

Does leadership matter? 2 August 2017

Edu-Lead

Education Leadership

ACADEMICAL DISCUSSIONS: ELAD

We all believe that principals can make a difference to the performance of schools. Research indicates that this influence is most of the time indirect and is arguably more important in underperforming or moving schools. Principals have many powers which they can use to accomplish the goals of the school; from their personal power to the official power as appointed principals. Schools are functioning in a performance driven, measurable environment of which examination and test results are the most important or only criteria to determine a successful or effectiveness of a school. Principals are therefore accountable and most probably pressurised to achieve these measurable criteria but it is obvious that many schools (principals) are not successful or less successful to obtain the required criteria. In this context it is important to understand the influence and the relationship between the principal and the context in which the principal is performing. The challenge is therefore to get a balance using the available powers to achieve the expected goals in the context where you are performing. We will address the why are some principals more successful and effective than others to achieve high-quality education.

School leader and specifically principals have an important role to play in the academic performance of schools. School have an important indirect influence on this performance second after the teachers who are directly in the teaching and learning in the classroom. We have about 25,000 schools in South Africa and depending on which academics or Department of education you are using as your point of reference up to 60 or 70% of these schools are underperforming or continuum of dysfunctionality. This is not an accusation it is the actual situation of schools. We can argue about the reasons for it from the inheritance of the apartheid education system to the current problems with funding but the important factor is that we need leaders to take the schools to the next level of performance.

We can briefly reflect on what is quality education and if the current emphasis or the only criteria as the matriculation pass rate is really an effective and valid criteria to determine the effectiveness of the performance of a school. My argument is that the current criteria for the pass at different grades are so low that it cannot be quality education. For example at the matriculation level a learner can pass the grade with three subjects at a level of 30 or 40% and then we also know that many times these marks are adjusted which in may mean that many learners did not even achieve the 30% which is indicated on their certificates. This really raise questions about what we accept as quality education.

My argument for this paper is that if leadership really have an influence on the performance of academic achievement in the schools why are we are not getting more schools that are performing better? Does leadership really matters and have a positive influence on academic achievement or is just something we use to boost our own esteem and for us as academics to have a job?

It is very difficult to impossible to have a direct scientific correlation between the influence of leadership and the school's performance since there are too many factors which can influence the actual performance in an examination or tests. Our point of departure will therefore be that principals but also including all other leaders in the school have an influence on the performance of the learners. When I referred to leaders I referred to all officially appointed staff members in promotional posts but also an official leaders at different levels and in different areas of the school for example subject leaders and leaders in sport or cultural activities.

So far I only referred to the fact that leaders have an influence on the performance at the schools but did not indicate if it is a positive or negative influence. The assumption will be that it is a positive influence but we are well aware that there may also be what can be called ineffective or even toxic leadership. That means that the principals specifically have rather a negative influence on the academic performance of the schools than a positive influence.