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Key characteristics of headteachers for making a school a health-promoting one

The growing desire for schools to be health-promoting is rising, increasing the need for special leadership qualities in order to steer such initiatives. School health-promotion is multi-pronged in its nature, rendering it a challenge for school leaders whose focus is mainly teaching and learning. One of the pillars of school health-promotion include collaborations and partnerships. As in many developing countries the implementation of school health programmes in South Africa is challenged by the lack of finances and resources. It is not surprising that collaborations between schools and their communities are regarded as mainly a means for acquisition of resources. Additionally, there is a realisation that the actions taken to promote healthy school settings, may be too complex and too protracted to be undertaken unilaterally by a school. Collaborations are indicated as inevitably linked to school health-promotion (Leurs, Mur-Veeman, Van der Sar, Schaalma & de Vries, 2008) globally.

Research highlights the problem of lack of capabilities to recognise the challenges of leading diverse groups (Conolly & James, 2006). Other research indicates not having enough know-how to implement and develop partnerships with parents (Turunen, Saaranen & Tossavainen, 2010). It is important to learn about the specific characteristics of headteachers that will enable them to lead collaborations for more health-promoting schools. School principals in European countries are referred to as headteachers, for the sake of the international community, both these terms will be used interchangeably in this research.

The questions that guided the research were: what key characteristics do school leaders

possess that enable them to turn their schools into health-promoting ones? how did the qualities they had strengthen or weaken their endeavours? I argue in this research that there are key characteristics that a headteacher must possess to enable them to change the status of their schools to health-promoting. I also contend that the presence or absence of certain qualities in a school leader can enhance or deter school health-promotion. According to Lord and Hall (2005), identifying effective skills has long been an approach to understanding and improving leadership.

Collaborations for school health-promotion in South Africa

In South Africa collaborations in schools occur in three tiers. The first tier pertains to partnership at national level which is cascaded to school level resulting in school nurses, psychologists and social workers providing services in schools. These health professionals are part of the inter-departmental collaborations that provide external interventions to schools. The involvement of the health professionals in schools is documented in health policies, of which the latest is the integrated school health policy (SA, 2012). This policy mandates collaboration of government departments in order to provide holistic health and educational services to learners at schools. The interventions that are provided by different departments require adoption and, commitment to effective and sustained implementation. The headteacher's role is that of ensuring that collaborations with the professionals providing services are as strong as those at provincial and national levels, in order for them to benefit the poorest learner. However, both in healthcare and

in education, these cross-departmental alliances are indicated as challenging. For instance, a research conducted by Cikaliuk (2011) found that obstacles hindering effective inter-organisational alliances include mind-sets, operations and inability to provide leadership.

The second tier is that of collaborations with Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) at national and school levels. At national level, there is a consensus that implementation of the education vision and priorities set out in the National Development Plan requires a strong and active NGO sector (Volmink & van der Elst, 2017). The NGO sector becomes the vehicle for community participation in school policy implementation, advocating for social change. Schools are able to draw on expertise of non-profit organisations that are already working with the Department of Basic Education in school improvement, as well as those that are in the vicinity of the schools that have the potential to make a contribution. The non-profit organisations that partner with the Department of Basic Education at national level collaborate with schools that they have been allocated to. In such instances the leadership that has to be provided is operational: providing support, organising resources and acting as liaising officers between the health professionals and parents of learners who are beneficiaries of the interventions. Schools are at liberty to choose any local voluntary-community organisation that they can partner with in order to strengthen their efforts of health promotion. The primary role of most NGOs in poor communities is that of service provision of counselling, shelters and food for vulnerable children. Headteachers and coordinators of health programmes either initiate these partnerships or accept requests for involvement in school health-promotion activities by NGOs in their communities. Headteachers have to provide leadership in terms of the activities to be embarked on. A study conducted by Dias, Vieira, da Silva, Vasconcelos and Machado (2016) highlighted the importance of organizational skills and the ability to improve structures as necessary competences for the development of inter-professional collaborations in school health-promotion.

The third tier pertains to collaborations with parents, community members, local business people and local companies. Unlike some

collaborations above, schools have to initiate and sustain the establishment of partnerships with local communities. These are organisations that are knowledgeable about the social, cultural and economic factors learners are exposed to as they also operate in the same circles. In these collaborations team building and direction setting become imperative in building strong social partnerships. Moreover, effective health-promotion alliances require leaders that are skilled in networking, knowledge-sharing, partnership creation and support (Barrett, Plotnikof, Raine & Anderson, 2005). Nonetheless, research highlights challenges in putting the partnership component into actual practice. In addition, Deschesnes, Martin and Hill (2003) indicate that the literature is anything but clear on how to make this partnership a reality.

The recognition of a need for collaboration with school communities provided a foundation for the investigation of skills and qualities that school leaders need to acquire to steer such teams. In line with Ahmadi (2011) and Robbins and Decenzo (1998), the research reported in this paper was based on the argument that successful collaborative leadership can hardly be begun without basic skills and certain traits.

Theoretical Framework

An operational definition of collaboration in this study is derived from Mattesich, Murray-Close and Monsey (2001:22), who describe it as "a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organisations. It includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals, a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility, mutual authority and accountability for success and sharing of resources and rewards." In this context leadership is defined as inspiring and motivating people to work towards a common goal. According to Hallinger and Heck (2010:97), collaborative leadership "focuses on strategic school-wide actions that are directed towards school improvement".

This research drew on the skills approach theory of Katz (1955) and Zaccaro, Kemp and Bader's (2004) trait theory. These are leadership focused theories that attempt to describe leadership through the characteristics and behaviours of the leaders themselves" (Callahan *et al.*, 2007). The capabilities that can make

effective leadership possible are technical, human and conceptual (Katz,1955). Technical skills are about building knowledge and proficiency (Katz, 1991), analytical ability and the aptitude to use appropriate tools and techniques, while human skills focus on the ability to work with people, understanding and adapting to differences and creating a trusting relationship. Conceptual skills comprise understanding concepts (Katz, 1955) such as vision, strategic goals, rules and regulations of innovative methods, flexibility, reflection and synergy.

The second theory used in this research was that of trait leadership. Zaccaro *et al.* (2004) define trait leadership as integrated patterns of personal characteristics that mirror a range of specific differences that can lead to consistent leader success and effectiveness across a variety of group and managerial situations. The trait theory encompasses personality, cognitive ability, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability.

Empirical research was conducted to apply the tenets of the skills and trait theories in order to better understand, describe and interpret the collaborative capabilities of headteachers by means of themes derived inductively from the data. As two complementary theories are tested in this research it was necessary to apply a system-driven theoretical path to examine the system from different angles as suggested by Lokke and Dissing Sorensen (2014:67).

Methodology

Research Design and strategy

A qualitative approach was chosen for its suitability to render in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The strategy of inquiry took the form of a multiple-case study design. Two cases were developed from two schools: one with collaboration with an internationally recognised NGO (School A) and the other involved in collaboration with community members (School B). The descriptive and interpretative case studies were to support the description and the interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. I described and classified the different dimensions of the key characteristics the school leaders possessed by summarising the commonalities found in the data. The use of two theories in this research: skills and traits, is congruent with interpretative case studies as they

use theories to explain and shed light on the case.

Population and sampling

The study was conducted in two schools from two districts in two different provinces: Gauteng and Gert Sibande in Mpumalanga. The schools in this research were located in the townships and were classified under Quintiles 1-3 indicating the low socio-economic status of the communities in which they were located. All the schools were non-fee-paying as is the case with schools in poor communities who are classified as Section 21, which rely on the subsidy from the department for resources and day-to-day running.

In school A, the headteacher (P1), the head of departments (HOD1), a chairperson of the health committee (Chair 1), the Life Orientation teacher (T1), the English teacher (T2) participated (n=5). In school B, the headteacher (P2), the deputy headteacher (DP2), the School Nutrition Programme (SNP) coordinator (SNPC2), a Grade 7 teacher (T2) and a volunteer (V2) participated (n=6). The sampling method was purposive as I was looking for schools that had existing collaborations with community members and or groups or institutions (government department representatives, NGOs, companies) with the intent of promoting healthy schools. I also targeted schools that had formed collaborations for a period not less than two years as I believed that participants in such associations would have more information to share than in partnerships that had been formed for a shorter time.

Data collection procedures

As multiple sources of evidence are key characteristics of a case-study design, three data collection instruments were used: narratives, interviews and observations. The narratives and observations were the main data collection tools and data from the interviews were used to corroborate that of the two main tools. The narrations revolved around the qualities and skills that headteachers possessed and how these skills and traits were revealed during the time the projects were implemented. I had to come up with topics for the development of stories in order for data collection and analysis to be an iterative process. Semi-structured interviews were used to probe so that participants could explain statements that were vague, ambiguous and not clear in their narratives. Some data were from the observations made by the participants on the skills and traits that their headteachers

displayed during the projects and self-reports from headteachers.

Data analysis procedures

A thematic analysis of data from the transcripts of the interviews, narrations and notes of observations was conducted by identifying codes, grouping them into categories and finally into themes. Data were triangulated in the analysis to develop case descriptions by means of pattern matching between the two cases, explanation building and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2003). I had to inter-weave data collection and data analysis right from the first case to avoid weakening both the data analysis and the data collection process.

Ethical aspects

The Department of Education, headteachers, teachers and the volunteer all gave permission for this research to be conducted. This research also got ethical clearance from the university.

Trustworthiness aspects

Credibility was ensured in this research by the use of triangulation, based on data from narratives, individual interviews and field notes. Checks relating to the accuracy of the data were done after all data were transcribed and analysed.

Results

Case 1 - Collaboration with an internationally recognised NGO

In the Gert Sibande district, I obtained information on schools that were part of a project that was sponsored by an internationally recognised NGO which had collaborations with schools in Mpumalanga. The NGO was assisting schools with maintaining clean environments by means of general upkeep of the surroundings and recycling projects. The NGO conducted meetings with the schools to inform them about their programmes and how schools could benefit. Schools that were interested to partner with the NGO selected two teachers each to be trained by the NGO. Each school had to choose a theme that they were to focus on for the year. At the end of the year schools that participated would receive certificates of participation and those that met the targets that were set on their themes at the beginning of the year received medals. In the first year, the theme for school A was - *clean surroundings*, the school received a certificate of participation and became internationally

recognised as a participant in the NGO programme. In the second year, the school focussed on *recycling* and it received a silver medal and in the third, on the theme - *planting for beautiful surroundings*, it obtained a bronze medal. The latter project was regarded as more complicated as the school had to collaborate with parents and the municipality in order to achieve its goal. Certain aspects of the theme were incorporated in the lessons that were taught in classrooms and also in the portfolio that had to be submitted for evaluation. The schools were supported by the NGO throughout. A portfolio of evidence was submitted to the NGO at the end of each year for evaluation. The school could continue the following year taking up another theme. The participants were reflecting on the three years when things were going well with their projects.

The headteacher had to delegate this task to two teachers who were responsible until it was finalised at end of the year. After their training they were expected to establish a committee or work with the health committee of the school. The responsibility of the headteacher was to support the committee and the two teachers; ascertain that they had an itinerary for the year in line with the theme chosen by the school; provide resources; and monitor and evaluate the project. Participants made it clear that the success or the failure of the project rested with the headteacher and not the teachers. With regards to the planning, the headteachers were expected to get information on how the project works in order for them to give direction and ascertain that the activities were in line with the vision of the school and were coordinated with all other activities within the school.

Skills that the head teacher portrayed

"the principal supported the committee throughout, she asked for feedback from the members on how the activities progressed and the challenges they were encountering. She would praise them for their work and motivate teachers to support the committee in whatever way they could. She would be part of the cleaning campaign every Friday, helping the committee members and motivating learners (T1); the principal was actively involved in the planning, execution and monitoring of the activities. As much as she requested reports on the progress, she also made time to check himself (T2); we depended upon her to steer the partnership towards success, she would have

been responsible for the failure of the projects, the principals were accountable and not the teachers. She would check if the photos taken by the members were of good quality. She would insist on this adding that she did not want the quality of the pic to disadvantage the school. She would check the portfolio files if they were of good standard before they were submitted to the NGO. She was very particular about the activities and the reports that were sent to the NGO, she knew the submission dates (HOD1); I am able to work with people and I believe in building good relationships with them first. Besides, I knew what was expected of us and there were clear guidelines and timelines. To me this was an opportunity to show how best we can be as a school (P1); I enjoyed doing the projects because of her, we worked as a team, her being a team leader. After meeting each target that was set by the committee she would organise a small celebration and report our achievements to all staff members" (Chair1).

Skills that were regarded as not developed

"Although we got a bronze medal in the last project I think we would have done better, mapping out our own involvement and, that of parents and the municipality was a mammoth task. The principal failed to understand the scope of the project, and we ended up involving parents to help out with planting late. We knew which vegetables to plant and in which area of the school, we had little knowledge of what vegies are planted in each season. This caused a delay in their planting (T2). In our third year the principal showed signs of too much obsession with the task and neglected us. Although she continued motivating us she was pushing too hard for the tasks to be completed. She just got carried away (HOD1). If there is no clear vision on what the collaboration should achieve the goal gets lost. The focus became more and more on the award and not what we could establish and sustain as a school. The main idea was to promote a healthy environment for our school but this was not enough the she became obsessed about the gold medal (T1); the last project needed coordination in order for it to be successful, this was lacking" (Chair1)

Traits that the headteacher possessed

"She is approachable, members were able to talk to her without any reservations, she is also driven in that she just kept on motivating members to implement the plan until completion (HOD1); she is focussed and does not get derailed. There are many tasks that principals are responsible for, but she never neglected this task. I think she is a go-getter and an achiever, when she sets her mind on getting a medal she puts effort and prepared to work hard to get it (Chair1); she is very confident although at first she was not, she

would say she was not sure if we would be able to do the task. At the beginning of the second year she said that we were going to get a medal and we did. Her confidence rubbed off on us as members" (T1)'.
Case 2 - Collaboration with community members

The school partnered with community members for a food garden project. This was the initiative of the Ministry of Education which was intended to produce food to supplement the feeding scheme in schools. The garden project had been existing for four years during the time of the research. The School Nutrition Programme (SNP) coordinator was in charge of the garden project. The latter role doubled up with the main role of being a teacher. The maintenance burden of the food garden was shared between the unemployed community members who offered their services voluntarily and the Grade 7 learners. The role of the coordinator was to ensure that learners do their part, while the principal was responsible for the day-to-day running of the project.

The principal organised the volunteers, approached an NGO to train (job in training) and empower them to assist the school with setting up and maintaining the project. The principal was also responsible for organising resources: garden tools and seeds to be planted in each season. The garden had a variety of vegetables and few flowers. The produce was used mainly for non-academic and non-commercial purposes: grown specifically for consumption. The agreement was that the produce will be shared among the volunteers and the SNP.

Skills that the headteacher portrayed

"The principal organised for job in training for the volunteers, and provided the necessary resources to maintain the garden project (DP2); we felt like we were part of the school community, he has a way of making us feel that we belong. If we lack something we approach him at any time, he listens to us. He motivates us to grow more vegetables each season so that we can have enough for our families as well (V2); he is supportive, I am not the only one responsible, we work as a team (SNPC2); he is passionate about this project, he says that it is his baby. He wants to see it producing more each year (T2); I consult with the NGO that helps us when we are experiencing problems with insects and mites that destroy our plants. I check the plants regularly together with the volunteers for any signs of damage to plants (P1)".

Skills that were regarded as not developed

"It is only the volunteers that went for training, the

principal and myself were not trained. He felt that it was not necessary for us to be trained (SNPC2); the major problem is that there was no maintenance during holidays, each time we would sought of start from scratch after longer holidays as some plants would have died or be in a bad shape (V2); although it is good for learners to maintain the garden I think they would benefit more if gardening was linked to curriculum. They would have some kind of formal training on theory and practice. Allocating them pieces of land to grow plants themselves would serve a better purpose. I do not think they are practising this at home (T2); we have been doing the project for few years now but all staff members know nothing about gardening (DP2); we started with 15 volunteers and after 3 years we are left with 8, we have not been able to motivate them to persevere. Those who left are still unemployed and we have not been able to fill up their spaces due to lack of time (P1)".

Traits that the headteacher possessed

"I think the principal has shown determination and patience to see the project succeed (DP2); he cares about the volunteers, he makes it a point that they are well taken care of and they are respected by learners (T2); he has the ability to work with people, the volunteers never complain about how he treats them, in fact they have worked with him for years now (SNPC2); he is fair, we get our share of vegetables, he sometimes gives us more (V2)".

Discussion of findings

This article outlines the qualities of school leaders based on the notion that it takes special characteristics to make a school a health-promoting one. The focus was on the key capacities of school leaders observed as they interacted with teachers and collaborators during the time when they were implementing health projects and on their followers' perceptions of their leaders' qualities. Both self and observer perceptions were explored. This investigation demonstrates that the two theories (skills and traits) were effective in describing and interpreting key characteristics of headteachers.

The first finding pertains to the leadership skills that were found to be multi-layered. This finding is in line with the categorisation of skills by Katz (1955) and Zaccaro (2001). This was indicated by the demonstration of the technical, conceptual and human skills by the headteachers in this research. Both exhibited a number of technical skills namely, delegation, listening, providing support, monitoring and teamwork.

The knowledge skills were at a higher level of development as both had an understanding of how the projects worked; the amount of work to be done; what needed to be done to make the collaborations effective; and of the people they were working with. Both headteachers could analyse and diagnose the situation for instance: A - would monitor and do quality control to make sure that the portfolios were of good standard before they were submitted to the NGO for the school to get acknowledgement. However, these skills could not help in strengthening collaborations with more than one group of collaborators, handling multiple partnerships seemed to be a challenge for headteacher A who managed alliance with one partner well. Team building skills were also developed as both headteachers were able to motivate and keep the teams focused on the achievement of the desired goals by acknowledging good work, providing high levels of praise and positive feedback, holding interactive and reflective discussions and providing techniques for self-regulation.

With regards to conceptual skills, both headteachers proved their ability to communicate the vision well, with B indicating his longing to see the garden project grow. The two-way communication between all those involved was important for the schools' successful collaborations. The meetings about the processes and plans in school A, led to clarity of roles and responsibilities of each partner. The continuous communication between the headteacher and the volunteers in school B determined the kind of collaboration they would have. The volunteers also highlighted the importance of honest, open dialogue where the school expresses its needs and they express theirs. Without such dialogue, the schools would not have continued with the partnerships for as long as they did. The factors that were indicative of the ability of the two headteachers to develop and maintain meaningful community partnerships were: high commitment to project/s; their support of community involvement; and the two-way communication that allowed the collaborators to feel part of the project. The commitment to the achievement of goals and strategies that were mutually developed reflected in their planning and observation of important dates (school A), and training of the volunteers (school B).

Headteacher B demonstrated social capacities

by building good relationships with staff and volunteers who felt part of the school. He followed a caring approach to an extent of being concerned about the welfare of the volunteers, whom he regarded as valuable assets to the school, regardless of their unemployed status. In both schools, followers were persuaded in order to influence them to accomplish goals more effectively, the persuasion skill was needed for such an endeavour.

The second finding pertains to the skills that were more developed than others. As much as all three skills seemed to be fairly developed, however, the conceptual and human skills appeared to be more developed than the technical skills. This deduction is based on the skills that were indicated as lacking which were mostly technical in nature: inability to lead collaborations with two groups at the same time (school A); lack of understanding of the scope of work when dealing with two collaborations at the same time (school A); lack of knowledge of agriculture (school B); lack of expansion of the project in order to include it in the curriculum (school B); lack of planning for the running of the project during holidays (school B). To my knowledge these results are unmatched by any reported from other case studies investigating collaborations in school health promotion.

In the third finding, both headteachers showed special traits that they were in possession of namely, being passionate, determined, patient, focussed, caring, fair and having integrity (headteacher B); approachable, driven, focussed, achiever, hard worker, self-confident and determined (headteacher A). These traits not only complemented the skills but became building blocks upon which a solid foundation could be built for stronger collaborations. All the traits contributed in solidifying the collaborations and task completion.

Conclusion

This study suggests that headteachers have to possess certain qualities in order for them to create a conducive environment to turn their schools to health-promoting ones. The key characteristics of headteachers in this study are: being visionary; conversant with collaborations in school health-promotion; commitment to health projects and collaborations; being a team-builder and a team-player; having social skills;

understanding the scope of health projects; and having the ability to monitor and evaluate health projects. Attaining such qualities would benefit school leaders in developing countries more, as school health-promotion hinges on their competence to network for resources. The evidence is based on short-term collaborations that were less than five years.

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