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Managing and Leading through African Philosophies at Secondary Schools in South Africa: A case study of King Cetshwayo District

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Abstract

Participative management is rooted in ubuntu (humanness) and democratic principles that ensure that employees have the right to participate in decision making. This paper aim to explore African management and leadership philosophies at secondary schools in the post-apartheid South Africa. Research was conducted in the King Cetshwayo district of KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. Apart from literature on participative management, the paper reports on empirical investigation based on quantitative research paradigm, which was used to collect data from secondary school principals. The literature findings revealed that secondary school principals need to rethink their management and leadership philosophies in the twenty first century. The findings of this research further reveal that ubuntu (humanness) and lekgotla (Sesotho term for "an African participatory approach to decision-making") should be embedded in the art of school management and leadership in the South African context. The paper is concluded that ongoing capacity building workshops should be fast-tracked on matters pertaining to management and leadership.

Keyword: *Distributed leadership; Team leadership, Decentralization of power; Transformational leadership*

1. INTRODUCTION

Participative management is rooted in *ubuntu (humanness)* and democratic principles. This is attributed to the belief that employees have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. It assumes that employees have the ability, or at least the potential, to do this as long as they participate intelligently, and demonstrate commitment to matters at hand.

Somech (2002) argues that the rationale for school principals and other school management team members to increase teachers' involvement in school decision making has ranged from the pragmatic argument that educational innovation is unlikely to succeed without teachers' support to the philosophical view that teachers have a right to be involved in decision making, taking into consideration the readiness levels of teachers, and regardless of outcome. Thus teachers' self-esteem and status, as well as school improvement, can be enhanced through participative management initiatives or *ubuntu (humanness)* practices. It goes without saying that having a voice in matters relating to work and its context is regarded as a right or an obligation by staff members.

Additionally, Mchunu, et al. (2025) asserts that collaboration and open communication among principals are critical to organizational success. Alos, Somech (2002) argues that participative management is further rooted in the management style which focuses on decentralisation of decision making and sharing of power in order to achieve organisational goals. This view is supported by Cho & Kim (2014), and Schrum & Levin (2014), who contend that school managers delegate managerial authority to their subordinates in pursuit of school goals. Decentralisation of decision making, infusing *ubuntu (humanness),* and sharing of power in order to achieve set goals have become a cornerstone of the post-apartheid management and leadership of public institutions, such as schools in South Africa.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Reflections on Participative Management and Leadership Practices in Africa: A Case Study of Uganda

Globalisation has increased the infusion of mainly Western knowledge systems into Uganda. Ready-made Western approaches have had a great impact during African colonisation. For African knowledge systems to be accepted they need to undergo scrutiny and pass Western standards. This means African paradigms such as *lekgotla*, *ubuntu* or *obuntu bulamu* [the Luganda term in Uganda] are yet to be internationally recognised (Muwanga-Zake, 2009).

Ubuntu or *obuntu bulamu (humanness) s*hares common features with participative management. Muwanga-Zake (2009) cites Broodryk (2006), who defines *ubuntu* or *obuntu bulamu* as a communal way of life which deems that society must be run for the sake of all, requiring cooperation as well as sharing and charity. Both cooperation and sharing are import indices of participative management. Arriving at a consensus through intensive discussion is

an important aspect of *obuntu bulamu* in Uganda. *Obuntu bulamu* demonstrates African democracy.

Thus it is a social responsibility which needs to prevail in all African spheres of life. Workplaces such as schools have not been left untouched by *obuntu bulamu* in Uganda. *Obuntu bulamu* emphasizes togetherness and cooperative approaches. Individuals are bound by it to others in terms of spirituality, values, needs, norms and mores. It calls for unity or consensus in decision making, and is empowerment driven in the sense that it considers individuals' expertise in the process. In Abram Maslow's theory of motivation, *obuntu bulamu* caters for individuals' need for self-esteem and recognition. *Obuntu bulamu* disregards the use of a top-down management approach. It favours the bottom up or two-way approach of communicating at all levels.

The communication levels are flattened in order to achieve the set goals. Participative management also strives for creating a flat structure for employees in the workplace environment through decentralization of authority and responsibility. *Obuntu bulamu* resembles participative management, and has now been transmitted to schools. There is, however, a challenge in building bridges between *obuntu bulamu* and Western participative paradigms when one is doing business in Africa. African workplace environments need to be transformed so that the values of *obuntu bulamu* are taken into consideration. Benchmarking *obuntu bulamu* is another challenge which might lead to internationalisation of the concept. Transformational initiatives are needed in Africa to embrace *obuntu bulamu* as a way of life, and to equate it in literature with participative management concepts and practices.

1.1.2. Participative Management in the Post-Apartheid South Africa

Political transformation and *ubuntu (humanness)* have guided the development of participative management in South Africa after the years of liberation. Globalisation has also had an impact as a way of putting the country on track after apartheid. Afrocentric practices in the workplaces have not yet been adequately established compared to Western standards and practices. Muwanga-Zake (2009) argues that lack of documentation, clear ownership and development makes it easy to ignore Afrocentric approaches in favour of Western knowledge systems. The Western curricula in educational institutions further maintain the dominance of Afrocentric practices by Western culture.

Muwanga-Zake (2009) postulates that formal educational systems and imported paradigms have redefined and often socialised Africans out of their indigenous knowledge

systems to suit a more foreign-based, albeit sometimes false, "global view" of who they are. He also cites Fanon (1970), who observes that education imposes inferiority complexes among Africans because they strive to feel equal to the Europeans, who assume superiority of knowledge and truth, and define lifestyles for Africans. This assertion indicates that African curricula and world views have been insultingly discounted since Europeans "discovered" Africa and imparted their Western concepts such as participative management and industrial democracy instead of shaping and developing South African concepts such as *ubuntu (humanness)* and *lekgotla* (*Sesotho* for "an African participatory approach to decision-making").

It is also probable that a colonial mentality persists among elite Africans since they seem to be entangled by Western paradigms that present to Africans ready-made approaches, theoretical assumptions, ontologies and epistemologies which are assumed to be ideologically and politically correct. Western paradigms offer employment opportunities to black South Africans. Brenton & Largent (2000) in Muwanga-Zake (2009), argue that such paradigms can be perpetuated by employment. Most jobs require a certificate issued according to the same paradigms.

Doing business in South Africa and Africa requires Western paradigms. The extant literature reviewed demonstrates that little has been done to equate *ubuntu* or *lekgotla* with a participative management style. Muwanga-Zake (2009) argues that imperialism successfully implanted the perception that African knowledge systems are worthless or shameful because they do not fit into the colonial education system, missionary world view and scientific notions. Since an African paradigm of *ubuntu* is not internationally recognized, the educated African is often an accomplice in perpetuating foreign paradigms such as participative management or industrial democracy. This practice may also lead to the extinction of African knowledge systems.

The concept of *ubuntu* is used in this section to mean an African characteristic of relationships. Ubuntu is found in diverse forms in many African societies. Africans have different terms for *ubuntu*, but it is fundamentally embedded in the notion that each person exists because the other person exists. Originating in *isiXhosa* and *isiZulu*, the concept indicates a communal way of life which is deep-rooted in participatory practices. South African democracy in all spheres of life is centred on the concepts of *ubuntu* and *lekgotla*.

Transformational issues in post-apartheid South Africa require that *ubuntu* should be embraced in all walks of life. Workplaces such as schools should embrace *ubuntu* and *lekgotla* in a manner that is conducive to achieving the set goals. Muwanga-Zake (2009) argues that

ubuntu is about amicable personal relationships, which accentuate the importance of collective agreement in pursuit of organisational goals. *Ubuntu* discourages a *muntu* (individual) perspective precedence over the community. This notion aligns very well with participative management in the sense that *ubuntu*, *lekgotla* and participative management regard a consensus-seeking approach as a vehicle to arrive at decision making. *Ubuntu* encourages unity and cooperative initiatives to arrive at organisational goals. Muwanga-Zake (2009) cites Tutu (2004), who states that 'we are bound with others in *Ubuntu*'.

Ubuntu and *lekgotla* are opposed to top-down management styles in the sense that they advocate a two-way approach. In most cases *ubuntu* requires decision making to start at the bottom. This is what might be regarded as employee involvement in the decision-making process. Thus *ubuntu* provides a shift from the solitary to solidarity, and from independence to interdependence. The shifts provide a basis for both *ubuntu* and participative management Muwanga-Zake (2009) argues that *ubuntu* and *lekgotla* share similarities with the Western participative management practice of teamwork where everyone brings something the team needs, and the team defines a common goal. *Ubuntu* brings in communal consensus in pursuit of the set goals. Collective decision making is at the core of *ubuntu*, *lekgotla* and participative management.

Political liberation in South Africa was achieved through *ubuntu*, *lekgotla* and other participatory approaches which were utilized by various political parties. Social transformation in South Africa is both *ubuntu*- and *lekgotla*-driven, since all people need to participate in all spheres of life. For the sake of democratising the workplace, all empowerment initiatives need to be *ubuntu*- and *lekgotla*-driven. The country's social transformation needs to be taken to the workplace environments such as schools through *ubuntu*, *lekgotla* and other participatory management strategies.

1.2. Research Question

- Which African philosophies can be embedded in management and leadership at secondary schools in the post-apartheid South Africa?

2. METHOD

Positivism paradigm was used to discover nature and cause effect relationships in this paper. In this regard, quantitative research approach was used to fulfil the objectives of this paper and to answer the research question. Validity and reliability issues were considered by the researcher in this paper. The researcher chose the quantitative approach, taking into

account the purpose of conducting research, questions being investigated, nature of the research problem, and available resources for collecting data. This view is supported by Creswell (2012) when he argues that the research approach needs to match the approach to the research problem.

The target population are made up of public secondary schools in the King Cetshwayo district of KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. Public secondary schools were randomly selected. The study focused on five (5) education circuits, which randomly selected secondary schools from each education circuit. The chosen education circuits comprised schools in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Principals of the randomly selected public secondary schools formed the samples, made up of 180 principals. because South Africa is large and consists of schools in urban, semi-urban and rural areas.

Questionnaire was used to elicit information from the selected principals. It made up of demographic information and 7 items management and leadership on a five Likert scale. It was validated by conducting a pilot study on some principal that are from another education circuit. The responses were collected and coded. Descriptive statistics of frequency count and simple percentage was used in analysising the data. Data gathered from literature was compared with findings so that generalisations could be made about management and leadership at secondary schools in the post-apartheid South Africa.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Teaching experience in years

Teaching experience in Years	**No. of Respondents**	**Percentage**
0-5	0	0
6-10	0	0
11-15	10	6
16-20	50	28
Over 20	120	66
Total	**180**	**100**

Table 1 reveals that there were no respondents who had teaching experience between 0 and 10 years. This indicates that senior positions in secondary schools need people with a lot of teaching experience. According to the table, 6% of the respondents had teaching experience between 16 and 20 years. Bush, *et al.*, (2011) have identified teaching experience as another requirement for school principals in South Africa. Thus most promotions seem to have come

to respondents after a long period of organisational preparation for the posts, if not as a reward for their long service in the teaching profession. It is, therefore, prudent for the state under the guise of the Department of Basic Education to ascertain that aspiring and practicing school principals are capacitated with South African management and leadership philosophy which embraces *ubuntu (humanness)*. Long-serving school principals who studied apartheid education might not embed *ubuntu (humanness)* in their management and leadership styles.

Table 2: Principals' views on management and leadership in secondary schools

ITEMS		Extremely important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Of little Importance	Of no importance	Total
a. Principals should possess professional expertise to facilitate participative management in the school.	N	65	100	10	5		180
	%	36	55	6	3		100
b. Principals should share information with the staff about issues affecting their work.	N	85	90	5			180
	%	47	50	3			100
c. Principals should enlist the services of senior staff members in decision-making processes.	N	35	110	30	5		180
	%	19	61	17	3		100
d. Principals should be afforded guidance to enhance their participative management skills.	N	70	100	10			180
	%	39	55	6			100
e. Principals should invite officials in the district/circuit to share information with staff members.	N	20	80	70	10		180
	%	11	44	39	6		100
f. Principals should conduct training sessions on how staff members need to participate in decision making.	N	50	100	20	10		180
	%	28	55	11	6		100

g. Principals should embrace the concept of ubuntu (humanness) in their management and leadership styles.	N	100	70	10		180
	%	55	39	6		100

a) ***Principals should possess professional expertise to facilitate participative management in the school.***

Table 2 shows that 97% of the respondents regarded professional expertise as important. In Table 2, 3% of respondents rated it as of little importance. John (2012) states that the school principal management style must be professionally matched to the management task. This view illustrates the need for African management development programmes in order to assist principals with conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of the work that they perform in schools.

b) ***Principals should share information with the staff about issues affecting their work***

Table 2 reveals that 100% of the respondents endorsed the need for principals to share information with staff members. The process of involving staff requires trust and confidence from school principals. Lichtenstein (2008) states that any participatory initiative in the school demonstrates that school principals have complete trust in staff members. Somech (2002) believes that school principals must be willing to let go of traditional roles, not only allowing teachers to have a greater voice on school matters, but helping to prepare them, providing support and establishing an environment of trust in the school by sharing information with staff members about operational procedures and processes.

c) ***Principals should enlist the services of senior staff members in decision-making processes.***

Table 2 shows that there was overwhelming support for principals to enlist the services of senior staff members in decision-making. Ninety seven % of respondents endorsed the idea that delegation to staff is the central feature of participative management. Waldron, *et al.*, (1996) aver that for managers to carry out their duties, they need to obtain recent, relevant information that exists in books, journals, and people's heads that are widely scattered within and outside the organisation. School management and leadership in post-apartheid South Africa necessitates the process of enlisting the services of senior staff members as an African expression of taking pride in what they do.

d) ***Principals should be afforded guidance to enhance their participative management skills.***

Table 2 reflects that 100% of the respondents rated the need for guidance to enhance participative management skills as important. Capacity-building initiatives on African management and leadership are essential for all employees in order to enhance their skills. Management practice without theory tends to be blind. Hodder & Stoughton (2012) state that it is essential to develop skills for handling problems in the staff who will eventually move into administrative positions, and test for the presence of these skills. It is probable that there is an increasing need for the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education to organise management development programmes which could assist practising school principals and other school management team members.

e) ***Principals should invite officials in the district/circuit to share information with staff members.***

Table 2 shows that there was overwhelming support for inviting officials in the district or circuit to share information with staff members. Ninety four % of the respondents regarded such invitations as important, and 83% of the respondents regarded this matter as important or extremely important. It is critical for information to be cascaded and shared at various operational levels in the organisation. There is no doubt that South African employees want to share in the management of the organisation of which they are part. However, Kreitner (2011) warns that managers, such as principals, must learn when to step back and let the forces of participation work, and when to step in to take decisive action. Six % of the respondents in Table 2 regarded the process of inviting officials in the district or circuit as of little importance.

f) ***Principals should conduct training sessions on how staff members need to participate in decision making.***

Table 2 reveals that 94% of the respondents regarded the process of conducting training sessions on how staff members need to participate as important. Eighty three percent of the respondents regarded the matter as extremely important or very important. The figures presented show that there is a need for Afro-centric training sessions in order to convince staff members to regard this view as important. Marland (2011) opines that school principals might use a staff conference, team-building sessions, working groups or committees in order to elicit staff responses in their areas of competence. On the other hand, Desimone, *et al.,* (2002)

suggest that coaching is one of the most important functions of the school principal as the manager, in the sense that it creates a partnership between school management and staff in getting a job done. Thus it might be imperative for school principals to become coaches rather than controllers when facilitating participative management in schools. Six percent of the respondents regarded the matter as of little importance. Their responses could be ascribed to their lethargic behaviour, lack of financial resources, and other contextual factors in schools.

g) ***Principals should embed ubuntu (humanness) in their management and leadership styles.***

Table 2 reveals that 100% of the respondents stated that principals should embed *ubuntu (humanness)* in their management and leadership styles. This shows that it might be necessary for principals to regard *ubuntu (humanness)* as one of the management and leadership philosophies which might augur well for participatory management initiatives in schools. In the light of this view, Nkondo (2007) asserts that policy development and implementation in South Africa should be characterised by basic tenets of *ubuntu (humanness).*

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides empirical evidence on the relevance and applicability of African management and leadership philosophies within secondary schools in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal. Drawing on quantitative data generated through questionnaires, the findings demonstrate that African philosophies particularly *ubuntu* and participatory traditions such as *lekgotla*, which remain conceptually valued yet unevenly implemented in school leadership practices. The analysis, guided by probing questions of "how" and "why," reveals that while principals acknowledge the humanistic and collaborative potential of these philosophies, structural, institutional, and capacity-related constraints often limit their effective integration.

Furthermore, the study affirms that African philosophies offer a contextually grounded framework for fostering inclusive, ethical, and relational leadership in post-apartheid South African schools. However, their operationalisation requires deliberate alignment between policy, leadership training, and school-level practices. The findings therefore contribute to ongoing discourses on decolonising educational leadership by demonstrating that indigenous knowledge systems are not merely symbolic but can serve as practical tools for transforming school management. Ultimately, embedding African philosophies in leadership is not only a cultural imperative but also a strategic pathway towards more participatory and sustainable school governance.

The study recommends that African management and leadership philosophies be more deliberately integrated into the daily practices of secondary school leadership in South Africa. In particular, *ubuntu* should be institutionalised as a guiding ethical framework that promotes humanness, mutual respect, and relational accountability among all school stakeholders. Complementing this, participatory approaches such as *lekgotla* should be embraced to strengthen inclusive, consultative, and consensus-driven decision-making processes within schools.

More so, there is a need for sustained and targeted professional development programmes to equip school principals with the skills required to effectively apply these philosophies in contemporary educational settings. Such efforts should be supported by policy alignment at the systemic level to ensure that African leadership principles are embedded within official educational frameworks. Finally, ongoing research is encouraged to further explore context-specific strategies for the practical implementation and scalability of these philosophies across diverse school environments.

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