Ubuntu-Inspired Principals' Leadership Styles: A Conduit for Effective and Ethical Knowledge Management Practices in Under-Resourced South African Public Schools

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Abstract

This study focuses on locating a leadership style that upholds the ethos of Ubuntu (a culturally embedded African philosophy of collective personhood and caring for one another in communal and professional spaces of people's social interactions) and the creation of an organisational climate that is conducive to effective and ethical knowledge management (KM) practices in under-resourced public schools. Having borne in mind that the knowledge economy implies that all sectors, including the schooling system, need to treat organisational knowledge as a precious commodity, the study looked at how three schools leveraged KM in their daily operations. This study offers an in-depth analysis of views expressed by 20 participants (including teachers, principals, heads of departments (HODs) and administrative clerks) concerning the principals' facilitation of KM practices in their respective schools. From the three leadership styles that were purportedly employed by the selected principals, the study selected the one that complements Ubuntu practices more than the rest. This social constructivist-inclined qualitative inquiry found that a democratic (or participatory) leadership style is more people centred and effective enough to moderate a) the pervasion of authoritative undertakings associated with the inherently top-down school organogram; b) hostile relations between subordinate and superior staff; and c) low participation of teachers and administrative clerks in decision-making processes. Some aspects of the findings explicated that both the laissez-faire and transactional leadership styles somewhat fell short of invoking among principals the morale for consistently sustaining multiparty dialogue and collective decision making as a measure to unite staff behind a common vision. Therefore, the study recommends that principals should be urged to consciously consider the extent to which their approaches to school leadership might espouse democratic virtues and promote a distributive sense of duty among all role players in the KM ecologies of these schools.

Keywords: *Ubuntu; Leadership Styles; Knowledge Management; Indigenous Ways of Knowing; Knowledge Economy; Knowledge Sharing*

Introduction

The explosion of digital technologies has leapfrogged the beckoning of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Coping with the knowledge era demands that both private and public sector organisations must constantly review and reinforce their knowledge assets. Private sector organisations, to be effective, need to keep abreast of their internal affairs and the impact that the external business environment might have on their profitability and/or sustainable development. Likewise, public organisations (including schooling systems) have to constantly introspect on how to innovate their service delivery models for the greater good of the citizenry. Either way, in both sectors, productivity is tied to auditing and utilising internally available knowledge assets whilst generating more knowledge assets from (or about) external sources through the use of intermingling strategies known as "knowledge exploitation and exploration" (Lou et al., 2018, p. 870; Vidal, 2005, p. 2). Systemisation of the flow of organisational knowledge necessitates the need for the adoption of knowledge management (KM).

Trends indicate that over the last few years, public sector organisations have hurriedly embraced KM (Cong & Pandya, 2003, p. 25) as a stimulus for knowledge creation, storing and sharing (Nasubunga & Munene, 2020, p. 105). Leadership, therefore, becomes imperative in the actualisation of KM (Malik & Malik, 2008; Nasubuga & Munene, 2020; Nguyen, 2009; Omotayo, 2015). In African societies, effective leadership speaks to the leader's espousal of Ubuntu values systems (Msengane, 2006; Msila, 2014; Setlhodi, 2019), which are drawn "from a concrete context" in which they thrive (Ngubane & Makua, 2021, p. 3). Briefly put, Ubuntu principles (as instantiated in practice) encompass a normative appeal to practitioners to generate a climate of sharing and caring, where the process of "knowing" is also a collective enterprise (cf. Khambula, 2015; Msila, 2014; Nasubunga & Munene, 2020). Against the backdrop that South African KM literature generally lacks a schooling system focus (Gxwati, 2011; Mokwena, 2014), the study was animated by the following questions:

- Which leadership styles are perceived to be governing the principals' role in leading the facilitation of KM practices at selected under-resourced public schools?
- How do participants perceive the principals' leadership in the cultivation of multiparty and non-hierarchal internally directed knowledge-sharing transactions at selected under-resourced schools?
- To what extent do principals facilitate the prevalence of Ubuntu in externally directed knowledge sharing transactions at selected under-resourced public schools?

The kernel of this study is on highlighting the uptake of KM practices in a South African public schooling arena. Relevant literature is drawn to corroborate a stance that Ubuntu, an African philosophy of extending care, support and respect towards others, can complement the Western organisational/school leadership styles. In structural terms, the study is animated by an outline of the research paradigm, method and ethical considerations. The final lap of the study unearths the paradoxes of the extent to which principals of these under-resourced public schools used Ubuntu as a guiding principle for the facilitation of ethically grounded KM practices. As per the norm of empirical investigations, the study offers some suggestions for future application in so far as KM is concerned.

The Concept of Knowledge Management

Processes of synthesising knowledge, directing its flow and determining how it is to be imparted, constitute core functions of a school (Anonymous, 2020, p. 5). Despite schools being platforms for knowledge sharing through multifaceted collaborative efforts (among groups of learners, among groups of teachers, and between teachers and learners), a report compiled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2010) generally labelled them as mediocre knowledge sharers. Low commitment to the cause of extracting and consolidating nuggets of knowledge embedded in the minds of teachers, administrative staff and other stakeholders (Flores & Pérez, 2010; Min, 2017; Perez-Soltero et al., 2019) has had insidious ripple effects on schools' daily operations (Dowling, 2003; Ashraf et al., 2018). King (2009) postulates that people's inability to voluntarily unbundle the knowledge embedded in their brains might have been what precipitated the institutionalisation of knowledge management as a science of anchoring processes of encoding data and information into organisational knowledge. In view of the abundance of KM definitions (Girard & Girard, 2015, p. 2), I find Kaya and Dey's (2016, p. 7) particularly apt as it depicts KM as a systematic method of consolidating the (incoming and outgoing) knowledge assets to avoid loss or wastage of knowledge that can potentially spur the conception of innovative ideas and the attainment of organisational goals and its sustenance.

Essentially, organisational knowledge exists in two different but symbiotic forms, namely, tacit and explicit (as expounded in detail by Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Tacit knowledge rests in the minds of the people. It relates to people's task-based skills and aptitude. Contrariwise, explicit knowledge is the knowledge that manifests in a physical/tangible form (such as files, policy documents, manuals, minutes of the meeting, and so forth). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) postulate that knowledge is generally tacit in orientation and can only be deposited into one's mind (brain) through experience/use of skills; while explicit knowledge is a physical manifestation of people's tacit knowledge, which can be expressed and shared with others in various forms. Experience is borne out of repetitive learning curves, which, over time, culminate into a method of how to do things systematically right. Through their SECI (**S**ocialisation, **E**xternalisation, **C**ombination and **I**nternalisation) model, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) underscore that knowledge creation is thrust on two facets, namely the epistemological and ontological (ibid). Of the two, the latter is the most tedious process to facilitate as it entails drawing out the (tacit) knowledge embedded in people's minds (King, 2009). Further to that, they also point out that the former pertains to the spiralling of knowledge from tacit to explicit and vice versa (i.e. explicit to tacit) (Nonaka, 1994). The spiralling effect of knowledge creation from tacit to explicit would eventually mature to give credence to the formation of two other variations (which are reconfigured offspring of the original two forms, namely tacit and explicit) resulting in four full-blown knowledge variations (i.e. tacit-tacit, tacit-explicit, explicit-explicit, explicit-tacit). "Among the four" variations of knowledge codification, "Externalisation" is the mainstay of

"knowledge creation", due to its impetus for generating "new explicit concepts from tacit knowledge" (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 66), as illustrated in Figure 1.

SECI Model of Organisational Knowledge Creation
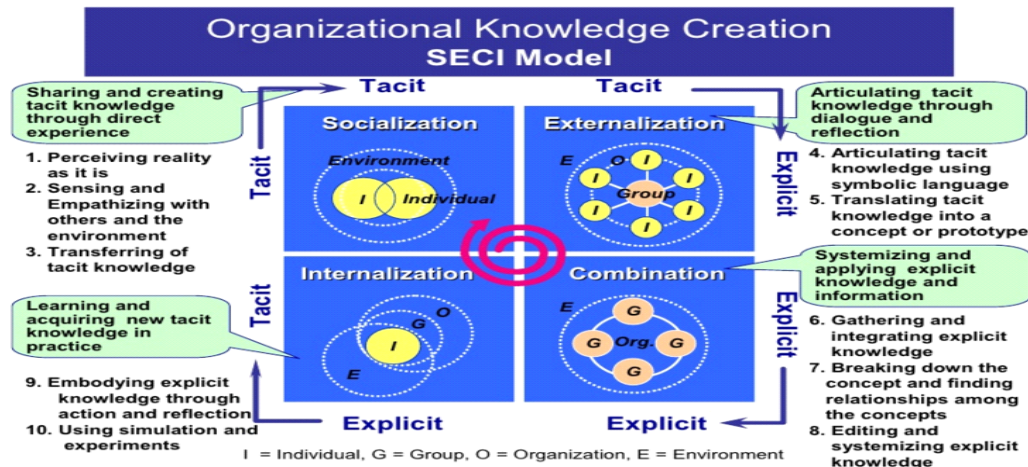
The diagram highlights the dynamism of organisational knowledge creation: Firstly, it illustrates that for organisational knowledge to be created as a shared process, a conducive climate and the arrangement of knowledge-sharing spaces or occasions are sacrosanct. Secondly, it is hypothesised that for knowledge-sharing transactions to aid the co-creation of contextual knowledge, a goal-oriented organisational strategy is needed. Also, the diagram bears resonances with Bhojaraju's (2005) argument that knowledge work typically involves three key elements, namely "people, processes and technologies" (p. 39) that are synchronised through the adaptation of KM (Hosseini et al., 2014, p. 36). Activation of synergy between "school leadership and knowledge creation" (Godfrey, 2016, p. 12) calls for sustained collegial interdependence, organisation-wide consultations and bottom-up contributions (Dlamini, 2017, p. 83; Nkomo et al., 2021, p. 2) as proposed by the Ubuntu philosophy.

Knowledge Management and School Operations

South Africa's KM research repository generally lacks the schooling system focus (Gxwati, 2011; Mokwena, 2014; Anonymous, 2020); consequently, there is not much literature proving the length at which KM aids educational administration and leadership. The only real empirical illustrations of how KM can possibly enhance schooling systems are found in educational bureaucracies confronted by circumstances that are similar to ours, including Malaysia where Awang et al. (2011) conducted a study that established that KM harnessed data management and general administrative processes in schools. Amidst the scarcity of resources, a study by Arumina and Pakkeerappa (2018) explicated that in Indian schools, KM elevated efficiency levels of data archival practices among teachers. Ferdinandus et al. (2015) conducted a study in a rural regency of Aru in the eastern part of Indonesia, which expounded that amidst infrastructural shortages, KM still improved the quality of curriculum delivery and administrative programmes of schools. Also, in several under-resourced Mexican schools, Perez-Soltero et al. (2019) found that KM played a key role in the general administrative processes of schools. On the continent of Africa, Ngozi (2018) established that knowledge sharing transactions in Nigerian schools strengthened the formation of communities of practice (CoPs); a factor that resulted in ongoing knowledge-transfer initiatives among teachers. A South African snippet of KM's plausibility comes from Gxwati (2011), who established a link between KM application and user-friendly information management and control at a provincial administrative level of a schooling system administration. These findings support the view that schools are sanctuaries for tacit knowledge codification, as propounded by Omigie et al. (2019).

Much of what was discussed above suggests that people's commitment and skills are a stimulus for effective KM application. Peter Drucker coined the term "knowledge worker" to classify a collage of people who are directly involved in assessing the impact of their level of "contribution and responsibilities" to the knowledge endeavour (Drucker, 1999, p. 86).

Essentially, knowledge workers (such as teachers, HODs, administrative clerks and principals) perform non-routine duties that demand the employment of "convergent and divergent thinking" to solve problems (Anonymous, 2020, p. 54). Their role in KM processes means that a) they have a bearing on the establishment of organisation-wide dialogical engagements; b) the realisation of a goal-oriented and ethical organisational culture; c) the reinvigoration of ongoing professional development; and d) effective curriculum delivery processes (OECD, 2010).

Some Common Leadership Styles Employed by Schooling Systems

Transactional Leadership

According to Khan (2017, p. 178), transactional leadership (TL) is widely employed within the education sector and is premised on a give-and-take approach of "you scratch my back and I scratch yours", whereby the organisation's leader explains the terms and conditions that employees are expected to adhere to in order to contribute to the growth and stability of the organisation. Smith too endorses this view of TL and adds that transactional leaders are often good judges of people's characters (2016). Once the leader has mastered one's character, they plot a strategy to keep them focused on achieving organisational goals. Depending on the leader's perception of the follower's performance, "punishment or reward" is served (Hickman, 2017; Khan, 2017; Nazim & Mahmood, 2016; Smith, 2016).

Laissez-Faire Leadership

Also known as "hands-off style" (Khan et al., 2015, p. 89), "delegative leadership" (Chen, Beck & Amos, 2005, p. 375) or "absence leadership" (Tosunoglu & Ekmekci, 2016, p. 90), Laissez-faire leadership's success depends on the behaviour of the personnel's skills and commitment. Because the leader operates on the principles that followers are informed about organisational policies, protocols and expectations attached to their occupational levels (Anonymous, 2020, p. 83), followers are at liberty to determine the approach to fulfil their duties. Although there is a projected view that LFL falls short of delivering desirable outcomes, some studies (i.e. Hickman, 2017; Khan et al., 2015; Mohammed & Wang, 2018) purport that it has its moments of producing desirable outcomes subject to issues of trust, support mechanisms, motivation levels, creativity and innovation among co-workers.

Democratic Leadership

A democratic leader constantly strives to reach a consensus with his/her followers. Decisions that are pronounced by the leader tend to reflect the will of the majority. Its proponents claim that democratic leadership (DL) is rooted in collaborative decision making where intense negotiations are entered into before the majority endorse a final decision (Hornáčková et al., 2015; Oelkers, 2013). However, disgruntlement among followers whose ideas were not endorsed by the majority and slow-paced decision-making processes are some of the undesirable manifestations of DL in the workplace (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders often value the cultivation of healthy relationships between themselves and their followers by keeping them motivated to reach the targeted outcomes (Odumero & Ogbonna, 2013). Since at the heart of transformational leadership lies the vision for transforming certain areas of operations, leaders are often seen to be leading by example in setting the agenda for the implementation of duties that lie ahead for the team to achieve.

Managerial Leadership

Leaders ascribing to managerial leadership encourage the participation of their followers in organised labour practices, collective bargaining processes and union activism. Despite these positive enforcements, many scholars still consider managerial leadership style as a moderate version of autocratic leadership (Sebakwane, 1997). To a managerial leader, compliance and adherence to timelines can never be negotiated. This rather task based oriented approach does little to inspire the formation of interpersonal relationships, which according to Bush (2007), limits the followers' exploration of unconventional methods and self-innovation. There is thus an indication that this leadership style is still rampant in many South African public service organisations such as schools, education circuits and districts (Bush, 2007).

Ubuntu as a Theoretical Basis for Ethical and Effective Organisational Leadership

Harrison, Freeman and Abreu (2015) extend a call for people in both private and public organisations to execute their responsibilities within ethical boundaries. It is of paramount importance that people's conduct in how they dispatch their responsibilities in these organisations "advocates for treating internal and external stakeholder with fairness, honesty and, even with generosity" (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 859), especially those whose responsibilities include leading people. This study models its depiction of the kind of ethical grounding that can be responsive to the needs of South Africa's public schooling context, which is predominantly indigenous in orientation, on the African philosophy of Ubuntu, a compact term from Nguni languages loosely translated as "humanness". Msengana (2006) generally points out that in African workplaces, Ubuntu-inspired leadership practices highlight the need for embracing each other's cultural orientations and appreciating the unique reality of a modern

professional climate in which we find ourselves today, where the inevitability of the convergence between indigenous and western life orientations is hurriedly becoming the order of the day. Concerned with exhibiting acts of kindness, hospitality and considerateness (Mpofu, 2002), Ubuntu encapsulates relational ethics that safeguard one's moral campus (Maphalala, 2017; Msila, 2014; Ncube, 2010) and are requisites for school leader's facilitation of reciprocal stakeholder relations (Belibas et al., 2021).

The ethical perspective of Ubuntu calls for one to act in tune with their "*unembeza*" [a Zulu word for "the conscience"] (Maphalala, 2017, p. 10237) and give *"inhlohipho"* [a Zulu word for "respect"] (Mpofu, 2002, p. 26) when engaged in all social settings. Doing so, enables one to pay homage to the roles occupied by different actors (i.e. elders, colleagues, leaders, preachers, friends, family, etc.) and their value in the knowledge endeavour.

While the outlook of its applicability may appear to be exclusively African in context, Ubuntu also houses a universal appeal (Khambula, 2015; Msila, 2014; Ncube, 2010) whose intent for radiating love, unity and care is a basic necessity (Khoza, 2011) in "more than 370 million" indigenous communities spread across the world's "90 countries" (UN, 2009, p. 1). Therefore, amid growing calls for a blended approach to African organisational leadership (Serpong, 2019), the study illuminated the extent to which principals' various leadership styles imbued what Romm (2017) might call "a rapprochement which is not adversarial between indigenous ways of knowing and other ways of knowing" (p. 22) to not only engender contextually fit organisational/school leadership practices but also effective and ethical KM practices.

Methodological Processes

Research Format, Paradigm and Design

Based on a multiple case study format, this study can be considered a qualitative inquiry embedded in a social constructivist paradigm. During the data collection phase of the study, specifically during interviews, a set of interviewing guidelines was drafted to ensure that the researcher did not lose track of the gist of the investigation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006) and that his engagements with the participants ensued "without privileging one voice over another" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 78).

Selection of Participants and Schools

A sample can be regarded as a smaller and manageable unit drawn from a wider population of characteristics of interest to the researcher through a pre-defined selection procedure (Question Pro, 2020). Purposive sampling constituted a procedure that the researcher used to select 20 staff members, specifically three principals, six HODs, six teachers and five administrative clerks, who were considered crucial to the achievement of objectives of the study. This implies that one principal, two teachers, two HODs and two administrative clerks per school (except for school B where there was only one gainfully employed administrative clerk) were interviewed. Participants were drawn from three schools across the length and breadth of Emalahleni education circuits in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. The intention was to draw one school from each circuit.

Data Collection, Triangulation and Analysis

For purposes of triangulation or what some authors prefer to call crystallisation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Romm, 2017; Stewart et al., 2017), multiple sources of data were used. The logic behind this was the avoidance of relying on a single trail of data. Patton (2002) argues that triangulation allows for cross-checking of findings and the generation of thick data. Triangulation facilitated an inductive thematic interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78) that is a process dependent on the researcher's cognizance of "themes and categories that seem of interest" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 158). Coding became the ultimate solution to data reduction and identification of patterns, in terms of which I had to a) acquaint myself with data and generated preliminary codes, b) identify and review the themes, c) define and label those themes, and d) engage in the write-up processes of the findings.

Research Sites

Data gathering was actualised in three characteristically under-resourced public schools. School A is a combined school (Grades 1 to 9) situated in Emalahleni Circuit 1 with an enrolment intake of 1 070 learners and a staff complement of 31. School B is situated in Emalahleni Circuit 2 and is a primary school that caters for Grades 1 to 7 learners, comprising 1 020 learners and 28 staff. School C is a secondary school situated on the outskirts of Emalahleni Circuit 3. The school has 500 learners and 14 staff members.

Ethical Measures

In her seminal work, Chilisa (2009, 2012, 2019) emphasises the need for empirical inquiries into the lived experiences of humans in diverse African contexts to be governed by indigenous ethics (see also: Mertens, 2007; Mkabela, 2005; Mthembu, 2020; Romm, 2017). After the Unisa College of Education's Research Ethics Committee declared this research ethically responsive, the research proposal was forwarded to the Mpumalanga Department of Education's research unit for inspection and was given a green light. To act in consonance with the participants' social norms, the researcher consciously embraced the "interpretative elements" of how they lived (Okeke & Okeke, 2016, p. 20) and engaged one another in their organisational dealings. Also, a "multi-vocal text" was developed to circumvent "privileging one voice over another" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 78).

Participants consented in writing to their voluntary participation in the study (i.e. letters were sent to schools notifying them about the nature of the study and its beneficial value to their schools). All participants attended an orientation meeting during which they were briefed about the turn of events. To ensure anonymity, they were given pseudonyms and their schools were labelled A, B and C. Although principals were not given pseudonyms, they were nonetheless labelled by their order of appearance in the interviews (i.e., Principal 1, 2 and 3).

Findings

Patton (2002) encourages researchers to consider that there is generally no single most anointed data reporting "recipe" (p. 432) and as such, researchers should take full ownership of the processes of relaying the findings of their investigation in a manner that they deem appropriate (Luvalo, 2017). In light of this, themes that emerged include (1) principals' leadership styles, (2) Ubuntu in internally directed knowledge sharing transactions, and (3) Ubuntu in externally directed knowledge sharing transactions, as documented below.

Theme 1: Principals' Leadership Styles

This particular theme encapsulates perceptions of staff including principals themselves on what they considered to be leadership styles that underpin principals' leadership of KM practices. The first narrative was drawn from Principal 1, who proclaimed himself a democratic leader, as he stated:

Democratic because before we implement, we have discussions. All duties are discussed with educators and the rest of the staff, and sometimes we also discuss things with learners. Parents always know about our programmes. We talk to them about many things, including their children who give us problems (#Principal 1).

However, a contradictory view was projected by subordinate layers of staff, particularly teachers and administrative clerks whose narratives somewhat portrayed Principal 1 as a laissez-faire type of leader. Teacher Zukiswa argued:

He is not paying full attention to details. For the most part, I think that we as educators in post-level 1 report to our HODs. I think that information gets lost between the principal, the vice-principal and the HODs before it comes to the educators (#Teacher Zukiswa from school A).

Administrative clerk Petronella alluded to this by pointing out that:

The principal does not protect us from exploitation by HODs and some of the teachers. We talk to him to be the one to monitor our work but he says we are doing a good job. Then we get surprised when he chooses HODs to tell us what work to do, and so on. You talk to him he says he will fix things but always forgets to do it (#Petronella from school A).

Principal 2 (from school B) shared how he would together with teachers, administrative clerks, HODs and deputies draft and endorse strategic directions to be taken and expectations thereof from staff. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that their principal was kind, humble but strict and goal oriented. He demonstrated these traits as he stated:

Well… we have a strong SMT and together we steer the school. Everyone has a say in this school. As for the way I lead, people say I am strict, and I agree. But in my strictness, I show appreciation for the effort they have put into doing something, and I do not police them because I regard them as adults who know what they are here for. They will tell you themselves I spend a lot of time in my office doing work. Sometimes I am unpopular for this high work ethic. Look, if the school produce bad results, who will account? For what it's worth, I would not do things out of policy (#Principal 2).

The overall impression of Principal 2's leadership style suggested that he ascribed to transactional leadership. This was elucidated by HOD Mzwandile who shared how although staff at a subordinate level, specifically teachers and administrative clerks, are left to their own devices, stakes are high because their work ethic and overall performance are always subjected to the principal's judgment, "So that when there are any irregularities, now when I moderate, I have to check who did punch the mark into the system" [HOD Mzwandile from school B]. Strict enforcement of human resources policies quelled chronic absenteeism, for example, both HODs (namely Petrus and Mzwandile) mentioned that they discourage absenteeism by demanding that upon their return to school, teachers who had been absent must submit a "catch-up recovery plan", which details how they propose to cover the teaching content that would have been covered during their period of absence. They mentioned that this strategy was being enforced at the insistence of the principal.

Principal 3 from school C aligned his way of leading the school with the democratic leadership style.

We communicate effectively and we have an open-door policy, which makes it easy for the SMT to be engaged. We meet regularly as staff to discuss a range of issues with all members of staff because to us communication is the key to success. I use "we" because this is not my school, it is ours, so it does not make sense for me to say "I" when I am not the only one responsible for what is happening around here (#Principal 3).

Participants opined that Principal 3 recognised the value of delegating some of his duties outside the school management team (SMT) realm so that ordinary teachers are included in decision-making processes and are empowered with leadership skills that may come in handy in future when they eventually apply for senior positions. While participants (especially teachers) felt that there was room for improvement in respect of the formation of communities of practice among themselves, they said this without blaming Principal's 3 leadership qualities. Teachers' views were confirmed by HODs in their respective interviews, during which they unanimously posited that Principal 3 often encouraged workers to form committees as a method of cultivating ongoing dialogue and worker professional growth (Kane & Patapan, 2010).

Theme 2: Ubuntu in Internally Directed Knowledge Sharing Transactions

Teacher Tembisile from School A, questioned the level of Principal 1's attempt at showing decisive leadership skills. He further mentioned that over and above curriculum delivery and learners' welfare, the principal was not attentive to organisational dynamics that were directly linked with unhealthy conditions of collegial relationships and knowledge sharing among staff members throughout the ecology of the school. In her exact words, she posited that *"the organisational culture does not allow one to develop and to even share knowledge"* (#Thembisile from School A). A similar sentiment was echoed by HOD Florence in stating that the hostility with which both teachers and HODs treat each other in the school triggered a culture of chronic "teacher absenteeism [which] makes it hard for us to share knowledge in class the best we can" (#Florence from school A).

Equally concerned were administrative clerks, Petronella and Virginia (both from School A), who questioned the sensibility of the principal's tendency to shy away from crucial aspects of his job by randomly delegating these functions to individual members who form part of the SMT. They stated that this approach taken by Principal 1 to running a school has made it a conducive space for strained working relationships, particularly between themselves as administrative clerks, teachers and HODs. They related how, due to Principal 1's oblivion, they were constantly subjected to an unreasonable amount of work at the hands of HODs who, in the first place, are not procedurally positioned to exercise direct leadership on them. These factors constitute the gist of their diminished faith in the principal's leadership (Al-Malki & Juan, 2018).

In School B, the overriding perception elicited from participants was that except for in meetings, briefings and campaigns and class visits, Principal 2 was generally not easily accessible to subordinate staff, but availed himself to external stakeholders even outside visiting hours.
The way I lead is more like giving a chance to HODs to familiarise themselves with the work of managing and leading teachers as well. I do a lot of PR work with many people who visit us here at school. I also spend most of my time doing paperwork in my office or going for submissions at the circuit or attending meetings outside. I just receive reports from them [i.e. HODs] and they tell me so and so did not perform well, and so and so did well, and I act on it because jokes aside, rules are rules (#Principal 2).

It was mentioned that he would only intervene in labour matters when he felt the SMT was out of depth to handle such matters (Smith, 2016). The only administrative clerk in the school was dismayed by Principal 2's distance from the lower chain of operations, which created a situation whereby HODs make unreasonable demands for him to meet (Bayat, 2014, Bayat et al., 2015) in a relatively short timeframe. Teachers too felt coerced into implementing resolutions that were unilaterally taken by the SMT under the guise of dogmatic meetings and briefing sessions.

At School C, although participants indicated that they sometimes have moments where they are not impressed with one another, they posited that they often resolved these matters for the sake of sustaining healthy professional relationships. Through the analysis of the narratives, it emerged that staff generally upheld mutual respect in how they engaged each other, and in events where conflicts emerged, owing to Principal 3's proactive approach to resolving issues that may cause disunity among staff, these issues were often resolved amicably. Principal 3 succinctly explained how he would often handle staff tensions from the position of a conciliator.

I pay attention to them as they speak and show them the reasons why I can help them or why I cannot. Even when they are not happy with the response they got and start losing their temper, I remain composed (#Principal 3).

It appeared as though Principal 3's leadership style set a tone for HODs to follow. HOD Peter added:

He is not perfect but the principal does his best to motivate us to forge unity because unity makes sure that the school do what it is supposed to do to make sure that learners get our attention and learn in a climate that is violence free and where we are all happy to be working under this condition (#Peter from School C).

Teacher Tamrin supported this view by stating that:

I don't want to lie to you and say we are the best school ever because we do fight a lot in meetings but he (referring to Principal 3) always reminds us not to lose track of what we have been called to do here. So, because he speaks sense we listen and really work together. That is why now our matric results are very high compared to other schools that don't have enough facilities like us (#Tamrin from School C).

Theme 3: Ubuntu in Externally Directed Knowledge Sharing Transactions

The general sentiment that came across all three sites is that all three principals displayed some elements of Ubuntu towards external stakeholders, albeit to varying degrees. A confirmation of this played itself out in the narratives of subordinate staff who posited that all three principals ensured that their dealings with external stakeholders are uncompromisingly underpinned by the ethos of Ubuntu. Principal 1 stated:

We treat parents as our clients, who are always right and we do not discriminate and everybody is treated the same. Normally when people come to this office they come in and they are unhappy but after having met me they go out with a smile (#Principal 1).

In the same breadth, HOD Conrad said:

Because we are avoiding the issue of them standing at the gate, we allow people to come in and they must sit down there and then when they are there I explain to them to say yes you know the time is half past one to come in; but because some of you, I don't know your condition, I'm just allowing you to come and see us (#Conrad from School C).

HOD Vuyo added:

Ubuntu has to happen with co-workers and with outside people who come to us every day, and it is very easy to treat people with Ubuntu, when you are talking to another person, just examine what your conscience tells you is the best behaviour. Your conscience will never sell you out on this, it always wants you to do the right thing (#Vuyo from School B).

Administrative clerk Virginia added that to ensure that external stakeholders' demands are met, even in instances where there is a potential for conflicts:

You smile, you greet, you remain calm even when they shout at you for turning them down when there is no space for their child (#Virginia from School A).

A Synthesis of the Findings

The study sought to locate the (possible) instantiation of Ubuntu values in how principals lead the facilitation of ethical KM practices in their respective schools. Hereunder lies a concise discussion of the findings.

In School A, where the principal applies laissez-faire, it emerged that there are issues that compromised KM application efforts in this school, such as hostile professional relationships and unilateral decision making. This was coupled with high teacher absenteeism, which influences effective teaching and learning activities (Obeng-Denteh et al., 2011). In School B, where the principal ascribes transactional leadership, subordinate staff (especially teachers) feel that meetings and briefing sessions are merely organised to create a pretext that they had been consultatively engaged in decision-making processes. School B is portrayed as a highly regulated environment. This impression came across in teachers' and administrative clerks' narratives as they point out that they were merely performing their duties because failure to do so was tantamount to reprisal for not performing according to the prescribed standards. In both School A and B, tensions between teachers, HODs and administrative clerks (Bayat, 2014, Bayat et al., 2015) are purportedly precipitated by the principals' oblivion to issues affecting the lower chain of the school (Yukl, 2011; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). A low drive for the formation of CoPs is also apparent. Instead in such schools mutual learning and knowledge sharing occurs "among learners rather than staff" (Godrefy, 2014, p. 9). Hence the reason why despite all the counterproductive labour relations issues, both schools still perform within the threshold of functional schools. Another issue worth noting is the selective practice of Ubuntu; for example, in School A, there seems to be no semblance of mutual understanding and collegial exchanges among employees (as advocated by Metz, 2012). Both leadership practices (adopted by Principals 1 and 2 from Schools A and B respectively) tend to put more emphasis on extending Ubuntu towards external stakeholders at the peril of internal organisational dynamics. Also, it was observable that other stakeholders' perceptions of the pleasantness of a school climate, relationship-building capacity and social dynamics differ greatly. This notion stems from the observation that at no point during the researcher's engagements with HODs did they willingly attempt to reflect on where they might have contributed to some of the prevalent mishaps. The SMTs' unwillingness to incorporate knowledge of subordinate staff (Flores & Pérez, 2010; Min, 2017; Perez-Soltero et al., 2019) has had insidious ripple effects on both schools' daily operations (as also noted by Ashraf et al., 2018; Dowling, 2003) the integrity of knowledge sharing (OECD, 2010). Until such time that teachers are removed from the side-lines of decision-making processes, the school may never be able perform exceedingly well (Godfrey, 2016).

In relation to School C, it was illuminated through participants' responses that the principal (Principal 3) is driven by the democratic virtue of embracing collaborative efforts and seeking the consensus of the majority prior to taking decisions (as described by Liphadzi, 2015). Despite the formation of CoPs being already at a fairly productive level, high morale among teachers drives them to demand further improvements in the formation of such knowledge-sharing platforms. Teacher absenteeism was reportedly relatively less than it was in Schools A and B. Furthermore, the principal's availability at the coalface of operations (Yukl, 2011; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010) expediently prevents conflict situations from blowing out of proportion.

Conclusion

The study located the extent of and ways in which principals of three South African under-resourced public schools reportedly infused the ethos of Ubuntu when leading the facilitation of KM in their respective schools. Through its theoretical lens the study demonstrated how Ubuntu can be complementary to traditionally western oriented leadership models. It argued that Ubuntu carries with it, an ethical campus through which both the superior and subordinate staff might be able to find a common ground, upon which to begin to work collectively as opposed to working in isolation. To contextualise the plausibility of KM in South African schools, the study largely drew on empirical evidence from similar schooling systems across the Global South. Furthermore, the study elicited how the fabric of each of the three leadership styles (i.e. laissez-faire, transactional and democratic) that were found to have been applied by the principals encompassed varying degrees of Ubuntu. From the leadership styles that were found to have had an influence on KM application, the study explicated the one that espouses Ubuntu above the rest.

Recommendation

As a parting shot, it is recommended that principals should be urged to adopt a democratic (participative) leadership style as it entrenches and sustains a culture of knowledge sharing, collaborations and broad-based consultations, which are all traits enshrined in Ubuntu philosophy. When applied with the sincerity it deserves, it can nourish knowledge management application throughout the ecology of the school.

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