

Perspectives on the Functioning of an Effective School Attended by Learners from Rural School

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ABSTRACT Since the attainment of democracy in 1994, South Africa has been committed to effectively addressing the problems of poverty and the gross inequality evident in most aspects of South African society, especially in education. This study explores the functioning of an effective school attended by learners from disadvantaged communities. Most schools that are attended by learners from disadvantaged communities have not performed well, especially in their Matriculation examinations. Against these great odds some schools attended by learners from disadvantaged communities have functioned effectively and achieved remarkable results, and from these a particular school was chosen. This is a school attended by learners from disadvantaged communities. It has maintained a Matriculation pass rate of 100%, since 1979 to date. Research findings were compared with the relevant literature to identify existing information and the possible differences. The findings were then recorded. The study also showed that an effective functioning of a school attended by learners from disadvantaged communities can be enhanced if schools focus on life skills education.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a long history of apartheid and other forms of unfair discrimination in education. Since 1994 when South Africa gained independence, there have been political changes that had implications for almost every sphere of society. This is especially true for education. There can be few, if any, areas of education that have been left untouched by the drive to overcome the legacy of apartheid since 1994. And yet there is a powerful perception that not much has changed and that things may even have become worse (Chisholm 2004:201). The legacy of apartheid left major inequalities between White and Black and urban and rural areas and departments of education. Despite this some of the schools in disadvantaged communities have maintained a high level of performance evidenced by their attainment of a 100% pass rate in the Matriculation examinations. Inkamana High School is one such school. It has maintained a Matriculation pass rate of 100% since 1979 to date. This study will focus on perspectives on the functioning of Inkamana High School.

Orientation, Motivation and Statement of the Problem

The communities within which schools are located strongly influence their development and

vice versa. The norms and values of the communities are reflected in the school and those of the school are reflected in the community. In disadvantaged communities there is a high incidence of job and income loss and the economic stagnation of the working poor, poverty among young families, single mothers and homelessness. These trends are highly devastating to learners (Donald et al. 2002: 160).

Economic loss brings about changes in parental attitude, disposition and behaviour. Unemployed parents are more dissatisfied with themselves and their lives. They feel victimised and are more anxious, depressed and hostile. These changes strain family relationships and exercise a negative impact on the success of children at school. Dysfunctional families do not provide sustenance, nurturance, support and intimacy to their children (McWhirter et al. 1998: 22).

Hillman (1996), in the British National Commission on Education, maintains that disadvantage in communities both limits access to educational opportunities and reduces the ability of children to benefit from schooling. Unemployment or low income reduces or precludes money being spent by families on learning resources such as books or learning opportunities in the form of excursions. In this regard Monstert (1998: 33) feels that children from middle class families as opposed to those from poor families have more opportunities of undertaking trips and

excursions that provide them with broadening experiences. They also have much easier access to books and magazines.

Mayekiso (1989: 65) further acknowledges the negative influence of poverty on school achievement by stating that under-nourishment and overcrowding are common elements of poor home environment. It is further maintained that overcrowding at home may result in worry, fear, anxiety, and these may lead to poor achievement. Monstert (1998: 33) on the other hand observes that the educational level of parents does play a critical role in the educational process and in raising educational accomplishments of their children.

Schools in disadvantaged communities are often poorly served by the education system in South Africa. In these schools there is a high rate of children dropping out. McMillen et al. (1996) believe that students who drop out of school are likely to be those who are unmotivated by their performance; who have had problems with either the school authorities, the police, or both; who skip classes or are often absent; who have to work to supplement the family income; who fall pregnant or get married; who have drug or alcohol problems; or those who have fallen two or more years behind grade levels. Molebatsi (1992: 2) notes from the responses to a questionnaire sent to grade 12 students regarding the unsatisfactory performance that insufficient facilities such as libraries, classrooms, textbooks and laboratories are major factors. In addition the down-spiralling is enhanced by drug and alcohol abuse.

This is the case with Inkamana High School, which is one of many poor schools with moderate fees that stand alongside more affluent schools. This school is partially subsidised by the government and the fees amounted to less than R60.00 a month per student in the year 2004. The school is based in Vryheid in rural KwaZulu-Natal and has achieved a matriculation pass rate of 100% every year since 1979 (Mkhize 2005). It is against this background that the school is seen as effective. It is thus necessary to find out from the people involved in the school how this school manages to be so successful. The answer to this question can serve as a framework that will assist schools that are less successful.

METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

To achieve the goal of documenting the perspectives of learners, teachers, school management team, parents of learners and members of the community a qualitative investigation on the functioning of an effective school attended by learners from a disadvantaged community has been undertaken. This method proved to be more appropriate to the aims of this study since it involved gaining an understanding of a particular phenomenon in question, with emphasis on innovative initiatives. This method of research elicited participants' accounts of meaning, experience or perceptions. It produced descriptive data in the participants' own written or spoken words. It thus involved identifying participants' beliefs and values that underlined the phenomenon (Leedy and Ormrod 2001: 147; Neuman 2003: 142).

Semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews with schedules were conducted to gather information required to meet the research aims. These interviews were conducted with learners, teachers, school management team (comprising the principal and deputy principal), parents of learners and the community.

Paradigmatic Perspective

Paradigm

The word *paradigm* comes from Greek and can refer to a model, theory, perception, assumption, or frame of reference (Covey 1998: 23). It is also found to refer in a more general sense to the way individuals view the world in terms of their perception, understanding and interpretation of it and their experiences in the world (Kirsten 2001: 11). This also has a direct bearing on the planning, execution and findings of research.

The researchers personal anthropology was also of importance in this study, especially because of the qualitative research component. In this qualitative component of the study, the researcher could be seen as a primary instrument (for the gathering and analysis of data). As such the researchers' paradigm, bias, assumptions, preconceptions and values needed to be reflected explicitly in qualitative research. This would add to the consistency of the research and serve to

identify potential dangers pertaining to the validity of conclusions made (Maxwell 1996: 26).

The researchers are higher education academics with the background in both Mathematics and Accounting in teacher training. The two researchers did have the opportunity to observe poor performance by most of the high schools in the Eastern Cape Province, especially in the rural areas, the researcher felt it important to find out what other schools attended by learners from disadvantaged communities, such as Inkamana High School did to achieve such good results. Once aspects that contributed had been identified, conclusions and suggestions to promote effectiveness in schools attended by learners from disadvantaged communities would be possible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Category: Factors Relating to Maintenance of Discipline and Order

The disciplinary system of Inkamana High School works in a quiet and understated way but it is fairly effective. The learners know that infringement of the rules for behaviour and appearance will be systematically followed up and that this follow-up activity will involve their parents or guardians. Both parents and learners know that if they do not cooperate with the school in such matters it may lead to disciplinary measures of different kinds. In most cases these measures are enabled by a system of early identification and intervention. Factors such as the role of religion, involvement of senior learners and prefects, rules, regulations, and punishment seem to play an important part in the maintenance of discipline and order (Table1).

Role of Religion

Religion seems to play an important part in the moral development at both individual and school levels. Religion is about learners valuing themselves and raising their self-esteem and staff valuing learners as people and forming healthy relationships with them.

Learners' Responses

(10L1): 'I mean without God you wouldn't be here which is another big influence we have here at school.'

Table 1: Factors relating to good maintenance of discipline and order

Category	Factors relating to good maintenance of discipline and order	Learners' responses N=15	Management staff and parents N=10
Sub-category	Role of religion	8	6
	Involvement of senior learners and prefects	0	5
	The impact of rules, regulations and punishment	3	4

(10L4): 'You see that in almost every room in this campus there is a crucifix so we also believe that God loves us. Nothing can be possible without God's hand.'

(11L3): 'The reason I'm here is because my grandmother was looking for a school like which was Catholic. She wanted to make sure that when I go to school I go to Catholic school and not only for academic but also as a person.'

(11L2): 'Here they teach you to pray and to work hard.'

(12L4): 'He [my father] said I should come here knowing it's a good school religiously and academically.'

Teachers' Responses

(ET1): 'I believe God is the person who is running everything.'

Parents' Responses

(Prt1): 'The spiritual guidance with the church is very enriching ... you are taught to discipline yourself.'

Involvement of Senior Learners and Prefects

Senior learners take an active part in the running of the school not only by being asked to undertake certain tasks but also by using their own initiative. This involvement of senior learners assists in maintaining discipline and order, and gives them a sense of responsibility and also reduces the likelihood of the younger learners being intimidated or bullied in the absence of teachers.

Grade 12 Examination Results

According to Van der Berg (2005) the only widely available measure of school outcomes in South Africa remains the results of final matric exams, and that weak matriculation performance is particularly severe in the poorest provinces, which benefited most from resource increases after the political transition.

In the first instance it is clear that the outcome variable, the mean grade 12 pass rate at a school, is significantly lower in former African and Coloured and Indian schools, relative to previously White. The pass rate in the latter schools, at 95% is close to double that of African schools (Bhorat and Oosthuizen 2006).

Van der Berg (2005), in agreeing with Bhorat and Oosthuizen (2006), further notes that the standard deviation of the pass rate increases further down the socio-economic ladder, indicating a more varied performance in poor schools, and particularly those that are predominantly black. Whilst pass rates in more affluent schools were almost uniformly high – amongst mainly White schools the lowest recorded pass rate was 68%-, predominantly Black schools performed abysmally. Most such schools had pass rates in the range of 20 – 60% and ten per cent had even worse pass rates. In contrast only 3 out of 179 mainly White schools had pass rates below 80%. Resources do matter in this regard, but differentials in efficiency among poor schools may be more important than in more affluent schools.

Contrary to the above, findings have shown that, Inkamana High School, a school attended by learners from disadvantaged communities has obtained 100% pass rate since 1979 to date.

Identifications Aspects by Participants for Improvements

The participants in the study identified the following aspects of their school as those aspects that need some attention: Infrastructure; activities; and nutrition.

Infrastructure

The general school organisation regarding infrastructure, that is, the school buildings and grounds is, according to Piek (1986:154), concerned with the following: the dimensions, gen-

eral appearance and furniture of the teaching leaders (principal, deputy principal, departmental heads) offices, the classrooms, the laboratories, library, assembly hall, school and sports premises, school grounds, storerooms and if the school has hostels, the kitchen, dormitories, ablution and dining facilities.

“Disadvantaged” is a relative term - one must be disadvantaged with respect to some condition that could be called advantaged (Cowles 1967). The term “disadvantage”, according to Mortimore and Blackstone (1982:8), is defined as the unfavourable conditions or circumstances, detriment or prejudice. It refers to social and material factors such as income, unemployment, housing, health, and environmental conditions. Some schools serve learners from disadvantaged communities and as such are not expected to perform as well as their counterparts that serve learners from more affluent communities.

The reality, though, is that there are schools that serve learners from disadvantaged communities that are effective and successful. These schools have, over the years, performed consistently well despite their disadvantage. One such school is Inkamana High School. In the light of the above it was deemed imperative to investigate what the teachers, learners, parents of learners in the school, and the members of the community contribute to the effectiveness and success of the school to.

CONCLUSION

The study was aimed at answering the following question: What are the perspectives of the learners, teachers, school management, parents and community on the functioning of an effective school attended by learners from disadvantaged communities?

The concept of school effectiveness seems to have been embraced by most research participants. The participants attributed the effectiveness of the school to a number of factors such as: The school’s focus on life skills education, the school’s ability to provide a safe and supportive atmosphere and physical environment, factors relating to the maintenance of discipline and order, dedication in teaching and learning, and the achievements and successes of the school.

The life skills that the school mainly focuses on include discipline, respect, ability to cope,

cleanliness and a sense of identity. Findings reveal that having disciplined learners in a school is a milestone to its effectiveness. Respect for self, others, and property leads to healthy relationships between teachers and learners, which in turn leads to effectiveness of a school. It is also important to prepare learners to be able to cope with life after Matriculation, such as in tertiary institutions, by encouraging independence. Cleanliness of individuals and the surroundings enhance self-confidence and self-esteem in learners. Cleanliness can also be promoted by insistence by staff and administration upon standards of personal appearance such as wearing of proper school uniform, and courtesy and politeness. Identities of learners are influenced not only by their immediate context but also by the relationships between learners and interests, likes and dislikes of the learners themselves.

A school's ability to provide a safe and supportive atmosphere and physical environment is also an important factor in the effectiveness of a school. A clean and attractive working environment is conducive to learning and teaching, hence would certainly contribute to the effectiveness of a school. The aspect of supportive atmosphere is supported by the ethos of caring, trusting, democratic and spiritually motivated relationships amongst teachers, learners and between teachers and learners, structural safety provided by the boarding facility, feelings of empathy towards each other, and the staff involvement in the lives of learners.

There are various methods that may be used to maintain discipline and order in a school. The study has shown that religion plays an important role in the maintenance of discipline and order. It is also important to involve senior learners in the administration of a school. Giving learners positions of responsibility is an extremely effective way of conveying trust in their abilities and setting standards of mature behaviour. This should, however, be done with caution so as to still promote servant leadership. Rules, regulations and punishment make sure that learners who do not abide by such stipulated rules and regulations are dealt with in a manner that is fair and consistent. It should, however, be made clear that such rules and regulations are basically meant to govern, control, and direct the behaviour of teachers and learners.

The study has also shown that quality of teaching and learning is enhanced by dedication of both teachers and learners to their different responsibilities. Quality staff implies teachers who demonstrate high levels of professional conscientiousness and commitment to the academic interests and well-being of learners. The concept of quality, commitment and dedication should extend beyond teachers to include all learners within a school.

A contributory factor in the effectiveness of a school is also found to be its academic achievements and successes. In striving to maintain their set standards, the morale of both teachers and learners is boosted. The pride of every school lies in seeing its products do well in life, such as occupying key positions in society and also individual successes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the research findings and literature control:

- Similar research can be undertaken to find out why things happen the way they do in other effective schools with learners from disadvantaged communities so as to provide guidelines to help dysfunctional schools.
- There is a definite need for more support to be provided to schools in disadvantaged communities. Provincial education departments should provide more staff, funds, infrastructure (especially libraries and laboratories) and staff development programmes to these schools.
- Parents and the community as a whole should be encouraged to be more involved with school activities, so that schools will be better supported and less opposed.
- For the promotion of good health to its learners schools should strive to provide learners with a balanced diet as well as relevant information.
- Life skills education should be part of the curriculum that extends from grade R throughout high school.

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