

Diversity leadership in schools: Challenges and obstacles

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Problem identification

Increasing diversity among teachers and students is one of the most critical adaptive challenges that schools in South Africa are facing. Ethnic differences between teachers and school leaders may result in expectations or working styles that may influence how they will respond to the increasing diversity in the student composition in South African schools. Although white managers in formerly disadvantaged (black) schools have been commonplace for many years, no black managers were found in formerly advantaged (white) schools until recently. The main research question in the proposed research is: What are the main challenges facing a (slowly) increasing diverse leadership corps in schools in leading black and white teachers to work collectively to meet the needs of their diverse school population?

Rationale and Motivation

Leadership and diversity are invariably connected as schools move from monocultural non-diverse contexts to ones that contain ethnically diverse, multilingual and economically disadvantaged children. Therefore, as leaders are prepared, there needs to be a commitment in providing training to school leaders so they can manage diversity challenges in these contexts. Thus, a new leadership framework should focus on the impact of diversity dimensions that involve strategic, structural, cultural, and personnel considerations in managing schools. Beckmann & Joubert (2000,61) are of the opinion that the increasing diversity in the South African education system calls for a new focus on the role of education managers. Whilst Van der Linde (2001) focuses on the role of conflict in analyzing the situation in two schools in South Africa, he is of the opinion that proper management can lead to a school environment where multiculturalism will not be an obstacle. It is clear from the South African literature that the issue of a diverse leadership corps in previously advantaged schools is not dealt with through research. Jansen (1999) admits that the public discourse on diversity in South African schools has largely been confined to the issue of black students into white schools. He calls this focus "misplaced", as the deafening silence remains on issues of curriculum, staffing policy, etc.

Diversity research examines how social, racial and cultural issues that originate outside the organizational boundaries but can affect leader-member interactions. Diversity research has found effects of race and gender on organizational networks, career opportunities, mentoring relations, employee perceptions, values and communication styles (Cox, 1994; Chemers, Oskamp & Constanzo, 1995; Chen & Van Velsor, 1996). Thus, leaders who work with members (co-leaders, educators and students) from different ethnic backgrounds need to recognize cultural differences in their followers that may affect the ways in which relationships are developed and negotiated. Consequently, it is necessary to recognize the importance of social group identity in leading diverse groups within the organization.

Educational organizations that reflect diversity of class, gender, socio-economic status and nationality establish a complex set of interactions that have implications for how groups are formed. Intergroup theory applies to school participants because of the nature of the organizational context between identity and organizational groups. In schools, there exists a teaching culture that imposes beliefs about appropriate ways of educating children resulting in norms of actions.

As schools in South Africa are becoming more diverse in its management and staff composition, important lessons are to be learnt from other organizations. Van der Colff (2001, 17) argues the case for the following steps to be taken in order to ensure that diversity is managed effectively:

- * Legitimacy of leadership: Collective decision making that is enabling to all employees, should be practiced.
- * Creating a communal enterprise: An inclusive culture, nurturing all employees in cohesive, yet diverse units, is needed
- * Value sharing: Leaders need to indicate the connection between individual and organizational direction clearly.

The abovementioned principles are applicable to schools in South Africa, which begin to reflect diversity in their leadership and staff structures. In groundbreaking research in the USA, Jones (2002) found that black educators described their comfort level with their black principal as a "confessional". They reported that they could discuss any issue or topic with their principal without fear of retaliation. They felt comfortable sharing information with them about personal and professional matters. On the other hand, other factors were important to white educators with black principals. These factors include the principal's ability to obtain needed resources, receive awards for the school and themselves, and solve problems, which affect the working conditions and comfort levels of teachers.

Research aims

The aims of the research are the following:

- 1) to investigate the impact of diverse leadership (in terms of ethnicity) in schools on the work life of teachers
- 2) to analyze the role of shared objectives for the school as an organization that is maintained by diverse leadership/management structures in schools
- 3) to analyze the interpersonal relations of leaders in diverse school settings as a factor contributing to the achievement or non-achievement of efficiency in their schools

Work plan/Research design

The research methods planned to achieve the objectives of the research, include the following:

- * Action research in schools of which the leadership reflect diversity. This will include observation by the researcher/research assistants of critical incidents such as staff meetings, contact with learners and meetings of school leadership. Leaders in the schools selected will be requested to keep journals for a certain period of time in which they record incidents where the effect of diversity could be felt. Structured and non-structured interviews will be conducted with leaders in these schools in order to analyze the impact of a diverse leadership corps on these schools. As a basis for comparison, schools in the USA (Texas) will also be visited.

* Questionnaires will be compiled, based on the literature regarding diverse leadership. A separate set of questionnaires will be implemented among the leadership of the school, the educators and the learners. The purpose of these questionnaires will be to analyze the dynamics brought about by the diversity in school leadership. In order to create a basis for comparison, similar questionnaires will be implemented in selected schools without diversity in leadership. The same questionnaires will be implemented in selected schools in Texas (USA).

Results from the action research component will serve as part of the theoretical framework when compiling the questionnaires.

Due to the fact that research of this nature requires frequent visits to the schools that take part in the research, and because of the nature of action research, a representative sample of 30 schools across the country will be selected to participate. Previously advantaged as well as previously disadvantaged schools will be represented on an equal basis. It is well known that previously disadvantaged schools have reflected diversity in leadership for a long time, as many white principals and deputy principals served in these schools. Results from the research in previously disadvantaged schools can provide a framework for the understanding of the dynamics involved in leadership diversity in previously advantaged schools (cf. Vryburg High School).

The following time framework will be used for the project:

Literature review and selecting schools to participate: 4 months

Action research in schools and implementation of questionnaires: 10 months

Analyzing results, writing report: 6 months

Potential Impact on HR Development

It is well known that the large majority of previously advantaged schools in South Africa do not yet reflect diversity in leadership. This research project, thus, takes place at an early stage of a process that will inevitably achieve momentum in the next two to five years. Results from this project can serve as guidelines for schools in dealing with a diverse leadership structure. The recommendations of the project will be a result of scientific inquiry into a new process, but will provide a framework to ensure that leaders in schools are prepared for their challenging tasks as part of a diverse leadership structure.

Potential Impact on Redress & Equity

The project aims to analyze the dynamics involved in diverse leadership in schools in terms of race. The findings will contribute to a better understanding of the complexity involved in leadership diversity in schools. This project will be followed by an international project, focusing on diversity in leadership in several countries. Co-investigators in the USA have already been identified.

Potential Outcomes

The discipline: Educational Management has focused in recent years on aspects such as the role of leadership in previously disadvantaged schools and the challenges associated therewith. The proposed research project will provide a new dimension, namely an investigation into the way in which a diverse leadership in schools contribute in achieving common objectives with the school as an organization. The creation of effective schools, regardless of the type of leadership, is a long-term outcome. On the short term, the outcomes of this research can contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of leadership in schools.