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School Leadership under Covid-19 Pandemic: A Critique of the South African School Context

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Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 exposed the lack of readiness for school leaders to cope with demands of leading during a pandemic. Globally, school leaders were not trained to deal with a crisis of COVID-19 proportions. Leaders in the twenty-first century need to have the required skills like the twenty-first century leadership skills and Fourth Industrial Revolution skills. This study investigated how school leaders are handling the challenges of school leadership under the COVID-19 pandemic in the 4IR era. This study adopted a qualitative research approach. An analysis of local and international literature was done to identify gaps. The study revealed that school leaders and teachers have inadequate information and communication technology skills. Leadership preparation programmes are lagging behind in preparing school leaders to lead in a crisis. Furthermore, the study revealed that school leaders and teachers do not establish communities of learning to learn leadership skills from each other. The study has concluded that there is no alignment between the level of readiness for school leaders and leadership skills of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Educational leadership, leadership in a crisis, leadership skills, school leadership, 4IR (Fourth Industrial Revolution)

Introduction

School leadership is expected to evolve and move with the times. Effective school leadership should be able to lead effectively even in a crisis. School leaders in the twenty-first century need to have the requisite leadership skills fit for purpose. Principals, today, are professional educators facilitating educational reform and change (Eisner, 2002). School leaders who use a strategic approach to leadership will focus on obtaining the best possible results which will result in positive effects on the school's overall success (Dinham, 2005). However, school principals are faced with various leadership challenges. This is supported by Du Plessis (2014) who stated that principals are facing unique and trying challenges in the twenty-first century. School principals have had the difficult task of leading their schools through a crisis (Kaul et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a study by Maifala (2017) revealed that, in the twenty-first century, the school does not have only one main role player (namely, the principal) but parents, teachers, the department and the community are all the key stakeholders. The main focus of the study was to investigate how prepared school leaders are to lead schools in the 4IR of the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

The section gives an overview of what is known the literature concerning twenty-first century school leadership.

What is leadership?

Kruse (2013) defines leadership as the action of influencing a group of people in an organisation, or as a social influence process that maximises the efforts of others in the pursuit of a common goal. However, for this study, educational leadership refers to a process of managing the school and its activities in achieving educational objectives (Baporikar, 2015). A major shift in the definition of educational leadership is needed to allow for the reconstruction of thinking, assumptions and practices in the 4IR era (Botha, 2013).

According to Best Colleges (2021), the main purpose of educational leadership is to ensure academic success through the process of training and new materials development. Educational leadership in practice involves:

- Creating an academic success vision for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status.
- Aiming for developing a responsive, healthy and safe learning environment by delegating responsibilities to all staff members.
- Enhancing the curriculum content and the teaching methods.
- Using current management tools and techniques adapted to educational systems.

Therefore, according to Bush et al. (2011), effective leadership and management are increasingly recognised as important provided they improve learning opportunities for students. We argue that educational leaders who are 4IR-ready should lead schools in the twenty-first century.

Future Leadership in Education

Because of constant changes, it is important to assess whether our existing leadership concepts are still relevant. Leadership is about behaviour, relationships, approaches, perspectives, abilities and competence, knowledge, personality and practice. All these are joined together by the powerful force of influence. This is supported by Sternberg (2000) who, in his theory of human intelligence, states that leaders should be able to apply practical intelligence. School leaders are expected to apply their knowledge and intelligence to solve every day organisational challenges.

In summing up this theory, a leader must make intelligent choices. According to Sternberg (2000), a successful intelligent leader must demonstrate the ability to set goals and lead successfully. Organisations are now evolving as a result of advances in information and communication technology. In the era of 4IR, old practices are being replaced by new practices (Gurr, 2004).

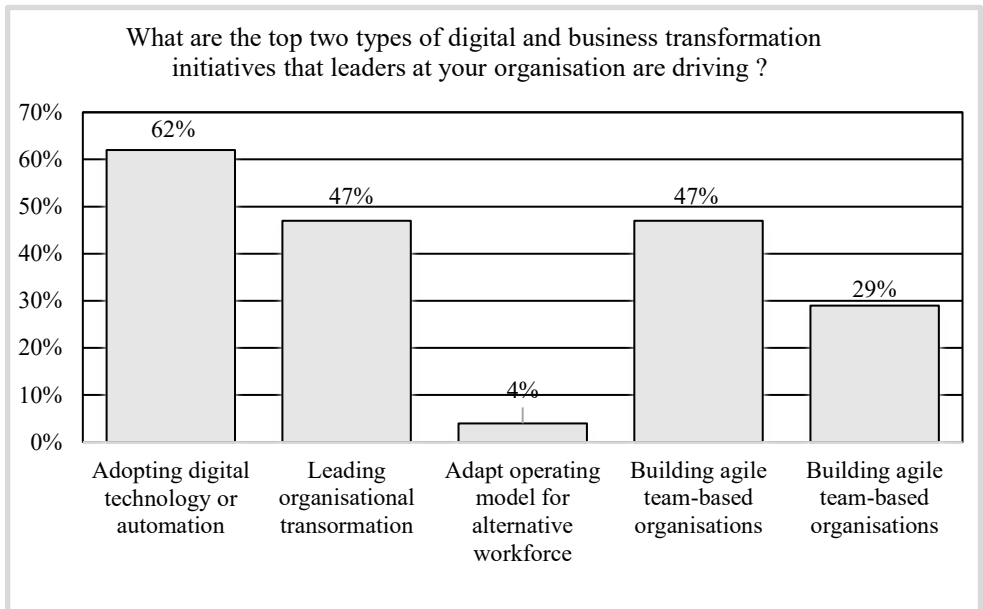
Many people now spend a significant portion of their day in digital spaces (Fottrell, 2018). Gurr (2004) further emphasises that ICT advancements have led to a need for upskilling people in the use and implementation of ICT in education which is subject to fast and continual development (Spender & Stewart, 2002).

E-leadership is now a buzz word used in conversations regarding current and future leadership among business consulting firms (Gurr, 2004). School leaders are also expected to be well versed in e-leadership during the 4IR era. However, “e-leadership” is nothing more than a term for an online version of traditional leadership concepts. People who make use of electronic channels to conduct their day-to-day leadership activities are regarded as e-leaders (Torre & Sarti, 2020). As a result, the primary distinction between a traditional and an e-leader is the context in which each operates. According to Gurr (2004), e-leadership is more coordinated than traditional leadership and has an influence on leadership practices.

According to the Deloitte Human Capital Trends report (2019) on an e-leadership survey, South African respondents were asked for their views on the new requirements for twenty-first century leaders compared to leaders of the past. The findings of the survey as presented in Figure 1 of the report show that that a new set of skills for leaders is a priority in the twenty-first century. Adaptation to digital technology is a priority at 62%.

Figure 1

Types of Digital and Business Transformation Initiatives (Deloitte, 2019)



The Significance of the Twenty-First Century School Leadership

According to Azorin (2020), COVID-19 presented an opportunity to execute leadership in education applying e-leadership principles. To put it differently, the post COVID-19 leadership globally can follow one of two systems, namely: (a) the traditional education system as usual and (b) a transformational education system.

According to Hargreaves (2020), we are currently stuck in a long dark tunnel with the COVID-19. By the time we emerge out of the tunnel, we need to do things differently from post COVID-19 era, and this will include school leadership. Transformation in school leadership will be demonstrated by leaders that are developed to lead in the twenty-first century and are 4IR-ready. Due to the pressures of the pandemic, the educational world has been pushed into transformation on different levels including leadership and teaching and learning. It is, therefore, necessary to develop school leaders so that they are better equipped to respond to and adapt to these changing times (Azorin, 2020). The other transformation, necessary for the leaders, has been to offer distance education online using various digital platforms to continue the educational process in schools (Erten, 2022). Another aspect of leading that has been a challenge for the leadership of schools is that teachers were very quickly forced to learn digital teaching techniques and ways to convey course materials to their students because of the pandemic. Digital tools, internet resources, social media technology and online learning activities were all used extensively during COVID-19 (Erten, 2022).

Fullan (2020) states that that evolution, especially in school leadership during and after COVID-19, could have great benefits for education systems globally. The evolution in education as a result of the COVID-19 will require people who are ready to handle the changes, especially in school leadership. This article examines the current situation to ask whether school leaders are prepared and ready to lead beyond the global challenge of COVID-19. The study examines aspects of school leadership during times of crisis like COVID-19. This was informed by the fact that during a crisis, school leaders are expected to make informed decisions, serve better, act in a trustworthy manner and be the credible voice for their school (Varela & Fedynich, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on school leadership, and schools in South Africa and other parts of the world were forced to transition from traditional methods of teaching and learning to online methods. Literature indicates that school leaders are not adequately prepared to transition from the traditional system of leadership to the new style of leadership focusing more on technology (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). Most school leaders found themselves in a state of uncertainty because they were not prepared to make the transition so suddenly during the pandemic.

COVID-19 affects people over 65 in a disproportionately high number of cases, according to various medical studies. This age group accounts for more than 18% of all public and private school teachers, as well as 27% of all principals (John et al., 2020). As a result, in this article, we argue that good succession planning is necessary in educational leadership and skills development programme needs to be established that will prepare leadership for the future.

According to Eisner (2002), leadership in the twenty-first century necessitates a thorough understanding of a school's needs, which include the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and Future Work Skill Needs. Our community now lives in a society that is becoming more diverse, globalised, complex and media-rich. We have no idea what the world will look like, in the future but we are expected to prepare.

The Twenty-First Century Leadership and 4IR

The United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The education sector falls under SDG 4: The goal is meant to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Rosa, 2017, p.14). According to Khumalo (2019), school organisational leadership plays an essential role in promoting sustainable development and, without their commitment, this goal cannot be achieved. The provision of inclusive and equitable quality education means that all systems should be in place, including having school leaders who are developed and ready to lead schools in the twenty-first century especially under crises like COVID-19. Quality and effective school leadership needs to be empowered in using the 4IR for leadership. Ally (2019) states that the 4IR will transform the role of teachers from the conventional ways of doing things to modern ways. School leaders and teachers are also expected to be technologically savvy: they should be learning technologies like robotics, coding, and AI (artificial intelligence).

The Policy on The South African Standard for Principals (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2015) under instructional leadership, emphasises that, the principal is required to lead the school into the future through the use of ICT. Furthermore, the principal should be developed in using information technology that supports teaching and learning (DBE, 2015). The National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) (National Planning Commission, 2012) emphasises that the use of ICT is key for development around the world in the twenty-first century. Literature indicates that there are serious backlogs regarding the implementation and achievement of the SDG4. This is highlighted in the UNESCO (2019) report which states that the world is unlikely to meet the SDG4 in 2030 and the challenge is worsened by the inability to collect the necessary data regarding the proper implementation of 4IR especially in developing countries. This raises the question of whether school leaders are prepared and ready to lead in the twenty-first century. Bush et al. (2011) highlights the need for effective development of school leaders to lead in the twenty-first century.

Mathibe (2007) is concerned that South African school leaders are not appropriately skilled and trained for school management and leadership. Furthermore, Khathu (2019) states that school leadership and teachers’ competency reskilling are required. In addition, Butler-Adam (2018) reiterates that the successful implementation of 4IR in education requires a new set of skills to manage and work with technology.

Hurdles to 4IR Implementation in South Africa

Ally and Wark (2020) are concerned that globally, education systems have not kept up with the 4IR and appear to still be operating in the Education 2.0 rather than Education 4.0. Adhikari (2020) is worried that developing countries, perhaps due to their location, government structure, lack of infrastructure or lack of technical expertise fail to implement the 4IR effectively. The challenges of implementing 4IR in South Africa include funding and the lack of technological skills and expertise among other things (Kayembe & Nel, 2019). Brown-Martin (2017) states that the technological infrastructure and qualified teachers comprise the biggest cost in the provision of training in 4IR. School leadership skills include skills required for 4IR. Penprase (2018) emphasises that, in a world that is increasingly interconnected, interculturalism, human

rights, respect for freedom and interpersonal skills should be developed. Furthermore, Kayembe et al. (2019) laments the marginalisation of certain socioeconomic groups from participating in 4IR; this negatively impacts on the successful implementation. This is evident in different socioeconomic groups in South Africa. Some socioeconomic groups are privileged while others are still underprivileged. Meyer and Gent (2016) drew the following conclusions on the status of education and technology in South Africa:

- A system-wide change management needs to be prioritised, and ICT-enabled assessment needs consideration;
- There was limited access to technology across the provinces and quintiles;
- Despite the existence of policy, there is limited capacity and a slow pace in implementation;
- There is lack of clear integrative interprovincial strategies, and progress is fragmented; and
- Constraints in resources and solutions are not addressed.

Furthermore, the Department of Basic Education, the National Development Plan and the White Paper on e-Education 2004 identified a number of hurdles in terms of education and technological advancement. The following are some of those hurdles:

- Promoting new ideas and exposure to critical thinking;
- Enabling self-learning and discovery;
- Identifying which teachers require pedagogic assistance;
- Providing teachers and learners new twenty-first century skills;
- Reducing administrative burdens, for example marking assessments and keeping attendance registers; and
- Making learning more learner-focused, fresh, novel and exciting (Meyer & Gent, 2016).

The identified hurdles raise the question of whether school leaders in the twenty-first century are ready to cope with the changes brought about by 4IR or COVID-19.

School Leaders as Lifelong Learners

Since the dawn of democracy, the South African education system has undergone challenges of various behavioural, transformational and technological types that ultimately impacted the culture of teaching and learning (Khumalo, 2019). Therefore, to be a successful leader in a crisis including dynamic change, leaders need to be lifelong learners. Leaders always need to seek professional development to learn and improve their knowledge (Maifala, 2017). School leaders need to be well equipped in all key dimensions of successful leadership. Education Development Trust (2014) identify key dimensions of successful leaders as follows:

- Designing the organisation; aligning roles and responsibilities;
- Improving teaching and learning;
- Enhancing and enriching the curriculum;
- Building relationships inside and outside the school; and
- Promoting school culture and values.

School leaders need to be developed in the above dimensions to be successful in their leadership.

Research Strategy

This study followed a qualitative approach using a literature study method. According to Lin (2009), the use of:

literature research method is to read through, analyse and sort literature in order to identify the essential attributes of materials. Its significant difference from other methodologies is that it does not directly deal with the object under study, but to indirectly access the information from a variety of literature, which is generally referred to as non-contact method. (p.179)

Yuan in Lin (2009) points out that, literature research methodology includes non-structured qualitative analysis, they access and process information contained in literature from different perspectives. In this study, articles, reports, books and newspapers were read through and analysed to identify the essential attributes of the material. Qualitative analysis is used to classify information contained in literature; to select typical examples to re-organise and come to conclusion on the basis of qualitative description, (Lin, 2009).

A systematic literature review is conducted in this study. According to Liberati et al. (2009), a systematic literature review is a research method and process for identifying and critically appraising relevant research, as well as collecting and analysing from such research. The researchers then identified relevant articles, reports, books, and newspapers for analysis.

Gaps Identified

Akinbode and Shuhumi (2018) state that, “the 21st century is the era of globalised world which ushers in a dramatic change in the society and the world at large” (p.142). This study focused on the preparedness of school leaders to handle school leadership under the COVID-19 crisis. O'Brien and Robertson (2009) argue that leaders are expected to acquire a set of management and leadership competencies necessary for situations they may have never experienced before. Furthermore, Stoll and Temperley (2009) emphasise the need for “creative and adaptive leadership” (p. 2) in schools in order to deal effectively with crises in a complex and rapidly changing educational environment. However, it appears that, in this era of management and leadership complexity in schools, schools need to create a professional learning community instead of relying on a single instructional leader that works in isolation (Akinbode et al., 2018).

According to Mathews and Crow (2010), a professional learning community refers to a situation where the school principal and teachers collaborate to learn from each other with the objective of enhancing students' achievement. In the twenty-first century, schools should not operate as ivory towers. The principal is expected to be a facilitator of activities within the organisation. Therefore, the parents and the community as stakeholders in the school should be involved in the decisions made in the school (Akinbode et al., 2018).

Iskak and Pa-alisbo (2019) lament that some school principals lack the requisite skills and knowledge to lead schools. There are school principals who still use the conventional methods of leadership which are no longer in sync with dynamic educational demands of the present. Iskak and Pa-alisbo (2019) found that twenty-first

century school leaders are unable to influence their subordinates, including learners to achieve more. Iskak and Pa-alisbo (2019) further emphasise that school principals' roles in the twenty-first century are no longer limited to the implementation of educational policies and objectives but are now transformed into raising the future generation and preparing them for the rapidly changing world. These expectations from school principals mean that they also need to be empowered to handle the challenges presented by a crisis like COVID-19.

Research Questions

An analysis of the literature review attempted to answer the following questions:

To what extent is school leadership ready to cope with the challenges of COVID-19? How are school leaders empowered to lead in a crisis?

Theoretical Framework

According to Burkus (2010), the skills theory grew from the obvious flaws in the trait approach which stated that traits are relatively fixed. As a result, the traits theory was not particularly useful in the development of new leaders who possessed those characteristics. Skills theories are leader-centric and focus on what characteristics about a leader are important. Thus, theorists on leadership sought to identify the skills and abilities that made leaders successful.

Burkus (2010) further emphasises that competencies, individual attributes, leadership outcomes, career experiences, and environmental influences are the five components of effective leadership, according to the skills model of leadership. The impact of the leader's attributes, experiences and environment on the leader's competencies is critical to effective leadership.

This article began with a summary of our theoretical framework, with a focus on what we mean by "Future leadership in the twenty-first century in the South African School context". According to skills theory, learned knowledge and acquired skills/abilities are important factors in effective leadership. However, although skills theory does not deny the existence of a link between inherited traits and the ability to lead effectively, it contends that learned skills, a developed style, and acquired knowledge are the real keys to leadership success (Wolinski, 2010). A strong belief in skills theory often necessitates allocating significant time and resources to leadership development and training (Amanchukwu et al., 2015).

Burkus (2010) points out that skills theory bases effective leadership performance on learned (and learnable) skills rather than traits which is perhaps its most useful strength. To summarise, technical, human, and conceptual skills are all part of the three-skills approach. Leaders must possess all three skills; however, depending on their position in the management structure, some skills are more important than others. The skills approach to leadership takes a leader-centred approach. The skills approach also shifts our focus away from personality traits, which are typically viewed as innate and largely fixed, and toward skills and abilities that can be learned and developed. Even though personality plays an important role in leadership, the skills approach suggests that it is not the most important factor (Mumford et al., 2000).

Education and experience can help a person develop their leadership skills over time. According to Mumford et al. (2000), people who are capable of learning from their experiences can rise to positions of leadership. The skills approach is also distinct from

leadership approaches which focus on leaders' behavioural patterns. Rather than emphasising what leaders do, the skills approach frames leadership as a set of skills (knowledge, skills, and abilities).

Findings

The researchers investigated the readiness of school leaders to handle the demands of 4IR in the twenty-first century. Local and international literature was critically analysed to determine this. When reviewing the literature, the following themes emerged:

Inadequate ICT Skills for Teaching and Learning

In the current era, people involved in education especially teaching and learning are expected to have advanced skills in the use of ICT. However, literature shows that some teachers and people in leadership positions in education are still struggling with what can be deemed basic ICT skills. We are currently operating under what is termed the 4IR; however, the advent of COVID-19 exposed a dearth of understanding when leaders and teachers were expected to apply 4IR skills in teaching.

The main challenge is that most educational leaders are not sufficiently trained in ICT. Leadership in education is expected to lead regarding the application of ICT in their schools. The challenge around preparation and training lies in the lack of a budget and poor prioritisation of ICT for leadership and teaching. In some schools, there is evidence that infrastructure conducive to ICT usage for teaching and learning is non-existent.

Resistance to Change

Literature demonstrates that, in most cases, school leadership is still stuck in the past. People are still comfortable using what worked in the past and are resisting innovations. Traditional methods of leadership are still very much in use and any attempts by educational authorities are met with passive resistance. The more people adhere to the old ways of doing things, the less innovation is implemented. The new generation that embraces new ways of doing things is discouraged by the old guard. School leaders and their subordinates are not establishing professional communities of learning where they can learn from each other.

Fear of the Unknown Future

With the current changes taking place globally, people are not sure about the type of education system that is going to exist post the pandemic. Education leadership is likely to take a different form in order to cope with the changes. The prospects of learning new leadership skills and strategies brings anxiety to many educational leaders and teachers because there is a lot to be learned in order to be a competent leader of the future.

Conclusion

This study has concluded that there is no alignment between the level of readiness for school leaders and leadership skills of the twenty-first century. The study has also concluded that ICT skills for school leadership are not in line with 4IR expectations. School leaders are still using traditional leadership strategies and are resisting change.

There should be more development for school leaders in ICT. Infrastructure is required for 4IR in education should be put in place. School leaders and teachers need to establish communities of learning in order to learn from each other.

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