schools experience unique challenges and have characteristics that are significantly different from those in urban areas. In addition, Wildy and Clarke (2009) argue that it is important that principals have prior knowledge of the social, economic, political, and geographical aspects in the school environment, as well as how communities function and how principals can work together effectively and enter into partnerships. They further focus on the challenges faced by principals in remote communities, where they have to be sensitive be in terms of contextual and diverse circumstances (Wildy & Clarke, 2009). Principal leadership in smaller towns or school communities located far from large cities and towns, however, is often overlooked (Hardwick-Franco, 2019).

In theory, it sounds as if the role of the principals has been laid out clearly and they should only comply with these guidelines. However, in practice, this is not always possible, especially when it comes to school leadership in remote areas. In South Africa, many schools are located in remote areas. In this study, only one of the nine provinces in South Africa was used as a sample to learn more about the leadership and management of principals in remote schools.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Principalship in remote schools and challenges

The school is closely related to life within a community. For this reason, good relations with the community are of cardinal importance (Micah, Anthony, & Isaac, 2017). According to Akpakwu (2012), the school-community relationship can be described as the degree of understanding and goodwill between the school and the community. It therefore means that a school-community relationship is one of mutual understanding that the school, people, materials, and other resources needed should be obtained in order to create a favourable school environment for the effective and efficient achievement of educational goals. This relationship will help stakeholders to better understand the challenges of the school and then offer assistance, which can bring efficiency to the education system. This argument is especially true in remote schools where the community and the school are much more dependent on each other. In South Africa, where diversity is common, acceptance of each other and cooperation are of the utmost importance for the education of the children.

The contextual differences encountered by principals of either urban or remote schools determine their leadership and management style and practices. Principals of large schools have more flexibility and the capacity to delegate and share management tasks, but this is a luxury not afforded to their colleagues at remote schools. In other words, the realities of life in small, remote communities create unconventional circumstances for school principals (Miller, 2015). Taking the history of South African education into account, where many schools in remote areas were neglected after apartheid, the principals in these areas usually experience more problems than their peers in urban areas. In addition, South African school principals experience problems in reconciling political and social aspects with the traditional leadership found more in remote areas (Wright, 2001).

Many studies have been done on the challenges experienced by principals of remote schools (Chakaninka et al., 2012; Du Plessis, 2019; Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009). A challenge that comes to the fore is the problem of the long distance between villages or small towns and larger towns. In some instances, towns are hundreds of kilometres apart, and the only way to access many towns is via dirt roads (Disbray, 2016; Van Jaarsveld, 2019). Du Plessis (2014) argues that the lack of a culture of learning, issues of self-management, and insufficient educational resiliency have become increasingly important as challenges facing the education system in South Africa. In another study, Howley et al. (2009) refer to the negative consequences of the outmigration of families living in remote areas. In the past few years, South Africa has experienced severe drought, especially in the Northern Province, resulting in farmers leaving their farms and the number of inhabitants of the villages gradually decreasing. Because of the declining numbers of learners being enrolled in remote schools, these schools are receiving less funding and, with fewer resources, are struggling to function. As outmigration increases, so does poverty. For Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013), the ability of prospective principals to understand and fit into the political and social context of the local community is essential. This argument is in line with Van Jaarsveld's (2019) study, where principals of remote schools in South Africa admitted that political interference influenced their leadership and management and that some communities did not accept them if they were appointed from other regions. Preston et al. (2013) continue their argument, stating that parents and community members tend to scrutinise the actions of the school principal and place exceedingly high expectations upon their school leader. When a principal from other parts of South Africa is appointed in the community, the community is more likely to monitor the principal's actions. Moreover, the privacy of school principals is not respected because, as the population in remote communities is small, school principals are considered to be "public property" (Preston et al., 2013, p. 3).

In remote areas, recruiting qualified teachers is difficult because teachers are not eager to move to rural areas (Durksen & Klassen, 2018). This results in teachers who are not trained in subjects such as mathematics and science being appointed, simply to have a teacher on staff. Taking into account the fact that South Africa is one of the worst-performing countries in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, having untrained (mathematics and science) teachers on staff is a big problem for school principals in remote areas. Furthermore, principals face the challenge of integrating digital technology into their curriculum, in addition to the lack of trained teachers and financial shortcomings complicating their task (Kotok & Kryst, 2016). This puts a lot of pressure on principals, who "find themselves caught between the competing demands of the school, the local community and an 'upward accountability' environment, where accountability to the systems they are located within holds the dominant voice" (Guenther & Osborne, 2018, p. 59).

Other challenges experienced by the principals of remote schools are being accepted by the community, power challenges with the school management team and the school governing body, a high workload, and a lack of infrastructure (Van Jaarsveld, 2019). Against this background, an empirical investigation was conducted in the Northern Cape province of South Africa.

3. METHODOLOGY

The overall purpose of the investigation was to gain insight into the challenges facing principals regarding their leadership and management practices. A qualitative approach was appropriate to investigate the leadership of principals in remote schools. The central phenomenon of the daily leadership practices of and challenges experienced by principals was explored. The world of the principal was interpreted through the qualitative approach (cf. Creswell, 2014). The research was embedded in an interpretive, qualitative design, and

the goal was to discover and understand the phenomenon in question, namely the challenges facing principals regarding their leadership and management (cf. Maree, 2016). A phenomenological design was applicable to this study. Maree (2016) explains that interpretivism is strongly influenced by phenomenology, an approach that underpins the importance of considering the interpretations of human beings and their perceptions of their situation as our starting point in understanding social phenomena. The goal of this study was to gain a holistic perspective of principals' leadership and management within the environment in which they interact with people on a daily basis (cf. Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

4. STUDY POPULATION

The sample in this study consisted of ten school principals, male and female. Some of the principals have been a school principal for many years, and new principals have either been sent to these schools by the Department of Basic Education or they have moved there because of their spouses. The schools were chosen according to the number of residents in the town. Schools in towns with less than 4600 residents in the Northern Cape were identified using Statistics South Africa (2019). The Northern Cape is known for its widespread towns or villages that are located far from major cities. A further feature of the Northern Cape is the large number of gravel roads connecting towns, impeding access to the towns and the provision and maintenance of infrastructure. All of the schools selected were located in communities with very poor socio-economic conditions and an unemployment rate of up to 65%.

> The National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF) (Republic of South Africa, 2012:3) aimed to improve equity in the funding of education by ranking each school into one of five quintiles. This ranking is based on the unemployment rate and literacy rate of the community in which the school is located, with a Quintile 1 ranking indicating a poor/impoverished school, and a Quintile 5 ranking indicating a wealthy/affluent school. The reasoning behind this notion is that schools serving poor communities (Quintiles 1 and 2) should receive more state funding than schools serving wealthier communities. It was expected that this decision should result in an equal and fair distribution of funds between impoverished and affluent schools (Van Dyk & White, 2019, p. 2)

In the table below, an overview of the sample is given.

Table 1.
Biographical information.

Principal	Gender	Experience	Classification	Quintile	Learners	Teachers
A	Female	1 year	Black	2	414	15
B	Male	2 years	White	4	486	16
C	Female	3 years	White	2	265	8
D	Male	26 years	White	2	200	8
E	Female	5 years	Brown	4	120	8
F	Male	16 years	Brown	2	192	8
G	Female	17 years	Brown	5	250	11
H	Female	5 years	Brown	4	130	6
I	Male	29 years	White	2	550	21
J	Male	6 years	Brown	2	408	13

5. DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND ETHICAL ASPECTS

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals in their offices at the schools to gain insight into their leadership. The interviews lasted about two hours and were done with the help of audio recorders. During the interviews, it was striking how many times the interviews were interrupted due to staff members wanting information from the school principal. Open-ended questions were posed to give the principals the opportunity to expand on them to provide information that could provide better insight into their daily work and challenges. For the data analysis, an inductive data analysis process was followed. The data were coded and then subdivided into themes, sub-themes, and categories. During this process, patterns, associations, similarities, contradictions, and concepts that emerged from the data were identified. The Research Ethics Committee of the North-West University approved the project, and permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Northern Cape Department of Basic Education. The principals of the ten schools also consented to the research, and the required documentation regarding disclaimer, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntariness was provided.

6. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Although principals of schools in remote areas experience many challenges, in this study, a few specific aspects are discussed.

6.1. After Apartheid (1994)

After the abolition of apartheid in 1994, demographic change took place in most of the communities in the Northern Cape. All the schools consist of mostly brown learners, and in some schools, there is only one or two black or white learners. Of the original principals (before 1994), only two have remained. In some cases, the schools have merged with others and the principals have resigned or moved to other schools. The other eight principals are new principals appointed at the schools. The two principals who remained after 1994 have been accepted unreservedly by the community. The principals experience no problems with discipline, burglary, or poor academic performance. Two of the principals (Principals A and B), one black (placed there by the Department of Basic Education) and one white, have been appointed from "outside". According to these two principals, they are not accepted by the community. When asked how this affected their position as head, one remarked as follows:

> *I am a Xhosa-speaking female from outside Northern Cape. The community is not ready for me; they don't want a Xhosa.* (Principal A)

The community blames this principal for other teachers not having been appointed and her personally for not appointing Afrikaans teachers. This has resulted in strained relationships among the teachers and between her and the teachers.

For Principal B, his appointment is problematic, as he is a white principal appointed in a school where the learners are brown and black.

> *The cultural differences are just too great. There is a lot of racism between the black and brown learners. It does not stop at the school but is also experienced among the staff and community. As a result, my decisions are often ignored or overruled by teachers, the governing body and parents.*

It is clear that although apartheid was abolished decades ago, some people in the Northern Cape are not ready for acceptance and cooperation.

6.2. Lack of understanding

The biggest frustration the school principals in the Northern Cape experience involves misunderstanding with regard to the Department of Basic Education. The principals regularly receive memoranda indicating that teachers, and sometimes the school principal as well, have to attend meetings.

> *What the Department of Basic Education does not understand is that my school is located 920 kilometres from the town where the meeting will be held. I only heard on Thursday morning that I had to go there. I am a woman and have to face the road alone.* (Principal G)

The complicate matters further, when, for example, cluster meetings are to be attended by all or even only half of the teachers, the school must be closed.

All South African public ordinary schools are categorised into five groups, called "quintiles", mainly for purposes of the allocation of financial resources. Quintile 1 is the "poorest" quintile, while quintile 5 is the "least poor". Over time, the drought in the Northern Cape has forced farmers to leave their farms or continue farming on a smaller scale. The financial aid provided to these schools has dwindled. One principal made clear her frustration with the Department by pointing out that she had been struggling for 18 years to change her school, which was classified as a quintile 5 school, to a quintile 1 school.

> *For the past 18 years, the treasurer has visited my school often, and he agrees that the school must be downgraded to a quintile 1 school, but the Department of Basic Education does nothing about it. I get the minimum school fees from the parents, and yet I still have to provide in all the needs of the children.* (Principal G)

She has to supplement the finances of the school by means of fundraisers, but because the community has become so impoverished, she is fighting a losing battle.

6.3. Undermining of power

Political parties and cultural differences play a huge role in the remote areas of the Northern Cape. The chairperson and members of the school governing body serve as assistants to the principal, especially with regard to fundraising projects.

> *My school's governing body is on paper only. One or two members try something while the chairman is absent. He and I constantly argue because he does nothing. As soon as I try to take the initiative, the chairman reprimands me.* (Principal E)

Often the chairperson of the governing body wants to run the school, which complicates the task of the principal.

> *Once the chairpersons get in a position of power, they do not know how to handle it.* (Principal B)

When decisions are made by the principals, they are opposed by the school governing body. The representatives in the governing body often form a front against the principal with regard to decision making.

> *The former school principal is now the governing body chairman. Now the members of the governing body are too scared to vote against him. The result is that he still wants to run the school his way. This leads to constant conflict and contributes to the fact that the relationship between me and the governing body is not positive.* (Principal E)

For the principals, their main concern is their teachers and learners, but for the governing bodies, it is about how much power they can exercise in the school. In some cases, principals are presented with an ultimatum regarding the appointment of teachers or fundraising ideas. When the principals want to do the "right thing" and do not heed these "instructions", the governing body distances itself from the principals or blatantly opposes the principals.

6.4. Survival

Although the problems facing the principals in the remote areas of the Northern Cape are not new, two principals touched on the crux of the main problem in remote schools:

The school system in South Africa has become too easy. The school plan must be adapted so that children who end up at university must be intellectually correct. The school system does not suit the community, and for this reason, we as school principals struggle. (Principal E)

In yet another remark, one of the school principals reacted as follows:

The environment in which the school is located must be looked at, and then the curriculum must be expanded or adapted. Diversify. Tea is grown in this area. Let the learners learn how to do it. Use the residences to attract learners. Economic needs must be addressed. Our schools need to address the economic needs. Then the learners will be motivated and we as principals will not experience as many problems. Why is the government not listening? (Principal F)

The principals in the Northern Cape are no ordinary principals; they are exceptional principals who are not overcome by problems, challenges, or anything else that stands in their way.

7. CONCLUSION

This investigation looked at the leadership and management of principals in remote schools in the Northern Cape. Although principals in remote areas in the Northern Cape experience the same challenges as those in other schools in remote areas globally, a distinction can still be made between the challenges before and after the abolition of apartheid. As Du Plessis (2014) points out, remote areas present unique challenges. The abolition of apartheid has contributed to principals having to make adjustments to meet the additional challenges of diversity. In addition, the fact that there is no insight into the circumstances of schools in remote areas is problematic for the principals. Bayar (2016) argues that there is no doubt that the roles of school principals in today's world of education have enlarged considerably. Therefore, the demands on school principals have changed and the expectations with regard to school principals are dramatically more than before. However, strong leadership overcomes this obstacle. To overcome challenges, school principals must closely intertwine and, with relevancy, assess curriculum and instruction, that is, theory, strategy, and implementation. In this process, cohesion will improve. However, further research will need to be done into dealing with diversity, especially in remote areas where communities follow strong historical values and principles. Principals need to be trained and prepared to deal with diversity, power awareness, and the lack of insight into the role of the principal.

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