EXPLORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN LESOTHO HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Whilst teacher leadership is an evolving concept with a potential that has yet to be realized, the fostering of teachers' leadership growth remains a sustainability element in education worldwide. Teacher leadership for sustainability indicates a fresh and extended consideration of leadership emphasising sustainability principles and providing leadership that transforms the school environment while engaging in collaborative efforts to do so. Located in the interpretive paradigm, this qualitative study sought to elicit the views of Heads of department (HoDs) and District Education Managers (DEMs) in Lesotho high schools to explore the views they consider most relevant in developing teacher leadership skills to ensure leadership succession as sustainable practice. The findings reveal that to achieve sustainable teacher leadership, there is a need to withdraw from a top-down hierarchical model of leadership towards more flexible, transformative, and empowering approaches to leadership. Furthermore, in order to maintain sustainable teacher leadership, HoDs and DEMs must be innovative in providing reflective plans for professional development that can sustain teachers throughout their careers and foster learning environments that are healthy for teachers, learners, and the school. The study recommends that school leaders should mobilise the leadership expertise of teachers in their schools in order to create more chances for transformation and capacity building. Sustainable teacher leadership can help bring about great improvements in a school, including extending the scope of leadership beyond what the HoDs and DEMs cannot achieve alone, and building their relationship capacity to become collaborative change agents.

Keywords: District education manager, school management team, sustainable teacher leadership, teacher leadership.

1. Introduction

Teacher leadership focuses on learner advancement and signifies a leadership model which is focused on the concepts of professional cooperation and encouraging the teacher to be actively involved in development opportunities as well as decision-making to sustain school leadership (Makoelle & Makhalemele, 2020). Significantly, enhancement in leadership sustainability may contribute to the changing roles of leaders within the school environment.

Makoelle and Makhalemele's (2020) study in South Africa point out that the importance of sustainable teacher leadership and teachers' involvement in decision-making processes show comparisons between how they theorise and enact leadership and the techniques used by teachers internationally. In South Africa, however, it is absolutely clear that the governmental dialogue of teacher leadership remains a critical matter which impact on teachers' thoughts of teacher leadership and how it is to be enacted.

The problem of teacher leadership in Lesotho high schools has not been adequately addressed. Whilst teachers in Lesotho schools typically fulfil the role of learning facilitators aiming at improving learners' academic achievements, they simultaneously contribute to the schools' development (Perumal, 2015). In Lesotho, mistrust of teachers towards their schools' leaders exists as leaders are sceptical of the capability teachers possess to carry out certain tasks entrusted to them. Consequently, teachers become demotivated and the level of commitment wanes. It is typically these sustainability factors that the researchers wish to explore in this study. To address the problematic of teacher leadership, the current study provides recommendations on how to sustain leadership aimed at providing direction to Lesotho high schools in developing teachers as leaders.

This paper addresses the central question: *What are the sustainability factors that influence teacher leadership practices in Lesotho high schools?*

2. Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework informs the direction of the research. Whilst a conceptual framework contains the significant variables, features or concepts and presumes connections among them (Miles & Huberman, 1994), it also provides an indication on how to explore the research problem and signposts how the variables in the study are connected (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The conceptual structure in Figure 1 provided the authors with guidelines to teacher leadership practices.

Figure 1. Teacher Leadership Conceptual framework (created by authors).
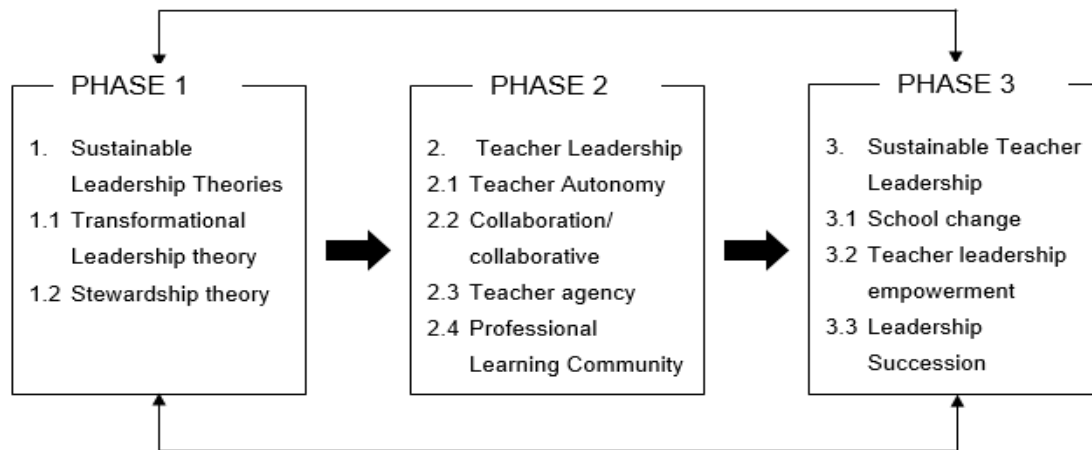
The development of teacher leadership is enhanced when teachers are afforded opportunities to raise their voices on matters such as the establishment of PLCs, decision-making as well as ensuring professional autonomy (Sfakianaki et al., 2018). Sustainable teacher leadership includes three aspects. First, school change requires a shifting from the traditional autocratic approach to the transformational approach by actively working with stakeholders to sustain leadership and to improve the school (Olujuwon, 2013). Second, teacher leadership empowerment aims at enhancing teacher leadership opportunities by building capacity in terms of abilities, skills and expertise whereby teachers partake in decision-making and the management of the school (Peterlin, Pearse & Dimovski, 2015). Third, leadership succession can be regarded as a process of finding and growing future leaders who will replace current leaders, in order to sustain continuous successful leadership over time in schools (Al-Zawahreh, Khasawneh & Al-Jaradat, 2019)

In this study, the researchers contend that, in order to sustain leadership in schools, HoDs and DEMs should work collaboratively with a shared vision to.

3. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative methodology to acquire knowledge of how sustainable teacher leadership is practised in designated schools in the Berea and Maseru districts from the perspective of Heads of Department (HoDs) and District Education Managers (DEMs). Researchers are positioned to obtain more information about the social world they are learning about, through involvement with an emphasis on the individual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The collected data was in the form of words, providing for a more transparent approach, without the use of mathematical information (Creswell, 2011). The qualitative approach was suitable for this study because of its importance in emphasising the existing experiences of HoDs in Lesotho schools.

4. Participants and sampling

In this study, purposive sampling was used to identify the participants. This technique implies that the chosen participants share more or less particular similar characteristics and can, therefore, offer essential information desirable for this research study and suitability to advance the aim of the study (Maree, 2011, Mouton, 2011). Eight HoDs and two DEMs were selected to participate in the study in four schools in the Berea district and four schools in the Maseru district of Lesotho.

5. Data collection

The HoDs and DEMs were requested to engage with the researchers by means of in-depth individual semi-structured interviews. The aim was to elicit the feelings and experiences of HoDs and DEMs of the nature and practice of leadership succession and teacher leadership in their schools. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) assert that semi-structured interviews are suitable where researchers primarily focus on procedure or difficulty, as it delineates the lines of inquiry by means of open-ended questions (Maree, 2011).

6. Data analysis

Codes and thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. Coding involves a careful scrutiny of the recorded data, breaking it down into sections and then dividing it into important logical units (Maree, 2011). Moreover, coding is usually used in the occurrence of a pattern or data repetition (Saldana, 2016). Thematic analysis was done by categorising mutual themes in answers, for example, looking at the differences and similarities in answers by grouping the data, searching for significant patterns and then arranging it according to themes and content (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

7. Discussion of findings

The participants were adamant that factors influencing teacher leadership in Lesotho High Schools mainly centred around decision-making and autonomy.

7.1. Sub-theme: Shared in decision-making

Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017) mention that the development of teachers, growing their full potential and leading themselves effectively, should be regarded as the core of being a leader. To achieve the goals of a school, principals need to be efficient in leading learning and teaching processes to be regarded as transformative leaders (Faupel & Süß, 2019). DEMs reveal that they work together with principals to discuss the vision of the school. DEMB reiterates,

> *"I think it is important to do so because it enables everyone to come up with new ideas and views that provide a genuine conclusion which helps schools to always remember what they want to achieve at the end. Principals especially should not work alone".*

Working in collaborative teams allows transformation to take hold in an organization when the leaders empower others, disperse leadership and models collaboration and its practices (Admiraal et al., 2019). Relationships are simultaneously fostered which may enable teachers to address struggles across leadership and shift their experience of working in an isolated environment to one of supporting collaborative efforts. DEMM indicates,

> *"Trust is a real issue in schools. Some principals are autocratic. To involve stakeholders develops an environment of trust by allowing the voices of the stakeholders to be heard and their issues to be known".*

Participants HoDA, HoDB, HoDC, HoDE and HoDG stated that there is a need to strengthen school values, mutual trust and respect to co-create a satisfying and interconnected school environment that is ideal for school improvement. In this way teachers may embrace the practice of deliberating their duties and difficulties with each other and devote time conversing what knowledge they can acquire during workshops in the pursuit of innovative ideas (Admiraal et al., 2019). HoDF and HoDH indicated that HoDs and DEMs should support a healthy environment with open communication channels so that teachers may assist each other and participate in school-wide decision-making. HoDE made the following statement in this regard:

> *"The close relationship between stakeholders is common in my school, we prepare scheme of work with subject teachers whereas, with HoDs it's is once a year while we do not meet the DEMs at all".*

7.2. Sub-theme: Teacher autonomy

Teacher autonomy is important for the creation of a unique learning situations where the diverse learning needs of learners can be addressed. Notably, teacher autonomy is an informally created process, where support and development teams can facilitate and share autonomous learning, different pools of knowledge, equal power and teaching experience (Edwards & Gammell, 2016). However, teachers demonstrate their teaching abilities according to the designed curriculum which restricts their autonomy (Wermke *et al.*, 2019). Participants (DEMB and DEMM) indicated that teachers who require autonomy are the ones that seem independent and who ensure that teaching and learning take place without any prescribed

instruction from authority. DEMM elaborated, stating:

"They plan on their own and ensure that the delivery of the curriculum within their classes is done properly. They also ensure that every work that has been done is done as required. As a result, these teachers require more support to function optimally".

Participants DEMM and DEMB further revealed that they encourage teacher autonomy, but within academic constraints, such as compiling reports at the end of the lesson and evaluating them, after which they are afforded opportunities to develop their individual self-sufficiency. This implies that teachers should engage in peer observation aiming at developing the self and others. Teachers should be dynamic in balancing the desire to make choices grounded on their individual capability with the encouraging effects of teamwork. Consequently, DEMB confirmed stating that:

"Minimum guidelines should be set while classes should be monitored and guidance provided in order to produce good results as a team. However, teachers should not always be told what they should do. Sometimes it is for them to decide."

Organizational success requires a focus on aspects of teacher autonomy such as responsibility, capacity and freedom in carrying out their professional activities (Wermke & Forsberg, 2017). In addition, they require creating a collaborative learning environment such as empowering teachers to share knowledge. HoDA and HoDE mentioned that teachers have freedom because they participate in different departmental meetings to make suggestions regarding innovations in terms of implementation plans for learning. They do have freedom although they communicate it with the principal. Stating thus,

"Our principal allows us to decide in our departments concerning different materials that we need but at the end of the day we have to report to him" (HoDE). Adding to this, HoDB, reported, *"As a head of department, I want to believe that my responsibility is limited especially in my department because the principal is the one who makes conclusions".* HoDD, explained further by stating that, *"I do not think I have that much autonomy because most of the things are done by the principal"* and HoD4 elaborated, *"For example, if we want to hold a debate with other schools if the principal does not give us a time to do that, we end up not doing it because is the one who has the final word".*

Leaders must trust teachers' capacity to carry out responsibilities and tasks and, in so doing, reinforce teacher autonomy, because autonomous teachers work with their learners openly in an attempt to stimulate learning whilst fostering accountability. Autonomous teachers continually search, in collaboration with their learners, for better reactions to diverse difficulties unavoidably arising in re-interpreting and developing their learners (Wang & Wang, 2016).

8. Recommendations

Training programs for teachers as leaders may be considered the first step in addressing the leadership imperative. The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET, 2009) in Lesotho and denominational educational secretaries may provide professional development training programs and short courses focusing on principals' and teachers' leadership development such as seminars and online refresher courses (Moodley, 2014). Schools (in collaboration with the MoET, 2009) could train teachers and leaders on developing tailor-made approaches to sustain teacher leadership in schools. This is a crucial interchange as some leaders are not trained in leadership, so it is difficult for leaders to assist teachers in leadership skills, even to empower themselves and others (MoET, 2009).

Fostering positive school change and improvement through continuous professional development, demonstrate improved instructional practices for example, the use of ICT, and creates cooperative working practices such as relationship-building and networking with teachers (Loh & Ang, 2020; Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

Additionally, such programmes should focus on the value of PLCs, as the quality of education relies heavy on principals and teachers continuously renewing their professional knowledge and skills, in order to sustain leadership and maintain improved learner performance throughout the school. DEMs must aid SMTs and teachers in areas of management and administration, such as arranging in-service courses, providing national publications and materials, as well as providing administrative assistance from the MoET (2009), both nationally and at district level (Gale, 2014).

9. Conclusion

The data emanating from the in-depth interviews were subjected to thematic analysis and a main theme was presented. The findings were verified from the quotations from the interviews, as well as from the relevant literature. It is imperative that DEMs and HoDs foster collaborative, team-based, teacher leadership practices in schools in the quest for ensuring leadership succession. The findings confirm that

teacher leadership is significant for teacher leaders to facilitate learning and teaching and building effective PLCs to enhance the schools' functioning. As a result, it provides an opportunity for a school leader to create a wider path and inclusive opportunities for sustaining teacher leadership.

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