

Chapter 4

Instructional Leadership as a Model for Leadership in Multi-Grade Schools

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ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to examine leadership styles used by multi-grade principals and explore the skills needed by principals in multi-grade schools. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the leadership styles of multi-grade principals? and (2) What skills are needed for school leadership in multi-grade contexts? The chapter adopted a qualitative design, using interviews and “shadowing” as data collection instruments. The participants were six multi-grade teaching principals. Data obtained from the various sources were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The findings revealed the prevalence of instructional leadership style among participants with the principal being both the academic leader and the instructional leader. In addition, participants emphasized the importance of collaborative leadership that relies on teamwork among teachers and community members in these small schools to ensure that the vision and the mission of the school is realized.

INTRODUCTION

Research on teaching principals is lacking. Newton and Wallin (2013, p. 56) argue that there is a paucity of literature and research on teaching principals and the skills that they need to carry out their roles with required competence. Cornish and Jenkins (2015, p. 135) echo the same sentiment that the research to date has tended to focus on the positive and negative aspects of teaching in rural schools, rather than on matters of teaching principals or of the identification and exploration of issues related to rural teaching and leadership. Multi-grade schools come about as a result of low learner enrolment numbers that impact negatively on the teacher-learner ratio and on the teacher provisioning model implemented by different governments and can range from two-grade classes to seven-grade classes (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015, p. 17).

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For the purposes of this chapter, it is important that the concept “multi-grade” be defined. This concept is often contested in literature, with different authors using it to refer to classes in which more than one grade is being taught by one teacher and others using it to describe classes in which learners with different abilities are taught. Multi-grade teaching is where one teacher teaches more than one grade in the same classroom (Brown, 2008). In addition to multi-grade, the terms multi-stage, multi-age, mixed-grade and multiphase are sometimes used. Literature indicates that multi-grade schools are usually situated in sparsely populated areas and in remote rural areas (Little, 2001; Wolfe & Gracia, 2000; Aksoy, 2007; Brown, 2008; Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). This suggests that principals in such schools are isolated from their peers and the professional development opportunities. There is a consensus among researchers that teaching in multi-grade classes is challenging (Seban, 2015).

It should be pointed that multi-grade schools are found in both developing and developed countries. However, reasons for introducing multi-grade schools varies from country to country. In New South Wales context, multi-grade is introduced by choice (Cornish, 2014). It should be pointed that that principals at all levels of experience have an increased need for professional development. One of the challenges faced by principals in small rural schools is lack of professional support, isolated from resources and their peers, other principals and leadership programs, (Southworth, 2004; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooyman, 2013; Stewart & Mathews, 2015). Rural school districts are particularly at risk for not having adequate funding to provide strong professional development (Stewart & Mathews, 2015). Multi-grade schools are constantly being reorganised and reshaped in order to remain viable (Wallin & Newton, 2013). The report of the Select Committee on the Closure of Public Schools in New South Wales (2015), points that there are a number of reasons why parents prefer small schools in than rural areas, some of them are:

1. That some children with disabilities such as autism have difficulties with large, less personal environments, so parents value small school environments that operate more like a large family, with greater peer support, and where they and staff know each other
2. Children who are struggling in other ways can gain more individual attention
3. Small schools cater well to gifted and talented children as they provide greater opportunity for extension.

In addition, the NSW Teachers Federation highlighted the particular support that small schools provide for students with special needs, students with disability, students from isolated areas and Aboriginal students who benefit from specific local language and cultural programs, Report of the Select Committee on the Closure of Public Schools in New South Wales (2015, p. 9). This chapter aims to examine leadership styles used by multi-grade principals. The chapter further explores the knowledge and the various skills needed by principals in multi-grade schools. It also hopes to promote “good” leadership in multi-grade schools. This chapter proposes a model for leadership in a multi-grade context, a model based on rich descriptions provided by multi-grade principals across different contexts and using a multiple case study design. The study focuses on multi-grade teaching principals in small rural areas in New South Wales. Small-scale research was conducted as part of a mentorship programme between the University of New England and the University of South Africa. The chapter is further guided by two main research questions, namely; (1) What are the leadership styles of multi-grade principals? and (2) What skills are needed for school leadership in multi-grade contexts? The sub-questions were: What it means to be a leader? How important is leadership? What are the roles of parents and community in the

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