Transformational Leadership: Lessons from Ramosilei's Leadership Study in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Educators are faced with classroom problems in South African schools which force them to quit as they cannot find solutions to them. This study investigated whether there were lessons to be learned from a successful study by a retired school teacher in the former Venda in Limpopo Province of South Africa. A qualitative approach was adopted to explain and describe the study. Data was obtained from both primary sources such as speeches where the researcher took down notes during the interview proceedings and also from secondary data extracted from literature. From the notes taken by the researcher, information was collated and analysed to answer the research questions. This study has revealed that learning and teaching should be integrated in the classroom and the teacher should provide leadership all the time and understand that learners are not small adults but children who need an adult to take them by the hand and guide them towards adulthood. This study recommends that the lessons from Ramosilei should be shared with other schools. It also proposes that schools could succeed if they establish stakeholder relationships with the management and administration of schools.

Keywords: transformational leadership; teacher; learners; education; schools; Mashamba village

Introduction

This study revolves around a single individual whose teaching career was characterised by positive highlights of success which can be used to motivate those educators who feel that the teaching profession has become unbearable. The study is premised on the fact that educators in Africa today are confronted with various classroom challenges which tempt

them to think of quitting the profession. These challenges, such as lack of discipline by learners, lack of parental support and sometimes little or no support from the departments of education, threaten the normal running of the education system. In order to prevent this from happening there is a need for the educators to devise strategies to meet these challenges to encourage teachers to remain in the profession. One such strategy is to provide leadership for the educators themselves. Leithwood, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004, 20) mention that defining objectives and exercising influence are embedded in the definition of leadership. Leadership plays a crucial role in educational administration because it directly affects the actions and outcomes of learners. Successful leadership is evidenced by the knowledge and skills that learners have gained during the learning process. However, it has been shown by research that the success of transformational leadership has less to do with under-resourced schools than with the quality of teachers (Leithwood, Anderson, and Wahlstrom 2004, 5). A lack of leadership qualities on the part of teachers causes them to leave the teaching profession. Other reasons are the enormous frustrations they experience with the education departments, parents and learners. This has become a challenge for public administration which should ensure that appropriate policies are formulated to confront this disastrous problem faced by the departments of education (Worth et al. 2015, 10). The survey conducted in 2015 by Worth et al. (2015, 10) in England found that 20 per cent of teachers were considering leaving teaching and retiring or seeking another job within the education sector outside of teaching while others were undecided on their next move. In Africa education has become a cheap commodity with pupils no longer interested in education, although it is generally viewed as the key to the development of human capital. Educators on the other hand see the profession merely as a source of income, without deriving job satisfaction from it.

The research report by De Villiers (2012) from the University of Pretoria found that South Africa lose around 4000 teachers on an annual basis due to migration within and outside the country. Transformational educators provide more learning opportunities by strengthening students' identities and encouraging their contributions and involvement in learning. They are able to negotiate learning and teaching and facilitate the involvement of learners in the learning process (Zhu 2016, 210). The study conducted by Deacon (2014) concluded that the educational process is a partnership between two parties, namely the learner and the educator. This process is mutually beneficial whereby one party receives education while the other facilitates its acquisition (Deacon 2014, 1). Leadership does not exist for its own sake, but is a gift which some have while others do not. A leader is one who has the ability to lead his followers from the front to attain the objective (Al Maktoum 2012, 47). The study by Mji and Makgato (2006, 32) in Gauteng revealed that the existence of resources in a school does not guarantee good performance. Transformational leadership looks beyond itself and sees its existence integrated with that of its learners and does not abandon its calling, as the study by Mafukata and Mudau (2015) found when researching why teachers left the profession between 2014 and 2015. The purpose of this paper is to describe the case of a retired teacher whose exemplary leadership qualities show how today's educators can rescue the ailing teaching profession.

Profile of the Locality of the Study

The study area is Mashamba village situated in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province of South Africa. This is a poverty-stricken rural village with a school called Mashamba Primary. It is one of the many neglected schools in the district that lacks resources for learning such as a library, textbooks, qualified teachers, and even a proper school building. Mr Ramosilei Lazarus was born in this small rural village of Ha-Mashamba in the former Venda, in Limpopo, South Africa. As teaching was the popular profession available for black South Africans at the time, he trained as a primary school teacher between 1973 and 1974 at Tshisimani Training Institute, established by Lutheran missionaries to train teachers. After completing his teaching course, he started his teaching career in 1975. The subjects he taught were English, General Science (Biology and Science), Music and Afrikaans. He loved the teaching profession in which he excelled and proved himself to be such a competent teacher that he was promoted to become a principal at the young age of 29, a position he held until 2015 when he retired. Mr Ramosilei taught many students who entered a number of professions as more and more opportunities opened up apart from teaching. They became engineers, medical doctors, nurses, financial managers and were among those who attended his farewell function at which they made speeches that aroused the interest of the researcher to undertake this study to restore hope to the many teachers of this 21st century who have given up on teaching and decided to take early retirement.

Literature Review

Educators today are faced with different challenges which seem to be far from being resolved. These challenges threaten the education system at a time when education should be a tool to promote economic development. Barrett and Breyer (2014) posit that educators are challenged with meeting teaching and learning demands at a time when the environment is characterised by negative undercurrents such as poverty, teacher dissatisfaction, inadequate salaries and poor training. These challenges have their origin in the unresolved question of their status, in terms of whether teaching as a career is a profession or not when compared with the professions of medicine and law as well as professional knowledge, autonomy and commitment to the welfare of their clientele (Shon 2006). This questionable lack of professionalism in teaching is perceived as compromising the quality of education (Shon 2006). However, Fapohunda (2013, 1) contends that there are many factors that contribute to the failure of the education system to provide quality education to the learners apart from those mentioned by Shon (2006). Fapohunda (2013, 1) posits that according to Shon (2006) team building is crucial in providing quality education because team building promotes team performance. Sparks (2013, 28) postulates that since teamwork is a recipe for the success of schools, leadership and teaching teams are crucial in improving teaching and learning. Sparks (2013, 28) further contends that leadership can only be effective and enhanced if there are effective teams to improve teaching and learning, nurture relationships, increase job satisfaction, and provide a means for mentoring and supporting new teachers and administrators. Teamwork and its characterisation will be discussed

below because it is seen as key in motivating educators or teachers and discouraging them from thinking of quitting their profession.

Setting Clear Goals

Teamwork functions well if goals are set so that the execution of tasks is directed towards achieving them. These goals should be clearly defined and not be ambiguous otherwise they will frustrate the team rather than motivating them. Team FME (2013, 6) argues that goals are crucial in any organisation such as schools since they guide the teachers towards the achievement of the set objectives. Team FME (2013, 6) postulates that there is a correlation between teamwork and goals. Goals are viewed as a tool to assist team members to achieve the end results of their teaching. They stimulate teachers to put more effort into their work and perform better. Goals are also credited with providing teachers with the opportunity to become pro-active in decision-making that leads to long-term productivity improvement (Team FME 2013). However, goal setting does not happen on its own but needs an inspirational and dedicated leader, especially when there are negative factors, mentioned above, such as salaries that do not keep up with inflation (Barrett and Breyer 2014, 1).

Leadership and Training Teams

Leadership occupies a crucial role in the management of any organisations such as schools. It is leadership that must contribute to the establishment of training teams that should ensure an effective teaching and learning environment. Ngang et al. (2010, 267) contend that teachers should be trained in leadership to build capacity and enhance and improve every student's level of achievement (Ngang et al. 2010, 267). Educators who are trained to become leaders are in a position to demonstrate those tangible leadership skills, such as the promotion of professional growth in the teaching and learning environment as postulated by Honig, Copland, and Rainey (2010). However, in order to acquire all these skills those who are in senior positions will be expected to provide support to the teachers during the learning process and also to help solve the difficulties that teachers face in the schools (Paulsen and Martin 2014). Training teams, if established, will assist teachers to discuss their challenges and also how to deal with them without leaving the profession. In contrast to the research findings about the positive value of teamwork, Omuya et al. (2011) argue that team building also has disadvantages, such as slowing down the completion of tasks, fomenting personality clashes, encouraging laziness among members, low motivation, selfishness and competition for recognition. But this study also contends that these disadvantages can be turned into advantages by quality leadership that inspires the team to perform beyond expectations. The School Governing Body (SGB) chairperson of Mashamba Primary School described Mr Ramosilei not only as a team builder but also a team-worker. He said that when the school was destroyed by a thunderstorm and the roof blown off by wind, Mr Ramosilei organised tents for learners. With the SGB, he led a campaign to raise funds to reconstruct the school and approached GENCO to this end. GENCO rebuilt the school as part of the Nelson Mandela School. The SGB was very

impressed by the manner in which he cooperated with them to carry out such a huge project. The chairperson of the SGB said that Mr Ramosilei taught him many skills which he described in his own words:

> He taught and trained me in HRM, time management and self-management. In 1996 the new school re-opened. For the first time I boarded an aeroplane from Makhado to GENCO just for lunch.

Dimensions of Teaching Leadership

The post-apartheid education system proposes a participatory approach in leadership and management in schools (Republic of South Africa 1996). It is premised on the notion of sharing the challenges of leadership across all the stakeholders in the school. Findings have shown that teachers felt their leadership was only limited to the classroom. This suggests that teachers want to exercise leadership beyond the classroom in Kwazulu-Natal schools.

It is possible that in every school there are teachers whose vision goes beyond classrooms, teams and departments. These teachers acknowledge that learners' experience also depends on the complex system throughout the school environment. As a result, teachers want to find ways to implement teacher leadership (Danielson 2007).

Does Leadership Inspire Teaching and Classroom Learning?

A study by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER 2007) found five leadership dimensions crucial to promoting teacher and student learning. These are educational direction, strategic alignment, and the creation of a supportive community that learns how to encourage student success, engage in constructive problem solving and select and develop relevant learning materials. Teaching success hinges on leadership and how it takes place and as such, teachers should be on top of the learning process (ACER 2007). In order to be effective, teachers as leaders need to be empowered so that they can put their leadership skills into practice and ensure that the education system is able to educate pupils (Searby and Shaddix 2008). Leaders should be prepared to serve by being empowered and prepared to teach pupils in such a manner that teaching is transformed into an effective, challenging and engaging activity (Searby and Shaddix 2008). However, since schools are becoming more complex, school leadership should encompass the participation of various participants beyond one individual (Ballek et al. 2005 cited in Searby and Shaddix 2008). Teachers initially enter the teaching profession with enthusiasm in order to make a meaningful contribution to society only to be subsequently confronted with social pressures and values which are alien to them and which result in disappointment and frustration and eventually regret (Farber 1991, 36). Teaching and learning are effectively facilitated when the teacher shows love for his or her pupils who need to look up to their teacher like their parents. Maslow has proposed a hierarchy, commonly known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is a key component for human motivation. Love goes with the need to belong. Other needs are self-actualisation, self-esteem, security and physiological needs (Huitt 2007). However, these needs are not achieved at the same time but follow a particular order.

The emphasis in the hierarchy of needs was to prove that motivation is not limited to external rewards alone (McLeod 2007). The teacher should ensure that all these needs are met to enable learning to effectively take place. In his speech, Col. Mashamba described Mr Ramosilei as a man who possessed unique leadership skills. Mr Ramosilei had saved his life and made him the man of high calibre he is today. He encouraged and instilled self-esteem in him and other pupils of his time. In his own words he said, "Had it not been for him, I would have long been buried. When I was frustrated he told both my uncle and mother that all would be fine with me, so they should not worry." His leadership contributed to his belief and conviction that any child has the potential to succeed even if this child is not gifted as long as the educator provides support. This study contends that there is a relationship between a teacher, leadership and school effectiveness. The factors that contribute to school effectiveness are a positive environment (6.5%), free and open channels of communication (2.9%), and above all the quality of teacher leadership. In their study, Katzenmeyer and Molter (2001) found that teachers with leadership qualities transformed the teacher and learning experience in a number of schools.

Praise and Feedback

Praise and feedback should be part of a teacher's duty in the primary school classroom in order to motivate the learners to improve their performance. It was also revealed by the study that praise should be targeted at specific behaviour such as the successful completion of a task (Burnett and Mandel 2010, 145). A study by Burnett and Mandel (2010, 151) revealed that teachers used general, non-targeted praise more often in the classroom. A student's ability to learn is dependent on the type of classroom environment that is created by teachers. The classroom environment should foster cooperation and acceptance and be compatible with the teaching methods employed by the teacher (Bucholtz and Sheffler 2009, 2).

Professionalism

The profession is still considered one of low status from a quality perspective, since it is perceived to produce low quality output (Tanang and Abu 2014, 25). In their study, Tanang and Abu revealed that teachers should be able to demonstrate exemplary behaviour and attitudes, outstanding teaching skills, wide knowledge and firm beliefs in carrying out a variety of learning activities in an effective professional manner (2014, 25). Teaching is a calling and as such teachers should be more creative in making learning interesting to learners. In their study, Rahimi and Karkami (2015, 57) found that those teachers who involved their learners improved their performance. They found that teachers who applied punitive strategies were considered by learners as being less effective in facilitating learning (Rahimi and Karkami 2015, 57). According to these authors, motivating learners was found to have the strongest effect on their achievement (Rahimi and Karkami 2015, 57). Professional teachers should display caring attitudes and should plan and design their classroom environments and the social studies curricula in ways that promote effective civic practice and development. Their caring classrooms foster a sense of community and

security in young children (Johnson and Thomas 2009, 8). This therefore suggests that those teachers who do not implement the strategies mentioned here still lack a sense of professionalism. This paper contends that such teachers will always struggle to succeed in their profession and the end result is that they will feel isolated and quit the profession.

Methodology

This study was carried out at Ha-Mashamba in the rural Venda area that falls under Vhembe District Municipality in Limpopo Province. The school where Ramosilei taught, both as a teacher and principal, was surrounded by poverty and the learners needed a teacher of his calibre to succeed. He motivated learners, teachers, parents and the School Governing Body (SGB) to be positive in the teaching and learning of pupils. During his time as principal of Mashamba Primary School, thunderstorms destroyed the whole school and he led the SGB in convincing GENCO to rebuild the school as part of the Nelson Mandela School. This study was conducted in order to convince teachers and principals that quitting should not be an option even if the environment they work in is not favourable. His distinguished career should set an example to all those who wish to enter the teaching career as well as those who are already in it. This study used a research design, which is defined as the planning of a scientific enquiry in order to identify the cause of a given problem (Babbie 1992, 89) by outlining appropriate procedures including the sources of data for this study (Bak 2004, 25). The research involves data collection, sampling and analysis (Polit and Hungler 1993, 130). Babbie (1992, 90–1) lists three types of research design, namely exploration, description and explanation. This study therefore adopts exploratory and descriptive research designs as well as a qualitative methodology. A qualitative study is described as holistic and naturalistic and is based on the premise that knowledge about human beings is only possible through lived human experience as defined by the participants themselves (Polit and Hungler 1993, 325). This study describes and explains the type of leadership that is needed to sustain educators in schools instead of them quitting the profession.

Sources of Data

This study is based on primary and secondary data extracted from speeches and a review of published literature respectively. It is a qualitative study that will analyse speeches delivered by various respondents who participated in the farewell function and summarise data from the literature. The researcher took notes while speakers were making congratulatory speeches in March 2015 at the welcoming function marking the retirement of Mr Ramosilei Lazarus, who was a teacher and subsequently a school principal in the small village of Ha-Mashamba. He was congratulated for having been a "teacher" with a passion for education and who went out of his way to ensure that his pupils, against all odds, attended school because to him education was a weapon to fight poverty and deprivation and promote development. Secondary data is defined as data that has already been collected for other purposes and in this case enabled the author to analyse leadership theories (Adams et al. 2007, 85). The author of this study used secondary data to position

Ramosilei in the study to see if his contribution to teaching and learning could yield some useful lessons. The study found that his leadership style can benefit and inspire new educators and those who are in the education system beyond the Mashamba area. Primary data was extracted from the speeches of various speakers who spoke whilst the author of this paper took notes. These notes were analysed and enabled the carrying out of the study in relation to its objectives. The primary data confirmed the literature in that Ramosilei's experience needs to be used to inspire educators to continue in teaching and learning environments. Both primary and secondary data have revealed that there are lessons that can be learnt from Ramosilei which can be applied to other schools' educators.

Data Analysis

The researcher took notes during the speeches from which he was able to compile a report that enabled him to answer the research questions. The objectives of this paper are two-fold. First, what are the factors that made Mr Ramosilei succeed in instilling a love of education in his pupils and second, what are the lessons to be learnt from the successful career of this great teacher to improve the current situation?

Results and Discussion

Leadership

Sharma and Jain (2013, 310) describe leadership as a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organisation in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent. In his speech, Col. Mashamba described Mr Ramosilei as a man who possessed unique leadership skills. He had saved his life and produced the man of high calibre he is today. He encouraged and instilled self-esteem in him and other pupils of his time. "Had it not been for him, I would have long been buried. When I was frustrated he told both my uncle and mother that all would be well with me, so they should not worry. His leadership ability made him understand that even if a child failed, if promoted, he could catch up and succeed later." Mr Mashamba went on to say:

> When I failed he permitted me to move up to the next class. Today I am a colonel. Mr Ramosilei had three characteristics, namely teacher, counsellor, and a religious man. He made South Africa a better place.

Another speaker, Nesengani, emphasised that he instilled leadership in her as she is a nursing manager today. She went on to praise him for shaping her character towards real goals. She said that wherever she worked she carried the lessons she learnt with her. In describing the leadership of Mr Ramosilei, Nesengani said that he displayed his leadership skills at secondary school where he used to assist them to get water during water crisis periods.

Love

Among the 10 characteristics of a good teacher, the love of work and children is paramount (Via cited in Miller 1987, 36). Mr Ramosilei had a profound love for his pupils. He loved them as if they were his own. He was a real father to them. His love also embraced those who were less gifted and he encouraged them to complete their education and move on to tertiary institutions. He assisted and supported those who performed poorly. He had a sense of humour. He would teach and then suddenly fall silent, saying "My wife." He punished his pupils with love. Every time he wanted to punish them he would first sing a song. He brought visual aids into the classroom when it was not fashionable. A speaker said that he personally did not want to go to school but he congratulated this teacher in the following way:

> I personally did not want to go to school and when I played truant, he would send big boys to come and fetch me from home.

The speaker managed to finish school and subsequently worked at the following places and in the following capacities: at Venda Sun and insurance companies, with air traffic control at SAA, and with pension funds at Alexander Forbes.

Another speaker said that Mr Ramosilei's pupils became medical doctors and professors, agriculturalists, teachers, etc. He brought light to the village of Ha-Mashamba by educating so many people over the years.

Training

According to Sloman (2005, 2), training is characterised as an instructor-led, content-based intervention leading to desired changes in behaviour. Another speaker, Dr Rambau, a medical doctor, said that she was one of those who did not want to go to school, but Mr Ramosilei would not allow her to stay away from school and would punish her with a stick and not a cane. Rambau said:

> He was more than a teacher. He was a trainer who trained [me] and others as if [we] were his own children. He taught me with love to realise my ambitions. When I passed STD 5 he bought us cups and towels. With the cups he said we should drink juice when we read and with the towels he said we should wipe off our sweat when we read.

Rambau today puts into practice what he taught her. In her own words she says,

> Today at work I practise what you trained me to do. This is your time of harvest.

As a token of appreciation for this great teacher she brought him a Bible. She concluded by saying that she was there to celebrate the retirement of "my" principal.

Songs and Music

Teachers should be creative by engaging their learners in absorbing activities and being able to add pace and humour to their teaching (Miller 1987, 36). Ramosilei as a teacher used to amuse his class by singing to them to arouse their interest in education. Ms Mashamba highlighted the fact that she was speaking for all the educators who were trained by him in 1975.

When he taught English he would always include singing, which enhanced students' performance. Singing laid solid foundations for their command of English which proved indispensable when they went to a college of education where they also performed well. This representative teacher said

> He instilled a love of English in me and today I am an English teacher myself. At my primary school, I was top of the class. At college my lecturer told me I would be a good teacher because of the solid foundations I received from Mr Ramosilei.

Sometimes the songs were associated with corporal punishment, but the pupils liked it because of the tunes. As one speaker observed,

> His songs encouraged us. Today we are training a generation of students based on the precepts he laid down for us.

Mr Ramosilei hated those learners who did not want to attend school. He ordered them to lie on benches as a punishment. He would go to his pupils' homes to bring them to school himself.

Learning by Association

Hammond et al. (2001) define learning by association as a process of drawing connections between what is already known or understood and new information. According to them, knowing in advance what the big ideas are and how they interrelate conceptually helps learners to make sense of information and remember and use it more flexibly. Mr Mabatha, who was taught by Ramosilei from 1979, described him as a good science teacher. According to him, Ramosilei could make science simple by associating it with an aeroplane being flown or with boiling water. In his own words, Mabatha said that through this associative learning "[t]oday I am an engineer and am responsible for setting government budgets."

Professionalism

Mr Selapyane, Mr Ramosilei's successor as principal, said that Mr Ramosilei had 36 years of outstanding success. He lamented the laziness of teachers today. He said that there was a need to celebrate his exemplary career. He was described as a man of vision. He created a centre of excellence in this village, the Mandela Presidential School. He emphasised the uniqueness of this man in the following words:

He had an art of reconciling teachers when disputes arose at school. He led us like a parent indeed. He called us brothers and sisters when we went astray. He was a real leader and initiator.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study has shown that teachers can perform in any environment as long as they possess the right attitude towards their work, as Ramosilei did. The study has also shown that leadership is vital to the success of teachers and learners irrespective of their background. In order to succeed in the classroom teachers should love their work and learners should be supported to become the adults of tomorrow, as was exemplified by Ramosilei's career. Learning and teaching could be more successful if the two are integrated and presented through entertainment, as Ramosilei did by using songs and music to stimulate learners. Teaching and learning can be stimulating if the two are integrated into learning processes by association because students learn if they see links between what they know and what they do not know. The study has revealed that teamwork can make the impossible possible as demonstrated by the relationships Ramosilei built up to transform a rural school into an effective modern one, producing results and empowering most of his learners to become responsible members of society beyond the confines of Ha-Mashamba. This study recommends that the lessons from Ramosilei's career be shared with other schools so that they can learn from them. It also recommends that educators should build and strengthen relationships to assist in the running of schools, as the relationships of stakeholders at Ha-Mashamba showed was possible.

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Congratulatory Wishes and Speeches

Mabatha, P., 27 March 2015, Ha-Mashamba Village.

Mashamba, R. M., 27 March 2015, Ha-Mashamba Village.

Mashamba, F. M., 27 March 2015, Ha-Mashamba Village.

Nesengani, M., 27 March 2015, Ha-Mashamba Village.

Rambau, T. D., 27 March 2015, Ha-Mashamba Village.

Selapyane, B. M., 27 March 2015, Ha-Mashamba Village.

SGB Chairperson, 27 March 2015, Ha-Mashamba Village.