PERCEIVED LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS OF SCHOOL MANAGERS AND THEIR EFFECTS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ANNUAL NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that to improve academic performance, school managers should exert leadership in the implementation of national assessments. This article explores leadership behaviour as a factor that either affords or constrains the effective implementation of the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) in schools. Fiedler's contingency theory of leadership effectiveness was used as a framework to explore the leadership conduct of school managers in three South African schools. This was a qualitative study, approached from a realistic, interpretivist perspective. The study population consisted of school managers and teachers who taught subjects that were evaluated through the Annual National Assessments. The findings were drawn from a case study design, and the data were organised according to Fiedler's two forces of leadership effectiveness: leadership style and the situational favourableness. The findings show that although the participants mostly favoured Fiedler's task-orientated leadership style, its effectiveness was hindered by the adverse contexts in which the ANAs were administered. The findings of this study contribute to school leadership and school improvement literature and should inform discussions on how to prepare school managers for the soon to be implemented National Integrated Assessment Framework (NIAF). These results direct the attention of assessment policymakers and facilitators towards conditions in schools that describe its capacity for change and improvement especially regarding annual assessments.

Keywords: Academic performance, National Integrated Assessment Framework, Leadership in national assessments

INTRODUCTION

Since the promulgation of the South African Schools Act (Act No. 27, 1996), school leadership has been charged with overhauling an education system that continues to be plagued with below par academic achievement – especially in literacy and mathematics. This situation is exacerbated by the changes in the education system, which among others put emphasis on school accountability for learner achievement. Researchers agree that the focus of attention in high-stake environments is on the quality of leadership that can produce desired results (Norman, and Renihan 2006). In support of successful leadership in academic performance and good teaching practices, the Policy on the South African Standard for Principalship (2015) mandates principals to recognise good instructional practices that motivate and increase learner achievement, and encouraging [*sic*] educators to implement these practices. This statement is echoed by Heaven and Bourne (2016, 1) who assert that the principal plays a dominant role, one that is inextricably linked to the growth and development of the school". For this reason, leadership in schools – especially in matters concerning the

core technology of teaching, learning, and academic performance – continues to be a concern globally.

South Africa is faced with the challenge of poor academic performance (Chisholm and Wilderman 2013). The country performs worse than much poorer countries on the continent. In fact, international benchmarking studies show that "the level and quality of learning outcomes in South African schools tend to be lower than those of countries that invest significantly less in their schooling sectors" (Moloi and Chetty 2010). It is for these reasons that, according to Adam and Nel (2014), the ANAs were implemented to track learners' performance in literacy and numeracy. The pressure on provinces and districts to improve academic achievement is immense.

It is widely understood that the national assessment of learner performance is necessary to improve the quality of education and monitoring of the system. The Department of Education in South Africa started piloting the ANAs in 2010, and they were implemented in 2011 in all public schools in an attempt to improve the performance of learners. Several studies have been conducted to determine the success of the implementation of these assessments (Spaull 2013; Department of Basic Education 2013; Kanjee and Moloi 2014). These studies revealed a number of challenges in the way the ANAs were conducted. These include lack of time for remediation after the analysis of results, insufficient knowledge on how to use information from the ANAs for teachers to improve learning, and inadequate support from school managers and district officials. However, no studies could be found that focused on assessment leadership during the ANAs implementation. The National Integrated Assessment Framework (NIAF), which was piloted in South African schools from 2018, is replacing the ANAs. Because leadership is crucial to the successful translation and implementation of mandated curricular strategies as authorised by the Policy on the South African Standard for Principalship (2016), school management will still be at the forefront in the implementation of the NIAF policy.

O'Donnell and White's study (2005) highlights that school managers should "focus[ing] on their own behaviour as a way to influence teacher development and student achievement". The ANAs and the NIAF are similar in their approach to assist teachers to identify and remediate learning gaps; however, the NIAF will be conducted once every three years as opposed to the ANAs, which are carried out annually. Irrespective of whether it is demonstrated in the context of the ANAs or the NIAF, effective leadership behaviour would assist teachers in identifying areas of weakness and curriculum gaps in literacy and mathematics. Because the goals of the ANAs and the NIAF are essentially the same, reflecting on leadership conduct in the context of the now discarded ANAs will assist in the creation of conducive environments in which Fiedler's relationship- and task-orientated leaders can contribute during the implementation of the NIAF.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, there have been demands for effective school leadership in many aspects of education – and in academic performance in particular (Leithwood et al. 2008; Nzoka and Orodho 2014). These expectations emphasise schools' accountability for learner performance and the role of school managers as assessment leaders. The national assessments at primary level, for example, are meant to continuously improve the academic performance of learners, right through high school. While research has long proven that there is a link between education management and academic performance (Orhodho 2014; United Nations 2013),

not much research has been conducted on leadership behaviour of school managers in heading learner assessments (Lamb 2007; Waweru and Orhodho 2013). By reflecting on leadership behaviour during the execution of the ANAs, educational leaders and policymakers will gain a deeper understanding and greater knowledge of the important aspects to look out for when large-scale assessments such as NIAF are implemented. Such reflection will also shed light on the impact of the context on leadership behaviour.

According to the Department of Basic Education (2010), "assessment is a continuous planned process of identifying, gathering and interpreting information about the performance of learners, using various forms of assessment". Assessment involves four steps: generating and collecting evidence of achievement; evaluating this evidence; and recording the findings and using these to assist learners and improve the process of learning and teaching. The Department tasked the school managers – the principal, the deputy, the heads of departments, and senior teachers – with the responsibility of providing leadership in the implementation of the ANAs (Ndou 2008). The management of the ANAs includes planning, organising resources, coordinating activities, monitoring, and evaluating implementation (Mihai and Nieuwenhuis 2015). The Department's expectation is consistent with Spillane's (2006) view that "[L]eadership is focused on activities tied to this cowork of the organisation that are understood by school members as intended to influence their motivation, knowledge, affect or practice". In line with its responsibilities, a school's management team is expected to select the best practices (Ndou 2008), which, according to Phillips (2005), include supervisory actions that will enhance general levels of assessment literacy in the school. The team has to support staff members and assist them in setting goals, adjusting instructional strategies to reflect on assessments, developing understandings of how to improve performance by maximising the effective use of performance data, and exploring various types of data and their uses. It is in executing such tasks that the team's leadership style (i.e., task- or relationship-orientated) manifests.

Early research projects about leadership behaviour in various organisational contexts were conducted at the Ohio State University and the University of Michigan in the 1950s and 1960s. The researchers were concerned with the "leader's actions in carrying out the leadership role" (Tabernero, Chambel, Curral, and Arana 2009). A task-orientated leader "defines the roles of their followers, focuses on goal achievement, and establishes well-defined patterns of communication". A relationship-orientated leader, on the other hand, "shows concern and respect for their followers, looks out for their welfare, and expresses appreciation and support" (Tabernero et al. 2009; see Bass [1990]). Fiedler's (1971) contingency model is based on leadership behaviour research that indicates that effective management depends on the interaction between a leader's style and the environment in which he or she operates. In this regard, O'Shaughnessy (2013) states that the performance of interacting groups is contingent upon the interaction of leadership style and situational favourableness. Fiedler (1971) conceptually defined situational favourableness as "the degree to which the situation itself provides the leader with potential power and influence over the group's behaviour". Fiedler and the contingency theorists Hersey and Blanchard (1982), and Vroom and Jago (1988) agree that the needs of an organisation can be satisfied if the leadership behaviour is appropriate to the task undertaken and the context is favourable. Verkerk (1990, 1) concurs that "the interaction between leadership style and a situation predicts the effectiveness of leadership behavior".

The leadership effectiveness in this project was measured on the basis of staff members' performance of their major assigned task: the implementation of the ANAs.

Informed by Fiedler's contingency theory, the research focused on how school managers' leadership behaviour influenced performance during the implementation of the ANAs. Furthermore, the contexts – or situations – in which these tasks were performed, were also analysed.

In these case studies, the contingency theory was, therefore, used to identify and explore task-orientated and relationship-orientated leadership behaviour, investigate the dominant leadership style, as well as examine the favourableness of the context and how it affected leader conduct. Rajbhandari (2013) postulates that these two leadership styles are not mutually exclusive; one can dominate depending on the immediate contextual factors. For this reason, a qualitative research approach was preferred as it is underpinned by a strong motivation to discover meaning and understand experiences in context. A case study approach also allowed the researchers to uncover subtle distinctions and provide a richness of understanding and multiple perspectives that experienced researchers are able to obtain on-site (Kohn 1997). This view is in line with Stake's (2006) assertion that qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its context and in its particular situation.

METHODOLOGY

Using Fiedler's contingency theory as an approach, the researchers set out to explore the leadership behaviour of school managers during the execution of the ANAs. The objectives were to identify the leadership styles most displayed by school managers and to establish how the nature of the situation contributed to or hindered the success of the most favoured leadership conduct. The researchers aimed to gain a deeper understanding of school leadership as represented in three schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

A qualitative research design was used to explore the perceptions of the research participants. The method used in this study is based on Yin's (2014) definition of a case study: He highlights this method's focus on the scope, process and methodological characteristics of a project. Yin emphasises that such an inquiry is empirical, and the case's context is significant. This study was approached from a realistic, interpretivist perspective (Lincoln et al. 2011; Yin 2014).

The study population consisted of school managers and teachers who taught subjects that were evaluated through the ANAs. The participants were school principals, deputy principals, heads of departments (for languages and mathematics in the case of high schools, and foundation, intermediate and senior phases in primary schools), and teachers for literacy and mathematics in grades 1, 4, and 6-12. The selected schools are a primary school from the Sedibeng East district, one from Sedibeng West, and one secondary school in Johannesburg South. A total of 24 respondents (n=24) made up of school managers (n=12), and teachers (n=12) participated in the study. Only literacy and mathematics teachers who had been involved in implementing the ANAs for at least two years and school managers involved in the management of the targeted grades were included. As all public schools affected the ANAs from 2011 to 2015, schools were randomly selected from a list of all schools in the above-mentioned districts. Not all the chosen schools were willing to participate.

Leadership behaviour in these schools was explored against the background of task-orientated and relationship-orientated probes similar to Fiedler's Least Preferred Coworker (LPC) scale. A qualitative approach was decided on because Antonakis, Schriesheim, Donovan, Gopalakrishna-Pillai, Pellegrini and Rossomme (2003) state that "to better

understand complex, embedded phenomena, qualitative approaches to studying leadership are also necessary" (also see Conger, 1998). Moreover, we argue that the behaviour of leaders vary depending on context, and the phenomenon of the implementation of the ANAs is contextually sensitive. For this reason, the questions in the survey were adapted and used in the interviews.

Data were gathered from school leaders (principals and management team members) and followers (teachers) with the objective of gaining perspectives from all the parties that are involved. Separate interview schedules were developed for the respective groups. The schedule for leaders was aimed at gaining information on their behaviour towards their followers. Leaders were also asked how they think the situation contributed to their behaviour. The second schedule was designed for teachers who were expected to describe the behaviour of their leaders, and how the context possibly contributed to management's conduct. When the interviews were conducted in 2016, school managers and teachers were in the process of reflecting on their actions when the ANAs were carried out.

Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with all school leaders, and three group interviews were held with teachers. Unstructured observations were also used to gather data, as using multiple sources of information is encouraged when using a case study method. According to Merriam (2009), unstructured observations provide a more synergistic and comprehensive view of the issue. Furthermore, interviews and observations are the preferred methods in seeking understanding and meaning (Harrison et al. 2017).

During the group interviews, teachers were asked to reflect on instances where they needed assistance during the ANA implementation, and how their leaders acted when they (the teachers) required guidance, information, or more resources. Managers, on the other hand, were asked to contemplate on their behaviour on these occasions. Participants were asked to be specific on whether they perceived their leaders as task- or relationship-orientated. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The field notes (observations) were included in the transcriptions.

The analyses of the data were undertaken in the field during the collection process. In the first phase of the analyses, the initial interpretations of the data were made during individual and group discussions. In the second phase, the process of transforming data into a standardised form, as suggested by Babbie (2001), was started immediately after the interviews and observations were concluded. The data were studied through the lens of Fiedler's contingency theory. We argued that leadership behaviour and context informed the data collection plan, and, therefore, we prioritised the relevant analytic strategies used in this research.

Preliminary visits to the schools were arranged with the intention to build rapport with the participants, become familiar with the context, and gain an understanding of each school. Each school was visited twice before and twice during data gathering. In the course of the first visit, staff members were informed about the research and the process. Those who volunteered to participate were given consent forms at the second visit. The third and fourth visits were dedicated to interviews.

The Department of Basic Education and the ethics committee of the North-West University gave permission for this research to be conducted, and the participants gave consent after they were informed about the intentions of the study. Participation in this research project was voluntary.

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in three categories: task-orientation, lack of relationship-orientation, and the situation or context.

Task-Orientated Leadership

The participants in schools A and C indicated that, although there was communication with them about plans for the execution of the assessment, it was in the form of instructions. The respondents pointed out the following: "*There is a specific time allocated to the ANAs – the first and second period. Teachers use this time for revision of the previous question papers. Teachers know about this – notices about the activities and times are circulated via written correspondence to them before the ANA administration starts*" (A1); "*In ANA meetings, HODs explain to the teachers exactly what must be done and when, so that nobody is uncertain about their roles*" (B1); "*Learners are told in time when they will be writing the ANAs in order for them to prepare*" (C1); "*The meetings that we normally have are just about what has to be done during the ANAs and nothing else*" (B5).

When the ANAs were written, school managers and district authorities continuously monitored the schools' activities. However, during these visits, the district officials were – according to the participants in this study – only concerned about whether the learners were writing or not, and whether the schools were adhering to the time schedules set out by the province. The participants' responses included the following: "*The school managers check if the preparation for the ANAs and the writing of the exam were successful*" (C2); "*Facilitators from the district come to check whether everything is running smoothly. They were only concerned about the ANAs*" (B3); and "*The district officials would ask about whether there were any hiccups regarding the question papers, whether they arrived on time, and whether learners started on time to write the test. Their concern was just the ANAs*" (B3).

These responses show that there was a focus on goal achievement, i.e., the writing of the tests, the marking, and the evaluation of results. Other participants confirmed this: "*It's all about working together, teachers and managers, to ensure that learners are prepared for the ANAs*" (A2); "*We were always concerned about the performance of the learners – all we could think of was the results of the assessments. I think we were shocked after the first results in 2012 were announced and all learners performed badly in both mathematics and English*" (C3); "*The managers were preoccupied with improving results at the expense of the actual teaching. Every time when the topic of the ANAs was raised in our meetings, the managers would start talking about the poor results of the previous year without coming with solutions to the problem*" (B4); and "*They checked if papers were written on time and learners were seated accordingly*" (C1).

Although managers explained the task to the teachers who executed the ANAs, followers still needed supervision. The procedures had to be explained to them repeatedly to assure that the task was completed successfully: "*We have meetings about the ANA where managers explain to the teachers exactly what must be done so that nobody is uncertain about their roles and what needs to be done*" (A1); and "*The school managers also provided teachers with every information that is available from the District*" (C6).

The respondents also implied that all parties should join forces to prepare learners for the ANAs: "*It's all about working together – teachers and school managers – to ensure that*

learners are prepared for the ANAs" (B1); "*They [managers] make sure that we work on previous papers, and learners are given exercises*" (B2); "*The school managers are involved. They give us time to do the work and administer the ANAs*" (A2); and "*They give teachers time to plan for the implementation of the ANAs. Morning classes are set aside for revision*" (C4).

The discussions further indicated that tasks were distributed among teachers and managers in an attempt to make operations run smoothly. However, the planning focused on operations and tactics, and there was no focus on systems to support the teachers. The following responses shed light on the planning processes at schools: " … *draw up management plans, get HODs involved*" (C5); "*They do planning and allocate some tasks to teachers, such as invigilation*" (C5); "*Responsibilities are shared among the teachers and managers*" (B1); "*There is a specific time allocated to the ANAs – normally the first and second period for revision*" (A4); "*The English and the mathematics HODs are the ones responsible for implementing the ANAs – with the help of some of the educators*" (C3); "*The teacher must give a report as the HOD will check learners' books against the program to see how far they have progressed*" (C5).

Lack of Relationship-Orientated Leadership

The data show that the managers at the selected schools volunteered to support teachers by making themselves available for assistance when needed. Although this was an indication of relationship-orientated leadership, the support was aimed at maintaining the structure and functionality of activities and not at providing help to the teachers to ensure their welfare: "*If there are problems, then we are available for assistance*" (A1); "*What they focus on is to ensure that we have classes, and they are clean, and furniture is adequate for all learners*" (C1); and "*The kind of support provided has to do with ensuring that learners sit and write assessments, and nothing else*" (A4).

In addition, there was a lack of focus on the welfare of the teachers that were involved in the implementation of the ANAs. The teachers complained of being overloaded with work and not receiving support. In this regard, the responses included the following: "*The challenge is human resource. We find that we don't have enough teachers to monitor the learners, especially during the afternoon studies. The managers do not help, even if we complain to them*" (B6); "*The workload is enormous, especially during the ANAs*" (C5); "*Teachers have extra work above their normal work. We mark double: the normal assessment and the ANA scripts*" (C6); "*The managers cannot do anything about the situation; they depend on the Department. If it does not help, then we have to do all this work without assistance*" (B2).

The Context

The roles of teachers and managers during the implementation of the ANAs were clearly defined from the start. There were definite plans on what and how activities were to be implemented to prepare for the assessments. The managers and teachers were allocated different roles, and communication channels were set in place.

Despite the focus on thorough planning for the ANAs, teacher participants indicated that they were not necessarily keen on following their leaders. Their remarks show that they reject the assessments. Besides, there are not platforms that allow them to discuss their

challenges with the ANAs. These remarks highlight their objections to the process: "*No it doesn't add value. At the moment we don't want it. Simple!*" (A2); and "*We just do it because it's an order. Even learners are writing it because we order them to write*" (A4).

Furthermore, the responses imply a lack of trust between teachers, principals, and the Department of Education. The feedback shows that the participating teachers believed they had no say in the administration of the ANAs. The issue of trust pertains to the management of interpersonal relationships, which shapes organisational conditions. However, while "*distrust carries with it a negative connotation,*" according to Lijuan *et al*. (2015:24), "*it can also be viewed as a functional response in a given organisational context".* Regarding trust, teachers stated the following: "*It [the ANAs] is not owned by us teachers; we feel that there is someone out there doing this for his or her own agenda*" (A4); "*I do not know why we continue assessing learners using ANAs when we have another assessment immediately after the ANAs. It's a waste of time*" (B7).

During the discussions on challenges experienced by the teachers during the ANAs, the respondents mentioned a number of factors that hindered the successful implementation of the assessments. As the Department of Education failed to address these matters, the situation proved to be unbearable, and teachers became overwhelmed and intolerant towards ANAs, as their responses suggest: "*The training was bad. You could not get any information. We were learning as we were testing the learners – a trial and error situation*" (A6); "*We really needed assistance with invigilation of classes, but we could not get any. One cannot revise the work with learners in preparation for the ANAs, prepare for normal classes, and at the same time be expected to invigilate, and mark the ANA scripts, then mark the classroom assessments. That's too much*" (B7); and "*We often heard district officials talking about evaluation of results. Yes, we could see that learners were not performing well, and we had to come up with a plan to reverse the situation. But what plan? The only strategy we came up with was to drill the questions*" (C3).

DISCUSSION

The following discussion focuses on the above findings and examines them in the context of the conceptual framework in which the investigation is theoretically rooted. In accordance with the contingency theory, as developed by Fiedler, the researchers set out to explore the context in which the ANAs were conducted, as well as the leadership behaviour of school managers during the assessment periods. Regardless of which style a leader prefers, it remains key to the progress of any school.

The school managers in the participating schools demonstrated a high level of task-orientation. As a result, all necessary arrangements were made for the tests to be written timeously, although this did not necessarily translate into better performances. The school managers focused on the organisation, distribution, and delineation of tasks and responsibilities. These were assessment leaders who seemed to know what had to be done. The data indicate that, within this context, task-orientated leadership is indeed effective in ensuring that targets are met and binging about order. Managers adopted a task-oriented behavioural style that enabled them to remain effective with respect to task completion, even in the midst of variations generated by the implementation of new policy: ANA. This result corroborates Rajbhandari (2013) and Rajbhandari et al.' (2016) findings that a task-oriented behavioural leadership style is effective. This research, however, refutes Schaubroeck, Lam and Cha's (2007) claim that task-orientated leadership is linked to better performance. While

keeping in mind the many challenges they encountered, the researchers could argue that the task-orientation behaviour of the school managers would have been more effective if their role in evaluating results to improve performance was made clear to them.

The findings also point to a lack of emphasis on relations by the school managers. The leaders seemed to overlook the importance and value of teachers but emphasised their skills and knowledge. The participating teachers complained about being overloaded with work. They also needed support in invigilating classes during assessments. They had to function in a stressful environment, characterised by lack of consideration for or attention to their interests, and management's failure to show empathy and provide support (which are indicated in the literature as crucial to effective relationship-orientated behaviour (Gholami 2016). School managers were evidently unable to provide this support. Perhaps hiring assistant teachers for a short period was beyond their control. The school managers failed to exhibit important competencies in assessment leadership: to mobilise teachers around assessment goals and build teacher assessment capacities. As managers failed to address the challenges faced by their followers, teachers became demotivated and dissatisfied. School managers missed an opportunity of providing welfare of their subordinates and create a motivating environment to maximize their productivity. This finding is in line with Yan-Li and Hassan (2018) observation that there is a significant relationship between relationship-oriented leadership behaviour and teachers' occupational satisfaction and motivation. The finding also suggests that the welfare of teachers was not prioritised, and the absence of relationship-orientated leadership resided in structural features rather than in managers' abilities.

During the discussions, it became apparent that teachers received inadequate training for the administration of the ANAs. In addition, the participating teachers did not understand the need for large-scale assessments like the ANA's; they questioned the necessity of the process. A lack of resources exacerbated the already unfavourable situation. If the assessments had been carried out efficiently, teachers would not have spent valuable teaching time on unnecessary tasks. Traditionally, large-scale assessments are kept separate from standard classroom assessments. Furthermore, none of the participants in this study seemed to understand the need to evaluate results or how the findings could be used to inform teaching that would, in turn, improve academic performance. A study conducted by Prytula, Noonan and Hellsten (2013) among Saskatchewan school principals revealed that 18 out of 83 respondents reported no effect or negative effects from large-scale assessments to teaching and learning in their schools. The perception of a lack of effect was indicated as revealing a lack of understanding of how to use assessment data to improve instruction. This finding suggests that a context that is influenced by external forces is likely to impact leadership behavioural style. External forces are inevitable during periods of change and development according to Rajbhandari et al. (2016). The findings also indicate that school managers were overwhelmed by the situational demands rather than by the demands of the task on hand. This finding is in line with Vroom and Jago's (2007) claim that leadership behaviour is constrained by the situations that they face.

CONCLUSION

The contingency theory, as described by Fiedler, was helpful in researching the conduct of school managers during the implementation of the ANA's. The theory enabled the researchers to obtain compelling evidence that the situation or context can restrict or increase

the effectiveness of leadership behaviour in schools. Indeed, these results indicate that, regardless of how effective a manager can lead, the situation or context remains the determining factor in ensuring the success of the operations. Although unintentional, this research project provided sufficient empirical evidence of this. Furthermore, these results direct the attention of assessment policymakers and facilitators towards conditions in schools that describe its capacity for change and improvement.

This study contributes to the current literature on school leadership in the context of South Africa. The findings highlight implications for the Department of Basic Education and the Gauteng Department of Education regarding school improvement in preparation for the implementation of the NIAF. The paper's contribution lies in examining what it may mean for school managers to lead and manage the NIAF without thinking explicitly about their behaviour and the context in which they will administer the NIAF policy. Reflecting on leadership conduct during the administration of the ANAs may potentially be of value in improving the quality of school leadership and addressing the problems highlighted above. The findings could also help the education officials to organise more training programmes on leadership in preparation for the full implementation of the NIAF, considering the importance of the two behaviour orientations and the context in which they operate. In view of this, it is recommended that principals' leadership behaviour capacity should be reinforced in order for them to build and lead well-functioning school organisations.

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