

Influences of Principal Traits on Learner Performance in Disadvantaged Schools

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Abstract

An overwhelmingly large number of schools in our current democratic dispensation, characterised as it is by social and economic development difficulties classified as disadvantaged. Learners from disadvantaged schools are socioeconomically challenged and perform poorly in the national senior certificate examination than learners from the advantaged socioeconomic background. This study examined the role of principals as agents of change to improve teaching and learning in order to reduce the poor performance of learners in disadvantaged schools. Four principals from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas were selected, through purposive sampling, to respond to the questionnaires and scheduled interviews. The collected data was analysed through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The results revealed that low-performing disadvantaged schools lack internal capacity as a result of lack of leadership capacity in those schools. Most of the principals do not have further qualifications and the experience and were not prepared nor supported to help the schools. The study recommends appointing authorities to appoint quality principals to provide quality leadership to improve the performance of learners. The prerequisites for appointment should include a management qualification and progressive teaching experience from post level one through to the position of deputy principal without a step jump. The study further recommends support for school principals through training and in some instances replacing the ineffective principals with dynamic and effective leaders so as to strengthen and support school leadership.

Keywords: principals, performance, disadvantaged schools, socioeconomic, learners.

Introduction

In South Africa today, learners at schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, perform less well in the national senior certificate examination than those at other schools (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2021). It can thus be stated that learners from a more disadvantaged socioeconomic background perform more poorly than those from a more advantaged socioeconomic background (Tan, Dimmock & Walker 2021). Poorer performance by learners from a disadvantaged background in both national and international ratings contests can be attributable to factors such as lack of systemic support and flexibility and the limited or ineffective use of resources, including staff, which are indicative of inadequate school leadership (Tan *et al.* 2021).

Mothata (2000:46) defines a disadvantaged school in the South African context as ‘a school suffering from severe economic and social disadvantage, often as a result of the previous discriminatory laws in education’. Disadvantaged schools are characterised by dilapidated and poorly constructed buildings, a lack of facilities and equipment, high dropout and absenteeism rates, and low morale among learners, staff and parents. Most are located in the rural areas and under-resourced townships of the former homelands.

In the national senior certificate examination written in 2021, the poorest performances were recorded for the provinces of Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. These two provinces are among the poorest and most socioeconomically disadvantaged provinces in the country (STATS SA (Statistics South Africa) 2021). Some schools in these provinces scored below 30% during the national senior certificate examination (DBE 2021). This low level of performance tends to mirror the inequalities between the more and less advantaged socioeconomic areas in South Africa. Even though a correlation between learner performance and socioeconomic background is not exclusive to South Africa, the situation in the country is exacerbated by the legacy of educational policies based on segregation as instituted by the apartheid government. Despite the socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by these learners as the legacy of segregation, when factors contributing to their poorer performance are mitigated through the provision of support, improved performance can nevertheless be achieved.

It is important to emphasise that while schools’ performance is mark-

edly influenced by socioeconomic status, evidence suggests that good leadership can reduce the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on learning outcomes (Kamper 2008; Tan *et al.* 2021). This suggests that the poor performance of schools is attributable not exclusively to the socioeconomic background of the learners, but rather to a poor response to learner needs, insufficient support for staff, or poor management practices. Often, because of inadequate professional development, school leaders lack the ability to attract and retain highly qualified teaching staff. Efforts to improve the performance of disadvantaged schools must take cognizance of equity and quality of leadership, and ensure that competent principals are appointed.

The study is focused on the improvement of poorly performing disadvantaged schools, with emphasis on the principal. It is argued that the improvement of performance starts with teaching and learning (Ahiaku & Mncube 2018); however, effective classroom learning practices are shaped by school leadership (Matthews 2009). Principals achieve this through support and development of effective teachers and implementation of effective organisational processes (Leithwood *et al.* 2004).

The research question to which an answer was sought was:

How adequately prepared are the principals of disadvantaged low performing schools to respond to the needs of these schools and their learners' low academic performance?

The answer to this question was arrived at through responses to the following sub-questions:

- What is the academic qualification of the principals of the disadvantaged, low-performing high schools?
- What is the leadership experience of principals in improving teaching and learning in high schools?
- What leadership preparation programmes are in place for improving learning and teaching in your school?
- What resources are provided for restructuring the school?

Principals' Qualifications and Experience

The requirements for a leadership position in any school are laid down by the legislation. The first requirement is a certain level of qualification. All over the world, in both developed and developing countries, the emphasis has been on a post-secondary degree and teaching qualification. However, this requirement varies from country to country: in Finland, for example, a principal is required to possess a graduate degree, a school-level teaching qualification (primary or secondary) and sufficient teaching experience, and to have completed a course in school administration (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale 2015).

In Singapore, the appointment of a principal is based on a track record spanning basic teaching experience to principalship through a series of promotions. Promotion is based on identification of the teacher by means of a written examination and performance (Dimmock & Tan 2013). Therefore, to become a principal in Singapore, a person needs to have a minimum teaching requirement, performance at class and school level, knowledge, experience and readiness to perform at a higher level (Dimmock & Tan 2013). These criteria make the process of recruitment in Singapore very democratic, without skipping any steps: a person can become a principal only after serving as deputy principal for a period and passing the relevant promotional examinations and interviews.

The South African situation is not all that different from elsewhere. A principal is required to possess a minimum qualification in the form of matriculation plus any other three- or four-year post-secondary qualification (M+3 or M+4) or any Relevant Equivalent Qualification Value (REQV 13) (Education Labour Relations Council [ELRC] 2003). The purpose of this requirement is to allow prospective principals to have moved through the relevant levels of head of department and deputy principal before being appointed principal. However, this procedure has not been followed in the case of the majority of appointments, as a result of which the best person is not always appointed to the position (Ahiaku 2019).

Research has identified a link between a principal's qualifications and experience and performance, and found this to be very important for the improvement of conditions in schools (Bush & Oduro 2006; Mampane 2015; Ng 2013; Orr & Orphanos 2011). Bush (2015) expresses the opinion that successful principals are those with the highest qualifications and most

experience. In his view, the training they receive makes them highly competent and influences their leadership and supervision roles in a unique way so as to have a positive effect on the performance of schools. This tends to be the case in Finland and Singapore, which have consistently come out on top in international mathematics and science competitions (OCED 2012; Vogel 2015).

The low performance of disadvantaged schools as compared with their more advantaged counterparts in urban and advantaged areas has been attributed largely to the lack of requisite qualifications and experience on the part of the principals of these schools (OCED 2012; Vogel 2015). The task of leading in a complex and difficult setting such as a socioeconomically disadvantaged and poorly-performing school is a daunting one. To be effective, principals need to be well prepared academically and have the requisite teaching experience. However, because of the demanding nature of the task of heading disadvantaged schools, most candidates for the position are inexperienced and lack the requisite qualifications. They do not have a background in pedagogical leadership training, and they lack financial and human resource management training (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). Therefore, departments and ministries of education all over the world look for principals who are highly qualified academically, who are experienced, and who are prepared to take risks. School principals must, therefore, have passed a competency test and possess a teaching certificate, and be able to direct and implement the expected learning patterns.

Principal Training and Support

Most disadvantaged schools are located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas with fewer resources, which therefore do not attract qualified management and professional staff with sufficient experiences to support the school staff and learners (Harris & Chapman 2004). The school environments tend to offer limited professional development opportunities for principals and teachers (Leithwood 2010). The poor-quality learning environments are improved only through the appointment of quality principals able to elicit or offer adequate support so as to respond to the needs of the school.

The quality of the principals is provided through leadership programmes to expand principals' knowledge and experience so as to equip them to deal with the challenges presented by disadvantaged schools.

Principals need to develop leadership knowledge, skills and the necessary disposition for school improvement through specifically designed leadership programmes (Pont, Nusche & Moorman 2008). Among the OECD countries, capacity training programmes have been developed for school leadership, offering specialised and specific knowledge and skills to understand the circumstances of the schools. Day *et al.* (2009) argue that these programmes are necessary to ensure that school principals are prepared to focus on the specific characteristics of disadvantaged schools, teaching and learning, by involving parents as well.

Knowledge and skills training is essential for high school principals with very limited knowledge of low-performing, disadvantaged schools; however, this support is necessary even for experienced principals. OECD (2012) suggests that novice principals should have an opportunity to participate in a coaching programme with experienced principals, during which the novice principals seek support from the experienced principals in the form of strategies to solve their problems. This training has yielded positive results in China and England (OECD 2012). Bush (2015) describes a coaching programme as a very effective and spot-on solution rather than a general programme that may not be applicable or may sometimes be too complex for one's situation. However, Morgan and Hawkins (2004) explain that the coaching programme will only succeed if schools of similar or the same characteristics are involved. Caldwell (2010) is of the view that leadership networking provides an opportunity for improvement, while Hadfield and Jopling (2006) suggest that different networks may provide positive and sustainable cultural change in disadvantaged schools. Despite supporting the networking as means of improving the performance of disadvantaged schools. McBeath *et al.* (2005) caution that the variation in such approach may not be a positive influence, since it is general in nature, and so schools with particular needs should adopt direct principles from the coaching programme. They further caution that both coaching and networking, when approached too casually, are likely to have a negative impact on learner performance.

In South Africa, one the most popular tools used to evaluate and train principals is whole school evaluation, which is an intervention intended for schools in distress and in need of rescue. Steyn (2002) explains that whole school evaluation is a process meant to support and develop schools that are underachieving. Even though this training has been viewed as punitive and

judgemental it nevertheless remains the best process for supporting under-performing schools (Steyn 2002).

Principals' Leadership Style and Teaching and Learning

Principals are equipped to adopt the right managerial style through their academic qualifications and training. The right managerial style enables the principal to perform multifaceted duties that entail administrative tasks, organisation of teaching and learning and support for teachers and the community (Moral, Martín-Romera, Martínez-Valdivia & Olmo-Extremera 2018). Hoberg (1993) suggests that the ability of educational institutions to achieve quality education depends on the crucial leadership role of the principal in fostering organisational commitment among the staff, learners and parents.

Effectiveness in this regard is measured by the way the principal uses policies and procedures to manage the level of absence, lateness and truancy of learners in the school. The teachers are the agents of effective teaching and learning, and are required to promote the culture of teaching and learning in the school. Principals need to have quality teachers and to provide them with an enabling and supportive environment in which to function. Davidoff and Lazarus (2002) state that a good principal provides an environment that supports teachers in a lifelong process of personal and professional growth and development. The professional development of teachers ensures quality in teaching through proper planning of lessons, teachers' subject knowledge, and effective use of strategies and resources in the classroom (Ahiaku & Mncube 2018).

The role of external forces in governing is central to the school. The principal's working relationship with the parents through the school governing body is paramount in improving the performance of the learners in the school. The principal should therefore always work together with the school governing body for the welfare of both the school and the learners (Tan, Dimmock & Walker 2021; Prew 2007: 455). The principal should use the school governing body as a bridge between the school and the community so as to avoid conflicts between the two.

The managerial role of the principal is likely to be influenced by external factors such as departmental policies and the allocation of resources. Formulators of policies should understand the context in which the policies

are to be implemented and factors likely to affect their implementation. Prew (2007: 456) states that policy formulators do not consider who implements the policy and under what conditions. In consequence, policies often fail to resolve the problems faced by the majority of communities. The educational inequalities in the country also place obstacles in the path of any principal who wishes to improve the situation of disadvantaged schools. There are vast differences in the resources allocated to disadvantaged schools in rural areas and those allocated to schools in advantaged communities.

Methods

The study falls within the qualitative paradigm, and qualitative research data was collected and analysed using qualitative content analysis. The qualitative approach allows for the participants to express a range of views. The approach produces descriptive data and allows for deeper perspectives to be captured through face-to-face interaction.

Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The study sought to analyse the perception of factors affecting the leadership of principals and their impact on quality of learning and teaching. The study was conducted in four secondary schools in Vhembe East district of Limpopo province. The decision to select Vhembe district was influenced largely by the fact that it is the most disadvantaged district in Limpopo province (STATS SA 2021). The four schools were chosen from within the district based on recent performance in the national senior certificate examination and their having a common basis on which to be assessed. In general, Limpopo province did not do well, trailing the rest of the country with 66.7% pass rate during the just ended (2021) national senior certificate examination (DBE 2021: 11). In terms of performance, two of the schools achieved above the provincial score, and two fell below it. The selection of the schools was also based on the willingness of the principals to participate in the study. Moreover, the geographical location of the schools fitted the description of a disadvantaged area. The schools were selected purposively. The principals of the four schools that were identified as the research sites constituted the research participants, with two being purposively selected from poorly performing disadvantaged schools and two from high performing disadvan-

tagged schools. The purpose of including the two principals from the high performing schools was to evaluate the perceptions of their roles to see whether there were notable differences and to establish what they had been doing differently so as to bring about transformational leadership and change.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews were conducted by means of an interview schedule with the principals of the four secondary schools selected so as to determine how the principals evaluated their managerial roles as transformational leaders in bringing about change in general in their respective schools. The interviews were conducted and recorded by means of a tape recorder with the permission of the participants. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interview summaries were compiled on the basis of the recordings and these summaries were sent to the participants for verification and confirmation of the correctness of the information before publication. The final data was organised into readable, narrative descriptions with major themes, categories and illustrative case examples extracted through content analysis.

Analysis and Findings

The analysis presents data generated from the interviews with the four principals. This includes data on qualifications, experience and training, as well as the managerial role of the principals in the disadvantaged schools selected. The four schools were designated A, B, C and D. Schools A and B performed below a pass rate of 30% while C and D performed above a pass rate of 80% during the 2021 national senior certificate examination at their respective schools (DBE 2021: 134-170).

School Characteristics

The school data is the representation of the physical circumstances and achievements of the participating schools. All four schools were officially rated Quintile one (Q1), which provides an indication of their poverty level. Table 1 shows the summary of the school characteristics.

Table 1: School characteristics

School characteristics	School A	School B	School C	School D
Type of school	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary	secondary
Geographical location	Township	Rural	Rural	township
Rating (Quintile)	Q1	Q1	Qi	Q1
Enrolment (learners)	1 230	441	718	800

School A served learners in Grades 8 to 12 and situated in a township. The school buildings were cared for, but had broken windows and doors. The school did not have a library or computer centre for the learners. The school grounds looked unkempt, with some learners not in full uniform. The learner enrolment was quite high at roughly 1 230; there were 29 teachers, yielding a teacher–learner ratio of 1:43. The matriculation pass rate for the school has been fairly constant for the past three years, not having exceeded 40%. The pass rate in 2019 was 34%, in 2020 33%, and in 2021 37%.

School B was situated on the outskirts of a township, with a learner population of 441 in Grades 8 to 12 and a teacher–learner ratio of 1:34. The school buildings were temporary in nature, with mobile classrooms to supplement the existing brick structures. The school lacked basic facilities such as water and electricity. The school was in a state of disrepair, with some parts of the roofs leaking. The matric past rate of the school in 2021 was 28%.

School C was situated in a rural farming community about 25 kilometres from the nearest town. The school had a population of 718 from Grades 8 to 12, with a teacher population of 16. The matric pass rate ranged between 87% and 89%. There were mobile classrooms to supplement the existing structures. Even though the school environment was kept neat there was no plant cover, and the environment was dusty.

School D was situated in a township and had an enrolment of 800 learners. The school buildings were brick structures. Although not situated on a large

piece of land, the school was nevertheless well kept. There was water, electricity and an ablution block. Prior to the arrival of the current principal, the school had been in a state of disrepair. The school was commended for producing quality results in the 2021 national senior certificate examination.

The school data in each case reflected the disadvantaged nature of the community but gave an indication of the differences in school characteristics that the principals had to contend with. It was possible to form an impression of the measures taken by the schools to ensure effective teaching and learning, specific leadership qualities exhibited, and the school's success.

Biographical Information of Participants

The principals' biographical information was recorded during the interview. Table 2 provides a summary; three of the participants were male, and one was female.

Table 2: Biographical information of participants

Biographical information	Principal A	Principal B	Principal C	Principal D
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male
Age (years)	50	43	39	45
Academic qualification	Matric	BA	Diploma	Matric
Professional qualifications	STD	PGCE	STD	BEd (Hons)
Further managerial qualification	None	None	None	None
Years of experience as a teacher	21	12	12	18
Number of years served as principal	6	8	6	4
General training for principalship	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Developmental programmes from peers	No	No	No	No
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Table 1 shows the selection of the principals to have been based on M+3 as the minimum requirement. The interviewees affirmed that graduate or further qualifications were not part of the requirement for the positions. The result shows the minimum qualification to be a three-year diploma, namely a secondary teacher diploma (STD) in education. However, Principal D had a further qualification in addition to a Bachelor in Education (BEd), having obtained an honours degree in education (BEd Hons). The participants had spent between 12 and 21 years as classroom teachers before becoming principals. Principals C and D had served as deputy principals before becoming principals. Principal B had been a head of department (HoD), while principal A had acted as HoD for less than two years before becoming principal. The length of teaching experience was quite extensive in addition to the basic qualification (M+3).

The interview revealed that none of the participants had a formal managerial qualification from any institution. However, the participants indicated informal managerial training received during in-service training from their local and district education departments. This suggests that managerial qualifications were not considered in the appointment of these principals. Apart from principal D, the participants did not consult their peers at performing schools so as to acquire further managerial skills. Participant D indicated that:

I taught for over 15 years at the multi-racial school in the town before accepting the position of principal here. I have been trying to implement some few things I learnt from my principal from the previous school.

Principal A gave the following reason for not consulting principals from neighbouring performing schools:

For me, I think an attempt to fall on my colleague for information of running my school is a sign of weakness. It simply shows that you are not capable of running a school, yet you apply for it.

Principal C explained:

Even though, I know is a good idea and good practice, but I won't do it simply because I have a reputation to protect. I don't know how my fellow principals would take this. I won't consider doing that even when they have the best solution for my school.

This result is quite revealing. The principals appeared to be running the schools with less concern for the learners than for their own reputation. Principal D appeared to be the exception, however, in that this principal had the highest qualification, had taught and had become a deputy principal, and was open to learning from peers.

The Principals' Managerial Role

All four principals maintained that a school needs a strong principal so as to ensure that changes are introduced. The difference, however, lies in how this is done. All the participants affirmed the efforts they made to ensure that everything ran smoothly in their respective schools. The principals confirmed that they ensured effective teaching and learning in their schools at all times. However, the interviews revealed that some principals did not receive the necessary cooperation from their colleagues, in particular the school management team and the teachers, and faced tough opposition from them. Principal A had this to say:

As much as I tried to ensure there is teaching and learning going on the school, I don't get the support from the School Management Team (SMT) and the educators. For example, with my heavy administrative duties I have to make sure I put learners in classroom for teaching and learning to take place. This should have been done by deputy and the rest of the heads of departments. The educators think it is the duty of the SMT to ensure learner discipline and therefore do not cooperate in disciplining the children. I think I must say this that I am the only one running this school instead of the collective.

The main narrative during the interview with this principal was an indication that effective teaching and learning was not taking place. There was also an

indication that the type of leadership exhibited by Principal A did not elicit cooperation from the management team of the school, as the principal failed to delegate duties to the staff: an atmosphere conducive to the delegation of duties and self-engagement by staff members was not created.

Principal D, on the other hand, contended that in order for effective teaching and learning to take place and for there to be improvement and control of the school, the help of other staff members, especially the deputy and the HoDs, was indispensable. The principal of school B also identified control of the school as being a very important duty of the principal but stated that it is not the responsibility of the principal alone. Principal D explained:

I have to lead bearing in mind that each staff member knows what is expected of him and her and ensure that it is done. I also make sure that teachers go to class not only on time but to teach. They attend workshops organised by the department of basic education through their curriculum instructors (CI).

Specific Leadership Qualities Needed in Disadvantaged Schools

The principals expressed their views on the qualities needed in disadvantaged schools so as to bring about the necessary changes in those contexts.

The participants agreed that the first step towards success in disadvantaged schools entailed accepting the environment and the conditions in the community and being prepared to lend a hand. Principal D stated:

*I treat both parents and learners with respect knowing their poverty level and accept their views on matters concerning their children. Principal B responded in a similar way, stating: *Even though I am not from this community, but I accepted it as my home and learners as my own children.**

This suggests that acceptance of the state of the community could potentially make it possible to uplift the school through quality education.

The indiscipline characterising disadvantaged schools can be overcome when the principal is committed to his or her task. An excellent educational institution is a product of discipline. Principals should serve as a

role model for both teachers and learners as they practise self-discipline, especially in reducing lateness and absenteeism. In the words of Principal D:

The principal must be seen to be in school on time and be visible for learners and teachers to see. Principal C expressed a similar view: I set the example for my teachers by accepting to teach a class in the school.

Some of the principals found the commitment to discipline difficult, with Principal C explaining:

The distance from town to the school is far and coupled with bad nature of the road makes it difficult to get to school on time sometimes.

The participating principals identified resourcefulness as an important quality for a principal in a disadvantaged school struggling with a lack of facilities, insufficient resources and a lack of support from the national and provincial departments of education. The principals expressed their frustration at the lack of resources, with resource provision often being considered part of their responsibilities, whereas it is in fact usually beyond their reach. Principal D reported:

I renovated my school through the help of corporate bodies. They have added additional buildings and renovated the dilapidated ones.

Discussion

The analysis showed the principals all to be in possession of a minimum qualification of M+3; the principals of these disadvantaged schools were therefore in possession of the minimum professional qualification required to manage a school. Thus, even though they lacked managerial qualifications, which are not a requirement for the recruitment of principals in South Africa (Ahiaku 2019), these principals were nevertheless professionally qualified. This finding is in contrast with the assertion that disadvantaged schools tend to be led by unqualified principals (OCED 2012; Vogel 2015). However, when the qualifications of the participating principals were viewed

in light of their school's performance, evidence suggested that the principal with additional qualifications (Principal D, with a BEd Hons) performed better than the others, who lacked qualifications at that level. This finding confirms earlier studies that identified a direct correlation between the performance of schools and the qualifications of the principals (Bush & Oduro 2006; Mampane 2015; Ng 2013; Orr & Orphanos 2011).

The study also revealed the management of a disadvantaged school to be a function of experience. The research indicated that the principals had served 12 or more years as teachers before becoming principals (Mampane 2015). However, the number of years served as a teacher does not provide managerial skills in the same way as serving in the position of deputy principal, as Principals C and D had done. The results achieved by schools C and D could therefore perhaps be attributed to the quality of the experience gained by their principals in their previous positions as deputy principals. Similarly, the poor results achieved by schools A and B cannot be disassociated from the fact of their being led by novice principals with a lower level of managerial skills (OCED 2012; Vogel 2015). This bears out earlier findings that principals who had served as deputy principals in well-functioning schools were able to acquire a degree of managerial skills that helped in shaping their schools (Dimmock & Tan 2013). What is of more concern is that apart from receiving in-service managerial training from the department of education, the other principals were not prepared to learn from their peers. This is an indication that the in-service managerial training was not effective in translating into the high-quality tool needed to run the schools, namely networking with other principals (Caldwell 2010; McBeath *et al.* 2005).

Infrastructure and resources also contribute to school performance. The analysis further showed the effect of infrastructure and resources on learner performance. Specifically, school D had well-constructed infrastructure and resources such as a computer laboratory, electricity and water. The school level analysis showed the condition of the school to reflect the managerial capability of the principal: the presence of a good principal demonstrating a high level of managerial skill tended to be reflected in the condition of the school. For example, the principal of school D, through his ingenuity, mobilised resources for the school through her leadership skills, whereas the principal of school A failed even to maintain the existing school structures. This is also clearly indicative of the failure of the provincial

department of education to provide basic infrastructure for schools in the province.

The analysis also showed instructional management leadership practices alone to be insufficient for the achievement of learner outcomes in socioeconomically disadvantaged environments. What works for disadvantaged schools is the kind of management with the capacity to engage external stakeholders. Evidence for this finding was found in the work of the principal of school D, who used a comprehensive approach that extended beyond instructional management. This approach influenced learner outcomes indirectly through collaboration with all stakeholders, including the community as whole (Tan *et al.* 2021). In order for student learning to benefit, school principals need to work collaboratively with parents, other management teams and teachers. It is clear that leadership that does not harness the strength of parents and teachers, but instead relies purely on the strength of the individual principal, may lack the support needed to run the school effectively and may influence the performance of the school negatively. This result bears out earlier scholarly works on school leadership in disadvantaged schools (Hoberg 1993; Moral *et al.* 2018). However, what works for well-functioning schools may perhaps not work for disadvantaged schools. The finding does not suggest in any way that instructional leadership does not lead to performance among learners in general.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Not all the principals of disadvantaged schools who participated in the study created an enabling environment for the provision of quality education. An overwhelmingly large number of schools in our current democratic dispensation, characterised as it is by social and economic development difficulties, classify as disadvantaged. However, the condition of these schools could be turned around provided the right decisions are made with regard to the provision of quality leadership. The authorities are currently doing very little in terms of appointing quality principals to provide quality leadership. Prerequisites for appointment should include a management qualification, and progressive teaching experience from post level one through to the position of deputy principal without a step jump.

The research findings indicated that socioeconomically disadvantaged schools require a democratic leadership style. Those tasked with the

appointment of principals should consider for these positions leaders who demonstrate an openness and who are not autocratic; the principal of such a school should be selfless, not selfish.

One of the main difficulties facing disadvantaged schools is the lack of support from the provincial and district departments of education. The lack of infrastructure and facilities in particular need immediate attention. Dilapidated structures need to be repaired and sufficient resources such as textbooks and other reading materials need to be supplied. The findings also indicate the learner–teacher ratio in some instances to be very high, which is an indication of insufficient teaching staff – a situation that must be rectified as a matter of urgency.

Improving the level of current leadership in disadvantaged schools is both an urgent and a significant need if the current poor socioeconomic conditions in South Africa generally are to be improved. As the findings suggest, action involving some principals is necessary so as to avoid perpetuating poverty through poor leadership and continued poor national senior certificate pass rates.

Finally, even though the study focused on only four schools in disadvantaged communities, the study presents some interesting findings that could be extended to other principals of similar disadvantaged schools.

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