

An Ethnographic Narrative of Hope for School Leadership in a Rural Educational Setting

Brigitte Smit

University of South Africa, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 0003
E-mail: smitb@unisa.ac.za

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ABSTRACT This ethnographic narrative, which is theoretically framed by appreciative inquiry, attends to the life of a school principal in a rural school in South Africa. The aim of this longitudinal ethnographic narrative inquiry was to uncover the life of a school principal in a rural school to unmask how he makes meaning of his challenging role as a school principal. Observational and conversational data of how Nathaniel (pseudonym) sees himself as a professional and how he performs well, despite the taxing demands, which move beyond the context of what is traditionally known as school, are presented. The qualitative data analysis, using content and narrative analysis, revealed how a dedicated principal leads and manages pupils, staff, parents and the local community in a context of public scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

A content analysis of a number of South African newspapers published in the period of June 2007 to October 2012 revealed numerous articles referred to education, and specifically to principals, and teaching. Very few articles addressed positive experiences of principals, teachers and education. Content for example concentrated on teachers' rampaging during the strike period demanding increased salaries, and wielding their "*knopkieries*" (a short wooden stick with a knob at one end, used by some South African people as a weapon) during this volatile period of teacher strikes (Adams 2007: 2). According to Kgosana and Oliphant (2007: 7), teachers "exchanged textbooks for stones and chalk for *sjamboks*" (a sturdy whip or riding crop made from the hide of a rhinoceros or hippopotamus) in their aggressive 'down-tools' behaviour. Media reports focused on teacher and school principal misbehaviour, school crisis, school violence, girl pregnancy, teacher rape, teacher low literacy levels, non-performance and low Matric

results as themes to describe the educational setting in South Africa. Evidently, newspapers thrive on dismal and sensationalistic stories that portray the education system in chaos, with very little, if any, reference to positive matters related to teaching, teachers and school principals. Even though the previous Minister of Education, Mrs. Naledi Pandor (Pandor 2007:10) appealed to acknowledge the good work many teachers are doing, and to reward positive performances, very little evidence of this is seen in the mass media. A bleak picture of teaching and leadership in schools is still constantly reinforced through the media in the public imagination (Business Day 2012; Cape Argus 2012; Cape Times 2012; Citizen 2012; Daily News 2012; The Herald 2012; Sowetan 2011; The Star 2011; The Star 2012; and Sunday Independent 2011). It would appear that no other profession receives such negative publicity as that of education.

It is against this bleak décor that this article tells a narrative of a school principal who still managed to continue his work with some sense of professional honour and dignity in the face of this constant adversity and negative publicity. Such negative publicity was neither beneficial nor helpful for the public educational image, acknowledging that many malpractices do occur. However, focusing only on the problems might indeed only remain that, a focus on problems and deficiencies. The kind of research questions that researchers ask, matter. It matters for this inquiry, because affirming teacher and school principal strength, enhancing success-

Address for correspondence:
Prof. Brigitte Smit
Department of Educational
Leadership and Management,
College of Education,
Po Box 392,
0003 Unisa, South Africa
Telephone: +27(0) 824118847
Fax: +27(0) 991-2569
E-mail: smitb@unisa.ac.za

ful teaching and leadership experiences, and promoting strengths-based approaches in education is critical. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Preskill and Catsambas 2006:1) as the conceptual framework for designing this inquiry, posed questions not to accuse, blame, find fault or condemn, instead envisaging hope, energy and motivation in an ever-changing and challenging educational context. It is for this reason that this inquiry explored how Nathaniel manages his school so well despite a demanding educational landscape, of HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies, violence, xenophobia, high drop-outs, low learner performance, initiations or mountain schools, hunger, poverty, child headed households, inadequate resources and even deaths.

Conceptual Framework

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which frames this research, has its roots in social constructionism, which views that reality is socially constructed with multiple meanings. Put differently, social constructionism asserts that people use language and knowledge to create their world. As such, reality is a social construction, which implies that research that focuses on problems only, becomes such a reality which is about solving problems only. Instead of focusing on the shortcomings and problems in education, this inquiry revealed a compelling argument how a school principal leads a school to success and hope in the midst of discounting educational circumstances. Drawing on the seminal work of Cooperrider (1999) cited by Reed (2006) who developed AI in organizational dynamics, the Cleveland Clinic Project, this inquiry is about discovering new knowledge and new ideas about educational practice, using a productive and an appreciative approach. AI is a strength based approach for it focuses on an understanding of the assets of an organization. In 1982, Kenneth Gergen published *Toward Transformation of Social Knowledge*, (Reed 2006) which corresponds with the initial ideas of Cooperrider, who was then able to refine and reshape the ideas of AI in order to develop a strong theoretical foundation (Reed 2006: 24). Framed in social constructionist thinking, AI developed into an established way of inquiring into organizations and change, evident in a numbers of texts, journal articles and research projects (Reed 2006: 22-25).

Appreciative inquiry (Watkins 2011; Mishra and Bhatnagar 2012) is described as a philosophy and an orientation to change, which facilitates the actual practice in organizations. It is based on the assumption that change can be achieved through focussing on strengths and successes, moving away from an emphasis on weaknesses and failures. As such, it is a strength-based approach for it focuses on an understanding of the assets of an organization – as well as the individual (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003). Appreciative inquiry as conceptual framework has its roots in positive psychology, grounded in humanistic philosophy (Norum 2008). Positive psychology emphasises those qualities and aspects associated with success and as such AI parallels positive psychology in focussing on positive questions that will result in positive narratives (Fritz and Smit 2008). Traditional approaches typically focus on defining and diagnosing the problem and coming up with solutions. Positive psychology, and also Appreciative Inquiry, starts with exploring existing solutions and focusing on what works, which allows for greater commitment from individuals to initiate change and creating a *destiny* of choice and possibilities (Skinner and Kelley 2006).

The first assumption that underlies Appreciative Inquiry is the belief that every person has some unique talents and as such, does something right some of the time. The second assumption is that “*images of the future are created by social interactions among group members, and once these images are articulated and understood they can guide the individual and group action*” (Skinner and Kelley 2006: 81-82). Inquiring therefore into what works mobilises people into action, which is the third assumption of affirming the power of positive thinking. Cooperrider and Whitney (1999:10) give a lengthy yet accurate definition:

Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives ‘life’ when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to heighten positive potential. It mobilizes inquiry through crafting an ‘unconditional positive question’... In AI, intervention gives way to imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spi-

ralling diagnosis there is discovery, dream, and design. AI assumes that every living system has untapped, rich, and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link this 'positive change core' directly to any change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.

Given the need for schools in South Africa to transform, a focus on strengths and assets might be more useful than focusing and fixating on problem-saturated stories. This appreciative lens framed epistemological and ontological perspectives of this study, which had a bearing on the methodological thinking that is suitable for this inquiry.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research puzzle seeks to understand why Nathaniel performed so well despite the minimising and discounting educational landscape. That said, the aim of this inquiry was to write up a school principal narrative of hope and commitment in order to create a 'new' educational landscape, one of hope and commitment, a landscape that is conducive for teaching and learning, for socialising, for growth and human development.

The design genre for this inquiry was narrative inquiry (Clandinin 2007; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 2005) sourcing data from one school principal. These data were analysed for content and narrative and then reconstructed into a narrative of hope and commitment. In this regard, Cooperrider, cited by Reed (2006: 26) does suggest that topics for the empirical data in Appreciative Inquiry were carefully selected narratives that attend to possibilities, opportunities for effective and successful enactments. Importantly for this particular inquiry, was Cooperrider's key argument, that 'human systems grow in the direction of their deepest and most frequent inquiries' – the topic choice shapes the direction of growth, and words create worlds. The school culture was portrayed through Nathaniel's narrative. The researcher became reflexive (Richardson 2000) and was acutely aware of the 'partial lenses' and Nathaniel allowed her to move from an etic to an emic researcher position to learn and understand his professional life in this educational setting, totally unbeknown to the researcher Nathaniel was flown from the school where he was a teacher

and Head of Department to his new school where he now serves as the school principal. He generously invited the researcher to be part of his life. The researcher has known Nathaniel for a long time and has built a trustworthy relationship with him. Evidence for this is that now she has become a confidant and he consults with her on the challenges he faces in this school from time to time. Within the context of trust, ethical clearance was granted by the Department of Education and the Faculty of Education at her previous university.

The empirical data spoke to field notes and field texts (Michael 2005) collected from January 2005 to December 2011, in addition to a selection of media data from June 2007 to October 2012. The researcher used a variety of methods, such as non-participant observations, mostly informal guided conversations, and artefacts from the school, such as the vision and mission statements, newsletters, and journal entries. The researcher visited the school regularly, approximately twice per month, and spent the days in his school casually interacting, observing classes and staffroom meetings, making field notes, and transcribing digital informal and guided conversations. Such conversations took place during the normal activities of the school. As Nathaniel had time, he shared with the researcher daily events of his school. Often the researcher would spend 20 minutes talking, they would walk on the school grounds, and he would show her new developments of the sport fields, or the researcher would simply 'hang around' and observe school activities. These data were captured using a Livescribe™ recording device, which is unobtrusive. Data were analysed for content and narrative, using as a methodological frame, the 'Clandininian' "metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space" (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Clandinin 2007) to write up thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) of Nathaniel's narrative. This Clandininian frame appropriately analyses the personal and the social, as the educational landscape. The researcher learned how Nathaniel makes sense of his work environment, which shifts beyond the boundaries of what is normally known as 'school'. The immediate environment, and far beyond, shape his perceptions, meanings, work ethics, commitment, compassion, and enthusiasm in his daily engagement with teachers and learners.

FINDINGS

Nathaniel¹, the research participant, was an only child born on 19 December 1958 in Kwa-Guaqa in Witbank. He grew up at Tafelkop in Groblersdal in the former Leboa Homeland, which is now called Limpopo Province. He went to four different schools, three Primary Schools and one Secondary School, and wanted to study Law. Unfortunately, his parents were not in the position to pay for such studies. Inspired by his friends, he decided to become a teacher, a course that was subsidised with a bursary. He enrolled at the Ndebele College of Education, from 1983 to 1985, majoring in History and Sepedi, and graduating with a Secondary Teacher Diploma. In 2001, he passed his B Ed Hons degree in Quality Assurance and Assessment, at the University of Pretoria. To supplement his income as an undergraduate student, he worked as a stock clerk in a paint factory. In his private life Nathaniel was involved in a number of community activities, including a council member, church elder and interpreter. Nathaniel and his wife both served as translators and interpreters in a multi-racial church, the Abundant Life Ministries, where sermons are preached in English. English is the common language, since churchgoers are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Ndebele, Sotho, Xhosa, Pedi and Zulu. Nathaniel and his wife were well versed in these languages, which enabled them to translate and interpret the sermons as need arose. He had been married to his wife for twenty years and together they had two children. His wife was also a headmaster of a nearby rural/township primary school. They supported each other in their leadership roles, exchanged information and shared their management experiences. *My problems are her problems*, he told the researcher. *I share the work load at home— cooking, washing, ironing and so forth – now that my wife has to complete her doctoral studies, I help in the house. My parents taught me how to do this.*

Nathaniel started his teaching career in 1986 and has been teaching since. During this time he worked at three different schools and has been at DK since 1989, teaching Sepedi, History, Afrikaans and Biblical Studies, to Grades 10 to 12. In 2000 Nathaniel was promoted to Head of Department. He also served on numerous school committees, including the governing body, the learner support team, the Christian Movement, the As-

essment team, the Merit Award and the Management Team. Management and leadership skills enable Nathaniel to serve on these committees. These skills he learnt when he studied for a Further Diploma in Education in Management and School Organisation. To sharpen these skills, he has enrolled for a leadership course at the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance.

In January 2008, Nathaniel was promoted to headmaster of a rural/township secondary school, some 10km away from where he had been teaching for 17 years. This promotion attested to his dedication, commitment, and excellent performance in education. In fact, he was promoted from head of department to headmaster, and not first to deputy headmaster. His fellow teachers were extremely troubled by his departure and learners expressed their disappointment. Nathaniel had a trusting, respectful relationship with his learners. His gentle and kind conduct in class showed his rapport with learners. In fact, he was labeled, *Mr Wonderful*. He was a disciplinarian, not authoritarian. He earned the respect from learners he deserved, simply because he treated learners with dignity and humility. These fine characteristics were honed at his parents' home. His parents nurtured such values. Nathaniel acknowledged the role of his parents who lived humble lives – his father worked all his life for the South African Railway Department, and his mother was a domestic worker. Today, they are pensioners. This humble person displayed the characteristics of what it means to be a compassionate and caring teacher and principal. He showed passionate and genuine interest in his learners and staff. His daily conduct was driven by Christian values and beliefs – and he was not ashamed to share these – in fact he opened the assembly with Bible readings and prayers. He spoke in these Bible readings and addressed learners about ethical conduct, hard work and time management. He walked the talk: *I have the element of God inside of me*. He served both learners and fellow teachers. In times of despondency he drew on his faith for strength. Some days, he *simply pushed on* to cite Him verbatim. He exuded strength, without being forceful. He spoke with authority, without be autocratic. He supported learners in genuine ways – he understood their contexts of poverty and pain all too well. During crises of sickness, hunger and death, he helped learners beyond of what

was expected of him: he started a learner support group in his school as well as a prayer group. Together with some teachers he prayed during break for the school and the learners.

Nathaniel has been involved in the *Bontle Ke Botho Campaign*: the school cleaning project. This project was coordinated by the Gauteng Department of Agriculture, an annual cleaning and greening competition – Bontle ke Botho. This campaign, which was aimed at promoting ecological activism among local communities and school learners, was born out of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which was held in Johannesburg in 2002. Bontle ke Botho means being beautiful is being human. Nathaniel ‘lives’ this beauty! The project intended to create a beautiful quality life for all and aimed to promote participation in and contribution towards living and learning that enhances human dignity. Furthermore, the *Bontle ke Botho* campaign focused on themes such as ‘Sustainable Water Conservation, Sustainable Waste, Sustainable Energy and Sustainable Agriculture. The theme of Sustainable Water Conservation provided a platform for building mass public awareness and the planning and implementation of practical programs focused on safe water, adequate sanitation and hygiene awareness. Three staff members, under the leadership of Nathaniel and five pupils have been responsible for this project in their school.

Nathaniel took up the leadership in the ‘new’ school with honour, modesty and renewed strength. The school had many needs, basic needs: flushing toilets, paving, car ports, a security fence, sport grounds, and so forth. The school, which was situated in Mpumalanga Province, was incorporated into the Gauteng Province in 2007, has been neglected for many years. Little if any resources had been invested here. This school was Nathaniel’s new challenge. His inherent dignity and respect for others was visible. Staff welcomed him with a gift, which he really appreciated: *The beauties that others do for me, I want to do the same for them*. Outward beauty and neatness were values he takes seriously. At a parents’ meeting recently, he requested all parents to take responsibility for their children’s school uniform. Learners were then taking great pride in wearing their uniform. Nathaniel was making his mark in a positive manner – he wanted to be proud of his school! His pride spoke beyond the realms of his school. He actively participated in the local community, where the

school children live. This was a context where HIV/AIDS is a pandemic, and where poverty and child headed households were at the order of the day.

DISCUSSION

This inquiry wanted to make positive contributions to educational practice, given the educational hardships in the South African context. To date, most if not all research into educational practices focuses on problems – this inquiry took purposively a positive stance, as opposed to the usual deficit stance (Preskill and Catsambas 2006: 3). The researcher inquired into the ‘best’ of a school principal, acknowledging that which gave *life* to staffrooms and classrooms, present strengths, assets and human potential. Nathaniel spoke about hope, courage, high and pleasant experiences and he linked these to why he considered his leadership as worthwhile. In the analysis the researcher recognised so much good in him, something that ‘gave him life’ in his school, enhanced strength, that which gave him power, and that which made his professional life worthwhile.

Appropriately, according to Preskill and Catsambas (2006 :2), “underlying AI is a belief that the questions that were asked were critical to the world they created. In so doing, ‘organisations move toward what they study’”. So the focus was to unpack what was good, what is right, what was working well in school, and beyond. Also, what gave Nathaniel joy, when and how he was energised, where he showed commitment and courage, was what the researcher looked for in the data. Nathaniel expressed hope for the children, hope for the future, commitment and hope for education and teaching and leadership, and a passion for teaching, wanting to help children. Therefore, it is argued that based on such feelings and thoughts, these discourses of education could be strengthened and enhanced – heightened positive potential could be optimized, and educational intervention could pave the way for positive change, innovations and motivation. If fundamentally such capacity existed in the system, which could build on achievement, (even little ones) assets, opportunities, high point moments, assets based narratives and expressions of wisdom to create an educational environment, then an ideal landscape for teaching and learning could be realised. If schools could tap into

what they want more of, not less of, and tap into the positive qualities of teachers and principals and amplifying those, such schools would be far more conducive to teaching and learning. Assuming that schools grow in the direction of what they repeatedly focus on, that is where the attention should be.

Importantly for Nathaniel's narrative of hope, was the multifaceted exposition of hope, commitment and passion in the context of public scrutiny, bad publicity, constant policy change, low status, poor remuneration, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa. Although recent research has shown (Smit and Fritz 2008) that the power of the working environment, the educational landscape, was a much stronger force in education than national educational policies, this inquiry revealed that a school principal can move beyond the realms of the educational practice to make meaning of his professional life, experiencing hope, showing commitment and passion for his school. Also, narrative inquiries that create textured vocabularies of hope, and narratives that serve as catalysts for positive transformation in schools, set the platform for hopeful research agendas that focus on life-producing and energising aspects in schools. If according to Lude-ma (2001:13) "the premise that hope was a primary source of positive knowledge and action in organizational life is accepted, and the tenets of social constructionism – that knowledge is a social artefact, that language is the means by which knowledge is developed, that there is an inextricable link between language, knowledge, and action – were embraced, then it could be concluded that the creation of textured vocabularies of hope may well be the most powerful tool available if the aim was to generate constructive organizational understandings that open new possibilities for human organizing and action".

CONCLUSION

This inquiry expected to create positive awareness of educational practice, school leadership as well as teaching and learning, given the educational challenges in the South African context. To date, most if not all research into educational practices and teacher education, educational leadership focused on problems – this inquiry took purposively a positive stance, as opposed to the usual deficit stance. The researcher inquired into the 'best' of Nathaniel, acknowledging how he gives *life* to his new school, presents strengths, assets and poten-

tial. Words in the daily discourse matter, and the disempowering discourse needed to be replaced, because how principals thought, behaved, managed, lead and interacted with learners and staff, affected how they respond. This inquiry was a first step in such a positive direction. And finally, deep and appreciative exploration into ultimate concerns had the capacity to inspire hope precisely because it compels to transcend the ego, to put people in service of a cause that was beyond them yet that could be personal, and to moved toward 'the best as a totality'. According to Bushe (2007), this spoke to wisdom needed in schools, and the quality of school leadership, which was a good predictor of the success of an Appreciative Inquiry or project. Hope, commitment and passion at a school where Appreciative Inquiry was driven, would make the difference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Appreciative inquiry is an under-used research method² both in terms of empirical and theoretical approaches in the field of educational leadership, navigating educational change and a leadership of transition. It has the potential to make significant contributions to the educational research practice. This inquiry highlighted that good practice in educational leadership using appreciative inquiry can make a distinctive contribution to educational leadership and management in South African schools. There are useful guidelines for appreciative inquiry and the study of leadership in order to elicit rich narratives about positive experiences³. Given this type of design and methodology, qualitative researchers are reminded that principals more often than not report on what is wrong and find it difficult to focus on the positive. They need to reflect purposively on what is right⁴ and once they are able to do so, they elaborate with ease on these and become often quite excited about the topic. This inquiry suggests that more inquiries should focus on what works in the hope that once matters of the future are addressed, principals are able to propose possible solutions to current problems.

NOTES

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