

## How do School Management Teams (SMTs) Experience Teamwork. A Case Study in the Tshwane North District Schools

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n23p1432

### Abstract

*Democracy in South Africa, among others, has brought a significant number of changes in the education system, including the concept of school management team (SMT) in schools. This article focuses and sought to unpack the experience of SMT members regarding teamwork. It has the potential of helping SMT members by empowering them with knowledge and skills which will assist them to share their leadership widely and equally to education; and enable the SMT to realise that teamwork is central in the efficient and effective school management. Interviews were conducted with twelve SMT members from six secondary schools in Tshwane North district, sampled using purposive sampling. Among others, this study has found that, although the concept of teamwork is well-received, there are significant obstacles to the implementation of teamwork as an alternative form of management.*

**Keywords:** teamwork, school management team, school leadership, school performance.

### 1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an unprecedented global attempt to adjust/regulate education to the demands of the 'new' economy. As Tabulawa (2009) puts it, modern forms of production require workers who are versatile, flexible, technologically competent, predisposed to teamwork and who have problem-solving ability skills. Within the schooling context, teamwork plays a critical role in the effective and efficient management of teaching and learning. For Rassool (1993:229), teamwork decentralises power controls within the production process and is also seen as having contributed to an increasing pluralisation of control within the work context. Hence, decentralised power favours democracy. Teamwork characterises flexible specialisation and also contributes to implementing education policies successfully at micro level, specifically at school setting. Interestingly, teamwork setting democratises work relations, flattens subject hierarchies and encourages greater flexibility.

Notwithstanding challenges of successfully implementing the flawed education policies (Curriculum 2005, National Curriculum Statement, Revised National Curriculum Statement), the absence of teamwork attributes, among others, in the school management team (SMT) in the Tshwane North District schools (Gauteng Province, South Africa) has impacted on the educator's performance at classroom level; and on quality of teaching and learning. Within this context, we argue that the absence of teamwork attributes deemed essential in today's changed work (in schools) has a potential of affecting the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Outstandingly, there appears to be a knowledge gap on teamwork in the SMTs that affects schools performance. Central to this article is the assumption that teamwork in the SMT should be driven from an instructional leadership perspective. This article assumes that teamwork is an important component of effective and efficient leadership. Effective teamwork can only be achieved when individuals work together for the success of the group rather than the success of the individual players. Little research, if any, has been conducted on teamwork in the Tshwane North District schools. Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper was to investigate how do SMTs experience teamwork in the Tshwane North District schools. The article is organised as follows: we begin by capturing literature on teamwork in the schooling context. This is followed by a research methodology. Then, follows the findings and discussions. Finally, it will provide the recommendations and conclusion.

### 2. Literature Review

Teamwork is a very old concept and has a rich history and has a considerable number of proponents. Among others, they

include: Peter Drucker, Warren Bennis, Meredith Belbin, Erving Goffman, John Adair and Bruce Tuckman. Within the schooling context, teamwork plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. In this article, Tuckman's teamwork theory will be employed as methodological lens in capturing its implications, transformational leadership and practising teamwork in the school context, and in exploring teamwork as a tool for improving quality of teaching and learning.

## 2.1 *Implications of teamwork in the SMT and the school in general*

Teamwork amongst SMT promotes joint responsibilities for their actions. So, decision-making power is increased through teamwork. Effective communication within the SMT is also promoted by teamwork (Schaubroek et al., 2007:1022). Schools in general also benefit from teamwork. Schools set goals; vision and mission are realized through teamwork. Regular structured meetings amongst the SMT contribute to team's success. Staff members in a school feel empowered; they co-operate and collaborate through consultation. Problems can also be solved more creatively if the SMT functions as team rather than individuals (Van der Mescht and Tyala, 2008:230). On the other hand, benefits of teamwork in schools include stress reduction, and improved quality of relationships. When team members feel included in their team processes, the team becomes more flexible and more capable of adapting to new situations. Most importantly, when the team is tight and connected, team members work hard, not just for themselves but also for everyone around them. They feel loyalty to each other, as part of the performing organization and as if they are part of the family. This bond helps them hold together during any challenge (Vivian, 2010:61).

Teamwork in schools implies creation of an environment for shared responsibility, knowledge and both continuous professional and personal development. As Tondeur (2008:230) states, communication is the very means of cooperation. One of the primary motives for schools to implement teams is that team-based organizations are more responsive and move faster. A team or the school, in which it resides, cannot move faster than it communicates. Clearly, fast, clear and accurate communication is a hallmark of high levels of team performance (MacMillan and Schumacher, 2007:7). Vivian (2010:62) suggests that common experience, along with a vast collection of research demonstrate that schools can expect a range of benefits to accrue when educators work together. Educator teaming can reduce educator isolation, increase collegiality, facilitate the sharing of resources and ideas, and capitalize on educators individual and shared strengths. And most recently, educators teaming have been discovered as an avenue toward educator learning and enhanced professional development that can subsequently lead to gains in learner achievement Vivian (2010).

## 2.2 *Transformational leadership in the school context*

Schaubroek et al. (2007:1020) define a transformational leader in a school context as a leader who inspires followers to transcend self-interest and perceptions of their own limitation to become more effective in pursuing collective goals. Transformational leaders articulate ambitious collective goals and encourage followers to accept those goals. Transformational leaders also support followers in working towards the goals, such as by acting as a role model, stimulating them to engage in analysis, showing concern for them as individuals, and encouraging teamwork. Transformational leaders act as mediators because they influence team performance through the mediating effect of team potency which is defined as members generalised beliefs about the capabilities of the team across tasks and contexts. They communicate a high level of confidence in the team's ability to achieve ambitious collective goals (Dionne et al., 2004:177). Transformational leaders should model desired behaviors and encourage followers to engage in analysis. Such guidance provides team members with a better understanding of how to approach their work and should therefore strengthen their belief that they can execute the behaviors and analysis needed for successful team performance. According to McNatt and Judge (2004:550), transformational leaders should show concern for followers' needs, and also should promote a belief among team members that the leader will provide them with any support that they might need from him or her. Believing that the leader will provide them with resources and other type of support, followers need to execute their work successfully and also strengthen team member's confidence that they will be successful.

## 2.3 *Practising teamwork in the school leadership context*

The prerequisite of effective teamwork in a school requires an effective leadership, effective communication, participative decision-making and sharing of power and authority. The SMT should create opportunities for staff development and also establish good human relations. They must ensure that the plans of different teams complement each another in

promoting school goals and distribute the work load evenly amongst the team (Moloko, 2006:32). The SMT as a team that leads all school activities should also promote active and effective participation of the team members in decision-making. Notably, educators should feel that their opinions and suggestions are welcomed during staff meetings. The SMT should perceive educators' participation in teamwork not as favour, but as the educator's democratic right. During meetings, SMT should also level the decision-making field by ensuring that all educators have sufficient information on the topic under discussion.

As Swart (2008:47) argues, the role of SMT in team building consists of improving people and task-related skills. In addition to this, Prins (2007:35) holds that an effective leadership ensures that empowered environment is created which is characterized by different categories of team such as attitude to leaders, values and norms of educators, authority, staff identity, teaching standards, relations and attitudes of individuals with regards to people's feelings. Ideally, the SMT should provide educators with the forum where there is an interchange of information and the strengthening of relationships and the improvement of the school climate. Specific rules that relate to specific tasks need to be clarified by the SMT as well as those that relate to the team. For Mogotlane (2006:48), SMTs should realize that the role they play in school is significant. Regardless of this role, they can never be solely responsible for the management of the school. They should realize that for school to achieve, excellent collective effort is needed. Involvement of team members in decision-making will help in achieving the school mission as well as the goals. Essentially, this will result in the taking up of the schools ownership by all team members. Accountability will therefore be owned by all team members not only the SMT.

#### **2.4 Teamwork as a tool for improving quality of teaching and learning**

According to Begg and David (2009:142), team teaching involves a group of instructors working purposefully, regularly and cooperatively to help a group of learners of any age to learn. Ideally, educators in team teaching set goals for a learning area together, design work schedules, prepare individual lesson plans, teach learners and evaluate the results (Begg's and David, 2009). Educators also share insight, argue with one another, and perhaps even challenge learners to decide which approach is better to improve teaching and learning. With team teaching, new educators may be paired with experienced educators to take them on board. As a result, innovations are encouraged, and modifications in class size, location and time are permitted.

Team teaching facilitates more interaction between educators and that may result in an improved quality of teaching and learning as SMTs model the respect for differences, interdependence, and conflict resolution skills (Okumbe, 2007:56). The SMT set the target for all learning areas concerning performance together, select common material for educators to use, and also develop common test and examination for all learners as to improve performance. Francis (2009:133) asserts that the quality of teaching and learning is improved when educators set sequence of topics and supplemental materials together, when they also give their own interpretations of the materials together and use their own teaching styles. The greater the agreement on common objectives and interests, the more likely that teaching will be interdependent and coordinated. In addition, team teaching can also offset the danger of imposing ideas, values and mindsets on minorities or less powerful ethnic groups. Essentially, educators of different backgrounds can culturally enrich one another.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study is qualitative in nature. In order to obtain a better understanding how do SMTs experience teamwork in schools, a purposeful sampling was used to select the participants where interviews were conducted. Respectively, the six secondary schools were selected primarily because two were classified as top performing schools, two as average performing schools and the last two as underperforming schools. For the purposes of refining the interview questionnaire, a pilot interview was conducted with SMT members similar to the participants of the research study from two secondary schools not included in the sample before the interviews commenced. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the twelve SMT members from the six schools. SMT members were interviewed and their answers reflected their perceptions and experiences about teamwork. Having ethical issues in mind, before the interview commenced, permission was solicited from the participants to use a tape recorder. Permission was asked so that the SMT could know why a tape recorder was used. After the permission was approved, a brief introduction was given to give interviewee the aims of the study. In the introduction, the interviewees were also requested to be free to give their opinions as much as they wanted. Respondents were also informed that the information collected was strictly confidential and private.

#### 4. Findings and Discussions

The interview data are presented in themes identified through close reading of the interview transcripts. Respondents are distinguished from each other by means of the following key: P = Principal, DP = Deputy Principal and HOD = Head of department. Schools were also distinguished from each other by means of the following key: School 1 = S1, School 2 = S2, School 3 = S3, School 4 = S4, School 5 = S5 and School 6 = S6. The following are the themes that emerged from the data obtained from the interviews.

##### **(a) Perceptions of teamwork**

In DP1's situation, he indicated that:

*"We are two deputy principals and she (principal) says here are the duties, which one do you think you can do best? And then she gives you duties and sometimes we are given duties even if you think cannot do them; it's your duty you must do it. I don't think this is teamwork."*

HOD1 also indicated that "... We work as team. We divide the work amongst ourselves as school management team and we hold SMT meetings together to plan school activities, thus teamwork".

##### **(b) Impact of teamwork on quality of teaching and learning**

The HOD's, as SMT members directly involved with curriculum issues, confirm that teamwork impact positively on quality of teaching and learning.

In DP2 situation:

*"...I am not enjoying teamwork as a deputy in as far as curriculum management is concerned, because there are borderlines and restrictions. You do not work freely, sometimes you say things to the educators and educators do not see it your way. Sometimes educators do not like to take your opinion, if it is not from their HOD and they will say you are interfering; we have our own HOD. The only people that they recognise are the HODs. They are given more powers in curriculum than deputy principals".*

According to HOD3, team teaching impact positively to the quality of teaching and learning because:

*"...educators share learning areas where they have to plan together, set common tasks and assess learners together..."  
They are able to assist one another on how to approach some of the topics..."*

##### **(c) School performance**

It emerged in the interview with DP2 from S2 which was classified as performing school that their school performs well because:

*"...As SMT we meet on regular basis to plan and discuss management and curriculum issues, and come up with strategies of improving results, and there after involve all staff members in implementing those strategies..."*

In HOD4's situation from S4 which was also classified as performing school indicated:

*"...We don't focus on grade 12 results only. As SMT we also draw strategic plan for improving the results of lower grades. One of the strategies is rotation, where educator has to continue with his group of learners until grade 12, so that when the results are poor, he does not point finger to somebody for not laying the good foundation..."*

##### **(d) Decision-making**

Generally, the respondents feel that decision-making is crucial in any organization and they claim to be involved in the decision-making processes in their schools. HOD6 from S6 believes that:

*"...if you are in a decision-making position, then group work or teamwork is essential."*

Another HOD5 explains:

*"We make decisions and decisions are easily accepted because people feel that they are part of the decision-making and also when there is a problem facing them...when we take a decision the decision is taken jointly as a team as a result when you have to implement that decision everybody accepts it..."*

According to DP2, this is so because:

*"...when there was no SMT the principal was there to make unilateral decisions; now that there is an SMT, there is quality decision-making, we make decisions as a team - as an SMT..."*

**(e) Knowledge and skills needed to implement teamwork**

It emerged in the interview with SMT members that they use experience and expertise of some of their members including educators to co-ordinate some of management activities.

P2 from S2 commented that:

*"...We identify this person is good in this, or has certain skills. We can approach this person to co-ordinate these activities or to be a team leader in that field, but not all SMT members are leaders. If you give to someone else, you'll find that person indeed have knowledge and skill in that particular area. In certain cases others have developed much more competence than these seniors. So we distribute leadership all the time. Support will be on one on one to support that person given to co-ordinate that programme..."*

**(f) Benefits of teamwork**

Respondents feel that working in teams is likely to bring about cooperation. On that score P4 from S4 says "I've realized that you cannot do everything on your own, you need people to assist, to cooperate and to help".

DP2 from S2 cited the following example of team benefits:

*"We celebrated 25th birthday years of the school three years ago. I could never have done that on my own. We set down as staff and elected a committee or team and wasn't just the SMT but any members of the staff and one staff member took on he said he would like to advertise it, one wanted to do fundraising and we delegated what we wanted to do and it worked out, it was a great success".*

Another HOD6 from S6 attributes academic improvement as a direct spin-off of teamwork. She states that:

*"Results-our results have improved since the SMT has taken full charge for the past two years...in 2009 it was 63 percent and last year it was 83.9 percent it was an increase of 20.9 percent, that to me is a most significant achievement and that starts with teamwork. It starts with good administration".*

**(g) Monitoring teamwork**

Response from the interviews with SMT members agree that for a team to be effective, monitoring must be done on regular basis. One DP4 from S4 explains that:

*"...keeping an eye on them" attitude is all you need, isn't it? After all, you know whether they are doing good job or not. By simply asking your team members how they are getting on, whether they are enjoying the job, and if they wanted to go for a promotion or take up some new training, is monitoring, isn't it? (He laughed).*

Another HOD6 from S6 indicated that:

*"...I meet with educators in my department, listen to any complains or grievances and record them on the form, along with what all of us as a team need to do to resolve them..."*

Also, 'I try to be constructive with any criticism I have on them. It doesn't help to lambast them with all their failings'. Tell them that there are aspects of their work that you feel they are unmotivated in trying to agree to a plan of action to resolve the situation. Sometimes you may discover that someone you thought was a bad, lazy team member was only that way because they were bored and needed more responsibility to stimulate them.

**(h) Challenges of teamwork**

The respondents felt that although teamwork is generally advantageous, it has its own threats and challenges. P1 points to the challenge of forming of a strong team and advises that: *"More effort should be put towards building a team so that you really have a strong team..."*

P3 highlights personal clashes that might arise:

*"Where people are involved there will always be difference of opinions and to other personality clashes...there might be problems emanating from staff to other staff... there might be personal clashes which cannot be accommodated properly, there might be different agendas".*



According to P3: "working in teams you rely on the weakest person" and you find that "... not every HOD is pulling his or her weight." This may lead to some members being overloaded, as P5 explains: "I do a lot of things myself because the staff is overloaded...experience tells me when they are overloaded."

Principals also feel that teamwork is time consuming. P3 argues:

*"Things are not done quickly enough because of the process of consultation and talking because sometimes it does take time to actually come to one opinion about something or to an acceptable opinion, and things that need urgent attention sometimes don't get it..."*

### **(I) Support and guidelines needed to build teamwork**

Another perceived essential ingredient of teamwork is support. The respondents generally see support as characteristic feature of teamwork. Obtaining and providing support boost the morale of the participants and the team members become more committed to what they are doing. According to the DP3:

*"...I think we can support each other... I think if there is input from all sectors so it's not one person who has a good idea, it's all of us who feed into system where there's a good idea and everybody can make the idea better, and I think all of us as human beings need the support and the encouragement and feedback".*

DP4 argues that:

*"....I think we as school managers are crying out for help so coming from the managers there aren't any barriers, we need the assistance of everybody. The school is a huge institution to run..."*

Generally, the picture elicited by this study is that the concept of teamwork is a positive development. The respondent's perception of teamwork is generally favorable and they welcome the development, though many argue that it is essentially nothing new. Their responses indicate several positive attributes of team management. Furthermore, SMT's have brought the phenomenon of teamwork to the fore, and teamwork is perceived to have many advantages.

At the heart of these seem to be the notion of sharing, both of the actual 'load' of management as well as human resources. Conclusively, principals are strongly of the view that the SMT members need to share everything especially the responsibilities. Coupled with this is the idea of support, which the respondents feel is very much part of the notion of teamwork.

## **5. Recommendations**

Although some work has been done on SMTs, I strongly feel that the practice of team management needs further investigation. In this study there are reasonable numbers of research areas that came to light, but were outside the scope of this study. It is clear from the respondents that the Department of Education is not doing enough to ensure the smooth running of schools, particularly in ensuring that teaching and learning, which is the core business of the school is effective.

- District office's role is clearly to provide support, chiefly in the shape of development programmes that develop people in their totality.
- Programmes that expose and develop managers' sense of reliance on each other and joint management would go a long way towards addressing needs expressed in this study.
- The district office also needs to provide on-going support in the form of experts who visit schools to mentor principals and other managers.
- District office should also provide induction programmes for newly appointed SMT members, to develop and empower them with management skills.
- Monitoring and support should be on an on-going; to make sure those departmental policies and memorandums are implemented and not gathering dust in the principal's office.
- SMT members should be aware that the performance of the entire school rest surely upon them.
- Principals, deputies and Heads of departments should be aware of the importance of consulting each other, not merely for fear of opposition, but because it is the democratically correct way to operate. Ownership will only develop in people who feel valued.
- Openness is crucial for trust and real teamwork to develop. SMT members should be aware of the principal's

intentions.

- Principals should encourage teamwork to acknowledge the democratic nature of the school and most importantly to have a broad base of inputs.
- SMT should accept that empowering staff members is their responsibility, and they should delegate tasks without fear of failure or embarrassment. The notion that one learns through making mistakes need to be embraced.

## 6. Conclusion

The fact that the concept of teamwork amongst SMT members is so positively received is encouraging and perhaps provides a sound foundation on which to build. Undoubtedly, there is a strong need to develop democratic practices. However, in the light of what this study has found, it is evident that SMT members in some of the schools lag behind when coming to building effective teams in their schools. They appear to have a narrow understanding of team management for the many reasons discussed above. Until this understanding matures, there will be no true 'team management' in South Africa. This study can hopefully play its role in highlighting problem areas, which could lead to programmes and interventions which will develop educational managers who still lack the confidence to lead in democratic ways.

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