

# INTERPRETING THE LEADERSHIP PRACTICE OF A SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL USING THE LEADERFUL PRACTICE MODEL

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## ABSTRACT

Literature reveals the crucial influence of school leadership on the creation and maintenance of successful schools. In searching for new foundations to understand leadership, Raelin's leaderful practice model serves as an authentic model to describe a successful South African leadership practice. A qualitative study was used to interpret school leadership in primary schools through the lens of the leaderful practice model. The following observations emerged from the study: "It is passion that makes people succeed in life"; "It isn't my school, it's our school"; and "Development has to be an integral part of education". By sharing the leadership experiences of the principal, this study could serve as a valuable resource and promote the creation of other leaderful practices in South African schools.

**Keywords:** principalship; leaderful practice; professional development; collaborate leadership

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research on school effectiveness conclusively indicates that leadership quality is a key factor in determining the success or failure of schools (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005). Effective principals act as catalysts for effective schools and have a huge impact on critical processes within schools (Lin, 2005:iii). As such, principals' leadership skills may influence professional relationships, professional development and school development (Hallinger & Heck, 2010:100; Kelly & Saunders, 2010:134).

There has been a global increase in studying school leadership (Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2006:372; Slater, Garcia & Gorosave, 2008:702). These studies reflect the analysis of qualitative school leadership in countries such as England (Day, 2009), Australia (Drysdale, Goode & Gurr, 2009; Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2005), Sweden (Höög, Johansson & Olofson, 2005), the United States (Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki & Giles, 2005), and Indonesia (Raihani, 2008). Perumal's study (2009) uses the leaderful practice model to focus on the legacy of racial segregation in two previously disadvantaged South African schools. This study, however, attempts to employ the leaderful practice model to interpret a South African school principal's leadership practice and as such, build on a foundation of school leadership theory and evidence (Leithwood & Day, 2007:12).

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Literature reveals core leadership practices of successful school principals regardless of the particular school context (Jacobson et al., 2005; Gurr et al., 2006; Raihani, 2008; Leithwood & Day, 2007). Such principals build a vision and set clear directions that promote a sense of shared purpose for the school, which is at the core of most conceptions of successful leadership (Dobbs & Walker, 2010:10). However, this implies that principals should clearly and regularly articulate and communicate the school's vision, and set and communicate high but achievable performance expectations, stimulate their staff's initiatives, provide support and give feedback in this regard (Raihani, 2008:487; Gurr et al., 2006:376). Adopting such an approach may enable certain changes in practice, either through their personal efforts or by involving staff in collegial leadership (Botha, 2004:241).

Through their leadership support and by providing sufficient intellectual stimulation, successful principals understand and develop learners in their schools by directing their actions towards the shared goals (Gurr et al., 2006:375; Jacobson et al., 2005:611; Leithwood & Day, 2007:4). It is primarily through principals' encouraging of staff to collaboratively discover and make changes to their teaching practice that they can influence learner performance. By doing this, principals shift the power distribution among staff members to a flatter network, which is used to promote professional communities that are involved in attaining success for all learners (Botha, 2004:241). For professional communities to emerge, staff members need opportunities to be empowered and to learn the necessary skills (Katz & Earl, 2010:42; Raihani, 2008:487; Spillane, 2005:144). The key word is "interaction", which involves strategies for encouraging others to lead irrespective of their position in the school (Frost, 2008:343). This aspect includes practices such as creating an environment conducive to allowing staff to make the most of their abilities, encouraging commitment and motivation, and establishing appropriate structures to support staff collaboration (Gurr et al., 2006:376; Leithwood & Day, 2007:4; Raihani, 2008:487).

Framed by Raelin's leaderful practice model (2003), the aim of this article is to report on a principal's perceptions of leaderful practice during his career as a principal. This model does not present a model where leaders allow followers to participate in leadership. Raelin (2003:5—16) introduces the concept "leaderful" as a way to reconsider leadership from a transformational perspective. A leaderful practice consists of the following four tenets,(the so-called four Cs of leaderful practice (Raelin, 2003:13,14):

- (1) Leadership is concurrent where people as leaders in a community share power with others.
- (2) Leadership is collective where many people in a community can function as leaders.

- (3) Leadership is collaborative where every member in a community, and not only the position leader, may speak on behalf of the entire community.
- (4) Leadership is compassionate, as values are closely linked to leadership.

Raelin (2003:71) also identifies the following four characteristics of a leaderful practice, which apply across all individual, team and organisational levels. (1) Leaderful practices ensure that individuals and communities have the necessary resources to assume accountability and empowered decisionmaking. (2) A learning component, which includes the development of skills and attitudes, is necessary to prepare all role players to assume shared responsibility. (3) All role players need to be committed. (4) Selection is required to identify those “most ready to assume the challenge” in order to extend the shared power and authority in the organisation. Perumal (2009:46) succinctly describes this model as follows: “Critical leaderful practices decentre the school principal as central leader in the school.” As such, the model is an authentic mutual model that transforms institutional leadership as an individual activity into a collective practice.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research method, in particular a case study, was selected as the most appropriate method of data collection. Being appointed to teach school managers at the University of South Africa, the writer shadowed a number of principals in a district to observe their day-to-day activities in order to use the information as material for the study. Through this shadowing exercise in 1992, the writer became acquainted with the specific primary school used in the study and was instrumental in assisting the school to receive the International Award for Invitational Education in 1993 for being an inviting school. This paper reports on the study of leadership within a South African primary school in which other studies, having different purposes, were conducted (Steyn, 1994; Steyn, 2007; Steyn, 2009a; Steyn 2009b; Steyn, 2010a; Steyn, 2010b). Throughout the years of involvement in the school, the principal in the study proved to be highly skilled as a principal and “on the cutting edge of leadership as reflected by theory and best practice” (Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005:111). As part of a series of studies, this paper attempts to reveal the principal's leadership experiences through the leaderful practice lens.

The school in the study was an urban, Afrikaans-medium primary school within a middle-class community, which offered approximately 70 extracurricular activities. Within this community, there were a few affluent families. In addition, some families were exempted from paying school fees.

This school demonstrated the characteristics of leaderful schools and showed that the principal was an exemplary principal who placed a high premium on creating a conducive, collective practice in which each role player's potential contribution was acknowledged (Raelin, 2003:206). His leadership displayed the following characteristics: purposive and flexible leadership; a focus on teacher and learner performance; teachers and learners' commitment to work; a safe and organisationally functioning school context; a culture of care and concern in the school; and a positive relationship with the parents and the community.

Data in the study were collected conducting a semi-structured interview with the principal six months after his retirement. A follow-up interview was conducted and telephone calls made to clarify certain issues. The interviews lasted approximately two hours. The rationale for focusing on the exemplary principal who retired was that after retirement he would be in a better position to reminisce about his whole career and would have a more objective perspective of his leadership approach. A focus group of six teachers, who were staff members at the time of his principalship, was also formed and the interview lasted an hour and a half. Field notes were taken during these interviews.

Where appropriate, data from previous studies were included to enhance the richness of the study. The trustworthiness of the data was attained by including different data collection methods and by comparing evidence from the last interviews conducted for previous studies within the school (Muijs, Ainscow, Dyson, Raffo, Goldrick, Kerr, Lennie & Miles, 2010:145). Although that is not the purpose of some of the previous studies in the school, the leadership role of the principal in all these studies was prominent. Ethical measures included requesting participants' willing participation, treating the participants in a humane way, and obtaining the informed consent (Johnson & Christensen, 2008:109) of every participant before the interviews were conducted. I sent transcripts of these interviews via e-mail to participants in the study to ensure accuracy of the data collected (Kelly & Saunders, 2010:128).

Social constructivism regards leadership as a social construct because it develops over a period through interaction with individuals (Ladkin, 2010:21). It is therefore considered a subjective experience that is significantly influenced by both context and culture. Focusing on the leaderful practice of a principal and on a social constructionist approach to leadership, it could uncover sense-making and relational aspects of a principal's leadership.

For the purpose of this study, the particular interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated, considering the English idiom. The focus group interview with teachers was conducted in the natural habitat of the participants, while the interviews with the principal were conducted at the school where the principal had taken up another post (not as a principal).

A literature control provided a benchmark for comparing and contrasting the findings of this study to other findings. In the data analysis, I used vivo coding in the themes to “prioritize and honor the participant's voice” in the study (Saldaña, 2009:74) while the conceptual framework regarding the leaderful practice model of Raelin (2003) provided a suitable way of analysing the data collected.

## **4. FINDINGS**

In line with the studies of Gurr et al. (2006) and Drysdale et al. (2009), this study showed strong evidence that the school improved its performance. The following leadership attributes were identified: strong leadership, shared leadership, relationship-building, strong sense of purpose, and a focus on continuous development. Guided by the leaderful practice model of Raelin (2003), the following valuable statements were identified in the study: “It is passion that makes people succeed in life”; “It isn't my school, it's our school”; and “Development has to be an integral part of education”.

### **4.1 “It is passion that makes people succeed in life”**

The principal's caring attitude, availability and strong presence at every level of the school stood out as exemplary. The principal knew the direction he would like the school to take and had a strong view of the school's future. The principal's personal philosophy regarding visibility was described in a case study by Steyn (1994), confirmed in another case study by Steyn (2006). This philosophy was based on an anecdote about President Paul Kruger: “The eye of the farmer keeps the cattle fat”. He regarded this approach as a suitable strategy to acquire first-hand information about the school and used these opportunities to be “among people”. This approach also allowed him to see what was happening in the school, which required his attention, for example, a leaking tap or a crying child. He regarded this approach as a “big truth” – “It's a very small thing, perhaps even insignificant – small things that people overlook.”

According to the principal and his staff members, his success was based on his love for children and respect for all other people. One teacher said: “The principal was always there for us. He was not behind a closed door, and (he) knew how to work with people. He succeeded in making a person comfortable ... he felt like one of us.”

The principal's caring attitude towards people was expressed in the following way: “I think I'm very people oriented ... had compassion for people and I had the right calling.” He believed that he “was extra blessed with a great love for children ... it's something that has been given to me from above”. As such, he believed that his “secret” was that God worked largely through him. He acknowledged that principalship was “not an easy job; it's really difficult” and that without God's guidance, he would not have been successful.

The principal regarded a passion for education as the one characteristic necessary for being successful in education.

It is passion that makes people succeed in life ... When people are passionate about what they do about 99.9% of the time, they are successful ... They [people] die inside because they do not enjoy what they are doing, and they also make the people around them die.

Throughout his career, the principal constantly reminded staff that they were working in paradise. One of the teachers in the focus group interview confirmed it: "In doing this (creating a school environment conducive to creating leaders) he tried to create a safe harbour in the school ... He reminded the staff that if it were not for the children, they would not be there." He criticised the private sector for not focusing on people, but on production only. In schools, the question that should be asked is whether it is about people or products. For him, "people need to be happy at a place; staff should be happy; children should be happy".

The principal emphasised the need for a positive attitude towards education and was of the opinion that if teachers came to school with a "song" in their hearts, it would be possible to "take people with them along the road". He said:

They [such teachers] excite others – those people are medicine for the profession ... the sparkling wine of the organisation ... I'm increasingly beginning to realise that the people who really make a success of everything [are the ones] with a heart... Your heart must be in it.

Similar to the findings of a study by a US principal (Jacobson et al., 2005:614), the principal in this study encouraged teachers to approach him with their personal and professional problems, as he valued and cared about them as human beings. He was also never too busy to listen to the needs and concerns of all individuals in the school.

As can be seen from the above, the principal revealed characteristics such as passion, integrity, love for people (particularly for learners), humbleness, sensitivity, enthusiasm and persistence, all of which firmly tie in with the tenet of a compassionate, leaderful manager (Raelin, 2003:16). Compassionate and caring principals focus on the needs of followers, and inspire and motivate them by making their work meaningful and engaging their followers through a profound commitment that aims to benefit both the person and the organisation (Printy, 2010:117). They acknowledge that care extends beyond good interpersonal relationships with followers and as a result, they move beyond self-care and demonstrate a sincere interest in the development and welfare of others (Printy, 2010:117). These leaders also recognise that schools should not merely focus on learner performance, but that they should be places where creativity and human imagination can be employed to transform the world (Dantley, 2005:40).

By implication, this means that a school environment needs to be created where people work together towards a common goal.

#### **4.2 “It isn’t my school, it is our school”**

Since receiving the inviting school award in 1993, the principal had a clear vision of invitational education. The principal was of the opinion that once a school had succeeded in receiving the prestigious award, it became increasingly important to continue showing what it meant to be an inviting school. He nevertheless acknowledged the support of his staff who gave him the opportunity to do what he was passionate about: inculcating moral and spiritual values in the learners and their education.

At the beginning of his leadership career, the principal did not regard his own leadership as important; however, in the course of his career he became very interested in leadership and even enjoyed it. According to the leaderful practice model, personal awareness of a leader's abilities is required in developing a community of practice (Raelin, 2003:60). Based on previous studies (Steyn, 2007; Steyn, 2009a; Steyn, 2010a; Steyn, 2010b), the principal acknowledged how Maxwell's presentation on the 21 laws of leadership was his wake-up call and changed his way of thinking. Although he developed his leadership approach unintentionally, the first law (the Law of the Lid) made him realise that if he did not develop himself sufficiently, the school and staff would also not grow successfully. His professional growth was necessary to empower others in the school. His idea was to empower people beyond himself and he supported teachers in all their endeavours.

The principal confirmed the importance of a principal's personal growth as indicated in previous studies (Steyn, 2006; Steyn, 2007; Steyn, 2009a; Steyn, 2009b; Steyn, 2010b) and explained his attitude towards leadership development. He stated:

The whole thing is self-development – that's the most important. If you are not growing, you are dying ... You yourself must grow ... You have a responsibility towards the people under you to grow ... You must search, you must do research, you must listen, you must look, you must attend courses.

The principal believed that “the secret to the success of any business is ownership”. He explained it as follows:

One of the most important things is for all role players to accept ownership – and you [as the principal] must think of very fine methods to develop joint responsibility. Children should have the privilege to be able to have a say in the management of a school. Parents should have the privilege ... I never spoke of my school – it isn't my school ... it's our school ... I think everyone has an unbelievable say and value ... “If you are not able to take the people with you then you are going to lose ...

Do not move too far ahead of them ... ensure that you are among them.

The principal facilitated teamwork and collaboration opportunities to reduce teacher isolation. For him a general principle in shared leadership was to “start trusting and using people”. He empowered many people whom he believed were his “superiors” in many areas and whose expertise made him “strong”. He “gave people the freedom to be themselves and to grow and do what they enjoyed”. The principal therefore succeeded in conveying high expectations of teacher performance.

Consistent with a leaderful practice, the principal's approach to decision-making was democratic and collaborative (Raelin, 2003:15). Collaborative leaders acknowledge that everybody is important and that they can make a significant contribution (Raelin, 2003:16). The principal also encouraged teachers to be leaders at all levels in the school (Drysdale et al., 2009:702), and even allowed them to be empowered beyond himself. In collaborative leadership, all stakeholders participate in joint decision-making where their potential is utilised to create and enhance the quality of education in the school (Singh, 2005:11). For the sake of quality education, collaborative leadership requires careful nurturing by principals who lead the change process, and this implies continuous development.

#### **4.3 “Development has to be an integral part of education”**

In various studies conducted at the school, the principal's focus on school and professional development was a recurring theme. The principal promoted development among staff and acted as a role model in view of his own development as indicated above. It was evident that the number of school-based development opportunities had increased during his principalship. Areas in which changes occurred included, inter alia, a change in the reward system for learners and teachers; a whole year's focus on inculcating a positive attitude to life; inculcating a value system; and including continuous improvement as a standing item on the agenda of the weekly school management team meetings. The principal constantly had high expectations of his staff and learners, and helped them attain those expectations by identifying ways to develop their potential. He confirmed his stance on continuous development in the last interview: “Many [organisations], schools especially, don't realise that development has to be an integral part of the whole staff's personal development”. He acknowledged the need for meetings, but such meetings should not focus only on “maintenance”. He suggested: “You must empower your people, you must send them on the best courses, you must buy the best-quality material in the world and you sometimes have to almost force them [to attend].”

The principal's justification to develop staff, was because little, if any, growth occurred in schools. According to him, the only difference between photographs of schools taken 50 years ago and taken presently would be the “colour of the photo”.



He was of the opinion that much research had been conducted and many changes had occurred in society, which he believed should change the approach to children and the methodology in classrooms. "So the [main] thing is to keep up ... I know that what works in place A will not necessarily work in place B, but you must find out what's important for you, in your [school] environment."

What concerned the principal most was the emphasis on school performance only. He explained:

I'm talking about mental fitness ... We encourage children to aim for so many distinctions, we make them into cultural champions ... We do well in the sporting arena. But when a child is growing up, this stuff is actually worth nothing. Then your spiritual qualities, the value system that was inculcated in you starts.

The school provided ample opportunities for teacher and leadership development. By reorganising the annual school programme, the principal provided opportunities for staff each morning to collaborate and share professional experiences. As in the case of other studies (Jacobson et al., 2005:616; Gurr et al., 2006:376; Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005:111), the influence of daily opportunities for development and teacher leadership was evident in decreased isolation and improved communication between teachers. Apart from these development opportunities, the principal invited expert facilitators or showed DVDs to develop the staff's professional skills. He also addressed the professional needs of individual staff members by sending them on appropriate professional development (PD) workshops. The school budgeted annually for such workshops.

As mentioned before, the school was successful academically as well as in numerous cultural and sporting activities. Although the principal believed in celebrating a school's successes, he provided a stern warning:

If you've achieved something or you've won, celebrate. Light the braai fire, but don't sit for too long, because while you're celebrating, others may be busy running past you. Then you start falling behind. I think a person has a huge responsibility to keep up the continuity, to develop, grow and learn. So lately, this has become quite important for me.

Leaving a legacy after retirement was essential to the principal. The principal recalled a seminar presented by John Maxwell on which Maxwell indicated that he took the blame for the collapse of his first congregation after he had left. From the principal's own viewpoint, he realised early in life that he had to build up a legacy, "a sort of heritage". He elaborated:

If you leave and the place collapses, then it's your fault. So what happens when you're not there? That's important to me.

The greatest gift that I could have given to the school was that I could establish a place, and it's been doing better since I left.

To move from self-awareness to self-leadership and team leadership is another prerequisite of a leaderful practice (Raelin, 2003:65), which is confirmed by the findings. Once self-leadership has been mastered, leaders are in the position to model the behaviour to others (Raelin, 2003:65). This implies that a “learning component”, which includes knowledge and skills, is required for a leaderful practice to be realised (Raelin, 2003:71). The findings are also in line with those of similar international studies (Gurr et al., 2005:545; Raihani, 2008:493; Höög et al., 2005:604).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study shows the contribution of one school principal in creating a leaderful practice. The findings indicate how this principal managed to establish and maintain a sense of direction for the school and how he had a positive influence on his followers. He succeeded in sharing his leadership with staff but, more importantly, he empowered them to lead the school to a higher level of performance after he had left. By being an exemplar of passion, this principal convinced role players of his commitment to make a difference in the lives of others.

Embracing a leaderful practice takes time and requires that a principal establishes a clear vision, optimism, and high performance expectations and that he acts with care and integrity to broaden and nurture relations among all role players. In line with Spillane (2005:143), the findings show that a principal cannot “single-handedly lead schools to greatness” and that school success depends on a concerted, collaborative and collective effort from all role players. Moreover, a leaderful practice should not focus only on what principals do to make schools leaderful, but more importantly, also on how and why this needs to be done. It implies an improved conceptualisation of the problems that contemporary principals have to face in complex learning environments.

Although the particular context of the school in the study could be considered more conducive to leaderful practice than other South African schools, the findings may be relevant to the grave contemporary challenges of creating leaderful South African school practices. However, more in-depth studies are required to add significantly to the evidence of the effect of successful leaderful practice on schools and the community, since critical research on leaderful practice promises to meet the actual needs for school leadership in current society.

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