An Autoethnographic Study of Leadership in a Deaf School: Raising the Bar of Academic Achievement

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I can't believe that', said Alice.
'Can't you?' said the queen in a pitying tone. 'Try again, draw a long breath and shut your eyes.'
Alice laughed, 'There's no use trying,' she said, 'one can't believe impossible things.'
'I daresay you haven't had much practice', said the queen, 'when I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'
(Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass)

My research aims:
My aim was to open my living textbook and to recollect and share my life experiences as a school principal. More importantly, my aim was to understand and theorise the Self and my life lived as a leader within a highly complex socio-cultural context. From my experience, I had come to view leadership as not merely the act of an individual but rather as embedded in a complex, unpredictable, non-linear interplay of various interacting influences. My aim was to interrogate and illuminate this dynamic interplay using autoethnography.

I believed, firstly, that my study had the potential to generate knowledge that would inform change and transformation in my practice as a school leader in a particular context which is a school for the Deaf. Secondly, an interrogation of my reflexive practice of leadership within a socio-cultural context would be a worthy contribution to the already existing knowledge base in the discipline of leadership and management studies.

I hoped that my study would generate new questions for other researchers and scholars in the field of education. Furthermore, I felt that the study would explore the particular complexities of educational leadership in a school for the Deaf, thereby contributing to the fields of disability studies and education for the Deaf. Such a study would evoke a response from school principals, educators, school governing bodies, academics, learners, parents, and the larger Deaf community. Lastly, my view was that my research had the potential to make a contribution to studies in research methodology in the social sciences through its use of autoethnography as a form of enquiry.

The research context

Hilltop School for the Deaf. The school has a highly complex, diverse socio-cultural environment with a huge range of talents, outlooks, cultures, backgrounds, languages, races and abilities. The school is situated in the picturesque Valley of a Thousand Hills.

It is a rural public boarding school. The school has an enrolment of 320 learners (2013). An academic programme is offered from Grade 0 to Grade 12, and this programme aligns with the National Curriculum Policy and Assessment Statement (for example, Department of Basic Education, 2010), which is mandated for all mainstream schools nationally. Learner admissions start at age three since the school prioritises early intervention, in particular the early development of Sign Language. Learners continue with the academic programme and exit school after completing Grade 12 with a National Senior Certificate.

Learners who are unable to cope with the academic programme are offered a skills programme and exit with a National Qualification Certificate from an accredited College for the Deaf. The school is affiliated to the college and a satellite college is administered at the school.

The staff component comprises 106 staff members in total, which includes teachers, support staff, administrative staff and hostel staff. The race groups comprise African, White, and Indian people. There is diversity in terms of language, with staff using English, isiZulu and Sign Language as means of communication. The staff members belong to various religious groupings, including Catholicism, Christianity, Hindu and Islam.

Research Design

'You don't choose autoethnography, it chooses you' (Ellis, 2003, p. 26).

My study adopts autoethnography as a method.
Autoethnography is a relatively new ethnographic method and its reliability and validity have come under much scrutiny and focus. Stemming from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares a storytelling feature with other genres of self-narratives but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation. Chang (2008) succinctly summarises the method as auto meaning 'self', ethno meaning 'people' or 'culture', and 'graphy' meaning 'writing' or 'describing'. Thus, simply put, autoethnography means "writing about the personal and its relationship to culture"). I was drawn to this method because of these three essential characteristics. I wanted to tell a story about my experiences as a principal within a particular sociocultural environment that is a school for the Deaf.

The data and research design emerged as I described and interrogated my nodal experiences as leader within this context. Research tools included my narrative, co-constructed narratives, reflexive journals, minutes of meetings and interviews. Texts served as catalysts to refresh my memory that enabled me to tell the story of my experiences within the context of a particular socio-cultural context. The analysis of my story was done through the lens of identity theory from a poststructuralist perspective. Reflexive analysis was used for chronicling my experiences as the person in the principal's office.

The notion of impossible things and the metaphor of the looking glass run throughout my study. These two themes are extracted from Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass a sequel to Alice in Wonderland. In Through the Looking Glass, Carroll uses the looking glass (the Victorian name for a mirror) as a metaphor for reflection, reversal, dilemma, contradiction and opposition.

For me in my research, the looking glass (mirror) serves as a tool for reflexivity. Autoethnography becomes the looking glass that serves as a portal to my world of leadership in the context of education for the Deaf over the past 10 years.

My narrative presented in my research, hinges on my belief in impossible things, as illustrated in Through the Looking Glass. In this story the White Queen imparts something immensely valuable to Alice. She teaches Alice that, with practice, believing in impossible things becomes possible. My gaze into the looking glass made me discover that I possessed the capacity to believe in impossible things.

Methodological Reflections

For me, it was an empowering methodology as it resulted in new learnings, news ways of thinking and sense making, and it raised new questions about the school leader as a social actor. In many ways, it has inculcated in me a new world view about school leadership.

Through my writing I have been able to question, reconsider and reinvent the various facets of my storied professional life.

Chapter 1 provided the rationale for my study while chapter 2 gives a detailed account of the methodology employed. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 I narrate my leadership journey as the leader of Hilltop School for the Deaf. In Chapter 3 I track my appointment from teacher to deputy principal to principal within a two-year period and examine the barriers I experienced and the complexities of change initiatives I manoeuvred and negotiated.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I share my journey as I traversed the intricate and often tortuous terrain of instructional leadership. I zone in on two facets of instructional leadership: the language curriculum and the academic achievement outcomes of my learners. A crucial issue that emerges in my narratives is the inextricable link between the personal and the socio-cultural context in which I work.

Chapter 6 is the integrating chapter in which I theorise my leadership enactments within the socio-cultural context in which I work, as evident in my narratives, using the lens of complexity leadership theory.

The following excerpt is from my narrative in chapter 5

MY FERVENT QUEST FOR QUALITY ACHIEVEMENT OUTCOMES FOR MY LEARNERS.

I have always held the view that lack of access to a sound education destines children to marginalisation and exclusion from tertiary education and access to a productive life. Having been raised by a single parent and coming from a working class background, in all humility I believe that I have achieved what many children with a similar life history fail to accomplish: I beat the odds. I achieved what many would have thought – impossible. My schooling occurred in the apartheid era. The schools I attended served working class and poor communities. Despite growing up in an unequal and oppressive society, on reflection I am thankful that my schools were functional with deeply committed teachers and school leaders who respected my right to a good education and my right to become an independent citizen. I knew that my single mother and my educators believed in me and my capabilities. In return, I was steadfast in my goal to excel academically.

Now as a school principal, I realise that the issue of access to quality education and equity in achievement outcomes continues to be a complex challenge internationally (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007; Christie, 2010; Riley & Coleman, 2011; Kyriakides & Creemers, 2011). Although there have been major gains in access to education in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade, serious concerns have been voiced over the poor achievement outcomes in mathematics, science and literacy (Akyeampong, Pryor & Ampiah, 2006; Carnoy, Chisholm, Chilisa et al., 2011; Fleisch, 2008; Pontefract & Hardman, 2005).

In South Africa, despite the legal and legislative frameworks for equitable, quality education for all promulgated since 1994, poor educational outcomes remain a troubling concern for all stakeholders in South Africa. The right to quality education for all learners is enshrined in the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996c). The Constitution's Bill of Rights emphasises that everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education and further education. It further states that

it is the responsibility of the State to make education progressively available and accessible through reasonable measures. Yet, policy analysts, educationists and scholars continue to raise the concern that education in South Africa is in 'crisis' (for example, Bloch, 2009; Soudien, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Frempong, Reddy & Kanjee, 2011).

Upon entering Deaf education, I was alarmed by the poor academic achievement of learners in schools for the Deaf in South Africa (Akach, 2010; Aarons & Reynolds, 2003). South Africa has approximately four million Deaf or hard-of-hearing people but an overwhelming number never graduate from high school. DeafSA points out that of the forty-seven schools for the Deaf in South Africa, only twelve offer an endorsed Senior Certificate 6(DeafSA, 2008). Internationally, the same pattern persists, as Deaf children are substantially behind their hearing peers in all measures of academic achievement. Many learners at schools for the Deaf in the United States of America and the United Kingdom are channelled into skills courses at an early age, as expectations for them are low (Traxler, 2000; Marschark, 2009).

From the moment I stepped into the principalship at Hilltop School, I was saddened by the low academic achievement outcomes of learners. Many thoughts vexed me in those early months: Why do the Deaf, in essence a language minority, struggle to achieve quality learning outcomes? What are the structural barriers that cause poor learning outcomes for Deaf learners? Are there particular dominant hegemonic discourses and embedded values, beliefs and expectations that produce and reproduce low levels of achievement for the Deaf?

My quest became the achievement of equity and quality education for my Deaf learners at Hilltop School. This quest continues to be both my obsession and my inspiration as I enact the principalship. I share with you my journey to achieving academic excellence for the learners at Hilltop School.

Educating the Deaf: my evolving understanding of the struggle of curriculum access

I resolved to gain an understanding of the key issues that impede curriculum access for Deaf learners internationally. I read widely and was attentive to debates at formal and informal forums in which I participated. I found that Deaf learners in many parts of the world leave school with poor competencies in most school subjects. A crucial reason documented in studies I examined at the time is the lack of linguistic access to the content areas of the curriculum. Furthermore, teacher beliefs about learners' ability and capacity to learn have a direct impact on academic performance. Generally, teacher expectations are low. As I gained experience at Hilltop School, I came to believe that one reason for the poor linguistic ability of our learners is the lack of early and effective exposure to language. This has been substantiated by research insights. This problem is often compounded when learners arrive at school and are taught by teachers who are unable to use Sign Language adequately. In South Africa, studies have shown that more than 50% of the teachers at schools for the Deaf are not fluent in SASL (Peel, 2005; Ram & Muthukrishna, 2011). Martin (2010) and Akach (2011) assert that when learners are unable to improve their reading and writing skills, it is always assumed that it is either the result of inadequacies of the learners or the difficulty of teaching English to Deaf learners. It is seldom suggested that the failure can be attributed to the inability of the teacher to communicate with the learner effectively through Sign Language. In South Africa a DeafSA (2009) report indicated that Deaf learners often enter Grade 0 (pre-school) with no speech, and that most teachers in the Foundation Phase (Grade 0–3) do not have adequate signing skills. Further, many teachers employed at schools for the Deaf have no specialist training in SASL and Deaf education.

While linguistic difficulty is acknowledged as a reason for poor academic outcomes in Deaf education, scholars maintain that the focus should rather be on how support can be extended to the diverse range of Deaf learner needs (Russell, 2004; Swanwick & Marschark, 2010). There is a need to examine the instructional practices that support learning and achievement. For example, teacher expectation plays a significant role in learner achievement (Smith, 2008; Brown & Paatsch, 2010; Kiyaga & Moores, 2009). In Deaf education in particular, it has been established that low teacher expectations affect learner outcomes. These low expectations have given rise to the belief that low academic achievement is an inevitable consequence of deafness (Smith, 2008; Pagliaro & Kritzer, 2005; Brown & Paatsch, 2005).

I also hold the view that demanding less from learners results in an impoverished curriculum (Meadow-Orlans et al., 2003; Good & Brophy, 2003). In other words, the classification of 'limited ability' by teachers does potentially alter instructional methodology and curricula (Powers, 2003; Pagliaro & Kritzer, 2005).

In my engagement with curriculum issues at the school I was confronted with and disturbed by the insidious systemic exclusionary factors that serve as barriers to access. My view was that historically the school as an institution was failing our learners. In the next sections of this chapter, I disclose the paths I traversed to address the issue of curriculum access and achievement outcomes. I strongly felt that issues of teacher beliefs about the Deaf child, issues of accountability, teacher competencies and teacher professional development were critical to fulfilling the rights of learners to an equitable and high quality education……..

Critical reflections on curriculum enactments during my leadership
As I reflect on my pursuit of academic excellence I analyse my leadership in the area of curriculum development at Hilltop School during this time. How did my impossible dream of achieving equitable achievement outcomes for Deaf learners become possible? What leadership behaviours enabled or hindered this success? Could I have done things differently? I believed that the majority of Deaf learners are as academically capable as their hearing peers, but Deaf learners need additional strategies and support in order to access the curriculum. It was this firm belief that challenged the notion of low expectations of Deaf learners. Subsequently, I became goal-focused in trying to ensure that the Deaf learners at Hilltop School were given every opportunity to reach their full academic potential. I argue that it was this belief that became a catalyst for my leadership behaviours and interventions in curriculum matters.

I knew there were teachers who feared risk-taking. While engaging with the new curriculum myself in considerable depth, I could ascertain what training and resources they required. I monitored teaching and learning closely in a sustained manner, and teachers knew that I was there for them.

As I gaze into the looking glass, I realise that I took many risks. I registered learners for a national Grade 12 examination, and knew that the results would be available for public scrutiny. Was I placing the school at risk when I changed the curriculum, set standards, and created high expectations for teachers, parents, and learners? Was I setting the staff and learners up for failure because of my belief in impossible things? Was I equipped to deal with the consequences of failure and did I have the capacity to protect my teachers and learners if the academic outcomes were poor? What assurance did I have that the new curriculum would be the answer to equitable academic outcomes? Was the school ready for the challenge of academic achievement given the history of Deaf education as discussed earlier in this chapter? These are some of the questions I now ask and as I attempt to answer them I am convinced that my leadership was a risky one.

My autoethnography: What is its original contribution?

My study further shows that the school is dynamic and adaptive, and involves diverse interacting entities and networks. Furthermore, emergent events arise from these interactions and networks – as in the case of Hilltop School, these included new learnings, innovation, creativity, change and adaptability (Marion, 2008; Brown, 2010).

For me as a leader, the study of complexity leadership theory and practice has offered me a powerful lens to make sense of the notion of educational leadership and my own practices. I have come to view an institution such as a school as a complex and adaptive system rather than a controllable, predictable reality. My leadership practices were emergent and I was able to create enabling conditions in which the new institutional behaviours and directions emerged through dynamic interactions. Rather than trying to control or direct in a linear way what happens within the organisation, I have learned that a good leader influences institutional behaviour through providing an enabling ethos and culture for the creation of networks and dynamic interactions

In collaboration with my staff, we were able to attempt new approaches, build our social capital, pilot novel ideas and programmes, interrogate and evaluate them and effect changes, where necessary.

The stories I have told reflect multiple, complex emotionalities embedded in my leadership enactments — my vulnerabilities, my precarious spaces and positions, my self-doubts, confusions, uncertainties, moments of trepidation and distress, my anxieties, delights and fateful moments.

I have come to understand my leadership as not merely a cognitive practice but an emotional practice. In my narratives, complex emotions were expressed in the collaborative pursuit of accountability and social justice by me and my staff. Leaders need to understand that emotions are integral to leadership enactments, that emotions are collaboratively and socially constructed and often public in nature rather than private and individual.

My study points to a model of leadership grounded in complexity rather than a controlled, predictable bureaucracy. Hence, my research raises new questions for researchers and scholars in the field, and for the professional development of school leaders.

Through the exploration of the complexities of educational leadership in a school for the Deaf, this study has contributed to the field of disability studies. My enactments of instructional leadership at Hilltop School for the Deaf, in particular our curriculum journey and how learning co-evolves through collaborative support, critical engagement, risk-taking and nurturing, points to a generative framework of possibility for the transformation of Deaf education. that new beginnings and new possibilities emerge.

My study further suggests that research on the sociology of emotions and the emotional resilience of school leaders is an important, under-researched issue, and has the potential to deepen our understanding of the complexities of leadership in schooling contexts.

Autoethnography