

Instructional Leadership: Empowering Teachers through Critical Reflection and Journal Writing

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ABSTRACT Instructional Leadership in schools is gaining much ground as principals desire to improve learner performance. This paper focuses on a study where a school principal utilised instructional leadership in empowering his staff. He worked with his School Management Team (SMT) to encourage staff to use reflection and journal writing. This was a qualitative case study where one school was investigated. The researcher made use of observations as well as semi-structured interviews. The findings explicate that reflection should be accorded an important place in teaching today. The findings also show that leaders need to be curriculum leaders as well, if the core business of schools is to happen effectively. The conclusions point out that effective leaders will always be conscious of the need to improve learner performance as well as teacher commitment. Furthermore, this study shows that with a focused leader who embraces a vision, even schools that have less resources can succeed.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Mendels (2012) points out that in recent years the view of principalship that has been growing focuses on instruction, and not building management or other administrative matters. Mendels also argues that if instruction is the heart of the principal's job, the principals have crucial roles to play in instruction. Yunus and Iqbal (2013) also contend that the key to instructional leadership is in the principal defining his/her role in terms of recognising instructional priorities rather than by serving as a school manager. This shows how important it has become for a principal to set the standard in a school; that is a school will arguably be as effective as its principal. It is as a result of these and similar arguments that the concept of *instructional leadership* is beginning to get more attention in South African schools. Instructional leaders know that successful leadership is one that supports successful teaching and learning. Bush (2007) avers that instructional leadership focuses on the direction of influence, on managing teaching and learning as the core activities of educational institutions.

Sharma (2012) also states that instructional leadership is crucial in the development and sustenance of an effective school. This author contends that the focus in schools should be on learner achievement and the principals should supply teachers with resources and incentives to keep their focus on learners. Bendikson et al.

(2012) distinguish between direct and indirect instructional leadership. These authors explain that on the one hand, direct instructional leadership is leadership focused on the quality of teacher practice, including the quality of the curriculum, teaching as well as assessment. On the other hand, indirect instructional leadership refers to the creation of conditions for good teaching and teacher learning by ensuring aspects such as policies, routines, support high quality effective teaching and learning. A few emerging studies are showing that introducing instructional leadership may salvage failing schools (Gray and Lewis 2012). Mattar (2012) also emphasises a crucial aspect in his study when he mentions how the socio-economic status (SES) has an impact on leadership in a school. He points out that the SES factors in a school and community influence principal leadership. This author also states that principals in low SES schools tend to emphasise the mastery of basic skills and defined unambiguous school wide goal targets for instruction.

Many writers concur that in South Africa the principal's workload is burgeoning, principals are not managing and many secondary school principals in particular, lack the time for and understanding of their or instructional leadership task (Olson 2000; Budhal 2000 as cited in Kruger 2003). Thurlow (2003) points out that the view that the core purpose of education management is to facilitate effective learning through effective teaching, is now emerging in South Africa.

Furthermore, he posits that the process of management is concerned with the transformation of schools, thus levelling the grounds for effective learning. In many instances, the school leaders and managers operate in climates that are far from being conducive to learning and teaching. A number of them are usually daunted and find it hard to find ways of guiding successful schools where learners achieve.

There are however, a number of strategies that researchers have not explored in South Africa in an attempt to minimise challenges posed by ineffective culture of learning and teaching. This study looks at an aspect that is almost non-existent in South African research, that of the effect of journal writing and reflective teaching in the improvement of learning and teaching. The question posed in this study was: What benefits can demoralised educators learn from the skills found in journal keeping and reflective teaching? In the section below the focus is on the objectives.

Objectives of the Study

This study sought to critically look into the following objectives:

- ♦ To investigate whether journal keeping can assist teachers to be reflective;
- ♦ To explore how teacher biography can enhance teaching in classrooms;
- ♦ To examine how teacher reflection can build the general teacher performance in classrooms.

The Context of the Study

The school under study is situated in a South African rural area and is a historically Black African school. It is among the low performing schools, and the average pass rate from grade 8 to grade 12 has been 40% for the past three years. Long after the fall of apartheid, many historically Black rural and township (historically Black areas) schools are still 100% Black African. Many of the families who remain in these schools are mainly working class poor parents who otherwise cannot send their children outside the government schools. The other majority of poor families are found in farm schools. Msila (2012, 2011, 2010) writes about how school principals struggle as a result of the poverty among the families in their schools. Msila (2011: 444) contends:

Poor parents experience many challenges in their homes and might find it difficult to as-

sist the principals in school governance, as required by the South African Schools' Act. Principals in poor areas hardly receive the necessary support from other stakeholders to manage their schools. Adams and Waghid (2005) point out that poor economic conditions have a direct impact on the community's participation in school structures as they benefit the community economically.

Yet many principals find their schools struggling, working with teachers whose morale and commitment is low due to many factors. Poverty of the families is sometimes indirectly or directly linked to this teacher despondence. In rural schools there are also a number of challenges. Msila (2010:171) again notes:

Fleisch (2008) relates rural teachers' testimonies that provide powerful evidence that links poverty to under-achievement. According to Graaf (1995) rural schools are "poor quality schools where the basic necessities were lacking". He also contends that there are no facilities and that these are schools where many teachers are not qualified to teach their subjects and some are not even interested in being qualified teachers,

The school under study also experiences some of the above challenges. It is built in Northern KwaZulu-Natal with minimal physical resources and under-qualified teachers. The school has no ablution facilities and almost half of the 862 learners do not have parents. Many of these children find themselves having to be 'parents' to their younger siblings. By admission of the class teachers, the learners are frequently tired; they do not do homework and sometimes do not appear to see any value in schooling. The principal however, attributed his school's performance to "the teachers' ignorance of best 'teaching' practices". The principal decided to introduce journal keeping and reflection "as an experiment of changing the school's performance around". This was the experiment that the researcher decided to investigate.

Literature Review

Journal Keeping and Reflective Teaching Explained

Journal Keeping

Many effective teachers keep journals to help them to be able to reflect upon their own teach-

ing. Effective journal keeping also ensures that teachers have ongoing professional introspection, constant dialogue with oneself, self-critical awareness of one's practice and being in perpetual search of best practices. All this is captured by the concept of reflective practice. Teacher-researchers have always acknowledged the role of journals. Nickel (2013) recognises reflective journaling as a valued component of the teachers' reflection upon their learning. Nickel also highlights the importance of deep and surface learning. Deep learning is for reflective practitioners and is different from surface learning which supports shallow learning. Shallow learners perform better in assessment that uses memorisation and quality learning is very poor. Hobson (1995: 9) argues that a journal is a "means by which we bring into fuller awareness, both for the student and for ourselves as teachers, some deeper processes through which we make meaning". Journals can be effective instruments to inform teachers about the mistakes they have overlooked over time. They can also give feedback to teachers about their good teaching that needs to be further reinforced. Conway et al. (2012) cite Contich who points out that journal writing helps participants clarify their thoughts and solidify their learning. Furthermore, those who use journal writing are able to analyse personal strengths. Some authors find a link between journal writing and reflective practice (Pedro 2005). Hobbs (2007) for example, also suggests that journal writing is an activity of encouraging reflective practice among teachers. In this paper this is how these terms would be understood and used. Journal writing implies reflective practice, although reflective practice is not necessarily journal writing only.

Thomas and Geursen (2013) point out that although reflection and reflective writing are often considered to be individual acts, teacher educators have important roles in encouraging the development of reflective thinking and enactment. These authors maintain that it is crucial for teachers to model this reflection in their classrooms if they want their learners to be reflective. Well written journals spell out the flaws and prepare teachers for the teaching ahead. In a time of under-performance and less commitment from educators, journal keeping can make teachers to continually examine their own practice. Journal writing and keeping can be a daily practice where teachers can write about their

teaching practice on a daily basis. There are also various ways of journal writing and these include descriptive writing; reflective writing; double entry journal writing; daily log, stepping-stones and underlinings (Hobson 1995). Below, these are briefly explained.

Descriptive Writing and Reflective Writing

Descriptive writing is very important for journal keepers. According to Hobson, descriptive writing recreates one's own perception of an event. One who describes an event looks at it carefully and tries to be meticulous when reporting. There is a close connection between descriptive writing and reflective writing. Reflecting on experiences explicated and described is another crucial aspect in journal keeping. Those who write reflectively stand back and relook at the perspective. "One moves from a description of experiences to a sort of commentary on it" (Hobson 1995:13).

Double-Entry Journal Writing and Daily Log

On the one hand, double-entry journal writing refers to the use of facing pages; on the one side there would be a descriptive writing and on the other side reflective account. On the other hand, the daily log captures what happens every day. The daily log paints a clear picture of what happens in an individual's life as seen through every day entries.

Stepping Stones and Underlinings

Stepping stones as a form of journal writing argues that any teacher brings remembered experiences to the teaching profession. For example one might list teachers who made a positive impression on her and those that did not. Small descriptions that one has of one's teachers can be viewed as forming stepping stones by which one travelled to the present understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

Linked to this is the idea of underlinings which usually helps to relook at what we have examined superficially before. Hobson (1995: 15) points out, "one obvious place to look is in the pages of what we've recently been reading. There is much to be discovered by searching a little more methodically for artefacts of "researching" that we have already been collecting and

bringing the results of that investigation into the pages of one's journal".

Dialogue with a Person

Sometimes teachers have to imagine having conversation with a particular teacher as highlighted above. One can use much imagination here as one interrogates the other teacher about their practice. Various persons can feature in this imaginary dialogue; individuals who have passed away, people who are currently in one's life, fictional characters that one cannot approach in real life.

Reflective Teaching

Doyran (2013) cites various authors such as Dewey, Schon and Boud who show how reflection has been a process of turning experience into learning. Doyran also states that journal writing and reflective practice are among the main vehicles that help teachers move in their career ladders. Journal writing discussed above is part of professional development. It helps teachers to grow their teaching practice. Like journal writing, reflective teaching is observing and reflecting on one's own teaching and using observation and reflection (Richards 1990). Zeichner and Liston (1996: 9) argue:

Dewey defines reflective action as that which involves active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of the reasons that support it and the further consequences to which it leads. According to Dewey, reflection does not consist of a series of steps or procedures to be used by teachers. Rather it is it is a holistic way of meeting and responding to problems, a way of being a teacher.

Richards (1990) contends that reflection refers to an activity in which the experience is recalled, considered and evaluated usually in relation to a broader purpose. The reflective practitioners ask themselves questions constantly as to why they are doing things the way they do and what they need to change. Teachers who are not reflective will never be able to interrogate their practice and will never be able to respond to classroom challenges. Richards also delineates three stages in any reflection process and these are the event itself, recollection of the event and review and response to the event. These three are briefly explained below.

Stage 1: The Event Itself

This is the starting point and it is the actual teaching episode. Critical reflection usually focuses on the teacher's own teaching; self-reflection can also be through an observation of another person's teaching.

Stage 2: Recollection of the Event

This is an account of what happened without explaining or evaluating the event. During this stage there can be written descriptions, recording of the event, or the use of check lists or coding systems.

Stage 3: Review and Response to the Event

After the description of the event, the participant returns to it and reviews it. The event is now analysed and more probing will be done at this level. Journal writing discussed above, self-reports and autobiographies are all forms of reflection useful to educators.

Much research conducted underscores the importance of this critical reflection enacted in the above stages. Many dysfunctional schools in particular have teachers who are not motivated, who are in comfort zones and who do not professionally develop. Many do not know this and those who do not know how to change the status quo. Critical reflection is crucial in ensuring that teachers adopt new identities that set effective strategies for teachers. Larrivee (2000) contends that unless teachers develop the practice of critical reflection, they stay trapped in unexamined judgements, interpretations, assumptions and expectations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This was conducted through a qualitative research methodology. The researcher interviewed all the 19 teachers at Prince Mlambo High School (not the school's real name). In addition to the interviews, the researcher also observed teaching and other aspects in the school such as daily routine. The school was selected through opportunistic sampling; the researcher had been studying the school principal's effectiveness for more than 26 months. It was during one of his visits that he learnt that the principal had introduced an intervention strategy to im-

prove teacher performance. Sixteen months before the study began the researcher had helped the school principal in this school in developing a prescriptive intervention which was based on training manuals. The principal wanted to introduce change strategies through the intervention where the teachers were trained in using journal keeping and try critical reflection as they tried to improve their practice. The study was then interested at the extent to which these were bringing real changes to the teaching and learning in the school.

In employing the intervention strategies the principal had followed Rothman and Thomas's (1994) phases of intervention research:

- (a) Problem analysis and project planning – the researcher and the principal analysed the problem through asking pertinent questions.
- (b) Information gathering and synthesis – getting as much information as possible from the teachers and observing what is happening in the classrooms.
- (c) Design of the intervention – this included the development of the training manuals.
- (d) Early development and pilot testing – the five heads of department looked at the instrument and modified it where necessary.
- (e) Experimental evaluation and advanced development – the actual training manual was used in the development of teachers.
- (f) Dissemination – at the time of conducting the study, the principal was preparing documents to share with his school's district officials.

For this study though, the researcher not only interviewed the teachers individually, but he also examined the learners' results and observed a few classes. The researcher used semi-structured questions for the interviews and used a schedule for the observations.

THE FINDINGS

Journal Keeping

All the teachers reported the various ways in which journal keeping changed their practice for the better. They usually wrote their entries immediately after class. There was no uniform

manner of entering journal entries. However, what was common among these were the following:

- ♦ How the class went
- ♦ The learner interest and behaviour
- ♦ How the teacher assessed himself or herself
- ♦ Problem areas
- ♦ What would be done differently in future

This journal writing strengthened the teachers because they learnt a number of aspects not only about themselves but about their learners as well. The teachers talked freely about their weaknesses with the principal during his bi-weekly class visits. They concurred that journal writing enabled them to expand their ideas on teaching as they mapped out their future practice. Their journals also enabled them to understand their professional past, understand the present and project into the future. The journal is a feature that others perceived as a resource where teachers could record the learners' actions. Fourteen teachers also postulated that they began understanding their teaching philosophies and general beliefs as teachers after utilising reflective strategies such as journal keeping.

The participants also shared experiences of how they had started writing about their own past as learners, and how they had begun understanding their own teaching. The latter is what experts would refer to as using biography in teaching. Josselson (2009) for example, defines autobiographical memory as a process of reconstruction rather than faithful depiction. Whilst Hobson (1995) cites Kurt Lewin who points out that an individual stands at the centre of his or her own life space, that an understanding of that life can only be accomplished by beginning with the perspective of that individual. Some journals were a reflection of the teachers' lives and were meaningful to their own practice. McAdams (2008) argues that the stories that we construct to make sense of our lives are basically about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are and might be in our heads with whom we were, are and might be in contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class and culture. The self in society happens through narrative identity.

These stories written in journals enabled teachers to improve their teaching and comprehend their learners differently. The principal also

deliberated about the slight improvement in the learners' results in the first full year after the introduction of journal keeping and critical teacher reflection. Table 1 illustrates the comparative learner pass rates over three years:

Table 1: Prince Mlambo School achievement rate over a three year period

	Pass rate grade 8	Pass rate grade 9	Pass rate grade 10	Pass rate grade 11	Pass rate grade 12
2009	48%	51%	39%	59%	29%
2010	49%	54%	45%	56%	36%
2011	57%	58%	47%	64%	47%

The first column, 2009 shows achievement rates before the intervention was introduced by the principal. Whilst the principal cautioned that there might have been other contributing factors to the slight improvement in learner achievement. However, he maintained that journal writing and critical reflection did have a huge impact on learner achievement rates. He however, stated that the new feeding scheme that augmented the Department of Education's could have been another factor. (The learners were given nutritious victuals by a nearby company every day). Yet, through observations the researcher saw the impact that journal writing made among teachers. The participants gained classroom management skills and empowered as teacher leaders whilst gaining more commitment towards teaching. This was enhanced by the critical teacher reflection.

Critical Teacher Reflection

This is an extension of journal writing as highlighted above. Journal keeping is part of reflection however; sometimes the experiences are not written down but are discussed for example between a mentor and a mentee. The participants in the study concurred that going into class then later think and talk about their classroom experiences made them understand their practice more. In fact, they concurred that since starting journal writing and teacher reflection they had also started talking openly about their practice among themselves in the staff room. Teacher reflection had also broken the isolation that existed before because teachers were sharing what they experienced in the classrooms. This was even more

beneficial to novice teachers and those who were under-qualified. The teachers also expressed that teacher reflection made them "understand the psychology in teaching and learning". Teacher reflection supports the idea of lifelong learning or teacher-as-learner concept. Choy and Oo (2012: 169) point out:

Teacher reflection can be thought of as taking the necessary steps to analyse and articulate problems before taking action. This allows for more constructive action to be taken rather than implementing a quick fix (Boody 2008). The challenge is to be able to demonstrate in action what is taught in the classroom. Many teachers fail to connect between their teaching and what they are actually practicing and vice versa.

According to the principal and the teachers in the school, teacher reflection was not empowering teachers only but was also instrumental in empowering the learners. The teachers stated that they had learnt to be more responsive to specific learner problems and their pedagogy started to suit the needs of the learners. The principal also saw this "as a good strategy in dealing effectively with curricular challenges". He said that in his conversation with many of his staff during class visits, he has seen them grow and being able to ask the pertinent questions. As an instructional leader he maintained that the critical reflection "made his job as a curriculum leader much easier".

The participants shared the following as aspects that they have seen as they tried out critical reflection and journal writing:

- ♦ Understanding learner circumstances;
- ♦ Being teacher leaders;
- ♦ Showing more commitment; and
- ♦ Understanding the psychology in teaching and learning.

These were crucial aspects that all the participants shared. These underscored their professional development and teacher change.

DISCUSSION

This study illustrates the profound change reflection can bring among teachers. A number of aspects happened among the teachers in the study and this included rectifying mistakes they themselves experienced during their own school days as learners. Lyngsness (2012) supports this assertion when she states that when teachers

use reflection they tend to select attributes and practices of their own former teachers and synthesise them into an idealised image of the teacher they want to become. Ordinarily, this reflection does not happen; it is a conscientious instructional leader who will set up the scene and ensure that teachers are able to engage in critical reflection.

Lyngsnes (2012:2) points out, "Reflection is a critically important characteristic of a professional teacher and that promoting reflection is vital to the teachers' professional learning". The feedback from the participants attests to this. One other important factor in the study was the manner in which teachers were able to adjust their behaviours to fit the learners' level of preparedness. Robichaux and Guarino (2012) cite Groce et al. (1999) who aver that the development of the ability to reflect on one's teaching is one of the underpinnings of the teaching profession. Furthermore, Robichaux and Guerino point out that through reflection teachers become more responsive to changing their behaviours based on the needs of the classroom.

The admirable exercise by the instructional leader in this study was to prepare the teachers for reflection. Initially, the concept of reflection was not understood by the teachers. Many thought it was just "a simple assessment of one's class". However, as the teachers began understanding reflection and journal writing, they pointed out that they gained confidence and were more prepared for the "unexpected" in the classroom. Again, Robichaux and Guarino (2012) contend that as teachers gain experience, classroom management issues become less of a concern and curriculum and pedagogy become more substantial when reflecting on their teaching.

CONCLUSION

The critical reflection and journal writing in this study taught teachers a few aspects that were crucial in sustaining a working and effective school. Teachers learnt that to be lifelong learners they need to look backwards and into future as they conduct the business of teaching. Without this, teachers will not be able to avoid the "pedagogical blind spots" even with long experience in teaching. A good leader should be able to instil this sense of learning from everyday experiences. This study has shown that interrogating one's practice is crucial for the improvement of teaching and learning. As an in-

structional leader, the principal in the school under study was gradually moving towards an envisaged goal. Whilst he asserted that learner success was gradually improving, he maintained that soon his school would be among the best because his teachers were on the right course to improve the achievement rates. The rest of the teachers learnt to be conscientious educators. They also started to believe that committed, diligent educators can change the lives of learners. They also learnt that whilst there are no panaceas in education, there are effective strategies that can turn around underperforming schools. Some of these need moral leaders who show commitment before they preach it. The instructional leader here showed that with the right tools, any school can gradually move towards success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that there are a number of alternatives that failing school principals can employ to improve their schools' performance. The school under study did not improve magnanimously but there was slight evidence that after some reasonable amount of time, improvement may be attained. The following were recommendations that were drawn after the completion:

- ♦ All school principals should be "hands-on" in curricular issues. There is more likelihood for climate to improve and effective learning and teaching to occur when the principal is directly involved;
- ♦ Teachers need to see set goals and vision all the time. In many dysfunctional schools this hardly happens. It is easier to instil a sense of commitment when teachers see achievable goals with their principal;
- ♦ Effective principals will do constant staff appraisals to ensure quality. Good appraisals need to be negotiated with teachers beforehand. Teachers like to be told when they progress; and
- ♦ All effective school principals should magnify the role of reflection. Teachers who reflect on their teaching are good learners who will always improve their teaching.

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