

In search of a Liberating Practice

Leadership, Teacher Commitment and the Struggle for Effective Schools in South Africa

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Abstract— This presentation is adapted from recent unpublished research findings of a study conducted in six Gauteng schools. There is growing research currently which focuses on the reasons why some schools fail to attain effective teaching and learning. In tandem with this, there have been a number of reasons as to why some schools are dysfunctional and not able to perform as expected by stakeholders. It is a critical commonplace that school leadership and management inefficiency leads to underperformance and paralysis of the school as an organisation. Yet, arguably, even with an able visionary team at the helm, schools will not perform well without the effective commitment of the teaching staff. This conceptual paper explicates teacher commitment within the commitment of South Africa. It argues that commitment should be the basis of any successful school. Among the themes explored are political ethic, school culture, power dynamics and servant leadership.

Keywords – *effectiveness; professional development; instructional leadership; school culture; school climate.*

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In a press statement in October 2012, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) condemned teachers who were behaving unprofessionally. This union emphasised that the union was committed to the quality learning and teaching campaign, that teachers should adhere to the code of conduct at all times [1]. In addition to this, the minister of Public Service, Lindiwe Sisulu this past week unveiled ambitious plans to fix the civil service. Among her pronouncements are the plans to reintroduce inspectors in schools, enforce a dress code for teachers as well as biometric fingerprint system to monitor teachers' working hours [2]. These are all attempts to improve teaching and learning in schools. Another South African teachers union, the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa [3] has always proclaimed to have held the view that teachers are the most important factor in achieving quality teaching in schools [3]. Of course these proclamations are not new to society which expects much from teachers. Many stakeholders maintain that when parents drop their children in schools, the teachers should do the rest. Furthermore, all parents irrespective of their socio-economic status want good education for their children. All education role-players in society expect functioning schools, functioning schools are schools where teachers teach and children learn.

The reality on the ground though is different, especially in those schools that serve indigent families. Four years ago one

of the Sunday newspapers looked for South Africa's top 100 schools. The list was devoid of township, rural and farm schools. Quality learning and teaching appears to be absent in the latter. The government has been trying although it seems to be failing. On the 3rd of June 2009, President Zuma stated that, "Education will be a key priority for the next five years. We want our teachers, learners and parents to work together with government to turn our schools into thriving centres of excellence". Five years after this declaration though, there are still thousands of underperforming schools in South Africa. There are several role-players that can make change in education; this includes administrators, politicians, learners and community. My lecture this evening though will focus on teachers and their commitment. Teachers and schools require commitment if they are to deliver emancipatory pedagogy. Many school leaders also struggle to lead schools where effective organisational values are adhered to. Even the best of leadership styles will be futile without teacher commitment. School leaders who try collective efficacy will also fail when teachers are directionless and display no commitment to school goals. In this talk I argue that that there are pertinent aspects necessary in creating efficacious teachers. I also show the broader goal of having educators who are committed to their practice. It is possible, effective principals can develop committed teachers. Devoted teachers can mould punctilious school leaders.

II. TEACHERS AND COMMITMENT

Croswell and Elliott [4] point out that teacher commitment is identified as one of the most critical factors for the future success of education and schools. Arguably, many failing schools have low pass rate because among other things, there is no commitment among teachers. Change initiatives will fail if teachers are not dedicated to what they are doing in schools. Day [5] also argues that teaching is a demanding profession where teachers need to maintain their personal commitment to the job if they are to sustain their enthusiasm. Graham [6] contends that teacher commitment is a key factor that influences teaching-learning process. Various authors have argued that there are factors that affect teacher commitment. Firestone and Pennell [7] list six key factors that affect teacher commitment and these are; teacher autonomy, efficacy, participation, feedback, collaboration, learning opportunities and resources.

Many dysfunctional schools might be failing because teachers have lost the commitment to their professions. Milner

and Khoza [8] contend that aspects such as teacher stress, school climate are pertinent when one looks at teacher commitment. Erawan [9] draws a close relationship between teacher efficacy and teacher commitment. Furthermore, [9] argues that self-efficacious teachers will be more likely to plan appropriate activities, persist with learners who are experiencing difficulties and try and find appropriate teaching material. When the post-apartheid system was introduced in South Africa some critics argued that it would fail without teacher commitment and teacher involvement. Moreover, when the learners' performance wanes, it is likely for teachers to highlight various reasons for low performance and failing schools. Parents who do not cooperate, children who are not goal-focused, under-resourced schools and principals who have no vision are among reasons cited for teacher non-performance. Conscientious and committed teachers will strive for better performance in these areas. It should be clear though that apart from learner results. School performance is influenced by a number of things; the families' socio-economic status, parental involvement, resources are among these. Yet when people talk about reasons why schools fail, they overlook aspects such as commitment. It would be naive to look at minimal resources as the main problem, but it would be equally irresponsible to perceive teachers as the only cause of under-performance. However, [10] point out that teacher commitment is among the critical factors in the success and future of education. Throughout a teacher's life, commitment is influenced by various aspects.

Commitment is what needs to come from a team. As organisations become more dynamic they would require committed teams to function. Hulpia et al. [11] point out that leadership has become more than a role; it is a social process that requires leadership from team members as well as from the team leader. Committed teams will remove the role of the principal as sole leader. Many authors have since argued for distributed leadership as an aspect that can enhance commitment of the organisation. Harris [12] writes about the benefits of distributed leadership by highlighting that it has positive effects on teachers' self efficacy, morale which can have an impact to teacher commitment. One of the schools I visited for the ACE research in the province of KwaZulu-Natal had a very effective principal who was always hands on. However, he had a tendency to kill teacher morale and commitment by refusing to give other teachers a chance to lead; there was less delegation. One teacher raised his concerns when he consented how the principal has built the poor school through a number of creative projects. However, he felt that teachers needed to be trusted more and be given more duties. Bush and Glover [13] also cite Harris and Leithwood who both advocate distributed leadership as an alternative to top-down leadership models. Furthermore, [13] argue that participative leadership may sometimes be conceptualised as distributed as organisations ensure that collaborative decision-making are preferred to single person decision-making.

Mart [14] maintains that there is a need for teachers to be passionate about teaching if they are to be committed to the school and the learning by students. [14] cites Fried who explains the following as strong connection between passionate teaching and quality student learning:

1. If students know that teachers get immersed in their subjects and sets high standards for students, they take their studies more seriously. At this point, teaching ceases to be a job done by force, and turns into an inspiration for students;
2. There is little chance of building a relationship based on respect and trust between teacher and student unless a collaborative learning environment and willingness to take risks are not created; and
3. Students will not have motivation to learn as long as they do not have clear idea of how to apply things they have learnt to their own lives.

Teachers who believe in their jobs and committed in instilling change will engender these values. The importance of commitment was also found crucial in a study by [13]. Linked to this was the aspect of school culture.

III. SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND POWER DYNAMICS

Today many schools experience power wrangles that usually shake the position of the school leadership. The unions in various provinces and various schools bring another dimension to schools. Unions should not be seen as posing threats to school leadership; the goals should be the same. Ethical leaders should also be able to ensure that confrontational relationships are avoided between unions and school management teams. No schools will have committed teachers when no common vision is shared. Adversarial relationships between school managers and union members do not build schools. Powerful teacher unions are necessary for they affect the quality in their schools positively. Therefore, a need for a new militancy for effective education needs to surface and the struggle should be to better each child's future. Unions that are propelled by teacher professionalism and principals who are ethical in their approach will build effective schools with other role players. Effective teacher unions can help "shock" schools into becoming more effective organisations and offer teachers a greater sense of professionalism and dignity [16]. School managers should begin formalising the alliance and collaboration between them and their union site committees. Schools that have clear policies will minimize confrontational relationships. Effective school management and strong unions can boost school achievement as they entrench professionalism. All schools must be based on this collaboration for the teachers' interests and the educational needs of the learners should not be viewed as incompatible, but in fact, intertwined [16].

IV. POLITICAL ETHIC – SACRIFICING FOR SOCIETY

A liberating practice and school with committed teachers can be attained when among others we have teachers who are politically conscious. Usually teachers are cautioned to stay out of politics. However, education is always a political act purported by governments. Governments introduce education that would redeem society from a number of ills. In fact so many critics have defined the goals of education. DeLany [17] argued that schools are continually scrambling for order in a rather disorderly world. DeLany also aptly referred to schools as "organised anarchies" because (among others) while

providing opportunities for different choices of schools, educational changes open up the possibility of institutionalising collective turbulence. Societal expectations further enhance the turbulence in schools. Whenever there are problems be they drug abuse, morality, the decline of economy or joblessness, it is frequently schools that are blamed for these societal ills. Teachers cannot avoid these pressures. Labaree [18] raised an argument that schools occupy an awkward position at the intersection between what people hope society will become and what they think it really is, between political ideals and economic realities. Teachers will hardly avoid the ambience of politics in their schools. Conscientious teachers will adhere to the country's goals and objectives, the Department of Education's mandate and government's vision to attain better schools.

Teachers need to follow a critical political consciousness; to consciously support district officials and their principals. Teaching is a continuous community projects and teachers can only be committed when they know that they are not isolated professionals in schools.

Conscientious and critical educators will work with many other role-players because the work of educators includes political role-players. Our politics inform our theoretical orientation. Moen [19] contends that, "We must be ethically state our own theoretical orientation and ideological bases, and explain that the readings we choose to expose the students to reflect our own personal and professional interests and concerns". Commitment needs the acceptance of the political nature of education as well as understanding our own political ideals. Moen [19] aptly sketches the role of teachers as critically engaged educators. She avers:

Teachers need to see themselves as, in Gramsci's phrase, "organic intellectuals" working with others for social justice. Teachers, as organic intellectuals, can exercise forms of intellectual and pedagogical practice that attempt to insert teaching and learning directly into the political sphere by arguing that schooling represent both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations.

We need more teachers who are critical political thinkers. School leaders would have fewer challenges if more of their teachers begin to see their role in social transformation by utilising the critical political eye. Today's teachers tend to have a narrow view of society, yet they need to see the bigger of their potential role in bringing about social transformation. Politics are an aspect that can enhance the teachers' adoption of a vision for a better society. It is only a pity that teachers and politics are seen within the view of unions disrupting classes or teachers openly serving their political interests in execution of their duties. The society though wants teachers with a political conscience and critical acumen who will strive to serve the poor families as well. We need a teaching corps that will have the commitment and political consciousness and conscience to lessen the ills of society in various ways possible. School principals need teachers who will all be teacher leaders who serve their communities as social transformers who will be servant leaders.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have tried to look at the various important roles that committed staff can play in their schools. Even the best of school principals and other school leaders cannot function well with teachers who are reticent and indolent. Moreover, among the agendas of the government is to close the gap between the poor and the affluent. Our schools still show we have two systems for both groups. If the majority of township school, rural schools and farm school teachers (all serving the majority of poor families) do not deliver, poor children will soon realise that education cannot redeem them from destitution and indigence. Wise school leaders will engender a sense of purpose among staff members as she promotes the adoption of a working vision. The teachers or staff propelled by a moral purpose and political will desire to build hope for thousands of poor families in our country. Textbooks or other related resources are very good for our schools but all these cannot replace the crucial role played by educators. However, as portrayed here, our schools are impotent and worthless for our children who rummage for a better future. All good reforms are toothless when teachers on the implementation end are apathetic. The country needs passionate and committed teachers who know their objective. Their passion should always goad them to realise the dreams of many families. Their presence should warm hopeful learners. The endeavours of hard working school leaders are also hollow without the stanchion of goal-directed teachers. As teachers we need to see the bigger picture and we owe it to the generations to come.

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