

## Importance of Teaching Leadership Skills in the Foundation Phase

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**ABSTRACT** Imparting leadership skills is the best gift that teachers can give learners as this will make them independent. Teachers look down on this stage because they think that learners in this phase are too young to acquire these skills. The purpose of the study was to investigate the importance of teaching leadership skills in the Foundation Phase. The study had a qualitative research design in which four teachers were sampled from four primary schools. Interviews were used as a method of generating data from the teachers. Data were analysed through content analysis of the responses from the participants. The study findings suggest that leadership skills create a direct link between the learning and performance of each learner and resulted in an effective learning of practice. The study concluded that teaching leadership skills to learners in the Foundation Phase helped them to gain confidence, enthusiasm, courage, and learn other skills.

### INTRODUCTION

Teachers can model and teach the skills that will equip young learners to lead themselves and others in this hyper-competitive world, because the path to leadership among young learners is in their teachers' hands at school (Bradberry 2015: 2). Leadership is everyone's responsibility, but individuals who have leadership potential do not simply become leaders overnight (Barnard 2015: 3). It is up to existing leaders to train the next generation, showing them how to guide a group of people toward a specific vision or goal. Whether your company has a structured training programme or you simply teach by example, there are a few key factors to keep in mind when you train future leaders.

Leadership skills in Grade R to Grade 3 learners have been and continue to be one of the major issues for debate. Rodd (2013) states that leadership is increasingly being seen as a critical role and responsibility of Foundation Phase teachers, regardless of their initial qualifications, especially as service provision becomes more complex to meet the diverse needs of young children, families and local communities (Haynes-Tross 2015).

Foundation Phase teachers may not find it easy to distinguish the qualities of emerging leadership skills because some teachers may not have been trained to recognise these skills. Even if teachers do recognise leadership skills or be-

haviour, they may not know how to support it in the classroom setting (Fox 2012). Leadership skills for children are meant to mould children into ideal leaders; to guide, inspire and help others grow; and this is how a strong foundation of leadership can be established (Department of Basic Education 2015; Marian 2012). All learners have the potential to develop leadership skills. Mullarkey et al. (2005) comment that it is also documented in the child literature that teachers influence the development of leadership in children by recognising or ignoring, and encouraging or discouraging child leadership behaviour. George (2011) argues that the missing link in contemporary leadership development is having a safe place where the individual learners can share their experience, belief, values and motivations, and gain deeper understanding of who they are; as well as learn to confront the barriers that prevent them from identifying with and influencing others.

One may ask questions, such as what makes leadership so important? It is a fact that leaders set a direction for the rest of us; they help us see what lies ahead; they help us visualise what we might achieve; they encourage us and inspire us. Without leadership a group of human beings quickly degenerates into argument and conflict, because we see things in different ways and lean toward different solutions (K-12 Strategic Talent Management 2015). Leadership helps to point us in the same direction and har-

ness our efforts jointly. Leadership is the ability to unite other people to do something significant that they might not otherwise do. It energises people toward a goal (Mills 2005:11-12). This is especially true for learners, for example in school subjects and projects, debates and sports. Also, developing leadership skills in children will make them confident, successful and more independent. Teachers may think that being a leader, and developing leadership skills, are learned because some learners may have a little more self-confidence than other learners. Krenz (2008) states that it has been proven countless times throughout history that anyone can learn to be a leader.

Ryan (2010: 2) states that leadership skills are like exercising a muscle: the more you train, the stronger you become. Learners are regularly encouraged to build leadership skills so as to assert themselves in school and also in the outside world. Leadership is vital in the classroom as it assists learners to become involved and work as team leaders and accountable partners (Department of Basic Education 2015; Chaibi 2003). Actually, schools are just about the most suitable area for power delegation and power redistribution because learners are likely to reserve roles in the classroom. For this reason, it is obvious that there is the possibility of operating and creating leadership in the classroom and for teachers to use their leadership and authority to support learners' growth (Hassim and Chaibi 2008).

This paper examines the importance of teaching leadership skills in learners from 5 to 9 years of age, and discusses some of the critical issues in leadership, such as focusing on the common leadership education challenges that teachers face in teaching leadership skills with the necessary ethics, value and character among learners from an early age.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach in order to explore the importance of teaching leadership skills in the Foundation Phase. This approach was chosen because it helped to gather information concerning a study from teachers and it allowed close contact between the researcher and the participants (Johnston and Vanderstoep 2009). In-depth individual interviews (Polit and Beck 2006) were used, guided

by structured interview questions. The study was conducted in schools under the Sibasa circuit in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province.

### Population

A population is the entire group of people who are of interest to the researcher and hence meet the criteria in which the researcher is interested (Katzenellenbogen and Karim 2007). The population for this study consisted of primary schools in the Vhembe District of the Limpopo Province.

### Sampling

UNICEF and the Jharkhand Tribal Welfare Research Institute (2013) state that sampling is suitable for solving qualitative problems, such as discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs and the relationships linking occurrences. The study was confined to four primary schools in the Vhembe District, and one teacher was drawn from each school. All four of the teachers were female. These particular schools were selected because they teach Life Skills as one of the subjects in the Foundation Phase.

### Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was granted by Department of Education. The principals of the four selected primary schools were visited and informed about the aim and nature of the study. The school principals introduced the researcher to the teachers who taught the subject of Life Skills in the Foundation Phase. The participants were informed that all procedures and data would be confidential, that their identity would not be revealed and that their participation was voluntary. The contents of the structured interview were first orally explained in the teachers' mother tongue (the Tshivenda language) to the participants for easier comprehension and understanding before they were asked to answer the questions. The interviews used in this study were conducted after school hours.

### Data Analysis

Hassieh and Shannon (2005: 127) define qualitative content analysis as "... a research meth-

od for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns". In this research, the data collected through interviews were analysed, reduced and interpreted. The analysis was presented according to the format of the interview schedule used for the participants,

### Trustworthiness of the Data

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher used the four criteria for developing trustworthiness suggested by Lincoln and Guba's framework in Polit and Beck (2006: 539); focusing on credibility through prolonged engagement during interviews to allow teachers to express their views and their culture in their own language so as to obtain an in-depth understanding of the factors leading to readmissions. To ensure dependability, the research design was described in detail to provide an understanding of the research methodology that was used. Conformability was established by using a subject-matter expert in the analysis of data.

## RESULTS

The results emerged after the process of consolidating the teachers' interview responses. The teachers' reasons were both positive and negative.

The study found that, judging by the responses from the participants after the researcher asked certain questions such as what they understood by child leadership, the participants did not fully understand the terminology. Some of the participants were not sure of the term child leadership because they thought leadership could be found only in an adult, not in young learners. The literature on the studies conducted reveal that child leadership is a process by which one person, namely a teacher, influences the thoughts, attitudes and behaviours of other people (Karnes and Bean 2010; Mills 2005: 11) which means that leadership is the ability to get other people to do something significant that they might not otherwise do. This is supported by the following quotations:

*"I don't think child leadership as a term means to teach young learners leadership skills as teachers can misidentify leadership behaviours as problems behaviours, because the char-*

*acteristics of leadership in young learners can manifest as rule-breaking" (Teacher No. 2).*

Some of the participants regarded child leadership as important to young learners because it encouraged young learners to take leadership opportunities but said that because learners had no practice in being a leader, they would probably find leadership uncomfortable.

Two of the participating teachers said it was important to teach leadership skills in the Foundation Phase. One of the participants indicated the ways she used to develop leadership skills during classroom learning activities. If young learners did not have skills in leadership or followership, the teacher could work to promote effective social skills that might help guide the learners toward effective leadership (Barhold 2014:12; Karnes and Stephens 2000). This could be done through various strategies, including coaching, modelling, praising, direct teaching or asking questions (Rodd 2013; Mawson 2011).

This is supported by the following quotations: *"I encouraged the behaviour of the effective leaders and discouraged the behaviour of the bullies during learning activities (Teachers No. 1 and 4)."*

This could be done by using puppets or dolls to demonstrate effective interactions between playmates. The children could then use these puppets to practise these interactions (Fox et al. 2015; Barhold 2014:13). Children could also gain the ability during play to understand ideas from the perspectives of others, which is a component of empathy.

Better Kid Care (2012) explains some ways which teachers could use to help children develop leadership skills as follows:

Learners learn from seeing what others do. It is important to model leadership behaviour to learners. Tell the learner what you are doing and why you are doing it. They learn that you do things with purposes which have outcomes.

Teach learners how to see things from another's point of view. Good communication is a key component to being an effective leader. Teach learners how to listen carefully and how to respond to others in a calm and respectful way.

Help learners build their leadership self-confidence by giving them opportunities to do a good job and offer praise when appropriate. A teacher might say: "I am so proud of you that you volunteered to be the leader of the group. It

is a big job to make sure everyone is doing their part.”

The present study revealed that teachers should be aware that young learners aged 5 to 9 years are in the initiative developmental stage (Kasanoff 2015: 1). This means that teachers should realise that learners demonstrate leadership skills which involve initiative or creativity. Teachers should also learn how the leadership behaviour taught to young learners is expressed so they can recognise this behaviour and know how to support and nurture these leadership skills. Foundation Phase teachers need to realise how important it is to teach and encourage young learners' emerging leadership skills so that young learners will continue practising them and noticing them; and teachers must be aware that they have a strong influence on young learners (Fox 2012).

### DISCUSSION

The study found that the array of theories about leadership make it impossible to define the term accurately. In a general sense, however, leadership can be defined as “a type of social influence through which one successfully garners the help and support of others to achieve a common goal” (Oleniczak 2015; Murphy and Johnson 2011: 461). A leader is able to inspire a passion, drive and motivation within others in order to persuade them to make a vision become a reality.

For the sake of argument, Northouse (2013: 12) defines leadership as “... a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal”. This means that the key element in this definition is that leadership is a processes rather than a function, it entails influence rather than enforcement, and there is an existing common goal rather than a personal goal of the leader.

Dunlop (2008:4) makes it clear that leadership development is based on rational factors such as commitment, mutual respect and trust. Teaching leadership skills is important because young learners could learn different skills too, such as communication or speaking skills, decision-making skills, problem solving, listening and persuading others; all of which require commitment and mutual trust (Keskes 2014).

Sledd (2015) the present study found that leadership skills emerge in the Foundation Phase and fostering such skills in young learners could have benefits in future. Some important qualities or skills are that a leader can learn how to listen (Fox et al. 2015:163). This skill can be taught by example, by being a good listener yourself.

### CONCLUSION

The study concluded that teachers should show the ability to form strong relationships in order to instil leadership skills in learners. Learners should be regularly encouraged to build their leadership skills so that they can assert themselves in school and also outside in the world. Leadership is vital in the classroom as it assists learners to become involved and work as team leaders. Some learners showed an interest in learning leadership skills during effective-learning classroom settings. Teachers should be encouraged to use effective and meaningful communication while they are teaching different skills. The teachers' encouraging responses in the study prove that it is possible for teachers to teach, create and build learners in the younger generations to feel confidence and enthusiasm when they lead in all areas in the classroom settings.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to teach young learners leadership skills as these skills empower them by giving them high self-confidence and the tools to make choice for themselves. The training of teachers should be organised to include how to teach and support a learner's leadership skills. It is important to teach learners different skills at an early stage as this will help them to act positively under all circumstances. Helping learners to develop decision-making and problem-solving skills could also help them to make age-appropriate decisions. The study recommends that learners should be taught leadership skills to help them gain confidence, enthusiasm, courage and other skills. The Department of Education should develop training manuals that show teachers how important it is to teach, encourage and support learners to develop leadership skills at an early stage in order to build morale about how people should behave. Therefore, more studies examining teachers' training and the ef-

fect it has on the recognition and support of learners' leadership would be appropriate. The study also recommends that leadership skills should be taught to learners to help learners gain confidence, enthusiasm, courage and other skills.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results of this study fill an important gap in the current literature on the importance of teaching leadership skills in the Foundation Phase. The study used individual interview as a data collection strategy but it was possible for all primary teachers to have a chance of being included in the study. The sample was purposive and only one teacher was included from each of four primary schools, which was one of its limitations. It also had several other limitations because this research was carried out in one rural area only, therefore the results cannot be generalised to all the rural areas in Limpopo and as only four primary schools were selected for the study, the other primary schools were excluded from the study.

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