

Leadership Styles of Principals with High Levels of Learners' Academic Performance Compared To Low Levels in Rural Secondary Schools in South Africa¹

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ABSTRACT There has been general underperformance in secondary schools in rural areas of Eastern Cape, South Africa. The paper aimed to identify commonly used leadership styles of principals with high levels of learners' academic performance compared to those with low levels in four rural secondary schools. Qualitative research approach and case study research design were used. Four conveniently selected schools were used, from each school, four principals, four departmental heads and four post level one teachers were purposively selected to make twelve participants. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that all school principals use a mixture of leadership styles like laissez faire, democratic, autocratic, instructional, transactional and transformational, in their quest to make their schools perform better. It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education capacitates rural secondary school principals in all areas of performance. Only competent people of strong character should be appointed to the principalship position.

INTRODUCTION

Roodt (2018) claims that South African education is in trouble and that her learners do poorly in practically every grade. What's more unfortunately, African children are disproportionately those who suffer the most. The society ascribes

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this level of accomplishment to the school principals' ability to manage, guide and oversee such institutions. Many schools around the nation, particularly rural schools where many African students are enrolled, perform poorly (Roodt 2018), greatly contributing to South Africa's failing educational system. In addition, South Africa was ranked 75th out of 76 countries by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in a rating table of educational systems that was created by the group in 2015 (OECD 2015).

The Department of Basic Education's (DBE) mission is to guarantee that all South Africans get high-quality education and training (Department of Basic Education 2016). In order to enable the democratic transformation of the national education system and serve the needs and interests of all South Africans, the DBE's mission is also reflected in the National Education Policy (National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996). Ad-

addressing the challenge of subpar academic performance in schools was the goal. The school principal has critical leadership and management duties to play in order to support this vision, solve the crisis of underperformance, and sustain an effective, thriving school. Therefore, school principals should carry out their managerial and leadership responsibilities in a way that maintain an efficient, smooth running and successful school. School principals should therefore execute their leadership and management roles in a manner that promotes effective and quality teaching and learning in schools (Nonyashe 2017). Ziduli et al. (2018) argue that the academic performance of learners can be used to measure the capabilities of principals in South Africa. This means the school principal is accountable for the whole schools' academic performance and for everything that is taking place in the school (Ziduli et al. 2018).

According to Khan et al. (2020), school principals should create welcoming and supportive school environments since they will improve the standard of instruction. This is accomplished through developing the vision, fostering the strategy, and fostering the growth of each individual strength to advance the organization. Principals should act as role models and encourage followers to develop their own or a group's capacity to realize goals for the success of the school and its students (Leithwood et al. 2019). When they are not working in stressful situations, teachers perform well. Teachers are the frontline personnel for the delivery of the curriculum, and as such, principals must assist them in every way to maintain their resolve, motivation, and belief in their ability to create high-quality learner output. According to Gordon (2013), among school-related factors that affect what students learn in the classroom, leadership comes in second place only to classroom instruction. Hattie (2012) contends that rather than having a direct impact on student achievement, school leaders more often indirectly affect it by fostering a culture and atmosphere that is favorable to learning. According to Atsebeha (2016), having principals who are constantly looking to enhance their professional performance is the best way to have a successful school. According to Bush (2013), it is widely accepted that a strong principal holds the key to a successful school.

Research Problem

One of the elements that contributes to learners' poor academic achievement is poor leadership. Rural South African schools frequently perform below par (Oupa 2014). Nkambule et al. (2011) further assert that despite numerous modifications to the South African educational system since 1994, education in rural schools has remained marginalized. The researchers have also read and seen newspaper articles and reports regarding how secondary schools in rural areas generally do poorly. In general, South Africa's citizens receive substandard education (The Economist, June 2017). Norviewu-Mortty (2012) adds that weak principal leadership results in unstable and challenging staffing, students' unfavorable attitudes toward academic work and punishment, a toxic school system and climate, and the community's lack of cooperation. The rural education of the African child appears to be neglected in the new dispensation since underperformance continues to triumph in rural secondary schools. Despite the government's injection of huge funds aimed at improving rural education (Skhephe and Mantlana 2020), when compared to their counterparts in urban schools, learners in rural schools continue to get education of low quality that is characterized by poor academic achievement (Hlalele 2012a). Without strong leadership, schools would not function properly and learners would not perform exceptionally well (Gyasi et al. 2016). Based on the foregoing, the researchers looked for the leadership styles that distinguish principals with high levels of learners' academic performance from those with low levels of learners' academic performance in rural secondary schools.

Research Question

The question that is being addressed is, which leadership styles are most commonly used by rural secondary school principals with high levels of learners' academic performance compared to those with low levels?

The following subsidiary questions were derived from the main research question:

- i. Which leadership styles do principals frequently use to manage their schools to perform better?

- ii. What leadership styles do principals use to raise learners' levels of academic performance?

Research Objectives

The aim of this paper was to investigate leadership styles that are most commonly used by rural secondary school principals with high levels of learners' academic performance compared to those with low levels. The following are the research objectives:

- i. To identify leadership styles that principals frequently use to manage their schools to perform better.
- ii. To ascertain which leadership styles do principals use to raise learners' levels of academic performance.

Having these objectives in mind might help to determine the degree to which the principals' leadership styles differ in influencing learners' academic performance and in carrying out their leadership and management responsibilities.

Theoretical Framework

According to Adom et al. (2018), the theoretical framework describes the direction of the research and bases it firmly in theoretical constructs. In this paper, the theories of instructional, transactional, and transformational leadership are discussed in an effort to comprehend the many leadership styles used by school principals and how they may affect the academic achievement of learners at various levels. Researchers chose these theories after reviewing previous studies on the effectiveness school leadership. Thus, the researchers proposed a new name, *instructra* leadership theories, a name that is constructed using the sounds of the selected three leadership theories.

Instructional Leadership Theory

According to Hallinger and Heck (2010), instructional leadership is goal-oriented with a focus on enhancing student academic results. The school principal should coordinate, control, oversee, and assess how the school's curriculum is delivered. The researchers believe that this is the focus of instructional leadership. In support of

this, Hausiku (2015) explains that instructional leadership places a greater emphasis on enhancing teaching and learning through the modelling of best practices, observation of classroom activities, and teacher professional development in relation to student growth. The reason the school is focused on a certain subject so it can provide superior teaching and learning. The researchers are of the view that this model is, therefore, significant. In summary, Shava et al. (2021) note that instructional leadership, which attempts to create a community of teaching and learning, is a crucial element of effective teaching and long-term school reform. The fundamental duty assigned to school principals, which is the promotion of efficient and effective teaching and learning in order to ensure that all learners succeed, led the researchers to choose instructional leadership as the theory to guide this study.

Transactional Leadership Theory

According to McCleskey (2014), the transactional leadership style focuses on the interactions that take place between the leaders and their followers. The author goes on to say that these interactions help leaders accomplish their goals, influence followers' behaviour toward the accomplishment of predetermined objectives, emphasize extrinsic rewards, and concentrate on enhancing organizational effectiveness. According to Lamb (2013), a leader's role is to establish frameworks that are crystal clear about what is expected of followers and the repercussions (rewards and penalties) that follow from meeting or failing to fulfil expectations. The researchers believe that principals should set clear performance targets, give clear instructions on what is expected of teachers and learners and outline the reward for meeting and consequences for failing to meet those expectations. Principals are thus expected to engage in the process of supervising and evaluating the performance of both teachers and learners. Such performance is determined by external motivational factors, for instance, people tend to work harder if they know they will be rewarded or in fear of getting punished, hence Cherry (2015) opines that when employees are successful, they are rewarded and when they fail, they are reprimanded or punished. This leadership model may result in staff's compliance and commitment to the task.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Buda and Ying-Leh (2017) claim that transformational leaders assist subordinates in letting go of old habits, coming up with original solutions to perplexing issues, and adjusting to new circumstances. The writers affirm that idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualised considerations, and intellectual stimulation are the four pillars of transformative leadership. A leader has idealised influence if he/she is able to become a role model for the followers due to his/her ethical behaviour. Idealised influence refers to a leader's ability to increase level of loyalty, dedication and identification without focusing on the self-interest (Suresh and Rajini 2013). Principals are expected to exhibit great professional and ethical behaviour because they are role models, and they must always walk the talk, hence Smith (2015) argues that idealised influence leaders gain great respect from their followers. According to Smith (2015), the qualities of inspirational leadership are the capacity to pique subordinates' emotions through a variety of individual and institutional behaviours, as well as through the development of their confidence, shared purpose, and passion. Such a leader will exhort those who follow them to work eagerly and optimistically to ensure that they foster a culture of teamwork and dedication and give work purpose (Gathungu et al. 2015). Inspirational motivation refers to a leader who inspires and encourages employees to support the organization's mission.

The ability of leaders to encourage staff to be creative and take risks is referred to as intellectual stimulation. Suresh and Rajini (2013) assert that intellectually stimulated executives encourage critical thinking and problem solutions to improve the organization. Leaders that inspire innovation and creativity by questioning the status quo or the group's present perceptions of the organization are described as providing intellectual stimulation. Suresh and Rajini (2013) further maintain that a leader can inspire their people to be more imaginative and creative by providing intellectual stimulation. Such leaders inspire people to approach problems differently in the hopes of coming up with novel solutions by going above and beyond what they are capable of.

For individualised consideration, a leader takes on the position of a mentor to the followers

for tailored consideration. The treatment of the followers is determined by their various skills and knowledge (Gathungu et al. 2015). Being a successful coach and mentor to the followers requires a strong emotional component. Individual consideration also refers to leaders who serve as their followers' coaches, mentors, and advisors, and who attend to their needs and problems. Leaders who take into account the needs of each follower motivate them to work toward objectives that benefit the group as a whole. Each subordinate receives varied treatment based on their unique needs and abilities when a transformative leader practices individualized attention.

Each of the four factors explained above, namely idealised influence, individualised consideration, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, describe characteristics that are valuable to the transformation process. It is important in the development of leaders to their full potential that these four areas of development are taken into consideration (Khan et al. 2020). This may also show that becoming an effective transformational leader is a process. There is a wide range of aspects within transformational leadership that are covered by transformational leaders with no specific steps to follow. When leaders are strong role models, encouragers, innovators and mentors or coaches, they are utilising the range of transformational leadership dimensions, or areas of development according to Khan et al. (2020), to help change their organisations into better, more productive workplaces and successful workforce.

Literature

The literature review is consistent with the above-mentioned study questions.

Leadership Styles that are Used by Rural Secondary School Principals to Manage Their Schools to Perform Better and Raise the Learners' Levels of Academic Performance

Effective school leaders are essential to transforming institutions of learning and elevating standards of student achievement. When it comes to educational influences on students' learning, principals are only second to teachers (Gordon 2013). The leadership style of the school princi-

ple has been proven to be a significant determinant of teachers' degree of desire to work, school exhaustion, or burnout. Teachers' motivation to work is influenced by a number of factors (Duraaku and Hoxha 2021). According to researchers, when teachers are motivated, pupils will achieve academically at high levels.

There are no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by an exceptional principal. According to Allie and Sosibo (2017), a particular leadership style of a principal sets the tone of the school as well as the level of professionalism, and it is considered a precondition for an effective school. For instance, a principal may use an instructional leadership style to raise levels of learners' academic performance or a transformational leadership style to keep staff and learners motivated and committed to a task. Hence Bush (2013) states one leadership style may not succeed at all times and in all contexts. Thus, the use of situational leadership requires the leader to change the leadership style to suit a particular situation. Below are some of the leadership styles that principals use.

Autocratic Leadership Style

According to Cherry (2015), authoritarian leadership is characterized by individual control over decisions and minimal interest in collective involvement. The personnel is typically quite far apart from an authoritarian boss, and the leader never respects staff decisions (Egwunyenga 2010). According to Cherry (2018), these circumstances could include new, untrained employees who are unsure of what duties to carry out or which protocols to follow and effective supervision can only be delivered through thorough instructions. This kind of leadership can also be used when employees don't respond to other approaches or when there are a lot of production demands each day and little time for decision-making (Cherry 2018).

Autocratic leadership style is very effective when decision-making does not need input, and it does not affect people in carrying out their subsequent actions whether they were or were not involved in the decision making (Napire 2014).

Democratic/Participative Leadership Style

In a democratic leadership style, a leader encourages staff to be part of the decision-making.

Democratic leadership provides a situation where all policies are derived from group decisions (Sobekwa 2017). Leaders also reward employees for commitment and prefer not to penalise mistakes but work on problems instead. Empowered employees feel more responsible for meeting goals (Inandi et al. 2016). Democratic leadership style may be problematic when there is a wide range of opinions and there is no clear way of reaching an equitable final decision (Cuciac 2016).

Laissez Faire Leadership Style

Lockwood (2021) defines laissez faire leadership as a free rein leader that exerts little direct control over decision-making processes but allows staff members or teams to make decisions independently with little interference. In this instance the leader does not make his presence felt. Van der Westhuizen (2011) argues that the leader guides staff by appealing to personal integrity. This leadership creates a situation where individuals feel totally trusted. The researchers are of the view that subordinates would mostly be driven by their respect for the organisation, intrinsic motivation to perform successfully, good knowledge, skills and willingness to perform the task. Otherwise, this style may adversely affect the productivity in the organisation if staff who are not knowledgeable and unwilling to perform the task are left alone. Lockwood (2021) observed that since there is no close monitoring by management under laissez faire leadership, followers are free to explore and reach some important decisions. While allowing people the freedom to make their own decisions sounds ideal, the result of functioning without supervision and guidance is often detrimental when staff are unable and not willing to perform their duties as expected.

Transformational Leadership Style

Employee motivation and vigour are increased in organisations with transformational leadership (De Jong and Bruch 2013). According to Arokiasamy (2017), principals that exhibit transformational leadership techniques anticipate from their staff behaviours that reflect excellence, quality, and high performance. The academic performance of students is raised when they have excellent and high-performing teachers who deliver engag-

ing and effective instruction. The four components of a transformative leadership style proposed by Burns (1985) are idealised influence, inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. The behaviours that are acceptable in transformational leadership, such as inspiration, intellectual challenge, motivation, and individual consideration, are seen as a major characteristic of exceptional leaders who may be well-known on a global scale (Arif and Akram 2018).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This investigation used interpretivism. According to Creswell (2014), interpretivism has a connection to subjectivity and a variety of realities. Interpretivism uses case studies, interviews, observations, document and narrative analysis, as well as audio and visual resources to gather data. Interpretivism was chosen since this paradigm frequently examines problems from the perspective of personal experience. Their results are frequently localised to certain settings and conditions rather than being generalisable to entire populations.

Research Approach

In general, the researchers do not attempt to influence the phenomenon of interest in this qualitative research study, which is based on a naturalistic method that attempts to understand phenomena in context or real-world settings (Maree 2015). To learn more about the differences between the leadership philosophies of the principals of high-performing rural secondary schools and those of low-performing schools in their natural environments, the researchers used a qualitative study.

Research Design

Researchers analysed a small distinct group that was chosen for its distinctiveness and used a case study research design in this paper, where data were gathered in the settings of participants (Cresswell 2014). The researchers wanted to see

how principals used their authority to affect quality in rural secondary schools.

Data Collection Techniques

The researchers elected to use interviews as data collection instruments. Maree (2015) argues that the purpose of interviews is to obtain descriptive information that will help the researcher comprehend how the participants create their knowledge and their sense of social reality. In this paper, semi-structured interviews were used. Alamri (2019) asserts that the semi-structured interview includes a number of crucial inquiries that aid in defining the subject areas under investigation.

Sampling

White (2020) refers to a sample as a portion of elements taken in a larger population. A sample of twelve participants was purposively selected from four conveniently selected rural secondary schools in the OR Tambo Inland Education District. Two schools had high levels of learners' academic performance and the other two had low levels. Convenient sampling refers to situations when elements are selected because they are easily and conveniently available (Maree 2015). According to Garfield et al. (2011), purposive sampling provides a sample where the identified group is selected according to specific characteristics, which are considered important to the study. The participants were four principals, four departmental heads and four post level one teachers selected from the entire population of the OR Tambo Inland Rural Secondary Schools. A purposive sampling was employed to select participants. Purposive sampling according to Maree (2015), is a method used in special situations where the sampling is done with a specific purpose in mind. Six participants were drawn from high-performing schools and the other six from low-performing schools.

Data Analysis

In this paper, verbatim accounts of all the interviewed participants were recorded in an audio recorder. The recorded data were typed into a word processor computer software and produced as three hard copies. A manual method of analysis was used to transcribe the transcripts. The researchers read through all data to understand it. Information and phrases that appeared to be

similar were grouped together. From there coding was developed by giving data codes to differentiate one data from another. Similar data were then grouped into categories, after which broad themes were constructed and discussed. The discussion of themes was linked to the objectives of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance and approval to conduct research were obtained from the university to which the researchers are affiliated. Thereafter, permission to conduct research was sought from the Eastern Cape Provincial Department Education for access to public schools as well as from principals of the selected schools, permission was granted. Informed consent from principals, departmental heads and teachers was obtained.

Trustworthiness

Babbie (2008) defined trustworthiness as the extent to which findings provide a true value of data collected. This refers to how authentic, reliable and credible the information collected is. The researchers tried to maintain trustworthiness by strengthening dependability, credibility, transferability and confirmability. Researchers ensured that the data collected was authentic by conducting individual interviews and allowing member-checks to verify researchers' interpretations after the facts. They also conducted data audits to avoid possible biases or distortions.

Limitations

The study could not be carried out on a large scale because of limited time and hence researchers employed semi-structured interviews. The paper was mainly funded by the researchers themselves since they used their own monies to conduct the research. Insufficient funds led to the study being limited to a small-scale project.

RESULTS

Data Presentation

Data and research results were presented in accordance with the research questions. Ques-

tions that were asked during interviews aimed at sourcing information to address the main research question. The first question was, which leadership styles do principals frequently use to manage their schools to perform better? The second question was, what leadership styles do principals use to influence levels of learners' academic performance? The same questions were asked to all participants. These questions were asked to ascertain different leadership styles that principals of high performing rural secondary schools frequently use to raise learners' academic performance compared to those of low performing rural secondary schools. Responses from the participants indicated that principals from both high and low performing rural secondary schools used different types of leadership styles. Both questions were merged to construct the main theme of this paper.

Leadership Styles that are Frequently Used by Principals of High and Low Performing Rural Secondary Schools to Manage Their Schools to Perform Better and Raise Levels of Learners' Academic Performance

Data revealed that principals of both high and low performing rural secondary schools use a variety of leadership styles to manage their schools to perform better and raise levels of learners' academic performance. Responses from the participants showed that principals frequently use transformational, transactional, democratic, laissez faire and authoritative leadership style.

Transformational and Transactional Leadership

Data showed that principals were able to inspire both teachers and learners to work hard and in trying to improve their performance for better. This was supported by a verbatim account of Principal 2 from a high performing school, who said, "*I am using a transformational leadership style here because I want teachers to develop and become better every day. I also give praises where they are due immediately and encourage others to follow suit. I rebuke poor performance.*"

Principal 4 from a low performing school revealed, "*I like to use a transformational leadership style. This approach allows everyone with-*

in the school to have a say in the way the school progresses. It also allows group work and working in groups provides opportunities for us to learn from one another. I also praise good performers."

Data revealed that principals use transformational leadership. Teachers and learners of rural secondary schools can always draw inspiration from their principals who inspire them to take initiative and be leaders.

Laissez Faire Leadership

Participants revealed that principals also used laissez faire style of leadership. HOD 3 from low performing school revealed, *"Our principal seldom meets with the staff to assert his vision. He tells us what to do and never does follow-up and monitoring. We just push one another to do our work with little support from our principal. He is in his office most of the time and is not visible to the school."* HOD 1 from a high performing school stated, *"Our principal is an understanding person and is supportive of staff members who try new ideas even without running them through him as long as such a change will contribute to improving school performance."*

Participants from high performing schools were of the view that positive school climates contribute to quality teaching and learning, which in turn contribute to high levels of learners' academic performance.

Democratic Leadership

Data showed that principals of low and high performing schools frequently used a democratic leadership style in their approach. Principal 1 from a high performing school indicated, *"I frequently use a democratic style of leadership, because I lead them in such a way that there are no tensions and conflicts. I am transparent especially on financial matters of the school. Principal 3 from a low performing school said, "I use democratic leadership style (Xa ndinombono omtsha ndiqale ndiwuthengise kwi SMT). If I have a new idea, I first sell it to the School Management Team (SMT) and once they buy it, we take it to teachers so that we arrive at a collective decision."* Principals were open and transparent to stakeholders, and all were involved in decision making.

Autocratic Leadership

Data showed that principals of both high and low performing schools used autocratic leadership to influence levels of learners' academic performance. Principal 2 from a high performing school stated, *"I am a visionary leader who wants to see goals being achieved and when teachers and learners are not committed, I become strict on them and push them hard to work on goal attainment."* HOD 3 from low performing school mentioned, *"He is using more of total powers as the principal but, wants to project himself as a democratic principal. He does not consult with us. He just instructs us to perform our duties. He is leading from the front and does almost everything all by himself."* The participants viewed the school principals as using autocratic leadership and their power to push their subordinates to do their work.

DISCUSSION

Discussion of findings were dealt with in accordance with the presented data. Findings were arrived at after data was interpreted and analysed in line with the research questions. Themes that emerged were discussed in reference to literature.

Leadership Styles that are Frequently Used by Principals of High and Low Performing Rural Secondary Schools to Manage Their Schools to Perform Better and Raise Levels of Learners' Academic Performance

Researchers looked at the leadership styles of both successful and unsuccessful rural secondary schools. Participants shared their analyses and opinions of the common leadership styles used in their schools. They were asked to reflect on their own leadership styles. According to the research findings, principals of both high- and low-performing schools employ various leadership styles to improve learners' academic achievement. It was evident that each principal had a situational leadership style, varying their approaches depending on the circumstances. Bush (2013) corroborates this by asserting that not all situations and periods call for a certain leadership style to be used.

It was further revealed that principals from both high and low performing schools frequently used democratic, laissez faire, autocratic, transformational and transactional leadership styles to manage their schools to perform better and to raise levels of learners' academic performance. This finding is consistent with Bush (2013) who asserts that successful leaders make use of a mix of leadership styles and are responsive to contexts such as school goals, school organisational structure and culture. This is in line with Allie and Sosibo (2017) who assert that a particular leadership style of a principal sets the tone of the school as well as the level of professionalism, and it is considered a precondition for an effective school.

Transformational Leadership Style of Principals

It was revealed that principals as transformational leaders keep staff and learners motivated in schools by using some form of verbal praises and material rewards for good performance. Cherry (2018) corroborates this finding by stating that when employees are successful, they are rewarded. These results revealed that principals from high performing rural secondary schools were able to use certain strategies, like verbal praises and material rewards, to keep learners and teachers motivated and willing to work compared to principals from low performing schools who seldom praised staff for good work. This finding is consistent with Arokiasamy (2017) who maintains that principals who demonstrate transformational leadership practices expect behaviours that demonstrate excellence, quality and high performance on the part of the staff.

Transactional Leadership Style of Principals

Principals from both high and low performing rural secondary schools used transactional leadership to motivate teachers and learners to be productive in schools. This finding is consistent with Cherry (2018) who stated that when employees are successful, they are rewarded and when they fail, they are reprimanded or punished. The paper revealed that principals of high performing schools also rebuked poor performance compared with those of low performing who appeared to be scared to speak strongly against underperformance. This is corroborated by Lamb (2013) who asserts that principals, as transactional leaders,

base their leadership on the notion that a leader's job is to create structures that make it abundantly clear what is expected of followers and the consequences (rewards and punishments) associated with meeting or not meeting expectations. Khan et al. (2020) support this finding in that transactional leadership is goal oriented.

Laissez Faire Leadership Style of Principals

The findings revealed that principals of low performing schools gave direction on what should be done but did not monitor teachers' work while principals of high performing schools were understanding and allowed teachers to make decisions that would improve general school performance. Van der Westhuizen (2011) supports this by arguing that the leader guides staff by appealing to personal integrity. The finding is supported by Emmanuel and Ronke (2013) who stated that laissez faire leaders only supply materials and ideas to their followers and only participate whenever the need arises. This is corroborated by Lockwood (2021) who asserts that under laissez faire leadership, there is no close monitoring by management and followers are free to explore and reach some important decisions.

Democratic Leadership Style of Principals

It was revealed that rural secondary school principals involved other stakeholders in decision making processes. This finding is in line with Emmanuel and Ronke (2014) who assert that a democratic leadership provides a situation where all policies are derived from group decisions. This is corroborated by Sobekwa (2017) who emphasised that decisions and resolutions arrived at should be a product of consultation and engagements that take place between the leader and followers. It became clear that principals of high performing rural secondary schools were open to and communicated effectively with their subordinates compared to principals of low performing rural secondary schools who were not open to their teachers.

Authoritative Leadership Style of Principals

Results showed that principals did not always consult when it came to decision making. This is consistent with Gosnos and Gallo's (2013) contention that some characteristics of autocratic

leadership include little to no input from group members, leaders making all of the decisions, group leaders dictating all of the work methods, and group members are rarely trusted with important tasks or decisions. It was revealed that principals from high performing rural secondary schools would exercise strict measures towards teachers and learners in their efforts to improve learners' academic performance. This finding is in line with Cherry (2018) who asserts that when there are high-volumes of production needed on a daily basis and there is limited time in which to make a decision, autocracy can be used. Principal from low performing schools was bossing people around. Cherry (2015) supports this finding and stated that bossing people around has no place in a leader's repertoire.

CONCLUSION

It was indicated in the introduction that there had been general underperformance in rural secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. Literature confirmed that underperformance in South African schools is dominant in rural areas. However, not every rural secondary school underperforms. Some rural secondary school principals enhance both teacher and learner performance through proper leadership style. The objective of the paper was to investigate leadership styles that are frequently used by rural secondary school principals with high levels of learners' academic performance compared with those with low levels. It was revealed that principals from high and low performing schools were using a variety of leadership styles to manage their schools better and to raise levels of learners' academic performance. It was found that all the principals were using a situational leadership style. They vary their leadership styles from transformational, transactional, democratic, distributed, autocratic and laissez faire due to contextual factors. The paper showed that principals with high levels of learners' academic performance were vigilant and had a strong character in performing their leadership and management roles compared to principals with low levels of learners' academic performance who seemed to be weak in character and always lead and manage their schools by consensus because they are scared to take bold decisions. They appeared to have ceded too much of their authority

to teachers. Literature demonstrates that a school principal's leadership style has a significant impact on whether it succeeds or fails.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking at what the findings revealed, the authors recommend that the Department of Education must capacitate rural secondary school principals, through workshops, on the advantages and disadvantages of different leadership styles, leadership skills necessary for school effectiveness, and strong character building. This can help principals to insist on quality performance and enforce school rules. The researchers further recommend that only people of strong character should be appointed to the position of school principal by the Department of Basic Education. The candidate must be tried and tested over a twelve-month probation period. Even though this may not be the measure for effective quality school leadership, it may serve as the basis for consideration for a permanent appointment. They must demonstrate strong character during the probation period to get a permanent appointment.

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