EXAMINING SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Hester Nienaber
University of South Africa
nienah@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The issue of effective school governance ensuring quality in education in South Africa is often raised in the literature. Some authors are of the view that the current form of school governance is sophisticated and complex. A question that arises is whether school governing board members have the skills to effectively discharge their responsibility. Literature suggests training as a means of capacitating members to be able to effectively do so. However, limited success is achieved with training. The question thus arises whether the training is perhaps too limited. Servant leadership is examined as an alternative to empower members of school governing bodies to effectively discharge responsibilities. According to servant leadership, all members of a group/community, irrespective of designation, can contribute to the betterment of the group/community.

Keywords: effective school governance, school governing bodies, servant leadership, South Africa, autonomy, ethical theory

INTRODUCTION

School governing bodies, an important role player in ensuring quality in education in South Africa, often receive attention in the literature. One of the points highlighted in these reviews is challenges to the effective functioning of the School Governing Body (SGB) (see for example Heystek 2006; 2010; Mbokodi and Singh, 2011; Mncube, Harber and Du Plessis 2011; Tsotetsi, Van Wyk and Lemmer 2008; Xaba 2011). A variety of reasons are advanced for the governance challenges, which have as a central theme the capacity to govern (Xaba 2011). Effective school governance has wide ranging positive results, including improved academic achievement (Mbokodi and Singh, 2011; Mncube *et al*. 2011). Hence, it is relevant to study effective school governance.

The concept of school governance, school governance in its current form as well as school governance as a partnership between stakeholders, is not unique to South Africa (Tsotetsi *et al*. 2008). The South African Schools Act (Act No.84 of 1996) (SASA) formally provides for democratic governance, which entails the decentralisation of power to school level, through the establishment of the SGB. The SGB has considerable powers, which are prescribed by the SASA, including the composition and function of the SGB. Membership of SGB comprises the principal, co-opted members and elected members from parents of learners at the school, educators at the school, members of

staff who are not educators and learners in the eighth grade or higher in secondary schools. The parents hold a majority presentation (50% plus one member). Functions include, but are not limited to, the development of a school mission statement; adopting a code of conduct of learners of the school; act on misconduct by learners; determine the admission and language policy of the school; and support educators (principal, educators and other staff) in the performance of their professional functions. This form of school governance is described as sophisticated and complex (Tsotetsi *et al*. 2008). Hence, research raises the question whether the stakeholders in democratic governance are adequately equipped to effectively discharge their responsibility (Heystek 2006; Mbokodi and Singh 2011; Xaba 2011).

Heystek (2010), Mncube *et al*. (2011) and Tsotetsi *et al*. (2008) observed that training could play a role in equipping members of SGBs to effectively discharge their responsibilities. Some authors mentioned success achieved by training, albeit limited (Xaba 2011). The question that arises is whether training, which seems to cover only duties prescribed by the SASA, is too narrow, in view of the challenges experienced. Consequently, this conceptual article examines servant leadership as a way out of these challenges. This is achieved by a synthesis review of the literature on servant leadership, with specific reference to school governing bodies. Literature was searched by subject, specifically education, covering databases such as ProQuest, Emerald and EbscoHost. Search terms used were 'servant leadership' and limited to 'school board/governing body'. A total of 180 articles were returned of which ten met the inclusion criteria of discussing the concept servant leadership and/or servant leadership in the context of a school board (governing body). These articles were mainly qualitative in nature, examining the concept servant leadership and/or the application of servant leadership in the context of school governing bodies (schools boards). From these articles it appeared that school governing bodies utilising servant leadership achieve successes.

CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

This section briefly highlights challenges to effective school governance in South Africa. These challenges are presented in no specific order, nor is it claimed that the list is all-encompassing. Rather, the challenges presented are deemed to represent the scope of the situation. Some of the governance challenges stem from the SASA itself. These range from the ambiguity of the provisions of the SASA to members lacking requisite skills to effectively discharge of their duties (Heystek 2006; Tsotetsi *et al*. 2008; Xaba 2011). The difference between school governance and professional issues is but one example of the provisions of SASA that gives rise to challenges (Heystek 2006; Tsotetsi *et al*. 2008; Xaba 2011). It is argued that parents will not be able to support the principal if they cannot get involved in at least some professional issues, for example, questioning the frequent absence of a teacher, which may be perceived as infringing on the rights of teachers (Heystek 2006). The lack of skills, in particularly financial and policy development and implementation, is explicitly mentioned as examples of

a lack of skills (Tsotetsi *et al*. 2008; Xaba 2011). Management of school resources, in particular finances and facilities management, which relates to specialised skills and thus related to the previous point, is also cited (Tsotetsi 2008; Xaba 2011). Strained relationships between the members of SGB, emanating from differences in perceptions about the roles of and/or the efficacy with which members discharge their duties are also observed (Heystek 2006; Mbokodi and Singh 2011; Mncube *et al*. 2011; Tsotetsi *et al*. 2008; Xaba 2011). Strained relationships result in parents' non-participation in SGB activities (Mbokodi and Singh 2011; Mncube *et al*. 2011; Xaba 2011), which is not an autonomous choice. Non-participation in SGB activities, whether in the form of absenteeism or presenteeism, in effect, silences a minority voice, instead of involving everyone in decision making as well as endorsing the decisions. As a result, some members are deprived of an opportunity to develop as autonomous, rational and responsible persons, which is tantamount to disrespecting their autonomy. Consequently, democratic governance, the ultimate aim of SGB, is thwarted.

LEADERSHIP AND THE 'SERVANT LEADERSHIP'

Servant leadership constitutes part of the leadership lexicon, which is integral to the philosophy (knowledge) of (general) management (see, for example, Grisiri 2013). In focusing on leadership, the discussions aim to understand the craft of being a leader, rather than on becoming a good leader (Grisiri 2013). Generally, leadership is associated with the top echelons of an organisation (as opposed to leading) (Grisiri 2013) and as such is ultimately charged with the responsibility for the performance of the organisation (see, for example, Nienaber 2010). It is argued in the literature that servant leadership differs from the traditional views of leadership (Parris and Peachy 2013; Reinke 2004). The traditional leadership paradigm generally emphasises hierarchical position and power based on authority and top-down relationships. Servant leadership, in contrast, holds that hierarchical position is not a pre-requisite, but rather the moral and ethical behaviour of people are paramount (Cassel and Holt 2008; Crippen 2006; Reinke 2004; Zhang and Lin 2012).

The crux of servant leadership, as conceptualised by Greenleaf (1970, in Greenleaf 1998) is a philosophy that each person can adopt to guide his or her decisions and actions in all spheres of life. Greenleaf (1970, in Greenleaf 1998: 1) defined servant leadership as follows:

> The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. The conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

Servant leadership is a holistic approach to work, the promotion of a sense of community and a deepening understanding of spirit in the workplace (Greenleaf 1998).

Servant leadership advocates a group-orientated approach to analysis and decision making as a means to strengthening both institutions and society (Greenleaf 1998). The central questions guiding the creation of great organisations are 'who do you serve' and 'to what purpose' (Greenleaf 1998: 10). Greenleaf wrote, 'I prefer not to define serve explicitly at this time. Rather I would let the meaning it has for me evolve as one reads through the essay' (Greenleaf 1998: 21). Given this statement, one can understand that Phipps (2010) observed that Greenleaf's writings were mostly narrative in form and lacked an operational definition of servant leadership. This kind of writing leaves room for interpretation. Parris and Peachey (2013) mentioned that only a limited number of studies have empirically examined servant leadership. This observation holds equally true for the educational literature (Crippen 2006), especially those pertaining to school governing bodies/boards. Parris and Peachy (2013) also pointed out that these reviews interpret Greenleaf's writings differently, highlighting the plurality of servant leadership. Despite the different interpretations of servant leadership, all literature includes the fundamental dimension of the willingness to serve others (Parris and Peachy 2013). The essence of servant and serving is transformation, and specifically improved performance (Greenleaf 1998), rather than servitude as suggested by Bowie (2000). Transformation results from relationships among equals, which empower a person to arrive at the common good of the group (Cassel and Holt 2008; Crippen 2006; Zhang and Lin 2012). These relationships are based on values, in particular those of trust, respect and service (Parris and Peachy 2013; Reinke 2004). The relationships are built on trust between leaders and followers and among followers (Greenleaf 1998). The relationships are also influenced by mind-sets that can enable or restrain people to use knowledge to facilitate transformation for the betterment of the community (Greenleaf 1998). This knowledge does not only reside in the 'establishment' but in people from all socio-economic groups. Possessing knowledge is necessary for transformation, but not sufficient. People should act on their knowledge to bring about transformation (Greenleaf 1998).

In summary servant leadership can improve organisational performance because it builds a trusting, supportive community that fosters creativity and initiative. It is characterised as ethical, including a moral component centred on a concern for followers and their needs, rejecting authoritarian (coercive) approaches. The servant leader creates opportunities for followers to help them grow to achieve their full potential to the benefit of accomplishing tasks and goals for the common good without being sacrificed/used in the process (Cassel and Holt 2008; Spears 1998; Zang and Lin 2012). Servant-leadership incorporates the ideals of empowerment, total quality, team building, and participatory decision making, and the service ethic into a leadership philosophy.

The craft of servant leadership includes, but is not limited to, the following abilities (elsewhere labelled characteristics) initially identified by Spears (1998) and accepted by the research community focussing on schools/education (see Crippen 2006; Ekundayo, Damhoeri and Ekundayo 2010):

- Effective leaders are great communicators, which command receptive listening. Good listening includes attending to one's inner voice as well as to others, dedicated to understand the communication of others. The need for silence, reflection, meditation and active listening and actually hearing what is said and unsaid is part of listening.
- Efforts to understand and empathise with others by identifying with the thoughts, feelings and perspectives of others. Civility is built upon empathy. Empathy is consistent with caring especially in a supportive manner (as opposed to patronising), showing sensitivity and above all accepting the person for whom he or she really is, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Empathy may lead to building trust.
- Healing, whether one's self or others on the basis of an understanding about personal and/or organisational health. Despite the risk of contamination, the spirits of others are raised. Healing can come through just quietly being or meditation.
- Awareness, especially self-awareness, which is developed through self-reflection, including listening to what others communicate to us about ourselves; being continually open to learning, in particular by making the connection between what we know and believe and our communication and action.
- Persuasion rather than coerce compliance. A person is persuaded by arriving at a feeling of rightness about a belief or action through one's own intuitive sense. In a group setting consensus is a method of using persuasion. Consensus implies participation.
- Conceptualisation – to nurture their own abilities to dream great dreams (vision); to see the whole in the perspective of history, past and future; to state and adjust goals; to evaluate and to analyse; to foresee contingencies a long way ahead. Leadership, in setting direction on the course to a vision, is more conceptual than operational. The conceptualiser, at his or her best, is a persuader and a relation builder.
- Foresight – the ability to foresee the future or merely know the likely outcome of a situation. Greenleaf (1998) deems foresight a wholly rational process, the product of a constantly running internal computer that deals with intersecting series and random inputs, and is vastly more complicated than anything technology has yet produced. Foresight means regarding the events of the immediate moment and constantly comparing them with a series of projections made in the past and at the same time projecting future events with diminishing certainty as projected time runs out into the indefinite future (Greenleaf 1998).

- Stewardship – Greenleaf (1998) believed all members of an organization, irrespective of type, play significant roles in holding their institutions in trust (caring for the well-being of the institution and serving the needs of others in the institution) for the greater good of society. Each person, notwithstanding designation, has a role in contributing to the organisation in making a difference to the organisation as a whole. Stewardship encompasses personal responsibility to manage one's own life and affairs with due regard for the rights of other people and for the common welfare. As such, Greenleaf (1998) viewed the servant leader as among the people, not above/superior.
- Commitment to the growth of people by nurturing others and supporting them to achieve their full potential.
- Building community by some means, usually utilising one or more of three approaches – giving back through service to the community, investing financially into the community, and caring about one's community. These approaches suggest an active participation in community life, which promotes a democratic mode of association. Most importantly a sense of belonging defined by a shared sense of purpose does not eliminate a person's uniqueness but focuses all energies into a resilient community. This includes the cultivation of meaning, community, and responsibility and states.

These abilities as set out above are intertwined. Moreover, they resound partly with the ideas put forward by the pioneers in management as illuminated by Nienaber (2010) as well as Reinke (2004). The pioneers pointed out that leadership can be exercised by many people, not only top executives. They further called attention to the fact that individuals have a will of their own and should be treated as mature adults (equals) who can make a contribution to the organisation, rather than trying to drive them by fear. Treating people as mature adults implies treating them as equals. This involves the craft of servant leadership to a greater or lesser extent.

Servant leadership as described in this section is in line with ethical theory as proposed by Kant (1724–1804), in particular the duty theories (*Internet encyclopedia of philosphy*). In terms of the duty theories, human beings have clear, and specific, moral obligations towards one self and one another. Most importantly people should treat people as ends and not as means to ends. These means people should always be treated with dignity, which determines the morality of all actions. This implies that the autonomy of each person is acknowledged.

CONCLUSION

Literature holds that quality in education in South Africa is threatened because of challenges to effective functioning of SGBs. The essence of the challenges is rooted

in the capacity to govern. The SASA provides for democratic governance by the decentralisation of power to school level, through the establishment of SGB. However, some authors are of the view that this form of governance is sophisticated and complex. Authors express their doubt as to whether stakeholders in democratic governance are adequately equipped to effectively discharge of their responsibility.

SGB members can be trained to prepare themselves to effectively discharge their responsibilities. The training provided pertains to the functions of a SGB, and not necessarily specialised skills or leadership. Some authors observed that training is only succeeding to some degree. The role of servant leadership in improving the effective functioning of the SGB was considered, although limited literature is available in the context of school governing bodies.

Servant leadership is interpreted differently. Only a few studies were done in the context of SGB. Nevertheless the central focus of servant leadership is service to others, without compromising the self, to the common good of the group. Service to the common good implies transformation. Transformation results from relationships among equals, which is based on values of trust, respect and service. The relationships are influenced by mind-sets enabling or restraining people to use knowledge to the betterment of the community.

To contribute to the betterment of the group requires a person to take up his or her autonomy and to act freely. Prejudice should not inhibit a person to offer his or her abilities, however modest, to facilitate transformation. Active and free participating in serving the community, to its betterment, means that the individual genuinely discharges his or her moral responsibility. In so doing the individual facilitates democratic governance and gives effect to the provisions of the SASA.

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