

Art. # 1321, 10 pages, doi: 10.15700/saje.v36n4a1321

## Schools performing against the odds: Enablements and constraints to school leadership practice

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There are many schools in developing countries which, despite the challenges they face, defy the odds and continue to perform at exceptionally high levels. We cast our gaze on one of these resilient schools in South Africa, and sought to learn about the leadership practices prevalent in this school and the enablements and constraints to the school leadership practice. Underpinned by a critical realist lens, and drawing on social realist theory, this case study of one school generated data through interviews, observation, document analysis and transect walks. The school principal, one head of department and two teachers, were selected as participants. The findings indicate that the school embraced an expansive form of teacher leadership comprising leadership within and beyond the classroom. Further, the structural, cultural and agential climate was receptive to the expansive leadership. We conclude that the professional capital of teachers, together with teachers serving as social actors rather than remaining primary agents, are key resources to change and transformation in an emerging economy.

**Keywords:** critical realism; expansive leadership; leadership practice; social realism; teacher leadership

### Introduction

The South African public schooling system is complex and has undergone “seismic shifts in the post-apartheid period” owing to changes in legislation that regulate schooling (Hoadley, Christie & Ward, 2009:373). Notwithstanding the noble policy interventions to improve the quality of schooling in a country “still transforming into a fully-fledged democracy” (Heystek, 2015:1), the output of the public schooling system continues to remain uneven, resulting in a stratified schooling system (Spaull, 2012). In order to contextualise the schooling system in this emerging economy, we draw on Naicker, Chikoko and Mthiyane’s (2013) metaphor, describing the schooling system as a continuum. They illustrate:

... on the one end [of the continuum] there are first class schools, which can compare with the best in first world countries. On the other extreme [of the continuum] we have dysfunctional schools, where a culture of teaching and learning is barely existent. In the middle of the continuum there are numerous disadvantaged schools, which, despite the socio-economic challenges they face, display a great degree of resilience and perform at levels comparable to first class schools (Naicker et al., 2013:138).

In this article we cast our gaze to those disadvantaged, resilient schools (Christie & Potterton, 1997) in this emerging economy which serve as “exceptional examples of schools performing against all odds” (Heystek, 2015:1). What are these schools doing right, from which others can learn? Even in disadvantaged contexts, school leaders cannot “succumb to the pressure of the challenges” they encounter because it is the function of leaders to “seek solutions rather than excuses” (Heystek, 2015:2). Given the scholarship that links high quality leadership to positive school outcomes (Bush, 2010b) and the premise that a school cannot improve its performance and “its student achievement [...] in the absence of talented leadership” (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010:9), in this article we bring under the microscope a key building block of educational leadership, namely leadership practice (Bush, 2010a). Specifically, we attempt to make visible the leadership practices of a highly functional, disadvantaged school in an emerging economy and, thereafter, focus on the structural, cultural and agential properties that enable or constrain these leadership practices.

A survey of the literature in educational leadership reveals that there is a preponderance of literature that focuses on ‘the what’ of leadership. By way of contrast, there is a dearth of literature that focuses on ‘the how’ (or practice) of leadership (Christie, 2010; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Hence, this article gives attention to the practice of leadership. It attempts to uncover the networks of leadership and the day-to-day practices of leaders within highly functional, disadvantaged schools, and how they influence school success (Christie, 2010; Spillane et al., 2004). Thus, this article may be significant to both practitioners and scholars in emerging economies for two reasons. Firstly, for practitioners, such a nuanced understanding of leadership practice may have the potential of galvanising leaders of underperforming institutions to replicate the leadership practices of these resilient schools in order to improve their institutional outcomes and possibly thereby contribute to the improvement in the turnover of the quantity and quality of human capital in the country. Secondly, scholars in emerging economies may be interested to learn how context, leadership and professional

capital can cohere in improving institutional outcomes. For the purposes of this article, leadership is viewed as a contextual practice, which is agentially, structurally and culturally specific (Muijs, 2011), and which encompasses key practices, such as goal setting, visioning and motivating (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). Leadership has close links to management. These two practices complement each other, and both are needed for a school to prosper (Grant, 2009). The practice of management involves planning, organising, controlling and coordinating (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). In this article whenever the term leadership is used, management is subsumed in its discourse.

In order to theorise leadership practice in highly functional, disadvantaged schools, we draw on a critical realist (Bhaskar, 1975) meta-theoretical perspective to view leadership practice and social realism (Archer, 1995) as a theory to make meaning of the structural, cultural and agential mechanisms that influence leadership practice. In educational leadership research, not many studies have embraced what critical realism might offer for understanding and making meaning of educational leadership practice, and how it might be used within the field (Thorpe, 2014). Moreover, there are few studies in the South African context that employ social realism in theorising school leadership practice.

The article commences by briefly unpacking the philosophical underpinnings of critical realism and the core understandings of culture, structure and agency from a social realist perspective. Thereafter we expound on the methodology employed in our study. We next present and discuss the data generated from multiple data sources about leadership practices in one highly functional, disadvantaged school, and the enablements and constraints to these leadership practices. We conclude the article by making visible the key factors that contributed to school success in this disadvantaged school.

#### A Lens for Understanding and Making Meaning of Leadership Practice: Critical Realism and Social Realism

Critical realism is a philosophy that proceeds from the assumption that there is a deeper, more profound reality that prevails in terms of how things happen in the world, and this reality is independent of our human experience of it (Case, 2013). To illustrate, we may experience teachers as being uncooperative in terms of participating in the leadership practice of the school, but in reality, there may be mechanisms (cultural, structural and/or agential), embedded in the organisation that constrain their participation in the leadership practice of which we are aware. Therefore, critical realists hold the belief that we can never claim to know the world fully, and that our knowledge of

the world is corrigible when we come to know the underlying mechanisms that give rise to certain experiences (Archer, 1995; Collier, 1994).

Fundamental to critical realism is a layered or stratified understanding of reality, comprising three levels, namely, the level of the empirical, the level of the actual and the level of the real (Bhaskar, 1975). The level of the empirical is concerned with what is experienced or observed by our senses, either directly or indirectly (Bhaskar, 1975; Vorster, 2010). This is the reality (superficial) we perceive. The level of the actual, consists of events which happen whether we experience them or not (Bhaskar, 1975). The level of the real explicates why things are the way they are at the level of the actual and the level of the empirical. It is at this level "where generative mechanisms can be found" that influence events and our experiences of the events (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2002:21). To illustrate, at the level of the real, there may be an organisational structure in place that is hierarchical and only recognises formally appointed leaders. This structural constraint may, in turn, generate events where subject committee meetings are not chaired by ordinary classroom-based teachers. Consequently, at the level of the empirical, we may observe and perceive teachers not participating in the leadership practice of the school. Therefore, a researcher adopting this view of the world cannot accept at face value what is being said, observed or provided in interviews, in observations, or in documents, as the ultimate truth. Rather, the data generated must be used to probe deeply, so as to unravel the best possible interpretation of the 'real' that is under study.

In order to understand the mechanisms at play at the level of the real, which may impact on the leadership practice in highly functional, disadvantaged schools, we draw on Archer's (1995) social realism. Archer (1995) understands mechanisms to comprise structural, cultural and agential properties with internal relationships to each other. Structure, in terms of social realism, is understood to comprise social institutions, social practices, roles and positions and it refers to the 'parts', which is in contrast to the 'people' (Archer, 1995). In terms of schools, structure may refer to the roles, positions, rules and policies that relate to the school as an organisation. Specifically, in terms of leadership practice at schools, structure may refer to the school organogram in terms of formal and informal leadership positions, roles and responsibilities of teachers, and rules and policies that regulate interaction among staff.

From a social realist perspective, culture refers to the "language, knowledge, beliefs, theories, semiotic patterns, conceptual schemes, signification systems, and socio-symbolics" prevalent within an institution (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson & Norrie, 1998:504). In the

context of schools, culture refers to the beliefs, values, norms, symbols, rituals and traditions which, together with the structures, evoke particular leadership practices in schools. Both structure and culture (the 'parts') can only be activated by the agents in the environment. The concept of agency in social realism relates to the human ability to act, manipulate or influence a situation (Archer, 1995). Agents stand for the 'people' in the socio-cultural system (in this article the school) into which they enter, and who operate within a particular structural and/or cultural system (the school). Many people (agents) may remain as primary agents in an organisation, because they do not transform themselves, and hence lack a say in cultural or structural modelling (Quinn, 2006). On the other hand, there are primary agents who, in the pursuit of change, use their agency to become corporate agents. Corporate agents are those who work with others in the organisation (school) and in so doing, are able to transform themselves and become corporate agents (Archer, 1995). For example, teachers who consistently take on leadership roles for the improvement of the school, transform their status from primary to corporate agents. With the right prevailing conditions, a corporate agent may then transform his/her status again to become an 'actor' - someone who finds a "role/s in which they feel they can invest themselves, such that the accompanying social identity is expressive of who they are" (Archer, 2003:118).

### Methodology

A case study methodology was adopted because we wanted "rich insights" into the leadership practice (Rule & John, 2011). Case study methodology granted us the latitude and depth to examine, interpret and understand the leadership practice (Stake, 1995). In our study the case was one highly functional, disadvantaged school and it was a case of the leadership practices as well as the structural, cultural and agential enablements and constraints that impacted on the leadership practices at the school.

One school was purposively selected for the study because of its "suitability in advancing the purpose[s] of the research" (Rule & John, 2011:64). The school selected had to fit two basic criteria: it had to be a high performing school and a historically disadvantaged school. In order to meet this criteria, the schools of school principals who completed the Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership (ACE:SL) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in 2011, were used as a pool from which to select the schools. After perusing the school-based portfolios, which contained evidence of school performance (such as school functionality reports and learner pass rates in year-end examinations) and school biography the

school principals submitted for the course, Wembibona Combined School (all names referred to are pseudonyms) was considered for selection. In terms of the school functionality reports, Wembibona was regarded as being highly functional, with overall pass rates in year-end examinations being in excess of 90 percent. The selection of Wembibona as a high-performing school was only confirmed after corroboration by the Superintendent of Education (Management) of the school. The school principal, one head of department (HOD) and two post-Level One (PL1) teachers were purposively selected as participants for the study. In order to select the HOD and two PL1 teachers, the help of the school principal was enlisted in identifying participants most actively involved in the school's leadership practice.

Wembibona, combined school is situated inland of KwaZulu-Natal, approximately 25 km off the N3 highway, between Pinetown and Pietermaritzburg. The school is located in a poor socio-economic area, characterised by high unemployment. In terms of the quintile ranking of the school, which is determined by taking into account the poverty of the community surrounding the school and the quality of the infrastructure of the school, Wembibona is ranked Quintile 2. This means that Wembibona is closer to the poorest grouping of schools, which are ranked Quintile 1. Owing to Wembibona being Quintile 2, the school is designated as a no-fee paying school. The finances to run such schools are largely derived from the state (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2006). The school itself is fenced, with a security guard permanently on duty, and the buildings show signs of recent renovation. There were approximately 1,171 learners during the time of the data generation, with 36 post-Level One teachers and seven school management team members at the school. The average number of learners per class is sixty. The school principal, Philani, is a male, who has been at the school for 12 years. He was first promoted to the school as HOD, then deputy principal, and finally to the post of principal. The other participants selected were Hlumi, the HOD, and Twali and Thandi, the two level one teachers.

Multiple methods of data generation were employed, which included interviews, observations, transect walks and document analysis. The time spent at Wembibona to generate data was approximately one month. Two individual semi-structured interviews with each of the participants (school principal, HOD and two PL1 teachers), as well as a focus group interview with all four participants, allowed for direct, verbal interaction with the participants in order to extract rich, in-depth, first-hand and nuanced descriptions of how they viewed their social world and leadership practices at Wembibona (Plummer, 1983). Further,

the four participants interviewed were decided to be sufficient, because they provided an adequate sample of distributed leadership across the staff post levels at the school. Observation of school practices was done to gain first-hand experience of the daily, lived experiences of the participants (Strydom, 2007). The observations included one staff meeting, one management committee meeting, two subject committee meetings, school assemblies, staff briefings, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and four lessons in classrooms. The transect walks involved walking around with the school principal to observe and talk about certain landmarks in connection with the meanings they hold in terms of leadership practices at the school (Rule & John, 2011). Documents relevant to the case, such as the school's vision and mission statement, minutes of staff meetings and minutes of subject committee meetings, proved to be an important source of data, because they "shed light on [...] attitudes, aspirations and ambitions" related to participants' leadership practices (McCulloch, 2004:101).

After transcription of the interview data, and collation of data from the other data sources, the data was categorised, labelled and stored for easy retrieval. When the data analysis process began, the data was subjected to a process of 'reduction' by coding, categorising and connecting data (Maxwell, 2012). Key to this process was the assimilation of data into Archer's et al. (1998) categories of structure, culture and agency.

Throughout the research process, all ethical protocols pertaining to anonymity, beneficence and non-maleficence were observed (Rule & John, 2011). For example, pseudonyms were used to anonymise the name of the school and the participants; informed consent was obtained from the participants for their involvement in the study; permission was applied for and granted from the relevant gatekeepers to conduct the study.

Case studies are limited in that they are not generalisable. While there are criticisms against case study in terms of its lack of generalisability (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), we draw support from Maree (2007:76), who professes that "a well-selected case constitutes the dewdrop in which the world is reflected". Further, this case was limited to the experiences and views of the four participants.

### Findings and Discussion

In presenting the findings and discussion, we firstly make visible the leadership practices, and thereafter we present the structural, cultural and agential enablements and constraints to the leadership practice.

#### Making Visible the Leadership Practices

Wembibona Combined School provided us with a rich case of expansive teacher leadership, by which we mean that leadership was taken up convincingly in classrooms (in relations with learners), in relations with other teachers in curricular and co-curricular activities, with the wider staff in whole school development activities, and beyond the school borders, in relations with parents and the wider community. Drawing on Grant's (2012) model of teacher leadership, the case is illustrative of teacher leadership sustained as an organisational endeavour across all four zones, and it can therefore be categorised as successful teacher leadership (Harris & Muijs, 2005).

#### Leading Learners within the Classroom

Expert knowledge, professionalism and ongoing professional development were prized in this school, with teachers operating as corporate agents as they focused on the key goal of teaching and learning. Within the domain of the classroom, these highly qualified and knowledgeable teachers demonstrated expert practice and engaged in autonomous decision-making to make change happen for the benefit of learners. They used "*innovative teaching methods to enhance learner skills and talents and construct learning environments that were appropriately contextualised and inspirational, respecting the individual needs of their learners*" (observational notes). To illustrate, Thandi (a post-Level One teacher) received the Provincial Teacher of the Year Award, and was placed third, nationally. This award recognises excellence in primary school teaching, and is bestowed on teachers for their dedication, creativity and effectiveness in the classroom. In addition, Twali (a post level one teacher), Hlumi (the HOD) and Thandi had previously won the National Award for Excellence in Team Teaching initiated by the Department of Education to improve the quality of teaching and learning at schools.

These teachers maintained a good standard of record keeping and engaged in reflective practice, which reinforced their expert practice. During observation of the Staff Development Team's (SDT) discussion of teacher record books, it was observed how high the participants had scored in the area of record keeping. Hlumi scored highly because the team was of the opinion that she spent a great amount of time and effort planning and preparing her lessons in terms of content-related pedagogy. Likewise, Twali's assessment file showed that she had used a range of assessment techniques with well-designed assessment criteria, and had therefore obtained a high score. The team

noted that comprehensive records of learner progress and achievements were kept, and that at the end of each of the lessons plans, there were indications of on-going reflections.

Effective, innovative, value-driven strategies were utilised to ensure good classroom discipline. To exemplify, Hlumi's outstanding ability was evident when she received a certificate for using creative discipline strategies in her classroom at her school's annual awards ceremony. To maximise the positive impact on her learners, she described how she took the lead in becoming the learners' role model, by being punctual in coming to class, well-prepared for her lessons, keeping learners purposely engaged, and using innovative teaching resources. In addition, she was consistent with praise and encouragement and enforced sanctions on those who were late, absent, and who had defaulted with their homework. During the transect walk, it was observed that participants' classrooms had the school code of conduct and a basic set of rules and regulations displayed for learners to observe. Twali had used behaviour modification charts and gave stars to learners for their dress code, behaviour, homework and work performance. Thus, these teachers were successful leaders, who displayed individual talent and worked hard at refining their professional knowledge and skill (Gehrke, 1988). They exhibited what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) term 'human capital', a resource, we argue, which they harnessed and deployed in order to effect positive change in their school. Human capital is about:

[...] knowing your subject and knowing how to teach it, [...] being familiar with and being able to sift and sort the science for successful and innovative practice, [...] It is about possessing the passion and moral commitment to serve all children, and to want to keep getting better in how you provide that service (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012:89).

#### Leading Colleagues in Curricular, Co-Curricular and Extra-Curricular Activities

Beyond the classroom, every effort was made to forge close relationships and build rapport with individual teachers, so that mutual learning could take place. This included building skills and confidence in each other, as well as striving to work in an atmosphere of trust and transparency. Emphasis was placed on mentoring and peer-coaching, and these practices served as key 'enablers' (Case, 2013) to the leadership practice. New curricula and subject learning gained from participation in training workshops, were taken back to the school, shared with colleagues, debated and re-contextualised for their particular pedagogic setting. Scrutiny of the staff meeting minutes indicated that all subject chairpersons were given slots at the meetings to report on their subjects, workshops attended, as well as on recent

developments and changes in their subjects. During a staff meeting, for example, Twali was given a slot to report on a lesson planning workshop she had attended. Similarly, Thandi explained that she and Hlumi attended a series of curriculum workshops and in turn, workshopped this to the staff. Regular subject committee meetings were the norm with post-Level One teachers taking the lead in chairing some of the meetings and in spearheading various projects – a form of group or team leadership (Van der Mescht & Tyala, 2008). However, while serious attention was paid to the formal curriculum, extra and co-curricular activities were also valued. Despite the absence of sports fields and sporting equipment, every effort was made to involve learners in the various sporting codes. In the words of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012:89), the teaching staff displayed a great deal of "passion and the moral commitment to serve all children that they taught and interacted with".

Performance evaluation was taken seriously at Wembibona; both formally, through the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) process, and informally, through peer-assessment activities and classroom visits. Structured reflection was integral to this performance evaluation role and teamwork was deliberately used to pool human capital, expand the network of opportunity, and build "cultures and networks of communication, learning, trust and collaboration" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012:89).

Thus, while these teachers displayed much human capital, they also displayed 'social capital', which refers to their relations among people and "how the quantity and quality of interactions and social relationships affect their access to knowledge and information; their sense of expectation, obligation and trust; and how far they are likely to adhere to the same norms or codes of behaviour" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012:90). This social capital provided a huge reservoir of expertise amongst these teacher leaders, which was shared as a resource and utilised to rise above the range of harsh challenges experienced at the school. The teacher leaders worked collectively and collaboratively and pooled their ideas and resources, and thus managed to achieve success. These findings resonate with the findings of Crowther's (1997) study, conducted in a disadvantaged community facing similar circumstances. Crowther (1997:537) found that teacher leaders displayed a deep sense of "commitment towards their work, enthusiasm which was contagious and who had the ability to inspire others and raise their expectations".

#### Leading Staff in Whole School Development

Unlike the many studies of teacher leadership in disadvantaged South African schools (Grant, Gardner, Kajee, Moodley & Somaroo, 2010; Grant & Singh, 2009; Gumede, 2011; Mpagase, 2010),

teacher leadership at Wembibona was not restricted to the classroom, and to the leadership of curricular and co-curricular issues. Instead, it extended into the domain of whole school development, where teachers played an active role in the leadership of school-based teams, participated in the processes of school-based organisational diagnosis, whole school evaluation, and school-based planning and decision-making. In the role of planning and decision-making, there was evidence of participative leadership practices involving high levels of consultation and communication, and calling for decision-making in situations of unavoidable uncertainty. For example, the Institution Level Support Team (ILST), spearheaded by Philani (the school principal) as chairperson, and which comprised the Whole School Evaluation Team led by Hlumi; the Learner Support Team, led by Twali; and the Teacher Support Team led by Thandi, took the lead in initiating change. Members of the various sub-committees organised, designed and developed programmes for improvement and came up with the school development plan. As chairperson of the ILST, Philani indicated that he ensured that the ILST sub-structures were fully functional, and that mechanisms were in place to ensure that change and growth took place. He emphasised that *“strategic planning took place continuously and as a team we identify our weaknesses through the SWOT analysis and the Whole School Evaluation process”*. The process then led to identifying the “development programmes that were needed to capacitate staff and other stakeholders with leadership skills”. At Wembibona, engaging in strategic planning meant that there were discussions, reflection and input from various stakeholders in the decision-making processes. Thus, amongst teachers at Wembibona, high levels of ‘decisional capital’ were evident; that is, “the capital that professionals acquire and accumulate through structured and unstructured experience, practice and reflection” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012:93).

#### Leading beyond the School Borders into the Community

The leadership of the Wembibona teachers extended beyond the school borders into the community. Curriculum knowledge was provided to the school governing body (SGB) and parents of Wembibona and, to a lesser degree, to teachers of other schools. To illustrate, the participants’ capacitation of the SGB on curricular issues, Philani, Twali and Hlumi served on the SGB. Twali served as SGB secretary and Hlumi as staff representative. Both Twali and Hlumi kept the SGB apprised of issues relating to curriculum changes and assessment. Philani emphasised that whenever the SGB was invited to capacity building work-

shops relating to the curriculum, he encouraged members to attend and accompanied them.

Wembibona’s vision to empower parents about curriculum issues was high on the list of priorities, and this was translated into practice through the development and adoption of a School Parental Involvement Policy. In the policy, teachers pledged to *“provide parents with a description and explanation of the curriculum in use at the school, the forms of academic assessment used to measure learner progress and expectations for learner progress and performance”*. Parents were also kept informed about curriculum news via regular newsletters, grade and phase meetings, and the school’s open-day programme, as well as through parental intervention programmes.

Teachers also networked with colleagues at circuit, district, regional and provincial levels and engaged in staff development initiatives with other schools. This was the case particularly in relation to co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, such as soccer tournaments, poetry and drama events, and computer lessons for schools in the circuit. These various initiatives involved cross-school mentoring, coaching, and skills development, across a broader range of colleagues. Thus, by drawing on their agency, Wembibona teachers developed the freedom and ability to transform the educational landscape beyond their classroom (Pounder, 2006).

The critical question is as to what enabled the emergence of a distributed leadership practice in this disadvantaged school? How was it that these teachers were able to draw on their agency to become corporate agents/social actors whilst colleagues in neighbouring schools were unable to do so?

#### Enablements and Constraints to the Leadership Practice

Given that the role of the principal is central to the emergence of a distributed leadership practice (Grant et al., 2010; Grant & Singh, 2009), it stands to reason that the role of the principal should be the starting point for a discussion of the enablements and constraints to the distributed leadership practices at Wembibona Combined School.

In social realist terms, the role of principal that Philani held can be understood as a structure, as can Wembibona Combined School – as an ‘institutional structure’. As structures, the *role* and the *institution* pre-dated Philani’s entry to Wembibona, and because “structures are irreducible to people” (Archer, 1995:71), we cannot conflate the role of Head of Department, Deputy Principal, Principal, or ‘the school’, with Philani but must look at the interface between Philani as ‘agent’, the school, and now his principalship as ‘structures’. This is in order to identify the causal influences of the power and properties that led to Philani

changing leadership practices to what they were at the time of this study, at a school in which he had been, in one way or another, contributing to 'leading' for 12 years.

To do this, we need to understand the manner in which Wembibona was led and managed *prior* to 2002, the year in which Philani became principal. Prior to 2002, the school's leadership and management was premised upon the ideology of the apartheid government, where schools were bureaucratically controlled in terms of decision-making processes. Philani explained how "*the past principal was a traditional principal and I came with another dimension of leading, in terms of involving the teachers in decision-making.*" One can only wonder at the strength of structural and cultural conditioning at Wembibona during the years prior to Philani becoming principal that precluded him from exercising any agential/personal emergent properties and powers to confront such a 'non-distributive' form of leadership, despite clearly holding beliefs and values contrary to those of the past principal. Yet Archer (1995:196–197) says that:

[...] emergent structures represent objective limitations upon the situations and settings which agents can encounter. Thus what is 'logged' within the register of the cultural system defines the doctrines, theories, beliefs etc. in existence and thus circumscribes that which impinge upon agents as their ideational environment. Objectively, it delimits that which can be reproduced, reformulated, rejected or transformed.

We would argue that this offers a very plausible explanation for Philani's 'passivity' towards change during the previous principal's reign, given the oppressive, racist, socio-political climate of the time. In terms of forms of 'agents', we could also describe Philani at this stage of his career as, perhaps, still a 'primary agent'.

Hlumi (the HOD) underscored Philani's view of the past principal saying "*he was always telling people what to do and did not distribute leadership*". She further made known that "*he was in the old way of leading. He was the only person who chaired the meetings*". From this, it is possible to deduce that the former principal did not exercise his personal emergent properties (PEPs) to mediate the influence of the structural emergent properties (SEPs), and cultural emergent properties (CEPs) inherent to the 'management' (rather than 'leadership') role he held, but submitted to them. We can speculate that this was the result of the fact that he had no desire to confront existing norms and hierarchies (other established structures) and ideologies (cultures), or he was comfortable within these and had no need to change anything. In addition, consideration must be taken of the fact that he was the principal during the apartheid era, and hence, probably portrayed its cultural beliefs and ideologies.

But, when Philani took on the role of principal, with new levels of material resources and power available after the departure of the 'old' principal, he was able to move from 'primary agent' to 'corporate agent' and then to 'actor'. From the data, particularly the interviews, it is quite clear that he exhibited a comfortable sense of self as principal. In moving from the role (structure) of Deputy Principal to that of Principal (structure, but with greater emergent properties and powers than that of a Deputy Principal), Philani's own PEPs exerted a new and different causal influence on how he began to think about leadership, and subsequently how he acted.

In terms of leadership practice, Spillane (2006:3) argues that it is "framed in a very particular way, as a product of the joint interactions of school leaders, followers, and aspects of their situation". This kind of interaction, according to Spillane, is what gives form and shape to leadership practice. What happened next was that Philani created new structures, where teachers with the necessary expertise were placed in key leadership positions, and "leadership was therefore seen as an ever-present potential, available to any member of the organisation" (Department of Education, South Africa, 1996:226).

The causal relationship between structures (as mechanisms), meant that when Philani changed the structure of the role of principal, other structures within 'the institution' were also changed, viz. the nature and form of, for example, existing committees, and the way in which leadership is now practised in the school. These new structures brought with them new properties and powers, which causally influenced the PEPs of all the teachers in this case study, as the earlier part of this article shows. Hlumi, for example, highlighted that "*to be a chairperson of the meeting, this is new to us as the previous principal chaired all management and staff meetings*". Drawing on observations during the School Management Team (SMT) and staff briefing session also confirmed that "*the management meeting is convened by a different management member each week, and today's meeting was convened by the Senior Primary HOD*". Those who chaired meetings were selected according to the matters to be discussed, and Level One teachers were the chairpersons of subject committees. 'Grade controllers' also became a new institutional structure, and a new role (also a structure), for Level One teachers.

Perhaps one of the most significant changes to note was that by opening up opportunities for more teachers to lead, these 'agents' also moved to become 'actors', which means that their personal investment in the school deepened. Thus, grade controllers began to use their PEPs in turn, to bring about change to the overall structural condition (Archer, 1995). Those who chaired meetings were

selected according to the matters to be discussed and personal expertise, and level one teachers were the chairpersons of subject committees. For example, Twali was the Sports Director, and Thandi was a grade controller for Grade Nine. Grade controllers and chairpersons changed every year, thus affording many teachers the opportunity to be placed in leadership positions. It would have been at the interface of the structural, cultural and agential properties and powers identified here, that more emergent properties and powers were produced, since there are “internal and necessary relationships within and between emergent properties” (Archer, 1995:168).

In this way, structure, culture and agency can be seen to act as mechanisms at the level of the real; either to effect change and transformation, or keep the status quo (the latter is *not* the case at Wembibona). For example, it is now possible to see that the generative powers of the ‘rules and policies’ of the school (and the government legislation framing these) as *structures*, together with the attitudes, beliefs and values which constituted the cultural system (or *culture*) during the *previous* principal’s time there, presented *constraining mechanisms* to change and transformation. With Philani taking up the role, however, and the way in which he used his PEPs and their causal influence on the existing SEPs and CEPs as described above, the generative powers and properties of the changed structures and cultural system that emerged from this interface, have created *enabling mechanisms* for change and transformation at Wembibona.

But Archer (2003:132) also deliberates at length about the ‘internal conversation’ which individuals conduct within themselves, and how, out of these deep levels of reflexivity, emerge ‘concerns’ which are transformed into ‘projects’ which “agents, both individual and collective, seek to realise in society”. These ‘projects’ find expression in *practices*. ‘Concerns’, ‘projects’ and ‘practices’ are all, of course, integral to the constitution of an individual’s PEPs and contribute to the causal powers and properties of them. A number of ‘concerns’ which emerged from deep reflexivity by ‘the collective’ at Wembibona can be said to have become ‘projects’ (in Archerian terms). There is, for example, the ‘vision and mission statement’ (also part of the cultural system) which reads, “*we are committed to placing teaching and learning first in everything that we do in our school. This would be achieved through providing staff with opportunities for leading, training and development*”. The practices (following the trajectory of concerns > projects > practices), as illustrated earlier in this discussion, can be understood to be all the changes in leadership practices now taken on by actors at Wembibona. The strong belief in the potential of

all learners; the high value placed on empowering all teachers; establishing accountability for actions as a key value; in addition to that of teamwork; respect for others, and the observance of shared symbols, rituals and traditions; can be understood as collective ‘concerns’ emerging out of reflexive engagement on “activities tied to the core work of the organisation that are designed by organisational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, practices of other organisational members” (Spillane, 2006:11).

### Conclusion

Wembibona, a case of a disadvantaged school in a developing country, is a shining example of how leadership networks and the practice of an expansive teacher leadership strategy can lead to school success. This can be largely attributed to three key factors. Firstly, the teachers at Wembibona possessed an abundance of professional capital, which is the product of their social, human and decisional capital. When the majority of teachers at a school possess the power of professional capital and use it as a key resource, they become “smart and talented, committed and collegial, thoughtful and wise” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012:35). Secondly, many teachers (both SMT and Level One) at Wembibona served as strong social actors (as opposed to remaining primary agents). This is crucial to change and transformation in disadvantaged as well as emerging economic contexts. Thirdly, the agency of the school principal is central to enabling teacher leadership networks and practices in order to turn the school around. It is only through “the actions of agents” like Philani can “the constraining or enabling powers of structures and culture be realized [sic]” (Archer, 1995:195).

### Note

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