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# *Ubuntu* and school leadership

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## Abstract

Among the many calls in educational transformation in South Africa has been the need to transform the management styles in schools. Many critics agree that the Constitution of the Republic lays a good foundation for a democratic system of education. Arguably, if ‘failing schools’ can utilise the democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution, schools would be more prosperous. The deteriorating quality of education and management in dysfunctional historically black schools for example, is frequently attributed to defective management strategies (Steyn and Van Wyk, 1999; Masitsa, 2005). Shared leadership, participative leadership, the creation of effective change agents in a team are some of the myriad solutions cited by research as answers to deteriorating leadership quality in dysfunctional schools (Singh, 2002).

In this article focus is on the role of *ubuntu* as one of the Constitutional values that can enhance school management. This study looked at whether or not *ubuntu* philosophy can assist schools rid of managerial obstacles. A case study was conducted in a school where the principal in it used *ubuntu* as a form of a leadership model. Based on tested and mellowed values of African democracy, it was found out that the philosophy contains the ideal model on which democratic leaders would like their fellow employees to follow. This philosophy also responds to the local African context, hence it might be ideal for African schools in particular. However, we found out that *ubuntu* is not a plain sailing form of leadership. As any other models, teachers need to be prepared to be receptive to it. *Ubuntu* as a philosophy can also not be seen as a ‘size fits all’ solution in the challenges that the African society faces today.

## Introduction

This article explores the potential of *ubuntu* leadership which can be loosely interpreted as an African-centred form of leadership. The term will be explored in more detail in the next sub-section. With the advent of a democratic education and more openness to issues of diversity, many school leaders that I have come across are trying to experiment with novel ways of management. A number of courses in South Africa have also been developed for school leaders so that they could be able to face the current emerging democratic society. Institutions such as the Mathew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance in the University of Johannesburg strive to update school leaders with new models. There are other similar projects around the country. In Port Elizabeth for example, the General Motors (GM) Foundation

has also been supporting school leaders who are upgrading their qualifications. This project was done in conjunction with the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. The Department of Education (DoE) has just introduced a course referred to as Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) specialising in School Leadership. All these are programmes that would enable leaders to explore various models that are congruent to a democratic society and efficiency in schools.

Teachers involved in various programmes have tried to transform the old top-down structure that used to be purported by the previous departments of education. The top-down structure was hierarchical and teachers were usually told what to do and not what not to do. It is this top-down culture of the past that is usually blamed for the teachers' resistance to change initiatives. Reeves and Ralphs (1994) pointed out that many experienced teachers and principals were mostly schooled in apartheid ideology. They were used to being administrators within their schools and when it comes to democratising the schools they tend not to accept this. Mahomed (1999) averred that four to five decades of a top-down teacher culture and passive acceptance of instructions might be enhancing interpretative difficulties being experienced by educators. Management utilising *ubuntu* as a basis of management ensures that a new culture of inclusiveness is promoted in the workplace. Recently there have been a number of writers and researchers who have suggested new forms of leadership in many dysfunctional schools (Steyn and Van Wyk, 1999; Masitsa, 2005). Research also shows that many township schools in South Africa continue to be underperforming and management structures are usually said to be helpless in the face of educational changes (Msila, 2005).

In a recent study by Msila (2005), he discovered that black parents continue to move their children away from township schools because of the belief that township schools or the historically black schools are failing their children. Among other factors cited by parents was that management in various historically black schools continued to deteriorate in the face of teacher apathy and incompetence. Many conscientious principals have long started to look around for alternative models that would improve their schools. A number of these schools leaders have tried and given up because they maintain that their teachers are not up to the challenge. Some are trying participative leadership, team management and various other employee involvement strategies. Although others have become despondent in the process there are a number who still believe that teachers need more time to learn to be committed.

In this article the focus is on the value of *ubuntu* and the possible role it can play in the enhancement of school leadership. The Manifesto on Education

highlights *ubuntu* as one of the important aspects and the need for it to be linked to the values cherished in the Constitution (DoE, 2001). *Ubuntu* is said to emerge out of the political tumult prior the 1990s and peacemakers wanted to ensure that in the process of creating a new framework, they would formulate a sentiment that would become part of the defining vision of the democracy (DoE, 2001). Furthermore, this publication states that there was a need in South Africa “for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimisation” (DoE, 2001, p.15).

Much Western literature sheds light on values that are cornerstone to *ubuntu*. Prinsloo (1998) argues that the concepts used within *ubuntu* context are not unfamiliar to Western thinking. Sharing, brotherhood, dignity and trust can be found in Western contexts (Prinsloo, 1998). Western literature also uses concepts such as participative leadership and the latter is similar to this article’s view of *ubuntu* leadership. Furthermore, Prinsloo explains that *ubuntu* is religious, expansive, transcendental and centrifugal (1998).

In this study, I look at the potential of *ubuntu* leadership model in a school. The main question explored was: Can participative-based strategies embedded in *ubuntu* help school leaders in enhancing the teachers’ positive attitude towards change?

Sub-question addressed was the following:

- Are teachers readily receptive to participative strategies of leadership as associated with *ubuntu* principles?

## *Ubuntu demystified*

Among others, the current system of education in South Africa aspires to bring forth a system that would be comparable to education systems around the world. Mbigi (1997) contended that if a competitive, developed nation is to be built, collective solidarity in African life should find its expression in the modern forms of business entrepreneurship, business organisations and management. This collective solidarity contains a number of values that can influence how people make choices in life. Broodryk (2006) states that *ubuntu* worldview contains the basic values of humanness, caring, sharing, respect and compassion. Furthermore, Broodryk points out that these core values are associated with other positive values such as warmth, empathy, giving, commitment and love. Mbigi (2000, p.6) also explains *ubuntu* as literally

meaning “I am because you are – I can only be a person through others”. The latter is very close to Chikanda’s definition of the concept. Prinsloo (1998) cites Chikanda who stated that *ubuntu* is *African Humanism* that involves alms-giving, sympathy, care, sensitivity to the needs of others, respect, consideration, patience and kindness.

The concept of *ubuntu* is very crucial for a number of institutions in the society and this includes schools. As South African school leaders are assuming leadership roles they need the best leadership models, philosophies and strategies to help them in this regard. Arguably, *ubuntu* is one philosophy that can help in developing practices of doing things together in organisations (Mbigi, 1997). *Ubuntu* has become prominent under the democratic dispensation in South Africa. Mbigi (1997) posits that the concept is both uniquely African and universal for it is implicitly expressed elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, Mbigi argues that South African organisations are faced with ruthless global competition hence the need to negotiate a shared common agenda in organisations. Common among the discussions above is the idea of interconnectedness among people which is espoused by *ubuntu*. A number of African languages reflect this humanness, this inter-dependence among people. *Ubuntu* is based on these principles.

In support of the above the DoE publication (2001, p.16) states that out of the values of *ubuntu* follows the practices of compassion, kindness, altruism and respect which are at the centre of making schools places of effective culture of learning and teaching. The publication further points out:

Equality might require us to put up with people who are different, non-sexism and non-racism might require us to rectify the inequities of the past, but *ubuntu* goes much further: it embodies the concept of mutual understanding and the active appreciation of the value of human difference. . . Ultimately, *ubuntu* requires you to respect others if you are to respect yourself.

This article focuses on how this concept can be applied to leadership in schools. Adair (2006) differentiates between leadership and management. On the one hand, he explains that leadership is of the spirit compounded of personality and vision while on the other he describes management as a phenomenon of the mind more of accurate calculation, of methods and routine. Furthermore, Adair explains that leadership is the understanding and sharing of a common purpose without which there can be no effective leadership. For Adair, while managers manage change, leaders manage growth. In this article *ubuntu* leadership refers to the management and nurturing of growth within an organisation. *Ubuntu* style of leading an organisation involves a departure from hierarchically structured management

relations and rather introduces a cooperative and supportive form of leadership in which collective solidarity of the group is employed and respected (Prinsloo 1998). Furthermore, Prinsloo cites Mbigi who points out that *ubuntu* is a social survival strategy that developed from adverse social and geographic circumstances in which people had to cooperate to survive. Mbigi (2004) points out that it is the role of leadership to bring meaning and hope in any situation and into the confusing world characterised by rapid and chaotic change. Furthermore, Mbigi states that in indigenous African traditions the leader is the one who is the medium of hope and channel for meaning. In schools, the principals as leaders need to take a lead role as they assist their teachers to make meaning of the leadership challenges that thwart certain schools.

Mbigi and Maree (2005) argue that the African village is based on mutual trust, respect and care and they maintain that these are elements that modern South African organisations should strengthen and convert into a competitive edge. This is supported by Khoza (1994) who opines that *ubuntu* has practical implications for the work place. Among these are values such as creative cooperation, empathetic communication and team work (Khoza, 1994). These values can be very crucial for leadership in schools especially, schools that are dysfunctional. Schools striving for success can use *ubuntu* philosophy to enhance effective leadership and meaningful followership that might translate to a collective solidarity among colleagues. It appears that a number of writers have agreed that the principle of *ubuntu* has to be transmitted into the management practice (Teffo, 1999:).

## The study

This investigation was conducted as a case study in one historically black school where a new principal was experimenting on the values of *ubuntu* in her leadership role. I had gone to investigate the cause of certain managerial problems in township schools and I discovered that as a new principal, she was in the process of transforming the school leadership policies. According to the principal and five of her staff members, she had inherited a school “that was fraught with mismanagement, low morale of teachers, disobedient learners and aloof parents”. When she assumed the position, the school, (which is situated in an urban Eastern Cape township), was experiencing all sorts of challenges. Many teachers were despondent stating that they were also frustrated by the changes in education while their school was languishing in the doldrums of educational set up. The school has twenty-nine teachers excluding the school principal. Research was conducted through observations

and interviews over a period of ten months. Not all teachers were willing to be interviewed or be observed though. Five teachers neither allowed the research team to observe them nor interview them.

Educational ethnographic methods were employed in the study. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) described the purpose of educational ethnography as providing rich, descriptive data about the contents, activities and beliefs of participants in educational settings. Like all other field studies, ethnography takes place in natural settings. Bailey (1987) pointed out that in ethnographic research; the observers attempt to become part of the culture or subculture that they are studying. Furthermore, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) stated that in an ethnographic study the researchers try to render a 'true to life' picture of what people say and how they act and hear the people's words and actions are left to speak for themselves. For ten months we (myself and two co-researchers) studied the particular culture of that school visiting the school at least twice a week. In most visits we were complete observers as we adopted a passive role thus minimising contaminating the setting. The aim was to be as objective as possible. This was a crucial aspect for such an ethnographic study for as ethnographers it was crucial to understand the culture of the participants fully well. The data gathered became so rich as a result of these frequent visits to the school.

In the school (which we shall name Liso High School) we visited teachers in their classrooms, in staff meetings and also attended four teacher-parents meetings. In two separate occasions we also became part of meetings between the school management and the Learners Representative Council. The methods used in the study ensured that we study the participants in natural settings. Weiss (1998, p.257) pointed out that among the many advantages of qualitative research and the natural setting are:

- Greater awareness of the perspective of programme participants
- Capability of understanding dynamic developments in the programme as it evolves
- Awareness of time and history
- Special sensitivity to the influence of context
- Alertness to unanticipated and unplanned events

### Methods used

The principal and twenty-four other teachers were interviewed during the course of the study. Of these twenty-four teachers thirteen are male and eleven

are female. Questions asked during interviews were open ended and teachers were given a chance to comment on teaching in general and management specifically. The teachers who are in management positions, the heads of department (HODs) and the deputy principal were interviewed more than the ordinary post level 1 teachers. Many post level 1 teachers (there were eighteen in the sample) were interviewed on average four times each during the course of the study. Once before the study commenced, twice while we were actively conducting the study on site and once when we were about to conclude the findings. However, the school management team was interviewed several times. On average six interviews were conducted with management members. Questions raised were on management and teaching. We also shadowed the principal for three weeks, one full week at the beginning and one full week in the middle of the study and one full week before the conclusion of the study.

Observations were crucial in the process of information gathering. We observed a number of factors in classrooms and meetings. Most of the time as researchers we wanted to see whether there was any change of leadership in Liso High School. We also wanted to see how the school functions when participative leadership strategies are introduced. In the classroom we looked at how teachers managed their classrooms investigating whether the leadership style of the principal had any impact upon the classroom practice of her teachers. We were able to visit sixteen teachers in their classrooms over the period of four months. Among other aspects we were interested in was how teachers were reflecting department's policy in teaching aspects of *ubuntu* in the classroom. In meetings we observed how these were handled observing aspects such as participation, facilitation of the meetings. We were also interested as to how crucial decisions were reached in these meetings.

## The findings

The study unravelled much about issues around culture, tradition and teacher change. The principal is working with a staff who have not been used to effective management strategies. The previous principal was a person who exercised a *laissez-faire* approach to the management in her school. There was never proper management of classrooms and the teachers' performance was never evaluated. The school was even condemned by the community around it as 'a failure and a useless school'. As a result of this form of management teachers were usually not sure what to expect from management. When Ms. Molo, the new principal arrived at the school, teachers seemed to have been taken aback in being delegated to do several duties. Many teachers were not used to perform other duties in the school. They appeared not to see their role

in school management. As the principal stated:

When we prepared for the parents' evening, I could see that a number of my colleagues were surprised when I gave them various roles to perform during the parents' meeting. Many of them expected me to do everything including welcoming, financial reports, learners' progress and so on. They did not expect to take part in the programme.

Molo also reported huge apathy when she came to the school. She said she suspected that it was a matter of her colleagues "being wary of a person coming from outside and was gradually changing their culture". Molo also stated that it appeared as if few teachers understood her idea of democracy and even those who did could not practise it. They hardly wanted to get involved in school matters at all. The teachers expected her to be a treasurer, a manager, a choir conductor, a sports mistress and various other roles. None of the teachers took any role in extra-mural activities when Molo arrived at the school. The previous organisational culture in the school reflected less staff participation in activities. The apparent failure for Molo to set goals shows the challenges of introducing a new culture and tradition within an organisation. According to Prinsloo (1998) introduction of new traditions might require further training and development and workers need to understand the competitive survival issues facing them. The latter did not appear to be true for this school. The teachers did not seem to understand their school as well as their roles. Prinsloo states that workers must understand the organisation so as to be able to contribute to and participate in planning procedures and organising teams.

In trying to institute a new organisational culture which involved teachers, Molo moved for a more inclusive approach to management. The idea of the collective is very basic to the *ubuntu* philosophy which she was consciously trying to implement. She was changing the leadership paradigm in the school. The principal rotated a number of roles in the school. The teacher's school committee's portfolios were changed in each of the four quarters of the year. What she wanted was for all teachers "to have a feel of what it felt to be a school's treasurer, sports teacher or secretary". At some point the teachers were very concerned when she apparently gave a position of treasurer to an alleged alcoholic. The teacher gave up after two weeks because he said he "could not balance the books". Talking about her staff members, Molo said she achieved a level of success with the teacher. She averred:

You see most of them never carried any responsibility positions in the school. Therefore it was quite a shock for all of them to find that they were assuming positions of high importance in the school. I could see their apathy persisting. However, many got embarrassed when they had to report what they had done. This taught many to be very responsible at the end.



Molo stressed the show of respect for all her teachers. All the teachers were treated as equals as the principal tried out team approaches to leadership which are based on mutual respect. However, many were sceptical especially at first. One teacher emphasized:

We do not understand this. We are not used to be involved in issues such as coordinating meetings, fund raising initiatives and school governance. We have always not concerned ourselves with things outside our classrooms. We think this lady wants us to run this school for her.

Molo encountered much resistance from teachers who seemed not ready for the challenge of taking responsibility for many school duties. The staff members appeared to expect to be told what to do at all time. The kind of shared leadership envisaged by the principal did not seem to work. The teachers were consciously or unconsciously refusing to take up the gauntlet of changing their schools for the better. This was a form of leadership where the principal was trying to infuse elements of *ubuntu*. These included some of the aspects mentioned above such as collective solidarity, respect, sharing and compassion. Molo arrived at a school where teachers did not reflect any of these qualities and the previous management style in the school was always cited as a reason by some participants. *Ubuntu* philosophy was struggling because of either the teachers' dependence upon leader's judgement or their apathy towards school management. Few ever shared their professional experiences. With the advent of the new National Curriculum Statement (NCS) teachers in a number of schools are unsure about their classroom practice hence they opt for teacher isolation rather than risk exposing their inadequacies pertaining to the new curriculum.

The paradox of educational change in South Africa though is that the NCS envisages a new kind of teacher who has different attributes from the teachers under apartheid education. The NCS regards teachers as key contributors to educational transformation in South Africa (DoE, 2002). Furthermore, this publication highlights different roles that teachers are expected to assume and these include being leaders, administrators and managers. The Schools Act of South Africa (SASA) which has influenced the governance of schools is based on the Constitution of the Republic. The School Governing Bodies (SGBs) are supposed to work in partnership in school governance. Effective partnership in schools has the following qualities:

- Mutual trust and respect
- Shared decision making
- Common vision
- Open communication
- Good teamwork

Promotion of the interests of the partnership rather than those of the individual  
Respect for the roles of different partners

(Potgieter, Visser, Van der Bank, Mothata and Squelch, 1997, p.8)

Liso needed the above qualities among the teachers in particular. The above qualities clearly show the need for solidarity and oneness in the workplace. Mbigi and Maree (2005) talk of the solidarity principle of *ubuntu* and one finds it very close to the above.

Teacher isolation in Liso meant that there was no interdependence among colleagues. The principal tried to initiate 'subject teams' headed by the heads of departments. The latter structures hardly worked in the first four months because the teachers were not used to working together in issues pertaining to professional development. They lacked the necessary diligence and for some time the teachers in the study were highly opposed to management changes. At the beginning a number of them thought that the management strategy that the principal wanted to introduce was more linked to NCS. As one lady participant put it:

The principal is not likely to succeed in implementing this new curriculum. We have tried this before and it has not worked. One person cannot do it, we've been to several workshops and few of us could really come to grips with the new system.

Teachers only began to grasp the basics of the 'new leadership' months after their principal arrived. Molo regarded herself a leader of change who was constantly trying to introduce leadership based on solidarity, respect and democracy and all these happen to be aspects that are part of *ubuntu* philosophy. She was also labelling what she was introducing as *ubuntu* leadership as it was based on some values of *ubuntu*. It was interesting to note how the teachers changed their belief systems towards the end of the study. By the eighth month a majority of teachers stated that they could 'see' the direction the principal was taking. One teacher union site committee member stated that:

You have to remember that teachers come from a past where their input was not valued. We were very suspicious of authority. But the irony here is that here is a leader who wants to give us voice and a will to participate fully in school governance but again we are suspicious. That is what history has done to us.

Similarly one of the heads of department reflected on how teachers tend to mistrust colleagues. This is what she said at the beginning of the study:

Sometimes you call a teacher and you show them what they do wrong maybe or something similar to that. Like one teacher in my department who never does lesson plans. These are

crucial for me to control the work. But he went to other colleagues saying that I was victimising him. It is difficult and challenging to be in school management when teachers do not trust one another.

Concerning classroom practice, a number of teachers tried hard to use methods congruent with the NCS. Yet it was clear that many were still struggling in really moving away from the exclusively teacher-centred approaches even when their learners were sitting in groups. Through classroom visits with me though the principal tried in a collegial fashion to point out the weaknesses to teachers as she tried to build their classroom practice, trying to manage change as a leader.

## Discussion

The study has shown that some of the idealized values in our society cannot be easily assimilated by people. With the transformation in the South African education there have been many debates on what we need to do in order to change our education system for the better. Values such as *ubuntu* have all been highlighted in bringing forward educational change. The study above however, has illustrated two aspects in particular:

1. That teachers who have not been prepared to be change agents will not be able to embrace values such as *ubuntu*
2. That the so called *ubuntu* models are not necessarily providing simple cut and dried solutions. There will still be many who will see these as oppressive or opposed to their own value systems.

The discussion of the findings will be completed under three themes namely:

- *Ubuntu*, communalism and leadership
- Common vision and *ubuntu*
- Re-education: confronting teacher fears in a time of change

### *Ubuntu*, communalism and leadership

The literature cited above reflects communalism as one of the important cornerstones of *ubuntu*. Khoza (1994) refers to communalism as collectivism. Prinsloo (1998) cites Khoza who points out that communalism is any of the several types of social organisation in which the individual is seen as being subordinate to a social collectivity such as state, a nation, a race, a social class.

According to Khoza *ubuntu* broadens the respect for the individual and the respect of each person in the social unit (Prinsloo, 1998). In a school mired in a series of mismanagement incidents and negative competition, the strategies introduced by the principal of Liso developed a sense of communalism. The majority of teachers stated that they have learnt to be communal in their approach to school leadership. The participants in the study pointed out that before the principal's implementation of leadership strategies, teachers were more apathetic and tended to 'compete negatively'. One HOD cited an example of how teachers tended to demean those who were experiencing problems in the implementation of the NCS. The HOD stated that although "at the end of 10 months the school is not perfect, but there is a culture of communalism and democracy creeping in". In fact, this was evident in the various aspects of the school. Teachers began to believe in working together after much resistance. Communalism meant that there developed respect for one another and the goals of the organisations became more important for the group.

Looking at communalism, it was clear that it had much impact on enhancement of leadership. The teachers at the school unanimously agreed that they used to work 'separately and selfishly'. The concept of *ubuntu* and communalism that the principal introduced enhanced team participation, sharing of skills as well as ideas. Mbigi and Maree (2005) point out that *ubuntu* is a collective, shared experience and solidarity and all these are crucial for the development of people and organisations. The participants in the study expressed how the concept of working as a unit helped in minimising problems. Workshops on team building, team teaching, as well as coaching are some of the aspects that the principal introduced to enhance the idea of solidarity and the teachers gradually internalised these values. Teachers grasped the 'new culture differently; some were more amenable to change. However, what was interesting was that the 'new culture' had clear effects upon the teachers who were not part of the sample. They were not interviewed or observed but we could see how they worked well in a team as their apathy waned. *Ubuntu* clearly led to some kind of shared vision.

### Common vision and *ubuntu*

Mbigi (2000) refers to common vision within the *ubuntu* context as collective visioning. He also states that it is crucial in creating a new collective mindset. The theory of shared leadership is one of the frequently discussed theories in literature particularly that from the 'west'. Mrs Molo initially stated that her staff did not have a common vision. By inculcating communalism and democratic leadership, she was also consciously trying to build a teaching

corps that shared a certain vision. The principal arrived at a school where teachers cherished and probably unconsciously clung to top-down strategies of management. She found ‘a management structure that was autocratic’. She maintained that she needed to rebuild the staff to confirm to certain values of equality. She saw the sharing of ‘collective vision and values crucial for the development of the school’. Mbigi and Maree (2005) refer to *ubuntu* as a spirit of collective development and reconstruction in organisations.

Sharing a common vision within the *ubuntu* context means creating a right balance between the individual and the group. The right balance between individualism and collectivism is made possible by accommodating people’s need for dignity, self-respect and regard for others seriously (Prinsloo, 1998). Molo says she arrived at a school divided by many elements; age, union affiliation, party politics and post level were some of the factors that made teachers not to share common values and vision. Yet Nel (1994) averred that shared vision is the deepest binding principle that enables employees to be united within an organisation. Common vision, as evident in this study, ensures that employees are able to fight their doubts and fears.

### Re-education: confronting fears

Among other challenges of leadership is the task of leading change. This is a time when leaders need to allay the fears of the employees. Molo experienced many challenges when she had to prepare her staff for changes and two of these were re-educating the staff and secondly addressing the teachers’ fears. The principal was introducing a new culture, a different kind of leadership. The *ubuntu* principles she was inculcating were an endeavour to create harmony among the individuals and their community around them. It appeared to be the fear of new responsibility and new culture that made the teachers to have certain fears and feel inadequate as professionals.

*Ubuntu* philosophy and change management was an experience of teacher empowerment. The teachers were not part of the ‘school community’, the collective. They were also isolated in their classrooms fearing to share experiences, good or bad. One of the initial exercises that the principal did was to provide the teachers with an instrument (a questionnaire) one morning which asked the teachers to write about their experiences as professionals. Many questions needed the teachers to reflect on their practice and express their beliefs when it came to change and change management. Each questionnaire had ten questions. A sample from the questionnaire is below:

1. What kind of a leader are you?
2. Why is collective/participative leadership important?
3. Should democracy be the cornerstone of leadership? Why?
4. Is the current change in education necessary?
5. Do we need *ubuntu* as a form of leadership in our school? Explain briefly.
6. Is it crucial for the principal to be the sole leader in change management?

When this questionnaire was administered by the principal at the beginning many teachers could not answer some of the questions with confidence. Many stated that for the first time they began to think about teacher roles and obligations. Seventy per cent of the teachers for example could not really articulate the role of teachers in change management. Sixty-five per cent thought that the principal should lead change in a school alone. Fifty per cent did not really understand how *ubuntu* can apply in a school. They thought this only 'had to do with customs and traditions of black people'. It is however, amazing how the same questions although asked differently on the ninth month of the research enabled teachers to come with more well thought of responses that displayed their growth.

From the study, many participants were for a couple of months still believing in 'old-style' of management. The following appeared new to them:

- (a) Teachers were not used to shared leadership – many teachers still needed boss-driven approaches. There was no motivation to innovate and bring strategies in sharing management duties. The professional maturity of the majority of teachers is very low to such an extent that they could not share duties well. Towards the end of the year there were a few teachers who appeared to have a full understanding of what was expected of them under the new leadership style of the principal.
- (b) Magnifying parental and community role – For a number of years the school had been operating without any efforts to involve parents in school matters. The community around the school was so alienated that they were not sure if there was any role they could play in the school. However, Molo tried hard to involve community in some school governance matters. The school is situated in an informal settlement area, many parents belong to low socio economic status and have low level of education. Few of them made efforts to become part of the School Governing Body, yet those who involved themselves who were about fifty, out of a possible three hundred found them being part of a team that was making crucial decisions for the school.

For the majority of the participants, *ubuntu* as a philosophy worked in the

school only after the participants started to understand themselves as well as their practice as professionals. Teffo (1999) pointed out that all that companies need is a mentor to teach or preach *ubuntu*. Teffo also states that this will go a long way into answering the question of: “How do we incorporate *ubuntu* in our management style?” (p.164). The idea of introducing a mentor is very crucial especially when one looks at the crucial aspect of preparing the workers as the climate is made conducive to be receptive to *ubuntu* models. While the principal at the school appeared to be a mentor to all her teachers, she also invited a few speakers, on average two a month to speak on various aspects of leadership. These speakers also incorporated the *ubuntu* concepts in their speeches.

What lacked most in Liso high school was the necessary cooperation. Regarding this Teffo (1999, p.164) points out:

*Ubuntu* empowers people to love and respect each other. In the search for a new management style, the writing of memos may have to be supplemented by communication (follow-up oral presentation and/or discussions). It would yield better results if the director or manager were to go to the people and discuss issues with them.

It was through the principal’s efforts that enabled the concept of *ubuntu* to be fairly accepted in the school. The principal brought in some form of re-education and encouraged teachers to reflect continuously upon their practice. The study also showed that when *ubuntu* is made to function well, it can enhance the school performance. Yet as pointed out above, there needs to be some form of voluntary re-education among the teachers. They need to be predisposed to change management.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study showed that *ubuntu* worldview can have a positive impact when its principles are used effectively in leading a school. Yet *ubuntu* demands a paradigm shift, a change in what many employees have been used to. As witnessed above, much research has shown the potential of participative-based strategies. However, aspects such as caring, sharing, respect and compassion might be challenging to internalise for many workers. *Ubuntu* poses this challenge of fostering a culture of interconnectedness and interdependence among workers. The principal in this study ensured that the staff followed and believed in a common vision that would lead to some form of communalism. Furthermore, this study also leads one to concur with Mbigi that *ubuntu* is a philosophy that can assist in developing practices of doing tasks together in an organisation (Mbigi, 1997). When people work together in a team, sharing a vision, they will tend to shirk apathy due to the positive

aspects of the collective and communal way of thinking. *Ubuntu* style of leadership does lay foundation for these qualities. Currently, *ubuntu* is about transforming belief systems as people look forward into the future. Leaders and followers all need to be prepared for it. It is apt to close with Mbigi's argument when he points out:

Effective leadership requires us to have convivial experiences by digging deep into our emotional and spiritual resources. It is difficult to create a new society with unchanged people and unchanged leaders. We cannot give the world what we don't have. For us to pass on the flu, we need to have the flu.

(Mbigi, 1997. p.15)

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