School culture as barometer of learners’ success: case study of Eastern Cape selected schools

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ABSTRACT

The South African government attaches high priority on education hence a bigger share of the country’s budget is allocated to education. Literature presents a growing concern that South African public schools are not performing well with a number of contributing factors for learner poor performance. However, despite poor learner performance in some schools, there remain a number of schools who continuously produce pleasing results. It against this background that this paper sought to determine whether school culture has a contribution to Grade 12 learners’ academic performance in selected secondary schools in the Eastern Cape Province. This paper used the Social Interactionist Theory (Mead, 1934) as it lenses, which seeks to understand events and circumstances around us and influence behaviour. This paper is located in the interpretivist paradigm and employed qualitative approach to gain experiences and opinions of participants on the influence of school culture. 5 schools were sampled with 40 participants who responded through semi-structured interviews. Among the findings that emerged from the study was the critical participation of the stakeholders in school programmes, the vision and mission of the school to ensure learner success and maintenance of proud legacy of the school. The paper therefore, recommends cascading focus to the lower grades to continuously sustain school culture that enhances good learner performance.

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Introduction

Schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District are subjected to great performance pressure as they are expected to produce high students’ academic performance rates at the end of each academic year. Melesse and Molla (2018), indicated that the performance of educational institutions could be determined by the nature of school culture including the quality of administration, commitment of teachers and students’ motivation for their learning. Malborg and Comighud (2020), assert that the success of educational institutions is measured by the academic performance attributes of its students and the academic performance may be one of the indicators of the prevailing school culture.

The Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, revealed that there are 6483 Eastern Cape teachers bunking schools every day and Eastern Cape has recorded the second highest in the country with 12% of teachers marked absent daily (Dispatch Live, 9 April, 2019). This report reveals high levels of absenteeism by teachers, placing learners’ future at risk. Another pervasive and disruptive school culture prevalent in our schools is corporal punishment. Although corporal punishment was banned in schools in terms of Section10(1) of South African Schools Act, 1996), alternatives to corporal punishment strategies seem not to be yielding the desired results (Moyo, Khewu and Bayaga, 2014).
The OR Tambo Coastal in the Eastern Cape has over the past years shown a disappointing learner performance trajectory, particularly with the matrics.

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The above table depicts a district that shows minimal improvement.

This paper, therefore, seeks to answer the question; how school culture determines the learners’ academic performance in selected secondary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District? This question is in the context of endless intervention programme introduced by the Eastern Cape Provincial Department of Education.

**Literature Review**

**Conceptualisation of school culture**

According to Gurr, Drysdale, Longmuir and McGrohan (2017), school culture is a term generally referring to the beliefs, norms, values, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, rituals, ceremonies, symbols, written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school function. Similarly, Sabanci, Sahin and Sonmez (2017) depict culture as symbolized by a frame of reference of beliefs, expressive symbols and values by means of which individuals define their environment, express their feelings and make judgements. Schools are organisations by nature and definition and thus Deal and Kennedy in Emunemu, Adu and Yusuf (2014) are of the view that schools have organizational culture which is an embodiment of organizational beliefs, feelings, behaviours, rituals, assumptions, symbols, expectations, norms and values. The school culture can be felt or experienced through school climate, which is perceived as an experiential phenomenon or internal environment experienced by the members that influence their behaviour and can be described in terms of the values, norms and beliefs of a particular set of attributes of a school (Nkuba and Massomo, 2019). School culture can also be considered as part of the school climate (Yusol, Osman, and Noor, 2016).

**Types of school culture**

According to Verma (2021) school culture can be broadly classified into two types, namely, positive school culture and negative school culture. Khumalo (2018) asserts that high performing schools have a positive school culture whereas the schools that are poorly performing reflect negative cultures that are characterized by loafing, absenteeism, indecisiveness, laziness and irresponsibility. Teasley (2017), articulates that positive school culture is conducive to professional satisfaction, effectiveness, morale and creates an environment that maximizes students’ learning and fosters opportunities where administration, teachers, and staff must engage in healthy behaviours, promote collegiality and collaborative decision-making with inputs from students, staff and parents. A positive school culture is characterized by effective leadership and management practices (Pervez, Dahar and Maryam, 2017; Bhengu and Mthembu, 2014). In a study conducted by Msila (2014), the findings revealed that there are factors that are critically important in building schools with a positive school culture that include shared vision, shared leadership, teacher commitment, delegation and performance feedback to learners. Dinsdale (2017) argues that principals who ensure that their staff members have the necessary classroom resources and lead in a transparent way that clearly communicates the school vision, and involves all stakeholders create a strong trust in the leadership of the school. Ngware, Ciera, Musyoka and Mutisya (2019) maintain that a well—managed school has a proper execution of the management functions of planning, organizing, leading and control as well as clarity on process by which such functions relate to each other. On the other hand, Car and Ipek (2019), are of the view that in schools where negative school culture prevails, bonds and communication between administrators, teachers, students and parents are weak, all members have low achievement expectation levels for each other, feelings of suspicion and hostility among members are common, and motivation is low.

**The School Principal as the driver of School culture**

The school principal plays a pivotal and critical role as a driver of a prevailing school culture. Pervez, Dahar and Maryan (2017), state that the school principal as a leader has a direct impact on school system, school philosophy, teacher efficiency, staff trust and belief, staff protection, teacher guarantee, staff extra work, teacher behaviour and student performance. Prakash and Rai (2021), state
that school transformation and success depend directly on the principal’s leadership competencies which in turn help create the necessary work culture conducive to teachers’ motivation, commitment and performance. Atchia and Chimapah (2019), argue that there’s a growing consensus based on empirical evidence that positive influence of successful leadership can have a positive effect on school performance and students learning achievement. Hanif and Alwi (2019), state that academic performance is assumed to be knowledge acquired and marks given by teachers after assessing that understanding. Kakupa and Dakar (2020), explain that critical components that bring about school performance in a school are the principal and teachers. Similarly, Tigere (2016), is of the view that members of the School Management Team (SMT) are responsible for taking the lead in pulling their school curriculum into practice and improving it. The research conducted by Enumem, Adu and Yusufu (2014) revealed that some elements of school culture like teachers’ collaboration, teachers’ efficacy and achievement of goal orientation correlate with students’ academic performance in secondary schools in South Western Nigeria, Usman and Madudili (2019). In this study, among the findings that emerged was the critical participation of the stakeholders in school programmes, the vision and mission of the school to ensure learner success and maintenance of proud legacy of the school. According to Salilew (2019) a positive culture can make an average individual to perform and achieve brilliantly whereas a negative and weak culture may demotivate an outstanding employee to underperform and end up with no achievement.

Theoretical Framework

Mead’s Social Interactions Theory (1934) which describes the essential dynamics in all interaction in the environment by sending signals to other organisms, which in return responds to signals and change behaviour. Therefore, Social Interaction Theory emphasizes the understanding of the mind’s view of reality, how we perceive events and circumstances around us and react as we do (Subakir 2017). For the purpose of this paper, the prevalence of school culture manifest itself differently in each school through language containing actions and deeds, the interaction in education is referred as educational interaction. Whether positive or negative, learner performance, which an educational interaction outcome can be interpreted as a relation activity of educational elements, educators, administrators, staff, and students, is automatically shown as a result of the prevalent culture. Educational interaction between teachers and students is a process of reciprocal relationship that is communicative, done intentionally, planned, and have certain goals (Subakir, 2017). According to Mead cited in Alver and Caglar (2015) communication is an important factor in the social development of humans and thinks that interaction is realized through symbols. In terms of symbolic interaction as articulated by Blummer (1977), human actions have three premises, namely: the meaning of objects determine human actions; secondly, the meanings of objects are formed in social interaction through social process; thirdly, humans do not only receive meanings, they shape, change and create them. Alver and Caglar (2015) argue that symbolic interactionism focuses on the micro dynamics of the society, daily life, the ways in which people interact with each other through symbolic interaction and how people create order and meaning.

Research Methodology

This paper is located in the Interpretivist paradigm. Pham (2018) states that the interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to investigate and prompt an interviewee’s thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings, and perspectives. Furthermore, Rehman and Alharthi (2016) assert that the goal of interpretivist paradigm is to understand social phenomena in their context and be understood through the eyes of the participants rather than the eyes of the researcher. Due to the focus on participants’ experiences, this paper employed qualitative research approach; which focuses on drawing meaning from the experiences and opinions of participants with underlying assumptions (Almaki, 2016). The OR Tambo Coastal in the Eastern Cape became the case study due to its poor learner performance trajectory, particularly with the matrics for almost a decade. According to Ahire and Prashanth (2020), a case study involves the study of an issue explored in one or more cases bound by time and place, by detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information. Patnaik and Pandey (2019), assert that the major strength of case study is that it is a more naturalistic method of investigation where the research questions and hypothesis have to be formulated as the study proceeds. In this study, the participants were selected due to their role in influencing and shaping school performance.

Discussion

This paper sought to investigate school culture as a barometer for learner performance and the findings form the participants confirmed that learner performance is not automatic but is a result of collective effort driven by a resilient school culture. Culture could be a problem in some schools. The study found that there is a culture of conflict in some schools, lack of curriculum monitoring and fairness, teacher ill-discipline and poor leadership, accountability and responsibility culture and visionary leadership. All these factors were found to be either positively or negatively affecting learner performance in the selected schools.

Culture of Conflicts

The endemic and unresolved internal school conflict become entrenched school culture that affect not only teaching and learning and the climate in a school. This was alluded by Teacher 1/ School C who stated that;

Infighting, clicks and favouritism, all the factors that affect our results. There are teachers who are feared and others do as they please.
School C depicts a negative culture. Ucar and Ipek (2019) states that in schools where negative school culture prevails, bonds and communication between administrators, teachers, students and parents are weak, all members have low achievement expectation levels for each other, feelings of suspicion and hostility among members are common, destructive conflicts are frequent, and feelings of love and respect are poor among members and motivation is low. Deal and Peterson in Bhengu and Mthembu (2014) maintain that negative school cultures are characterized by negativity with conversations, interactions and stories recounted for failures, limited capacity for improvement, low teacher commitment, high teacher absenteeism, poor time management, loss of teaching and learning time as well as low level of certainty. The conflict-riddled situation in School C can be understood in the context of the newly appointed Principal, who stated:

As newly appointed principal, you hit a brick wall and people tell you siqele ukenza nje [we are used to] and they simply reject change. I understand, change makes people uncomfortable. But we need to change our behaviour for the sake of our learners.

Despite the challenges and the push back from some teachers, the Principal of School C seem to be resolute change the situation and place learners as a priority. According to Barni, Danion and Bevene (2019) leaders’ belief in their ability to effectively handle tasks, obligations and challenges related to their professional activity, plays a key role in influencing academic outcomes (e.g. students’ achievement and motivation) and well-being in the working environment.

Lack of curriculum monitoring and fairness

School Management Team responsibility is to manage implementation and compliance of both school and DBE policies. The failure to stick to policy demoralizes teachers and breeds chaos in the school.

Some HODs are hard on some of us and other teachers get away with murder. Now, one just shut the mouth and go to class and wait for after school and go home. One is just merely working here, it is toxic, deur mekaar. Hai! I really hate it (Teacher 4/School A).

From this assertion, it is clear that school A, struggles with a clear working guidelines and protocols for monitoring teachers’ work as some teachers are treated differently from others. This implies that the school’s work ethics leaves much to be desired. This state of the school has made the Teacher 4 to hate the school an invariable this will impact on learners’ performance. According to Ozgenel and Mert (2019) fairness and treatment of subordinates equally is a matter of serious concern that impacts performance. This is the case with Teacher 4 in School A, where staff morale seems to be at its lowest level and invariably affect effective teaching and learning. The above situation is not different from School D, where also monitoring of extra classes has collapsed with teachers attending these classes indiscriminately and not adhering to the roster.

Extra classes are just by name. Initially we were told that we will rotate and after fundraising we will get petrol money at least once a term. Oho, nothing has happened is now 3 years in a row, with fundraising every now and then and nothing for us. But the connected ones make threats and are given ‘don’t tell others’ (Teacher 2/School D).

There seems to be an erosion of trust in the teacher participant due to management reneging on agreements. Certainly, this situation has an effect on breeding a school culture of inconsistency, distrust and non-cooperation. Once again, there is an element of favoritism and preferential treatment and lack of transparency. Ostovar-Nameghi and Sheikhhahmadi (2016) state that teacher collaboration and cooperation are conducive to professional development.

Teacher ill-discipline and poor leadership

In School E the SGB member painted a gloomy picture of ill-discipline and poor leadership.

Teachers ill-discipline is a big problem. Firstly, they come late to school, they sit in the staffroom and not attend learners. Some come drunk to school, particularly Mondays and month end. The principal has lost control of the situation. I am not sure if he is scared of the teachers or they are his friends and they are covering for each other (SGB1/School E).

Based on the SGB account of the status of the school, there seems to be a plethora of challenges in School E not only with ill-disciplined teachers but with the Principal who is ineffective, indecisive and impartial. Positive school culture is vital to creating positive teaching and learning relationships among students and teachers and build a strong work ethics (Khumalo, 2018; Sutton & Hhouse, 2016).

Accountability and responsibility culture

Despite the negativity of relations in some schools in this study, School B was a beacon of hope and this was explicitly articulated by HOD 5, who stated;

Shame our sacrifices paid off last year with improved Matric results. We work as a team and reprimand those teachers who misbehave and indicate the danger of being declared an underperforming school, worse lose children to other schools. Covid-19 is gone and redeployment is back, we can’t mess up.

From this statement it clear that teamwork exists in school B and there is concerted effort to improve learner performance through a culture of accountability and responsibility. More pleasing with the school is a non-partisan attitude and zero-tolerance of teachers’
misdemeanor. The school vision of continuous learner performance is supported by teachers’ sacrifices to improve learner performance.

**Visionary Leadership**

The School Governing Body (SGB) member in School B praised the prevalent culture in their school as result of clear vision from the principal.

*As parents we get encouraged when the principal gives a clear direction, then the school gets direction. Is difficult to support the school if it does not know what they want to achieve with our children. If they (teachers) show commitment in their work, then sobaxhasa [support].*

According to this SGB member, the School Principal has an indispensable role in steering the school to right direction, setting the tone and objectives to be achieved. Secondly, it seems the Principal of School B has communicated the vision to all the stakeholders and the expectations and instructions are crystal clear for all to buy in. Sagwe, Ajowi and Mwebi (2016) state that principals of performing schools demonstrated resourceful supervisory leadership, exemplary conduct and arbitration skills, sympathy and concern for the welfare of teachers and students. The quality leadership in a school not only builds an effective teamwork but draws support from other stakeholders (Nzisa, 2014).

Thus, Principal of School B stated;

*Being a leader of sinking ship is difficult, because you fight for survival all the time. I tell my teachers that I have served this community for 3 decades and they can’t come with funny styles to collapse the school. I fight that the learners come first, but they hit back with unions. Kodwa ekugqibeleni [at the endfinally] is about the learners not us.*

From this statement it can be deduced that even though the School B is on an improve trajectory with the principal in a total control and steering the school out of poor performance and wanting to maintain standards of learner performance at all costs. However, the principal faces challenges with some teachers who uses the unions to fight their battles and the conflict affects learners. According to Dinsdale (2017) the tone of school leadership helps to determine whether the culture is toxic, indifferent or focused on growth. Prakash and Rai (2021) state that school transformation and success depend directly on the principal’s leadership competencies which in turn help create the necessary work culture conducive to teachers’ motivation, commitment and performance. A principal’s leadership influence can enhance, encourage and nurture a positive school culture. Aysha and Sherine (2020) maintain that school principals play an inevitable role in supporting the school, staff and students’ performance.

**Conclusion**

Teaching and learning are two core and non-negotiable mandates of a school to ensure improved learner performance and these mandate and responsibilities are entrusted to the school principal to delegate the SMT members to ensure compliance. However, this study found that a positive school culture is a prerequisite for envisaged improved learner performance as opposed to a negative culture manifested by conflicts in some schools. It also emerged from this study that lack of curriculum monitoring and fairness undermines the objective of improved learner performance. Other sub-cultures that adversely affect learner performance according to the findings of this study are; teacher ill-discipline and poor leadership, accountability and responsibility culture and visionary leadership. All these factors were found to be either positively or negatively affecting learner performance in the selected schools. Karadag and Ozdemir cited in Kalkan et al (2020) maintain that schools that have a strong school culture are institutions where the students and teachers have a high motivation to learn and teach, and where sincere and honest relationships among school members and the sense of acting together become important. Kalkan et al (2020) further state that administrators in such an environment have a clear sense of duty and purpose, develop positive relationships with the members of the organization and transform the school as the sustainable structure into a learning organization with the participation of all partners.

This paper therefore, recommends that schools that exhibit negative culture need interventions programmes such as team and capacity building activities. Furthermore, all school stakeholders need to revisit the vision and mission statements to recover their purpose and realign with learner performance.

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