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The school management team's role of defining the school vision and mission at a South African rural school

Abstract

Schools in the rural context of Limpopo Province, South Africa have a plethora of challenges, which have a negative impact on learner achievement. This paper argues that for schools to triumph over the obstacles, effective school leaders are necessary. Such leaders must define and communicate a clear vision and mission and work with stakeholders to achieve them. With these assumptions, this paper explores how members of the school management team (SMT) of a rural school in the Limpopo Province define and communicate their school's vision and mission. Through the qualitative research method underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, a case research design was adopted and a single high school sampled to participate. Data were generated from semi-structured interviews with seven SMT members, a focus-group discussion with six teachers, and an observation of the research site. The findings revealed that most participants could not articulate the school's vision and mission. In addition, stakeholders were not involved in the processes of defining the vision and mission and communication methods in this regard were also ineffective. Lastly, the SMT viewed the vision and mission as fixed and did not review them. Based on these findings, I conclude that SMT members must understand that the vision and mission could serve more than a visual purpose when designed as guiding principles to direct smaller objectives within the organisation.

Keywords: *defining and communicating goals, rural schools in Limpopo, school management teams, school leadership, vision and mission*

1. Introduction and background

Rurality in South Africa is characterised by a multitude of social challenges, including poverty, high unemployment, low education levels, high rates of HIV and AIDS and lack of support from government structures. These challenges, while external, have a significant impact on schools in such communities. Internal challenges in such schools include inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, lack of parental involvement and inadequate support from the national Department of Basic Education (DBE) (Matshipi, Mulaudzi & Mashau, 2017; Myende & Maifala, 2020).

In the Limpopo Province, over 80% of its inhabitants live in rural areas (Malatji, 2020). Limpopo was once the poorest province and remains among the top three poorest provinces in the country alongside the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces (Wanka & Rena, 2019). The province's performance in the national final Grade 12 examinations have also been poor. For instance, for the 2021 year, Limpopo achieved a pass rate of 66,7%, becoming the only province that year to achieve lower than 70% in the country. Moreover, there is evidence that low academic performance is concentrated in rural areas (Heystek, 2015).

This study was grounded on the assumption that for schools in rural communities to prevail against these challenges, they require school management teams (SMTs) with a clear understanding of their leadership roles. In South Africa, SMTs comprise the school principal, deputy principal (or two deputies in larger schools) and Departmental Heads (DHs) for different subjects.

Scholarship on effective school leadership suggests that school leaders who succeed in their roles establish clear goals and communicate them effectively to stakeholders (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020; Li & Liu, 2022). A vital part of defining and communicating such goals begins with a clear vision and mission to guide the approach of smaller organisational goals (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Hallinger, 2018). Allen *et al.* (2018: 251) define the school vision as what the school aims to achieve or their "destination", while the mission is viewed as the "journey" or how the school aims to achieve its vision. Organisational goals can be long- and short-term, including the vision and mission, which I argue is the organisation's first goal, while smaller goals may include termly targets.

Gurley *et al.* (2015) assert that one of the reasons a school's vision and mission are important is because they drive strategic planning processes. Moreover, others have argued that the vision and mission are powerful in building strong school cultures and driving change (Sahin, 2011). Similarly, those who argue in favour of creating professional learning communities in which teachers lead their professional development assert that developing a shared vision is a fundamental first step to creating such a community (Admiraal *et al.*, 2021; Sukru Bellibas, Bulut & Gedik, 2017). As such, the school's vision and mission are more than slogans that schools use on their websites and school boards. Currently, in South Africa, no studies have explored how school leaders working in the rural context define and communicate their school's vision and mission. Hence, the purpose of this study was to address this gap by exploring how an SMT in the rural context of Limpopo understand their role in defining and communicating their school's vision and mission. The main question this study sought to answer was:

How do members of the SMT at a rural school in Limpopo Province understand their role in defining and communicating the vision and mission of their school?

The following sub-questions were also asked:

1. *What processes did the SMT take to define the vision and mission of the school?*

2. *What methods are used by the SMT to communicate the vision and mission to stakeholders?*

2. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this inquiry draws from Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) instructional leadership model and, in particular, the first dimension of defining the school mission. The authors argue that defining the school mission effectively consists of two key functions: defining school goals and communicating school goals. While they refer to goals in general, in this inquiry the two functions were adopted to focus on the vision and mission.

In the first function, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) argue that school leaders should involve stakeholders in the process of defining what the school aims to achieve. This is supported by a body of literature suggesting that members of an organisation are more likely to take ownership of decisions if they are included in decision-making (Leithwood *et al*., 2020). It is also important to recognise that schools are influenced by changes in the environment; thus, to flourish, visions and missions must be adaptive (Fullan, 2001; Fidan & Balci, 2017). This function of defining a vision and mission, while vital, is rendered useless when not properly communicated to stakeholders (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). For example, Rosenholtz (1985) argues that the movement of learners and teachers in and out of schools can create confusion about shared goals such as vision and mission.

Thus, in the second function, SMTs must find effective ways to communicate the vision and mission (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Having it in policy documents, for instance, is not an adequate method of communication. In rural areas, for example, where low education levels remain a problem among parents (Mestry, 2018), such documents may be lengthy and inaccessible. Hitt and Tucker (2016) suggest that the vision and mission should be communicated in such a way that they become common in conversations around the school. This includes verbally communicating them through school assemblies, meetings and informal communication such as conversations or short briefings (Murphy & Torre, 2015). The above therefore indicates that to be effective, SMT members must include various stakeholders in the process, communicate the vision and mission effectively and revise them as necessary to respond to environmental demands.

3. Literature review

Rosenholtz (1985: 359) argues that organisations without a clear vision and mission could lead to "loose coupling" in which role-players pull in different directions. Similarly, Gurley *et al.* (2015: 222) assert that the lack of a clear vision and mission leads to "a breakdown of mutual understanding of the primary purpose for the school's existence and eventually leads to fragmentation of effort among organisational actors". In South African rural schools where resources are scarce, the divergence in understanding of organisational goals could mean that decisions such as resource allocation are pulled in different directions depending on what individuals regard as important. This is why school leaders must be intentional about shared goal setting and communication (Murphy & Torre, 2015). The literature suggests that the roles played by school leaders, in defining and communicating the vision and mission, create and conditions that improve school effectiveness and student learning. For instance, Bhengu and Mthembu (2014) sought to understand the leadership differences in two South African township schools serving the same community. One of the schools was underperforming in terms of DBE guidelines, while the other had a great reputation in the community and produced great results in national assessments. Their inquiry revealed that among other leadership efforts made at the effective school, stakeholders credited their ability to work

as a collective to construct the vision and mission and work towards achieving them. These findings from township schools, which experience similar challenges to those found in rurality (Bhengu & Mthembu, 2014; Myende & Maifala, 2020), could hold hope for similar contexts including schools in rural areas of Limpopo.

In another study, conducted in Limpopo, Mohale *et al.* (2020) aimed to investigate how SMTs of four underperforming schools perceived their role of creating conducive teaching and learning cultures. The schools had obtained less than 50% pass rate in the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate examinations over five years. One of the aspects the authors explored was whether the schools had a vision and mission and if the SMT considered these important. They found that three of the schools had a vision and mission and the SMTs considered them important to have. At the final school which did not have a vision and mission, the deputy principal admitted that since he started working there in 1993, the school has not had a vision a mission. Observational data corroborated this. Contrarily, the principal indicated that there was a vision and mission which had been drafted before he joined the school and he could not testify how they were formulated. The authors concluded, based on observation data, that the school did not have a vision and mission. This finding shows that the principal has some understanding that the school should have a vision and mission, although he may not understand why this is important, explaining his inability to lead this endeavour. However, a surprising finding Mohale *et al.* (2020) made was that despite the other three schools having a vision and mission, their schools did not overcome underperformance. These findings suggest that having a vision and mission, and believing they are important, are not sufficient for these to have an impact. Rather, as I have argued, these need to be formulated in a way that guides smaller goals and activities in the school. In addition, it also supports the assertion made in this inquiry that, to make a difference, the vision and mission must be communicated skilfully.

An example of this is found in Ryu, Walls and Seashore Louis's (2022) inquiry in the United States of America. The authors explored the role principals play in fostering caring school cultures. Their findings showed that the principals were able to foster a caring school culture by explicitly communicating caring as important in their school's vision and mission. While remaining cautious not to romanticise what visions and missions can achieve, I wondered if, and to what extent, common rural school challenges such as inadequate parental involvement could be alleviated by targeting such aspects in the vision and mission and working with stakeholders to improve these.

More than changing school cultures, the literature also shows that the vision and mission can have an impact on teacher morale and retention. Qadach, Schechter and Da'as (2019) conducted a study to investigate the role of instructional leadership and teachers' intention to resign from a school. Their findings suggest that the principal's ability to share a vision with teachers and the collective teacher efficacy of working towards shared objectives were important mediators on whether teachers stayed at or left a school.

Despite the argument in this study and much evidence, some scholars remain sceptical. For instance, Wright (2002) argues that the vision and mission serve only a public relations purpose with no influence on the functioning of the school. In this view, Gurley *et al.* (2015) conducted a mixed-methods inquiry seeking to investigate school organisational statements (goals, vision, mission and values) and how these influence daily practices. Their participants were teachers, principals and district officials, 61% of whom were master's or doctoral students of education leadership, while 39% were at education specialist level. Their findings

show that most participants could not articulate their school's vision and mission. Gurley *et al.* (2015) argue, based on these findings, that vision, mission and other goal statements are often ambiguous and their role in school improvement remains vague. This finding leads one to ask if school leaders, who are also students of education leadership and can be assumed to have some understanding of why school visions and mission are important, struggle to articulate these, how likely are other stakeholders at their schools to articulate these? These findings also corroborate the findings from Mohale *et al.* (2020) discussed above, which show that even in schools with a vision and mission, learner achievement could not be improved.

However, these point to the need for school leaders to be empowered with skills to erase existing confusion and ambiguity around the school's vision and mission. It is only once these key role-players understand the importance of visions and missions that their presence at the school can have an impact. I am not convinced by the argument that a vision and mission serve only as decoration and/or public relations purposes. There is sufficient evidence from the studies reviewed in this paper that when the purpose of the vision and mission is understood by school leaders, and stakeholders are brought together to define these and skilfully communicate them, they can serve an important strategic function. In particular, these findings suggest that this role is even more important in challenging contexts such as rural schools in South Africa where the role of stakeholders is required to overcome challenges (Myende & Maifala, 2020).

What is missing from the literature are in-depth studies focusing on various aspects of the vision and mission and how school leaders working in such contexts understand the role of their formulation and communication. While Mohale *et al.* (2020) certainly attempt to do this, because vision and mission formulation and communication were not the focus of that inquiry, it falls short of answering this question fully. The significance of this inquiry lies in answering these questions.

4. Methodology

This inquiry was grounded by the interpretive paradigm, which acknowledges the subjectivity of the human experience and seeks to understand behaviours and actions from the perspectives of participants (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010).In this study, how the SMT understand their role of defining and communicating the vision and mission could differ from participant to participant. Thus, what was important was gaining insight into how participants see themselves in this reality, hence the interpretive paradigm. Guided by this assumption, the qualitative research approach became the most appropriate. Qualitative researchers seek to understand and interpret the human experience by studying how individuals or groups experience and perceive an aspect of their lives (Yin, 2015). Moreover, I deemed a qualitative case study appropriate for this study, because this method employs a variety of instructions to generate data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, a single high school in Moletjie in the Limpopo Province was sampled to participate through purposive sampling. The selected school had to meet the criteria of being within a rural context and being one of the least-resourced schools in the country as a non-fee-paying school. It is classified as a quintile three school under the National Norms and Standards School Funding (NNSSF) (RSA, 2012). At the time of study, the school had seven SMT members, which comprised the principal, two deputy principals and four departmental heads

(DHs). All were deemed information-rich participants and were selected to participate. For teacher participants, all permanent teachers working under the SMT in the school made up the population. From those that showed interest upon being approached, four males and two females were selected. Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each of the SMT members. The interviews took between 40 minutes to an hour and started with predetermined questions I created and probed based on participant responses. McMillian and Schumacher (2010) assert that semi-structured interviews give the researcher some structure to lead the questions guided by the topic, while not being so rigid that they restrict the participant.

Secondly, I conducted a focus-group discussion (FGD) with the six teacher participants. The FGD took about an hour, and like the SMT interviews, was guided by a set of prede-termined questions and probing of participants based on their responses. Marczyk, DeMatteo and Festinge (2005:154) define this method of data generation as "formally organised, structured groups of individuals brought together to discuss a topic or series of topics during a specific period". Teachers were important in answering the research questions, because their experiences and perspectives shed light on how the SMT led the formulation and communication of the school's vision and mission. I chose a FGD to generate data, as it created an environment for these information-rich participants to share their experiences, have fruitful debates and recall details that may be overlooked in individual interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Lastly, I also carried out a single observation of the research site, including some class-rooms (when not in use) to understand how the vision and mission were communicated visually. This observation consisted of walking around different areas of the school taking notes of different areas which had the vision and mission displayed and where they were positioned. These three methods of data generation ensured triangulation, thus serving to confirm or clarify the findings and enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The analysis of the individual interviews with SMT members and the FGD with teacher participants was conducted through the inductive thematic analysis approach. I began with transcribing the tape recordings of each data set verbatim and then reading it thoroughly to break it down to identify patterns and create codes (Henning, 2004). Then, I compared the findings from the two data sets to identify patterns from there. From those patterns and codes, themes emerged which are presented as findings.

4.1 Ethical considerations

Data generation in this study was conducted following a thorough process of seeking permission from various bodies involved in the research. It began with seeking ethical clearance from the institution I was affiliated with. I then approached the Limpopo Department of Education for permission to conduct the study in a public school in the province. Once granted, I contacted the SGB through the principal for permission to conduct a research study in the school. Then, the participating SMT members and teachers were approached for informed consent. The purpose of the study and the nature of their participation including the liberty to withdraw from the research at any time were communicated.

5. Findings and discussion

The study reported in this paper sought to explore how members of the SMT at a rural school in Limpopo Province understand their role in defining and communicating the vision and mission of their school. The findings of this inquiry revealed uncertainty among participants about the vision and mission of the school, lack of stakeholder involvement in drafting the vision and mission and ineffective ways of communicating these. These findings are discussed below.

5.1 Uncertainty about the school's vision and mission

The participants of this study had difficulty articulating the vision and mission of their school. Those who tried to articulate them had varied responses, some unrelated to the real vision and mission, while others indicated that they did not recall. I began the in-depth interviews and FGD asked participants to tell me what the vision and mission of their school were. Moreover, others could not differentiate between the school motto and the vision and mission. For example, Mrs Eland, one of the deputy principals, indicated,

> *We want our learners to be educated in totality. And then our vision, or our mission, is "endure and succeed". Usually, if a learner works hard, eventually they will succeed (*Mrs Eland, SMT in-depth interview).

While Mr Zebra, the principal asserted,

> *The mission of our school is to educate these children in totality so that they become responsible adults. The vision of our school is to make sure that our learners get the right skills. We instil knowledge so that they will be able to face the challenges of life out there. We want to ensure that when they leave our school and go out there and face problems, they must face them properly and not be challenged too much* (Mr Zebra, SMT in-depth interview).

These two accounts suggest that the main idea of the mission and or vision could be teaching in totality. However, it is also clear that what it means to teach in totality, may be understood differently by participants. Other SMT members indicated that they did not remember what their school's vision and mission were, while some shared understandings which were completely different from others. Mrs Elephant's view illustrates,

> *In my understanding, we as educators must teach our learners with dedication so that they can be successful adults of tomorrow. This commitment also includes not missing our lessons and everyone being respectful of time* (Mrs Elephant, SMT in-depth interview).

This understanding appears similar to a teaching philosophy; perhaps it is Mrs Elephant's philosophy, but does not relate to the vision and mission I observed written in the school. Another SMT member responded,

> *I don't revisit them often, but it is clearly stated on the school wall. I think it is to teach learners in totality so that when they go to the workplace, whatever we instilled here will be helpful to them. Another one is to provide a conducive teaching and learning environment, that's what I remember* (Mr Springbok, SMT in-depth interview).

Teacher interpretations in the FGD did not veer much from the disconnected conceptions of the SMT. One teacher, Mr Yellow (pseudonym) for instance, only exclaimed, "*Wow!",* While I was not able to probe this exclamation due to interjections by other participants, I interpreted

it to mean he did not have knowledge or recollection of these. This is because others also admitted to not remembering them while another participant, in an effort to help others remember asked,

> *Isn't the other one about enduring and succeeding? Which one is that? A vision or what?* (Mrs Blue, Teacher FGD).

Responding to her, Mr Red indicated, *"It is the motto that one."*

This finding confirms the findings by Gurley *et al.* (2015) which showed that many school stakeholders who participated in the inquiry could not articulate their school's vision and mission. Indicating that visions and missions, at least at those schools, could serve a visual purpose, with no real effect on teaching and learning or school effectiveness.

Therefore, these findings raise these questions: How can these stakeholders incorporate the vision and mission in smaller goals and practices of the school when they do not know what they are? Secondly, could the vision and mission serve any purpose beyond complying with DBE expectations for these schools? On the one hand, supposing that the vision and mission serve no purpose, it would be a missed opportunity by the SMT, in a school with such diverse challenges, to be intentional about them and direct actions towards desired actions. As the inquiry by Bhengu and Mthembu (2014) shows, schools in challenging contexts can use the vision and mission to direct actions that lead to school improvement. On the other hand, supposing that the vision and mission serve a purpose beyond aesthetics and or compliance with DBE, these diverse understandings pose a challenge. They could lead to "loose coupling" (Rosenholtz, 1985: 359) in which the goals of the organisation are pulled in different directions. Affecting decisions such as resource allocation and thus the attainment of goals.

5.2 Stakeholder involvement

The findings of this inquiry also reveal that the process of formulating the school's vision and mission was not inclusive and remains a mystery to most participants. Certainly, teachers and the current SMT members were not involved in the process of defining the school's vision and mission. When I asked about this process, Mr Springbok expressed,

> *We found them when we got here; they were already here when I got here* (Mr Springbok, SMT in-depth interview).

In the same vein, another SMT member, Mr Buffalo responded,

> *The former principal with the SGB and by then SMT, I was not in the SMT by then. I was just a mere Post Level one educator and those were the people responsible for drafting those* (Mr Buffalo, SMT in-depth interview).

The above explained the previous finding that participants did not know their school's vision and mission. This lack of involvement, mystery about who created the vision and mission, and poor communication methods (presented in the next section), can lead to members not remembering these. In addition, Mr Buffalo's response is concerning because, in addition to revealing lack of stakeholder involvement, it also suggests that in his understanding, it is not important to include Post Level-One teachers in such decisions. This is problematic because as established, for members of the organisation to take ownership of decisions, they must be included in making those decisions (Leithwood *et al.,* 2020).

Offering a different perspective, Mr Zebra, the principal indicated,

> *They were drafted by all the stakeholders. When we talk about stakeholders we talk about educator components, parent components, learner components and the community* (Mr Zebra, SMT in-depth interview).

Similarly, the teacher FGD participants relied on one participant's response when I asked who had written the vision and mission of the school. He responded,

> *If my memory serves me well, it was a combination of teachers plus the SMT. It is not something that was imposed, they sat down and came up with it* (Mr Yellow, Teacher FGD).

From the diversity of views expressed, I concluded that the true answer of who was responsible for defining the mission and vision was not known to most participants. Some responses such as the principal's response suggested that participants may be aware that vision and mission formulation should be a collaborative effort (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). However, I also wondered about the possibility of participant effects in which participants share a response they believe to be favourable (Marczyk *et al.*, 2005) rather than the reality. This would also corroborate findings from Mohale *et al.* (2020), despite other SMT members and observational data, suggesting that the school did not have a vision and mission, he asserted that there was. This could be from his understanding that the favourable response is that the school has a vision and mission. This is despite his admission to not knowing how they were formulated.

However, as it relates to the findings of the current study, they could indicate that the vision and mission might have been drafted years ago before some of the participants joined the school. Suggesting that the vision and mission may be understood by SMT members and other stakeholders as fixed, thus not reviewed to align with current aspirations of the school. As such, it is apparent that the school relies on a vision and mission which might have been defined in the absence of some teachers and SMT members currently leading the school. Granted, it is inevitable that there will be newer stakeholders whose inputs were not considered when drafting the vision and mission and it would be unreasonable that they should be reviewed often enough to ensure that all stakeholders are included. However, in this case, the findings suggest that there may not have been a review in recent years, if ever. This lack of involvement of some stakeholders could have been tackled through effective communication (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). However, this study also found that the way the vision and mission were communicated was ineffective. This is discussed in the section below.

5.3 Ineffective communication of vision and mission

When I asked the participants how this vision and mission were communicated to stakeholders, it was apparent that their understanding differed. Some participants explained that they were written on the wall towards the back of the school and at the school gate. Therefore, in their understanding, learners and parents can see and remember them. For instance, Mr Buffalo stated,

> *Upon arrival at the school, there is a board when you enter the gate first thing you meet is the mission and vision. They are there displayed, learners and visitors see them anytime upon arrival* (Mr Buffalo, SMT in-depth interview).

On the contrary, Mrs Eland, one of the deputy principals, viewed the school badge, which can be found in various items of the uniform, as playing the role of displaying the school's vision and mission, stating,

> *If you check, we have a school badge. So, it is displayed through school badges.*

Upon my examination of the school badge (which was not initially included in my data generation instruments), I found that what appears on the badge must be the school motto, stating, "endure and succeed". This corroborated the accounts of teacher participants, who stated that this was the school motto. During my site observation, it was not clear what purpose the motto serves and how it relates to the vision and mission. In retrospect, seeking to understand this motto and how it relates to other school goals could have added depth to this inquiry.

When I asked Mrs Elephant, she indicated,

> *We begin with the learners here in school before we call parents. We tell them that we desire for them to be like those learners in town and that they are not different from them because if we were to be pinched, we would all bleed the same way. We are the same, those in town succeed and here you say we don't have resources. But you have to try, we are also going to improvise* (for lack of resources*) but we want you to be responsible as well and study.*

Her statement above suggests that she seeks to motivate the learners and encourage them to work hard despite their challenges. However, it does not speak to the vision and mission. Moreover, because she and other SMT members could not verbalise the vision and mission, it suggests that in these motivation sessions with learners the vision and mission may not have been regarded as important.

The site observation also revealed that the vision and mission were written in bold in three different areas around the school. At the gate outside the school (Appendix A), on a large wall in the centre of the school, and in an open area between two blocks of classrooms. Outside of these three areas, I could not identify the vision and mission in the administration building, the two staffrooms, the offices of the SMT, or any of the classrooms I visited for my site observation. While having it in bold and visible is important, this method was ineffective, since some teachers and SMT members could not articulate even the main ideas of the vision and mission.

Upon hearing SMT members' perspectives about how they communicate these to stakeholders, I sought to find out if they believed the methods of communication were sufficient for stakeholders to understand them. Some, like the principal, felt these methods were sufficient, while others disagreed. For example, Mr Springbok, who was also an SMT member who admitted to not remembering the vision and mission, expressed,

> *I don't think these are received as well as they were intended. Although they are there and obviously every day as we pass the gate we can see them. The problem is that when something has been there for a while your eyes stop noticing it. Perhaps when a person sees it for the first time, they will read it but going forward you find that it's just another everyday feature* (Mr Springbok, SMT in-depth interview).

It is clear from these perspectives that members of the SMT do not possess adequate knowledge of the best ways of communicating the school's vision and mission. For example, simply displaying them in isolated areas around the school, as stated by Mr Buffalo, does not constitute adequate communication. This is particularly so since the participants could not articulate them. Surprisingly, some SMT members believe other stakeholders would remember them.

Thus, as Wright (2002) suggests, the role of these may have served a public relations purpose rather than directing school goals. While learners were not part of this inquiry, one can infer, based on the teachers and SMT and ineffective communication in this regard, that learners would also be in the dark about their schools' vision and mission.

6. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This was a case study of a single high school in the rural context of Limpopo Province. Its findings, while adding to the literature covering this topic, cannot be generalised to all schools within the rural context of Limpopo, or even rural schools in the rest of the country. I recommend that larger-scale studies be considered to have a better understanding of this phenomenon. In addition, future studies could focus on the SMTs' perspectives about what vision and mission mean to them and their purpose in school.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

This inquiry was premised on the assumption that the role of defining and communicating the vision and mission of a school is pivotal to the success of the school (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Moreover, the role played by SMT members in defining and communicating these, as leaders of instruction in their schools, is vital. This is particularly important at a school such as Bakwena High School, which is in a rural area and faces a multitude of challenges, which could be alleviated by having an SMT that understands the role of the vision and mission in the school. The findings of this inquiry reveal that members of the SMT were ineffective in the formulation and communication of their school's vision and mission. Therefore, the vision and mission only serve a visual purpose and its benefits are not understood by the SMT. As such, they have an impact on the daily practices within the school and its effectiveness.

Moreover, the different role players in the school could, as a result of working without a clear vision, pull the objectives in different directions (Rosenholtz, 1985). These findings have at least two implications for SMT members working within the rural context of South Africa. Firstly, SMT members must not rely on outdated visions and missions, but work with key stakeholders, including teachers, learners and parents to agree on the current ambitions of the school and write them down as their vision and mission. Secondly, it is also important that upon adopting a new vision and mission, they are effectively communicated to stakeholders and incorporated into daily school activities. This could include more visibility of the vision and mission in classrooms and other key areas around the school. Due to the challenges experienced at schools within this context such as lack of resources, having posters professionally made could prove a challenge. However, this could be a great opportunity to involve learners in creating posters to be displayed around the school conveying the vision and mission. Communicating these to parents could include doing so during parent meetings. More than these suggestions, schools must identify the best ways to engage stakeholders in this regard suitable to their unique context.

In conclusion, the vision and mission must not be drafted merely because they are good to look at or comply with DBE regulations. If they are to have any impact on practice, Murphy and Torre (2015) argue that beyond articulating them, school leaders must align smaller school goals and daily practices to the vision and mission and ensure that stakeholders collaborate to achieve such goals.

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Appendix A

Bakwena High School (pseudonym) vision and mission as appearing on the school gate.