

Chapter 12

Proposing a Leadership Model to Improve Underachieving Schools' Performance in Deprived Communities: A Case Study in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the findings from a case study that explored how a South African primary school in a challenging context had improved and raised students' academic performance. It shows how the principal's leadership in collaboration with all role players was able to influence the school's ability to improve and sustain its improvement. The study, however, argues that a school facing challenging contexts requires appropriate differentiated strategies to ensure school improvement. It concludes by proposing a model in which schools in challenging contexts can improve student performance. This, however, implies that such schools need to be committed to change and identify "tailor-made" strategies to ensure improved performance.

INTRODUCTION

The focus on improving low performing schools globally has in recent years received considerable attention (Duke, 2014; Gillett, Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2016; Jarchow, 2016; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Riveros, Verret & Wei, 2016; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Contemporary studies on improving schools in disadvantaged contexts show how external factors that are not usually present in normal school contexts adversely impact their ability to perform satisfactorily (Geier, 2016; Harris, 2010). Moreover, school leaders are increasingly becoming accountable for improving student performance (Marsh, 2012; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011).

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Although effective leadership in low performing schools is considered to be one of the major forces for ensuing school success and student performance (Bouchamma, 2012; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Harris, 2010; Marsh, 2012; Thielman, 2012), the challenges facing this prospective resource for improving schools have become more complex (Gillett, Clarke, O'Donoghue, 2016; Marsh, Waniganayake & Gibson, 2014). Moreover, Jarchow (2016) believes that effective school leadership is a tough proposition even for the most competent leaders, yet it is desperately required to support student performance in the most challenging schools in America. As such, Tulowitzki (2013) asserts that an ever-shifting environment of opportunities and challenges in schools makes leadership as a catalyst for change to improve schools very complex. Nevertheless, Benghu and Myende (2016) and Chikoko, Naicker and Mthiyane (2015) state that school leadership is critical for South African dysfunctional schools. Jarchow (2016) therefore suggests that more research is required that involves the strategies leadership takes in the reculturing process to fill the knowledge gap between research and practices in schools that succeeded to raise their academic performance.

The vast majority of schools in South Africa have been dysfunctional after the apartheid regime (Republic of South Africa, 2015). The Minister of Basic Education admitted that the South African schools are in a "state of crisis" (Nkosi, 2016, n.p.). According to Mbokazi (2015), numerous township schools in South Africa face severe levels of socio-economic poverty that are compounded by external factors that negatively impact their competence to function successfully. Previous studies in challenging contexts in South Africa revealed the following: Moorosi and Bantwini (2016) focused on how leadership styles in school districts in the Eastern Cape supported school improvement; Naicker, Chikoko and Mthiyane (2013) explored the instructional leadership practices of school principals in high performing schools within challenging contexts; Naicker, Grant and Pillay (2016) investigated leadership networks and the daily practices of school leaders within well functioned, disadvantaged schools; Benghua and Myende (2016) shared the stories of five principals who, despite contextual deprivations, succeeded to cope with and adapt to policy changes in South Africa; while Mbokazi (2015) focused on successful principals in urban township schools by paying attention to the interplay of four discernible dimensions of leadership strategies that signified the work of successful principals.

Little is known of how school leadership in a disadvantaged South African context succeeded to turn the school around from a once poor performing school to a high performing school under the leadership of the same principal. A better understanding of appropriate leadership in such a challenging context will provide a deeper understanding of leadership processes and its impact on the functioning of schools (Mbokazi, 2015). In this regard, Chikoko et al., (2015, pp. 452) state that such "knowledge is needed in South Africa's struggle to transform the many dysfunctional schools into learning organisations".

The research question that guided this study is: What leadership model can be proposed to improve the academic performance of students in a once underperforming South Africa within a disadvantaged context under the reign of the same principal? The following guiding questions also informed the initial data collection: What were the particular challenges school leadership encountered in their particular school context? What strategies did the school leadership employ to change the school's previous underperforming status? This study was deemed valuable of investigating for two main reasons. First, studies pertaining to leadership in South African schools have not sufficiently focused on underperforming schools in challenging situations that succeeded to improve their student results in South Africa. Secondly, the expanding accountability and autonomy of schools have become critical features of the

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