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Principals' servant leadership practices and teacher motivation: Perspectives from South African rural schools' context

Abstract

This study explored the relationship between principals' servant leadership practices and teacher motivation at selected rural schools in South Africa. It adopted a qualitative research design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with six principals and six teachers from rural schools in South Africa. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which identified themes related to principals' servant leadership practices and teacher motivation.

This study is underpinned by the theory of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which explains the five levels of human needs that motivate individuals. The findings revealed that principals' servant leadership practices were positively associated with teacher motivation in South African rural schools' context. Specifically, the study found that principals who exhibited servant leadership practices such as listening to teachers' needs, providing support and guidance, promoting teamwork and collaboration, and showing appreciation and recognition had motivated teachers.

The study identified that principals who engage in servant leadership strategies can succeed in motivating their teachers to commit to their teaching profession and quality education. However, secondary data show that servant leadership strategies are not drivers of success but contributing factors to keeping their teachers motivated and not losing them to urban areas.

The study further argued that not all schools practising servant leadership are able to motivate or keep their best teachers. Thus, other factors motivate teachers to stay at rural schools such as high salaries, teaching schools located in their home villages, or the ability of principals to appoint teachers who view the profession as their calling and not just an employment opportunity. Teachers who already view their profession as a calling are easy to remain motivated and stay committed to schools in rural areas. Similarly, teachers working in their rural villages have a higher chance to resist relocating to urban schools since they are comfortable being close to their families and relatives.

In sum, servant leadership strategies alone are not enough unless the teachers are already committed to the school project for subjective reasons. This study contributes to the growing body of research on leadership and motivation in education and highlights

the critical role that principals can play in promoting positive teacher attitudes and behaviours in South African rural schools contexts.

1.   Introduction

Education remains one of the important tools for development and poverty eradication among most families in South Africa. At the centre of a successful education system is the role of principals and their commitment to servant leadership (Northouse, 2015). As a study on principals' servant leadership practices and teacher motivation in South African rural schools' contexts, the paper aims to explore the relationship between principals' servant leadership practices and teacher motivation at these schools. In particular, the servant leadership practices and strategies that principals from rural-based schools use to motivate teachers to remain committed to their teaching profession. (Bush & Glover (2014) & Coetzer, Bussin and Geldenhuys (2017) define servant leadership as a leadership style that prioritises serving the needs of others, and it has been found to have a positive effect on employee motivation in various settings.

The study also highlighted some challenges faced by principals in implementing servant leadership practices in rural schools. These challenges included limited resources, inadequate training and support, and a high workload.

In conclusion, the study provides evidence that principals' servant leadership practices can influence teacher motivation positively in South African rural schools. The study recommends that principals from these schools should receive training and support to enhance their servant leadership skills and that policymakers should prioritise resource allocation to support the implementation of these practices.

2.   Research problem

Teaching as a profession requires teachers also to have a passion for teaching in order to be able to manoeuvre through the difficulties that might be experienced at schools (Bowman, 2005). This is worse at rural-based schools compared to urban schools that are generally surrounded by good infrastructure. According to Insley (2016), good infrastructure and business opportunities often help urban schools to attract good teachers, even if the school is not well-resourced or performing well. On the other hand, rural-based schools struggle to attract good teachers and when they do, they often struggle to keep them due to the challenges that are associated with rural development and inconveniences (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Thus, apart from a lack of resources and funding, most schools in rural areas end up facing a continuous decline in producing quality academic results and struggle to attract or keep their best teachers.

Previous research by Du Plessis & Mestry (2019), and Shula, Heystek and Van Wyk (2023) indicate that one of the reasons for the continuous decline in academic performance in rural schools' context is teachers' lack of motivation and dissatisfaction with their profession. Many factors contribute to their lack of motivation in their academic profession, which results in affecting school performance such as poor leadership, lack of ongoing training, lack of parental engagement, poor relationships among teams, etc. (Odell, 2018).

However, there are also those schools that act heroically while operating in challenging rural contexts and greatly improve the quality of education through motivated educators (Anderson, 2019). Previous research by Shula, Heystek and Van Wyk (2022) indicates that in most cases where school performance has been positive in a number of rural schools, principals were found to be motivating their educators through the practices and principles of servant leadership such as active listening, empathy, building relationship, allowing educators to share their vision, helping to develop themselves as leaders, etc. It was therefore worth investigating the strategies that principals from rural-based schools use to be successful, despite limited resources. Some of the strategies applied by the principals include creating moments where educators do a debriefing, enhancing teamwork, and community relationships, collaborative atmosphere. However, the study identified that there are other rural-based schools exercising the same servant leadership strategies and they struggle to be successful and to keep or retain their best teachers. It is therefore important to investigate the underlying challenges that servant leadership strategies fail to resolve at some of the rural-based schools in the rural context.

Teaching in a rural-based context is different from teaching in an urban-based context. In a rural-based context is less motivating for most teachers who are profit-driven rather than seeking personal growth and the passion to help the community succeed. According to Redding and Walberg (2012), rural-based context can have both direct and indirect influences on teaching motivation. Direct influences may include factors such as the availability of resources, facilities, and support systems in rural areas. For example, if a teacher works in a rural area where there are limited resources and inadequate facilities, it can lead to feelings of frustration and demotivation.

Indirect influences may include social and cultural factors, such as the sense of community and belonging in the rural area. Teachers who feel connected to their students and the local community may be more motivated to teach, as they see the impact their work has on the lives of the people around them (Kumar, 2019). Other indirect influences may include the unique challenges and opportunities that come with teaching in a rural area. For example, teachers in rural areas may have the opportunity to teach a wider range of subjects or work with students from diverse backgrounds, which can be motivating.

The rationale of the study is that servant leadership practices can work at some schools, but the same strategies can also fail at other schools. Thus, servant leadership practices are useful in enhancing the success of schools and helping rural principals to retain their best teachers instead of losing them to schools located in urban areas (Odell, 2018). The study argues that servant leadership strategies used by rural-based schools should be considered contributing factors to the success of those schools. This is because other schools use the same strategies without success (Malinga, 2021). Therefore, it is important to investigate the other factors related to the success of rural-based schools that are not related to servant leadership practices. The study used interviews to collect data on the servant leadership practices used by rural principals to be successful and to retain their best teachers. The study also used secondary data analysis to examine other factors that explain why other rural-based schools using the same servant leadership strategies struggle.

3.   Research questions

The main research question that guided the study was:

How does the servant leadership practice of school principals contribute to teacher motivation in the South African rural context?

Two sub-questions emanated from this main question:

1. What are the servant leadership strategies used by principals from rural-based schools to succeed in motivating their teachers?

2. How effective are servant leadership practices in motivating and keeping teachers committed to rural-based schools?

4.   Conceptual framework

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory that explains the five levels of human needs that motivate individuals. The theory is based on the idea that human beings have basic needs that must be met before they can focus on higher-level needs. The five levels of needs, in ascending order, are:

The first is physiological needs. These are the basic survival needs that include food, water, shelter, sleep, and other bodily requirements. Until these needs are met, an individual will not be motivated to seek higher-level needs (McLeod, 2007). Maslow argues that these basic psychological needs are subjective by nature and are heavily influenced by external motivation. This is because survival needs such as food and shelter are depended on financial rewards in order for them to be satisfied (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003).

The second is safety needs. Once physiological needs are met, the focus shifts to safety needs, which include physical safety, emotional security, financial stability, and protection from harm (McLeod, 2007). Thus, these needs are motivated by external forces. On the other hand, needs like love and a sense of belonginess are motivated by internal forces and are crucial in explaining why some people remain committed despite a lack of financial rewards (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003). Thus, social needs like such as love, affection, friendship, and a sense of belonging to a group can be crucial in explaining why some rural teachers are motivated to teach in rural schools instead of urban schools.

Self-esteem is another form of internal motivation that is crucial for individuals motivated by the need for growth. This type of need can be useful in explaining servant leadership strategies where leaders prioritise community growth and needs over their financial rewards (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003). Thus, servant leadership is heavily centred on internal motivation such as self-esteem, self-respect, and the respect of others.

The last type of Maslow's needs is self-actualisation. This is the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and it includes the need for personal growth, creativity, fulfilment, and the realisation of one's full potential. In this study, this type of internal motivation is crucial for teachers that consider teaching to be their calling rather than a job for financial freedom. In other words, teachers motivated by self-actualisation needs have the passion to teach in rural areas and gain satisfaction from the experience they get and the success of their students. According to Maslow, individuals must fulfil lower-level needs before they can move on to higher-level needs (McLeod, 2007). In other words, an individual who struggles to meet basic physiological needs will not be motivated to pursue higher-level needs such as self-actualisation.

5. Literature review

The challenge of educators' dissatisfaction in rural schools' context is a longstanding problem in South Africa. According to Hanushek, Kain and Rivkin (2004), there are several reasons why this happens. Pay and benefits are one of the main reasons behind rural schools losing their best teachers. Teachers in urban schools are often paid higher salaries and may receive better benefits than those in rural areas (Hanushek *e.a.*, 2004). This can make it difficult for rural schools to attract and retain qualified teachers. Moreover, urban schools tend to offer more opportunities for professional development and career advancement, which can be attractive to teachers looking to further their careers (Brownell, Bishop & Sindelar, 2005). Infrastructure and resources are also influential. Hanushek, Kain and Rivkin (2004) note how urban schools often have better infrastructure and resources than rural schools, including access to technology, modern facilities, and up-to-date teaching materials. Urban areas offer a better quality of life, including access to healthcare, shopping, entertainment, and other amenities (Brownell *e.a.*, 2005).

Brownell *et al.* (2018) note how the loss of teachers from rural schools can have a significant impact on the quality of education in these areas. Rural schools may struggle to find qualified teachers to replace those who leave, and this can lead to larger class sizes, reduced instructional time, and lower academic achievement. To address this problem, South Africa's government has implemented a range of policies and initiatives aimed at improving conditions for teachers in rural areas. These include increasing teacher salaries, providing incentives for teachers to work in rural areas, and improving rural schools' infrastructure and resources (Preston & Barnes, 2017). However, more work needs to be done to ensure that rural schools have the resources and support they need to attract and retain qualified teachers. Some schools have resorted to servant leadership as a supplementary way of keeping teachers committed to rural-based schools (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

6. Understanding motivation

Motivation is a psychological state or force that drives an individual to take action or pursue a particular goal (Redding & Walberg, 2012). It is the internal and external factors that energise, direct, and sustain behaviour, particularly goal-directed behaviour. Motivation can be intrinsic, which means it comes from within, such as an internal drive to achieve a goal, satisfy a personal need, or experience personal growth (McLeod, 2007). It can also be extrinsic, which means it comes from external factors, such as rewards, recognition, or pressure from others (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003).

There are many different theories of motivation, including Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which proposes that individuals are motivated by the fulfilment of their basic physiological and safety needs, as well as higher-level needs such as self-esteem and self-actualisation (Farimani & Shahri, 2020). Some theories like self-determination theory suggest that individuals are motivated by their innate need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The researcher selected Maslow's theory on motivation, since it explains internal and external motivations. The key lesson is that motivation plays a critical role in determining an individual's behaviour, effort, and persistence in achieving their goals (Wang, Tigelaar & Admiraal, 2021). It is a complex and multifaceted concept that is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors.

7.   Factors motivating teachers to work in rural schools

There are several factors that can motivate teachers to work in rural schools, including passion for education, opportunities for growth, community connection and lifestyle preferences. In most cases, teachers committed to teach in rural areas are motivated by internal motives stated above. For example, teachers who are passionate about teaching and believe that education is a powerful tool to transform lives may be more likely to work in rural schools, where access to quality education may be limited (Hardre & Sullivan 2008). Similarly, teachers who want to make a difference in the lives of children and families in rural communities may find working in rural schools to be particularly rewarding (Kumar, 2019). Furthermore, rural schools may offer teachers unique opportunities for professional growth, such as taking on leadership roles, developing innovative teaching practices, and working with diverse student populations (Kumar, 2019). Thus, teachers seeking personal growth may prefer to teach in rural schools despite limited resources. Moreover, teachers who value strong community connections may be drawn to rural schools, where schools often play a central role in the community and teachers have the opportunity to build strong relationships with students, families, and community members (Farimani & Shahri, 2020). Lastly, some teachers may prefer the slower pace of life and the natural beauty of rural areas, and may be motivated to work in rural schools for these reasons.

It is worth noting that while there are many benefits to working in rural schools, teaching in rural schools is heavily dominated by challenges unless teachers are internally motivated by the factors above. Challenges such as limited resources, greater isolation, and fewer opportunities for collaboration with other educators are some of the few challenges faced by rural teachers (Kumar, 2019). Thus, teachers who are motivated to work in rural schools are often resilient, adaptable, and committed to making a difference despite these challenges.

According to Swart. Pottas & Maree (2021) Servant leadership is at the heart of the successful rural schools. This is because servant leadership is centred on internal motivation where principals and teachers' passion for education and giving back to the community unite them despite the challenges in rural-based schools. Spears (2010) noted that Servant leadership can help to create a positive and supportive environment in rural schools that enables everyone to thrive and achieve their full potential. By prioritising the needs of others and fostering a sense of community and collaboration, servant leaders can help to overcome the unique challenges of rural education and create a brighter future for students and families (Malinga, 2020).

8.   Research methodology

The research seeks to understand the different servant leadership strategies principals in successful rural-based schools use to motivate their teachers to remain in their teaching profession. This study used a qualitative approach to collect and analyse data. Rule and John (2011) point out that qualitative design is useful for researchers seeking to understand human behaviour and non-numeric data. This approach allowed the researcher to gather enough information about the principals' servant leadership experiences and teachers' motivation (Creswel 2024).

Purposive sampling was used to select twelve participants from six top-performing rural schools in three South African provinces. All the selected schools were in rural areas. One principal and one teacher were selected from each school. The researcher hoped principals would provide data on the servant leadership that they use and teachers would further provide information on what motivates them to commit to their profession in their particular contexts from the perspectives of servant leadership practices.

This study forms part of the research project previously undertaken and ethical clearance had been granted by the ethics committee of the University of North-West (NWU). The researcher obtained the consent of the participants before conducting in-depth interviews with principals and teachers. The researcher also promised the participants to keep their responses confidential and not disclose the names of the schools and participants. The individual interviews lasted at least one hour, allowing the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. The researcher managed to record and transcribed the data. Thereafter, the researcher identified themes that emerged from the findings in relation to perspectives of servant leadership among principals and teachers from rural-based schools. Four main themes were identified and discussed below through thematic analysis. The study also reviewed secondary literature to examine the experiences of other principals from rural-based schools who continue to lose their best teachers to urban areas, despite implementing the same perspective leadership strategies used by successful schools.

9. Findings and analysis

The responses from the participant formed part of the primary data of this data. Four themes emerged from these findings. These are the creation of moments where educators exercise debriefing, enhancing teamwork, and community relationships and creating a collaborative atmosphere. These themes are analysed below.

9.1 Debriefing as internal motivation

Debriefing is an essential process in which educators reflect on their teaching practice, share their experiences, and identify areas of improvement (Poland, 2002). Despite low salaries and limited resources, principals motivated by non-financial rewards should be able to create opportunities for educators to debrief by incorporating it into their school culture and schedule. One participant strengthened this view by arguing,

> *We want to create moments where everyone has a voice and feels like they are part of the team. This can be achieved by regular meetings and allowing teachers to share their experiences and allow others to learn from these experiences* [PC].

The above comment complements the view of Brock and Grady (1998) who argue that the best way principals can create moments for debriefing is by scheduling regular staff meetings where educators can share their experiences, discuss challenges, and brainstorm solutions. These meetings can be used to discuss specific topics or events, such as a particular lesson or a school-wide initiative. By providing a structured forum for debriefing, principals can ensure that all educators have an opportunity to participate and benefit from the process. One participant shared the same view and argued,

> *Briefing moments allow us to learn from each other. Just by sharing my experience and how I handle it, I might help another teacher who is experiencing the same challenge* [PD].

Principals can also encourage informal debriefing by fostering a culture of collaboration and open communication. This explains why Paine and Ma (1993) argue that educators should feel comfortable sharing their experiences with their colleagues and seeking feedback on their teaching practice. Once teachers are comfortable, a sense of togetherness is created thereby making it easy for teachers to commit to rural schools. This sense of togetherness and a healthy working environment can end up being a motivation for some teachers to the school project. Principals can facilitate this culture by modelling openness and transparency in their own leadership practice and encouraging educators to engage in ongoing professional development (Stott & Walker, 1999). One participant commented on the importance of togetherness. He argued,

> *I value a healthy working environment where I am appreciated and loved. This is why it is hard for me to leave this school for better schools in urban areas. I don't know how they will treat me there* [PE].

Thus, creating moments for educators to debrief is an essential component of a successful school culture. It is, therefore, easier for principals to retain their teachers when there is a sense of togetherness and the school is thriving.

9.2 Community relationships and external motivation

In the South African rural school context, community relationships can play a crucial role in promoting servant leadership practices among teachers. The relationships between the school, the community, and other stakeholders can shape a school's culture and influence the extent to which servant leadership practices are embraced by teachers (Shula *e.a.*, 2023). By fostering positive relationships with the community, principals can promote a sense of shared responsibility and commitment to the school's goals, which is essential for implementing servant leadership practices effectively. Participant A pointed out that:

> *Our community is small and fragile, it is the role of us teachers to serve this community by creating future leaders. We must make sure that we the school leaders and the community members share the same values and speak with one voice* [PA].

Scholars such as Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) also point out that community relationships can enhance the implementation of servant leadership practices by promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility among teachers. When the community is involved in the school's activities and has a stake in its success, teachers can feel a sense of responsibility for meeting the community's expectations and needs. Participant B added,

> *This can motivate teachers to commit to servant leadership practices, which are aligned with the community's values and priorities. once teachers feel that they are part of the community, they are likely to commit to the project* [PB].

Farah (2013) supports the above participant's comment by arguing that community relationships can help principals address the challenges of implementing servant leadership practices in rural schools. By engaging with the community, principals can gain access to resources, support, and expertise that can enhance their ability to implement servant leadership practices effectively. For example, one participant added,

> *It takes more than good leadership to be able to keep your best teachers. In most rural schools, funding is limited forcing us to rely on the community. The community can provide volunteer support, funding, or other resources that can be used to implement servant leadership programmes and initiatives* [PF].

Community relationships can also promote ongoing learning and professional development among teachers. When principals engage with the community, they can learn from community members' experiences, gain new insights into their students' needs, and develop a deeper understanding of the community's culture and values. Schools with good community relations have a high chance to be successful and to retain their teachers once they feel like they are part of the family (Gaitan, 2012). This allows teachers to adapt their teaching methods to meet the community's expectations. This was supported by one participant who added,

> *The goal is to create one big happy family. Community relationships can promote this sense of connectedness and belonging among teachers. When teachers feel connected to the community, they are more likely to feel a sense of purpose and belonging in their work.* [PC].

The above view is backed by Gaitan (2012), who further argues that once teachers are connected with the community, it is easier for them to commit to their future. Moreover, it leads to higher levels of job satisfaction, lower rates of teacher turnover, and improved student outcomes, which is the ultimate goal of servant leadership.

9.3 Collaboration, teamwork, and internal motivation

In South African rural schools' contexts, principals who practise servant leadership can influence teacher motivation positively. However, Malinga (2020) notes that it can be challenging for principals to implement servant leadership practices in these schools due to limited resources, inadequate training and support, and high workload. The study identified that collaboration and teamwork among teachers can help principals overcome these challenges and motivate teachers to commit to servant leadership.

The study identified that collaboration and teamwork can enhance the implementation of servant leadership practices by promoting open communication, building trust, and fostering a sense of community among teachers. For example, Participant D argued,

> *We learn from each other through collaboration and teamwork, which allows us to share our experiences during debriefing moments, thereby providing support and guidance to our colleagues. This can lead to a more collaborative and supportive school culture, where colleagues feel valued and appreciated* [PD].

Collaboration and teamwork can also help principals address the challenges of implementing servant leadership practices in rural schools. For example, Farah (2013) argues that, by working together, teachers can pool their resources and expertise to overcome resource constraints. Teachers can also support one another in managing their workload by sharing responsibilities and collaborating on lesson plans and other teaching activities. What is important to note is that teachers will not be able to help one another unless a sense of togetherness and family is created in the workplace. This explains why one participant argued that,

> *Here, we are a family, we look out for each other. When I speak about school, I use the word We instead of the word them. This is the key, it does not happen overnight and requires the leaders to select the right team and get rid of the wrong people* [PC].

Moreover, collaboration and teamwork can motivate teachers to commit to servant leadership by promoting a shared vision and sense of purpose. This is supported by Stott and Walker (1999) who insist that when teachers work together towards a common goal, they can feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the school's success. This can motivate them to commit to servant leadership practices, which are aligned with the school's values and mission.

Scholars like Gaitan (2012) also note that collaboration and teamwork can promote ongoing learning and professional development among teachers, which is essential for implementing servant leadership practices. To retain or keep these teachers in rural areas, it is necessary for principals to allow their teachers to feel like they are part of the decision-makers. For example, Participant A added,

> *Teachers are more likely to stay in an environment where they are able to share their knowledge and expertise, provide feedback and support each other, and engage in ongoing professional development activities* [PA].

The above comment reiterates Gaitan's (2012) views and argues that collaboration and teamwork can enhance the skills and confidence of teachers, which is crucial for implementing servant leadership practices effectively.

In sum, collaboration and teamwork can motivate rural teachers to commit to servant leadership by promoting open communication, building trust, fostering a sense of community, addressing resource constraints, promoting a shared vision and sense of purpose, and promoting ongoing learning and professional development. Principals should, therefore, encourage collaboration and teamwork among teachers as a strategy for enhancing the implementation of servant leadership practices and improving teacher motivation in South African rural schools' contexts (Coetzer *et al.*, 2017). This can ultimately lead to improved student outcomes and the creation of a positive school culture that promotes collaboration, teamwork, and servant leadership.

10. Discussion

10.1 Internal motivation at the centre of servant leadership

The study identified that there are schools that lack enough resources and infrastructure; yet they continue to be successful in relation to school performance. Moreover, despite the challenging contexts, some of the schools have managed to keep their best staff and avoid losing them to urban-based schools, a challenge that most rural schools face more often. Therefore, the role of servant leadership in rural-based schools should be applauded for managing to motivate and retain teachers in rural schools.

Odell (2018) notes that servant leadership is broad, but can be trimmed down to empathy, morality, and the need to empower communal goals over individual profit. The prioritising of communal goals over profit means that the concept of servant leadership is entirely based on internal motivation, where leaders are generally motivated by the need to see their teachers and students achieve their goals. Thus, at the center of servant leadership is the desire of leaders to remain committed to servant leadership. In other words, leaders also need the motivation to be able to be relentless and pass over their enthusiastic passion to other teachers. According to Malinga (2020), servant leadership is motivated less by external forces such as money. Rather, it is based on internal motivation such as the need to pursue personal growth and help give back to the community. This explains why leaders with servant leadership skills often find ways to keep their team motivated even when resources are limited.

The study identified the different strategies of servant leadership that principals from rural-based schools can use to retain their best teachers and keep them motivated despite the several disadvantages that are associated with rural schools compared to urban schools. Servant leadership requires leaders to be motivated to find innovative ways of uniting workers

at the workplace. In rural schools, principals create a conducive environment for their teachers to feel like they are part of the project. This can be done through strategies such as promoting teamwork and collaboration, creating debriefing moments, and building good community relationships. What is important to note is that principals' efforts are mainly motivated by the personal satisfaction that comes with the success of their schools. This is in line with Maslow's theory of motivation which emphasised self-esteem and self-actualisation as the main drivers of internal motivation (McLeod, 2007).

The study also established that internal motivation is at the centre of servant leadership and the success of rural schools that continue to thrive despite limited resources Greenleaf (2008) The first step is to have principals who are motivated by internal rewards so that they can become role models to other teachers by demonstrating the pride and growth that is accompanied by helping the community instead of entirely pursuing financial gains. Anderson (2019) notes how it is easier for community members to support their schools with resources and donations if the school has a good reputation for valuing community needs. This reputation is created through servant leadership which allows principals motivated by personal growth to be proactive and consult with community members before engaging in actions that directly affect the community.

10.2   Servant leadership is not enough

The study acknowledges the strategies used by some of the principals to motivate their teachers successfully to remain committed to helping learners in rural schools. While strategies such as creating debriefing moments, enhancing teamwork, community relationships, and collaborative atmosphere were useful for some principals from rural schools to retain and keep their best teachers at their schools. However, this paper uses secondary literature to argue that these strategies are not-one-size-fits-all. For example, Malinga (2020) notes how some of the principals use the same strategies to motivate and retain their teachers without success. This explains why scholars like Odell (2018) argues that the key to avoiding teachers leaving rural schools for urban schools is beyond principles and the notion of servant leadership.

The study identified that it is beneficial for rural schools to have their principals motivated by the need to help the community over financial gain. Though this makes it easy for principals to become role models to their teachers, the study argues that these efforts are not enough to keep teachers at rural schools motivated. For example, the high level of unemployment in South Africa affects the notion of servant leadership in the education system. Preston and Barnes (2017) note how rural-based schools' infrastructure is poor compared to schools in urban areas. Moreover, the standard of living in most rural areas is not convenient for most teachers. Thus, most of the teachers settling in rural areas will not hesitate to move to urban areas if the opportunity presents itself (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Therefore, rural-based schools rely on appointing teachers with the passion to teach, prioritise the needs of the common good of society, and teachers who care about students. In other words, teachers must also be motivated by the need for personal growth and giving back to the community in order for them to be able to resist leaving rural schools for urban schools.

According to Cosner (2011) teachers who consider their profession as a calling are more likely to be motivated by the need to give back to the community over financial gains. Unfortunately, most teachers do not consider the profession as a calling but as a job they took due to the high level of unemployment (Insley, 2016). These types of teachers will struggle to commit to servant leadership and are more likely to move to urban areas when they get a chance. Therefore, principals from rural-based schools are much more likely to struggle

to retain these types of teachers who are treating the teaching profession as a job and not a calling. The money theory tool explains that the best way to retain these types of teachers is to reward them financially, because their goal in the teaching profession is to earn money. In other words, there are two types of teachers; those motivated by the passion to teach and see their students pass and those motivated by financial gain, since they do not consider teaching to be a calling, but a profession. The success of rural-based schools is therefore based on principals identifying teachers who consider teaching to be a calling rather than a profession (Insley, 2016). This is because those that consider teaching as a profession are mainly motivated by financial rewards and are constantly on the lookout for better opportunities. Thus, teachers motivated by financial rewards are more likely to leave for greener pastures despite the commitment of their principals to servant leadership strategies.

The study also established that the country's education system requires more support in the form of resources and infrastructure in order to be able to motivate rural teachers to remain committed. For example, some teachers alluded that servant leadership is a subjective decision that teachers subscribe to. Thus, principals can do their best to create a conducive teaching and learning environment, but ultimately, the individual aspirations and dreams of teachers determine if they will pass an opportunity to move to urban areas. Hanushek *et al.* (2004) complement this by arguing that generally like in urban areas is convenient compared to rural areas, thereby making it hard for principals from rural-based schools to retain their best teachers. Therefore, keeping these teachers in rural areas requires better incentive mechanisms such as higher salaries. Hanushek *et al*, (2004) argue that money is the best motivating factor in most societies. Money is the reason why most people work.

The study therefore concludes that while servant leadership works at some rural schools to motivate and retain their teachers, the same strategy fails at other rural schools. The study identified that it is inconclusive to argue that servant leadership strategies such as creating debriefing moments, enhancing teamwork, and community relationships, and collaborative atmosphere are the reason why principals manage to retain their teachers. As argued before, the same strategies are applied by other principals with minimum success. Thus, the paper identified that there are other factors that motivate rural teachers to remain committed to rural schools and ignore the temptation to move to urban areas.

At schools where principals used the above strategies successfully, the study identified that most of these teachers taught in their own rural areas and close to their families. This proximity to their families was motivation enough for some teachers to commit to rural schools with fewer resources. Moreover, it is much easier for these teachers to commit to servant leadership due to the historical attachment they have to the community. In sum, employing teachers from the same rural areas can be useful in getting them to commit to servant leadership, compared to other teachers who might struggle to feel at home.

11. Conclusion and recommendations

In order to ensure that rural schools succeed despite challenges such as lack of resources, funding, and poor infrastructure, participants indicated that rural schools can still succeed through servant leadership practices. Different servant leadership strategies were identified as effective in motivating teachers to commit to the school's objectives and goals instead of leaving for urban schools. These strategies include principals taking initiatives to ensure that there is time to debrief, creating collaboration and teamwork among teachers, and strengthening the bond between community members and teachers.

Based on primary data, the results of the study suggest that principals play a strong role in cementing servant leadership practices among teachers. However, internal motivation must be the one motivating principals in order for them to be committed to servant leadership. The idea is to create a family culture, where teachers work together and are comfortable helping one another and learning from one another's mistakes. Once the whole family understands the goals of the school and pulls towards one direction, the school is most likely going to be successful.

Relying on secondary data, the study argues that servant leadership strategies alone might be responsible for the success of rural schools, but they play a limited role in motivating and retaining teachers. Results from secondary data show that there are other rural schools that use the same servant leadership strategies, but continue to struggle. Those that succeed tend to lose their best teachers easily to urban schools. Thus, the real challenge for rural school principals is to keep or retain their best teachers. This is a mountainous task unless those teachers are also motivated by non-financial motives such as teaching in rural areas where they grew up, having a passion to help learners, or teaching schools very close to their family homes.

The study concluded that most successful rural schools use servant leadership strategies, but these strategies must be viewed as contributing factors. Most teachers that choose to remain in rural areas are comfortable with the lifestyle in rural areas for different reasons. For example, some teachers in rural areas prefer to teach at schools in their own villages. It is easier for these teachers to connect with the community since they grew up in such villages.

The study provides some recommendations based on the findings of the study. The recommendations of the study are as follows:

- Rural schools can succeed despite limited resources, but principals must play a vibrant role to motivate teachers through servant leadership strategies.

- Rural teachers are motivated by the proximity of the school to their family homes.

- Internal motivation is key, because it allows teachers to treat their profession as a calling, not just an employment opportunity for monetary rewards.

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