

How Extra-Ordinary Public Servants Shield Schools From Perpetual Underachievement

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Abstract: The paper critically reflects on how the most devoted and conscientious public servants in schools, overturn underperformance into higher academic achievement. The paper is empirical in approach. Interviews and document study were used to collect data from three selected secondary schools in one of the Districts of Limpopo Province. Research findings reveal that, institutional underachievement is a product of inappropriate and inadequate service delivery. Findings showed that, allowing the culture of underperformance to take root, by public schools, becomes an educational albatross enough to dismantle, oppose and to defeat. In addition, findings indicated that, the absence of decolonisation attitude in schools, which revolutionises amounts to emancipation without freedom to institutional incumbents. Lastly, not all educational institutions deserve to first, offer mediocre performance before they revive and enhance their educational service. On the basis of the above, the researcher recommends that public secondary schools need to experiment with the 21st century manner of managing and leading learning institutions where decolonisation of every practice at the school, permeates every corner of a school's governance and administration. Such a change of focus is likely to assist schools to deinstitutionalise the entrenched colonialism which is irrelevant in the 21st century schooling since it meddles with the delivery of a quality public service by public servants in schools.

Keywords: Conscientious, Deinstitutionalisation, Enhance, Revolutionise

1. Introduction

Despite many hours spend at schools, teachers remain members of their society. They are actually sourced from a society. The circle is completed when upon retirement, such teachers get back to their societies to go and rest after rendering a teaching service. Thus, the connectivity between schools and a society is indisputable. No talk of a school to the total exclusion of a society and vice versa (Arden, 2013:16). When teachers conduct themselves in an exemplary fashion when still serving, they would largely be mirroring their own society. On the basis of the preceding argument, it makes absolute sense to expect the society to play an irreplaceable role in the affairs of a school. In case a school underachieves in its mandate of dispensing knowledge, a society has every right of knowing why and how best to intervene. The relationship between a school and a society dates back to time immemorial. A society has a capability of perennially and perpetually keeping a school functional and as a high performing institution. That occurs when classroom teachers are revolutionaries par excellence, in the form of turning themselves around to be extra-ordinary teachers (Allen, 2014:33). This will be conspicuous through lessons delivered to learners inside the classroom, through the teachers' instructional proficiency being coupled with unique managerial acumen to assist

in creating a memorable and a theatrical classroom interaction with learners. Where an educational institution is populated by extra-ordinary teachers, there could be a little space for that school to underachieve. Teachers who have migrated themselves from ordinary to extra-ordinary are likely to ascertain that not a single learner inside a classroom experiences a lethargic teaching in an uninspiring learning environment (Oliviier, 2012:56). Furthermore, a set-up where there are learners who do not value schooling or who have been conditioned to failure other than to success is likely also to disappear. This explicitly suggests that the perpetual underperformance characterising some schools is, in part, owing its origin to the kind and type of ordinary teachers found in those schools. Such teachers are not likely to decolonise and revolutionise their teaching so that it tastes differently to pupils in the form of being inviting, absorbing and captivating to all learners at all times. The reason for such a state of affairs with the category ordinary teachers is because of them not being averse or allergic to institutional underperformance (Horowitz, 2014:10). A trait and a virtue of being an extra-ordinary teacher, helps to keep teachers awake to the point of never ignoring learner heterogeneity in class. Extra-ordinary teachers are ever aware that every learner ultimately mirrors her own teacher, when that learner performs or struggles.

For instance, where teachers have made a transition from being ordinary or mediocre to extra-ordinary or excellent, learners will reciprocate them (Mentz & van Zyl, 2016:79). This is because devoted and conscientious people would not love to be associated with failure or sub-standard performance. To enable the occurrence of brilliant learner results, the quality teacher-learner relations as one of the bedrocks of institutional performance are indispensable. Extra-ordinary teachers sow a culture and tradition of refusing to settle for less than the best, for the sake of learners entrusted to them in their schools. It is not likely to be a mountain to climb for schools with extra-ordinary teachers, to turn a new leaf from institutional under-delivery to a high academic achieving school, with the population of extra-ordinary teachers around.

The critical role played by extra-ordinary teachers in the affairs of a school, becomes even more explicit, where an institution develops a capability of a bounce-back philosophy where it has been experiencing a string of poor learner results (Mckaiser, 2016: 9). This is a philosophy that enables a school to set its own operational structures, systems and processes that are sustainable enough to facilitate self-recovery in an event where in one year a school under-performed. No doubt, the existence of extra-ordinary teaching personnel in an educational institution, could be summed up through confirming that they are likely to make the commodity called schooling to sell as best as in the past. With extra-ordinary teachers populating learning institutions, schools could resurrect their stuttering performance (Templar, 2015:94). That is possible within the harmonious atmosphere capable of turning any school into a great institution. The existence and prevalence of extra-ordinary teachers in schools, enlightens educational institutions to the reality that no school, is created for underachievement and failing of learners. With devoted and conscientious extra-ordinary teachers around, schooling challenges faced by learners, however herculean they could be, would be surmounted. That would enable both teachers and learners to represent progress and no longer educational decadence (Nyangia & Orodho, 2014:77).

2. Theoretical Considerations

Since this paper is empirical and qualitative in nature, the Complexity Leadership Theory was partnered with the qualitative research approach

to ground the argument of the paper. A research question such as "in what way could learner underachievement be opposed and defeated irrespective of the absence of extra-ordinary teachers inside a classroom", could at best be researched through the guidance of the Complexity Leadership Theory (de Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Deiport, 2011:313). The theory reminds that Education Departments across the globe are faced with rapidly changing interactions, policies, regulations, technologies and effects of globalisations in the realm of educational practices. As such, Departments of Education find themselves having to lead in the development of strategies and other interventions that are complexity-driven within the complexity-generative scenarios. The fact that Departments of Education throughout the world were not established solely to curb and combat institutional ineffectiveness in the form of underachievement by learners, makes the application of the Complexity Leadership Theory the most appropriate theory for the current schooling dynamics and ecologies. This theory is not grounded on bureaucratic structures like other theories. Of peculiar nature about this theory, is that it is grounded on sophistication and complexity (Mouton, 1996; Coveney, 2003).

The practice of some learners underachieving is not as simple as it appears. Given the type and nature of teachers and learners operating inside classrooms, it requires a complex theory that resonates with the current schooling sophistication. The theory enables schools to contend with constant complexities due to the rapidly changing realm of educational practices. Issues of teaching and learning are complex in the sense that they involve who teaches? Who is being taught? What is being taught? What is the manner of delivering the subject matter and how is the teacher received by learners inside and outside a classroom? As things stand, today's schooling, requires a certain level of complexity to oppose and defeat challenges experienced in schools in their mandate of dispensing knowledge. Current school ecologies are knowledge-based (Uhl-Bien, Marion & Mckelvey, 2007). Such knowledge has to be dispensed to learners by teachers having being generated within and outside schools. Through innovative means, knowledge has to be adapted to each school's classroom ecology and its own learners. As such, knowledge is fast becoming the main commodity and the swift-paced generation of that knowledge and novelty, becomes fundamental to the survival of schools. Complexity Leadership

Theory enables schools in their process of delivering knowledge, to adapt their level of complexity so that it is commensurate to the ecologies in which those schools operate. Despite myriad challenges which schools face in their process of rolling out curriculum, they demand proportionate changes to ensure they stay afloat (Isaac, 2016:9; Modiba, 2018:1).

It takes complexity to defeat complexity. Complexity Leadership Theory ascertains that schools possess complexity equivalent to that of its environment in order to function effectively (McKelvey & Boisot, 2003). The Complexity Leadership Theory enabled the researcher to frame the paper as well as to make meaning from the whole assertion of learner under-achievement of secondary schools being ascribed to non-extra-ordinary teachers who, in view of their mediocre teaching, are not able to stave schools off from their perpetual learner under-delivery. The theory emphasises the importance of understanding and validating interpretations in their own contextual terms instead of stressing the need to verify interpretations against an "objective" world. The Complexity Leadership Theory allowed the researcher to learn the purpose of individual actors and social meanings that they share with each other in the process of teaching and learning. Much of the scholastic under-delivery by public secondary schools is in more instances than one, wrongfully attributable to either teachers or learners, disregarding the context of their occurrence. The Complexity Leadership Theory stresses that the traditional pattern that teachers teach, learners learn and administrators manage, is completely altered, to reflect the 21st century, where all stakeholders in a school, become lifelong learners in a dynamic and evolutionary environment.

Khanare (2008:37) cautions that these days teaching is about touching the souls of learners. This signifies that whoever teaches without reaching out at the souls of learners under her tutelage, could face antagonisms apart from being regarded to be a non-extra-ordinary teacher. Every teacher has to value the individuality of every learner as a precondition for quality teaching and learning that touches a learner's soul. Khumalo (2011:8) disputes the fallacious notion that it is learners in secondary schools who create institutional under-delivery and then earn teachers a label of non-extra-ordinary teaching personnel. This is visible with his remarks to the effect that they "do not try to fix learners

alone, fix teachers too". He however concedes that a good teacher makes a poor learner good and a good learner superior.

Davidoff & Lazarus (1997:16) articulate that in the 21st century, with the type of the evolved teaching and learning environment in schools, it cannot be business as usual for teachers. This suggests that being guided by the Complexity Leadership Theory, the present day teachers have to lead with their hearts and excel with their souls when with current learners. No doubt, extra-ordinary teachers may not struggle to do that. Apart from advising schools to always consider the complexity of their ecologies of operation, this theory warns schools to be involved in a renewal process. A school that operates along the Complexity Leadership Theory is likely to take the concept of renewal very seriously such that learners there could be inspired and stimulated to remain teachable and thus portray their teachers as extra-ordinary. The manner in which a school is structured, with systems and processes followed there, could emit an impression that learners there are nuisance to the proper functioning of an institution and the production of brilliant learner results. That is no different from when a school succeeds and survives in projecting all its learners and teachers to be star-performers of note. This suggests that some notions either correct or fallacious, which members of the public have of schools, it is on the basis of how those schools project themselves to the wider public. Hofstee (2010:107) advises that a research topic is not synonymous to a research problem. Noting that, the problem of this paper centres on the critical reflection of the contribution of highly devoted and conscientious teachers to the dismantling of persistent under-performance of a school. A plethora of literature reviewed, confirms that a school that persistently underachieves, is likely to be having a huge predicament of less devoted and less conscientious teaching personnel. This therefore, implies that underperformance by a school constitutes a disservice to its stakeholders (Isaacs, 2016:9; Shamase, 2016:33).

3. Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this paper are anchored on the Complexity Leadership Theory (de Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2011:313). Those research questions are as follow: What prevents teachers from always being highly devoted and conscientious to their quality teaching to learners

despite the brilliant teacher-education programme they went through and the impressive teacher qualifications they possess? What are the ideas, concerns and aspirations of school governors and school management team members, regarding the perpetual under-performance of learners? Broad as they are, the above questions can be broken down into the following sub-questions:

- How is learner underachievement understood and dealt with?
- Who are the ultimate victims and losers, out of the process of learner underachievement?
- How best to counter and contain learner underachievement?
- How can the appointment of extra-ordinary teachers mitigate against learner underachievement?

4. Research Methodology

Out of the population of fifteen public secondary schools in a Circuit, three were conveniently sampled. In each institution, a School Principal, an SGB Chairperson and a Teacher were interviewed. The total number of research participants amounted to nine because every school contributed three. The three schools that critically reflected on how extra-ordinary teachers shield schools from perpetual underachievement, are being referred to as Schools A, B and C. to protect their actual identities. That the three public secondary schools were still experiencing the challenge of learner underachievement, was a cause for concern that triggered this in-depth study. This paper is qualitative in nature because the problem addressed is critically reflecting on why some public secondary schools are not offering quality teaching which could be a solution to scholastic learner under-performance. The nature of the problem was found to be researchable along the qualitative school of thought as against the quantitative line of thinking (Dawson, 2006 & Levin, 2005). The choice of the qualitative methodology was triggered by the utilisation of the Complexity Leadership Theory. The researcher found a need to create a synergy between that theoretical framework and the qualitative approach as the overarching research methodology (Hofstee, 2010:115). Msina (2015:24) notes that with the Complexity Leadership Theory, issues of learner

underachievement as experienced in some public secondary schools and being ascribed to lack of highly devoted and conscientious quality teaching in schools, could be better critically be reflected upon. The theory was applied to help establish why some schools were allowing learner underachievement to occur, despite being aware of its dire consequences. Amalgamating the Complexity Leadership Theory and the qualitative research approach was based on the complexity of the problem under study. The combination enabled the researcher to make an in-depth understanding of how despite knowing the unpleasant consequences of under-performance, some teachers were somewhat adopting a non-chalant approach towards curbing and combatting learner underachievement through turning themselves into extra-ordinary teachers. That could have been done through constant quality teaching which is known to be shielding a school from educational under-delivery. In this paper, interviews and document study were utilised to construct relevant data. All the primary and secondary documents which contained information about poor quality teaching and learner underachievement were studied. To corroborate and triangulate the gleaned data, interviewing was conducted with three participants in each school. Responses were audio-taped for transcription later-on. The mentioned data collection tools, were helpful in terms of accessing information pertaining to how the absence of quality teaching in some public secondary schools, is behind learner underachievement (Glattham & Joyner, 2005). Content analysis and the constant comparative methods were utilised to analyse the collected data. Analysis commenced when data collection started and was concluded immediately there were indications that all the collected data was making sense and talking to the aim of the paper. Again, data analysis was done in relation to the problem which the paper is attempting to address (Maykut & Morehouse, 1999; Hlogwane, 2016:36; Lamprecht, 2018:7).

5. Findings and Discussion

The basis of these findings is the literature studied pertaining to the quality of teaching in schools as delivered by extra-ordinary teaching personnel and how that inhibits incessant and perpetual learner underachievement (Knott-Craig & Rivett, 2015:53). In addition, the basis of these findings are the analysed data which were generated through the interviews and the document study (Mouton, 1996).

Focusing only on the sampled schools ought not to create an impression that they are the worse-off as regards lack of quality teaching which leads to learner underachievement. Suffice to disclose that the choice of those schools was on the basis of the researcher having familiarised himself with issues of learner underachievement and lack of quality teaching there. Some of the documents containing valuable data that emerged helpful as regards quality teaching in those schools included their School Improvement Plan (SIP) and Annual Performance Plan (APP). Reports and minutes of the meetings held that related to the status of teaching and ways to improve it, were also perused. Such documents divulged the vision of the school as regards containing and countering perpetual learner underperformance in those schools. The Complexity Leadership Theory was instrumental in the analysis of the data to ultimately emerge with the findings which are the following: Inappropriate and inadequate education delivery, dismantling the culture of underachievement, the absence of decolonisation and revival and enhancement of an educational service. The discussion of the findings would confirm that constant quality teaching is one of the solutions for the perpetual learner underachievement (Olivier, 2012:89). A detailed discussion of each finding follows.

5.1 Inappropriate and Inadequate Education Delivery

Magnificent and exquisite learner performance helps to market a school. This is being confirmed by the fact that in schools, there are difficult-to-describe factors which normally remain uncontrollable. From time immemorial, schooling has always been a complex process. As such, it is problematic to attempt to explain and interpret performance experienced in a school to a single cause. That way of doing things demonstrates a myopic and skewed view of schooling. Notwithstanding that, extra-ordinary teachers who are highly devoted and conscientious are known to be capable of arresting perpetual scholastic underperformance of learners. On the above point, Principal 1 of School A reasons that *"my more than 30 years experience as a teacher confirms that not a single learner would fail to perform with a theatrical and memorable teacher inside the classroom"*. SGB Chairperson 1 of School C proclaims that *"despite the countless problems which current teachers experience with learners, delivering impressive lessons in class, influences pupils to prefer*

a particular subject and perform better in their subject of preference". Teacher 1 of School B intimates that *"as secondary school lesson facilitators, we definitely contribute more than any other internal stakeholder to the performance or underperformance of pupils entrusted to us. The little challenge is that the majority of us teach these pupils inappropriately, hence they underachieve"*. What stands out from the responses of the various research participants is that learner underperformance at public secondary schools, is ascribed to poor quality teaching. This but ought not to serve to underrate the intricacy and sophistication of schooling especially in the 21st century. The practical reality is that any institutional under-delivery as created by the underachievement of learners has to be comprehended in terms of all the variables and ecologies within which the entire school operates and functions (Badroodien, 2015:53). Public secondary schools that display a commitment of being averse to learner underachievement and institutional under-delivery through improving their educational delivery to pupils, earn a reputation of being "performing" and "functioning" educational institutions.

5.2 Dismantling the Culture of Underachievement

Current teachers and learners, require a different form of engagement and interaction given their evolution (Horwitz, 2014:35). Current learners need to be conditioned to involve themselves in independent studies in order to augment what they have learnt from their lesson facilitators (Tolsi, 2016:32). Permitting the culture of non-independent study by learners is tantamount to making the sharing of the subject matter one-sided. Principal 1 of School B contends that *"being an instructional leader in the 21st century, requires one to place sufficient attention to learner participation to quality lessons delivered inside the classroom, to avoid disasters"*. SGB Chairperson 1 of School C notes that *"by failing to service learners well in terms of preparing and presenting inspiring lessons that are learner-centred and that trigger pupil involvement, teachers would be consolidating the culture of underperformance in a school"*. Teacher 1 of School C advises that *"classroom lessons that are wishy-washy, uninspiring and not acknowledging learners as vital actors in the process of knowledge acquisition are likely to aggravate the culture of underachievement as witnessed in the bulk of the educational institutions"*. Christie, Butler & Potter (2007) remind that learner involvement in

the lessons delivered, stands to trigger learner interest and curiosity and help to address the existing learner and institutional underperformance culture.

5.3 The Absence of Decolonisation

The survival and flourishing of schools, especially as public institutions, depend on them continuing to excel with their enterprise of teaching and learning, to service their society as awaited (Adam, 2005:68; Sebola, 2015). Schools in the 21st century have to strive to be a real societal centre of excellence (Badroodien, 2015:41). That is possible when schools do not shy away from experimenting with new African philosophy, namely, decolonisation as regards rolling out the business of teaching and learning in institutional ecologies that are not always predictable. With decolonisation in place, learners remain the reliable ambassadors of their own schools in the wider community. Principal 1 of School C advises that *"incorporating decolonisation to our current schooling could go a long way in consolidating and reviving genuine teacher interest in schooling and its activities"*. SGB Chairperson 1 of School A declares that *"although at times we receive an implicit resistance when involving ourselves in the business of schooling, this could be traceable to the colonial mentality and a panacea is decolonisation"*. Teacher 1 of School A consents that *"decolonisation of educational institutions, stands to increase the active participation of the societal members in the business of teaching and learning, and thereby stop learners from being burdensome to teachers through their perpetual underachievement"*. These findings emphasise how much complex schools have become and the need to try something new like decolonisation to refresh the old ways of viewing and interacting in schools (Union of South Africa, 1945:156).

5.4 Revival and Enhancement of an Educational Service

Success and failure of every school resides in that school's teaching and learning classrooms (Xaba, 2004:314; Tsheola, 2002). On the expressed point, Principal 1 of School A asserts that *"upon ensuring that every minute of schooling is put to good use by school members, results produced will be a source of marvel and jubilation"*. SGB Chairperson 1 of School A concedes that *"every school could overturn underachievement with achievement, by learning to revive through the enhancement of its educational service which is in line with dynamic conditions in its own*

school". Teacher 2 of School C emphasises that *"each school that sticks to its plan of altering its teaching personnel, to become extra-ordinary teachers yielding magnificent learner results, will achieve wonders to the amazement of critics"*. All the responses remind that every educational institution possesses a capability to perform beyond its measure (Hean & Tin, 2008:75; Samier, 2008:7)

6. Conclusion

Public secondary schools need to deal with the challenge of lacking extra-ordinary teachers who are known to be shielding schools from perpetual underachievement. This will enable them to keep their educational institutions ever efficacious and functional. That some Circuits in Capricorn District of Limpopo Province have secondary schools suffering from perpetual learner underachievement, owing to lack of extra-ordinary teaching, has to be a cause for a serious concern. This is untenable and could make it difficult for the affected secondary schools to overturn their experienced perennial underperformance. This is a threat to overcome in order to salvage the future of myriad innocent learners. As the findings have shown, placing enough attention to lessons delivered to learners, dismantling the culture of underachievement, introducing decolonisation and emphasising the general revival of education service in a school, is helpful and rejuvenating to institutional incumbents.

7. Recommendations

The basis of these recommendations are the discussed findings which are as follow: There is a need for public secondary schools to fathom or establish for themselves why is it that some of their teacher's despite being professionals, continue to offer inadequate educational service delivery to learners, and then invite perpetual underachievement of learners and the institution to set in. There is a need by public secondary schools never to permit a culture of underperformance to take root because it would become a real educational albatross to dismantle, oppose and defeat. As a battle against underachievement would be raging, scholastic performance of both learners and the educational institution would be grounding, something unfortunate which could have been avoided.

There is a need for educational institutions to embrace revival and enhancement with regard to

the managing and leading of teaching and learning in schools in view of its capability to revolutionise educational institutions and turnaround teaching and learning to become theatrical and memorable for all learners at all times. This happens as revival enhances the school's educational service delivery to learners and then triggers sustainable and impressive learner results that shield a school from perpetual underachievement. Finally, the researcher recommends that educational institutions need to experiment with decolonisation as the 21st century manner of managing and leading schools and see as to whether all the teaching personnel there would not become extra-ordinary teachers who collectively shield their school from the dreaded and avoidable perpetual underachievement.

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