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Book Review

Working between the folds: School leaders reimagining school life

Edited by **Labby Ramrathan, Daisy Pillay and Inbanathan Naicker**

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South Africa's unpleasant history of apartheid is common knowledge. The apartheid system segregated communities along racial lines and promoted various forms of discrimination (Pellicer & Ranchhod, 2023). This system was revoked in 1994 when the country became a democratic republic. During the dawn of democracy, the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, 108 of 1996*, the country's supreme law, was promulgated to establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights (RSA, 1996). To scaffold the principles and values enshrined in the Constitution, several progressive legislative acts and policies were formalised across sectors, including schooling. This book, edited by Ramrathan et al. (2021), focuses on the schooling sector and offers a retrospective view of the sector's progression concerning education reform and reimagining possibilities for the sector.

This Scopus-indexed book dissects the multiple school categorisations in South Africa and presents several stakeholder voices. The editors articulate what the book hoped to achieve:

The edited volume offers nuanced and insightful perspectives of school leaders to school challenges in innovative ways. The book chapters collectively build on personally, professionally, and socially useful understandings of teaching, learning, governance, school finance, and school-community partnership in relation to wider social, political and cultural concerns and across diverse contexts (Ramrathan et al., 2021, p. viii).

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first chapter, titled *Quality of Education and School Experience in South Africa: How Far Have We Come?* (Ramrathan, et al., 2021), provides a comprehensive introduction to the book. This chapter proceeds from the premise that there is little progress in terms of quality education despite several transformative interventions. It provides a background on school categorisation in South Africa, the book's focal area. Chapter two, titled *Successful Rural Schools: Learning from School Principals* (Naicker & Ncokwana, 2021), presents the practices and meanings of principals leading successful primary schools in rural contexts. These practices include inviting traditional leaders into school leadership, drawing inspiration from African proverbs to galvanise school leadership, exploiting home-bred teacher development initiatives and exercising *Ubuntu* leadership. The third chapter, *Changing School Images: How Quintile One School Principals Turn Around Learner Performance in Their Schools Within a Rural Context* (Memela & Ramrathan, 2021), centres on novice principals in schools categorised as most poor. The chapter interrogates the relationship between school identity and learner performance. It presents novice principals' efforts in reimagining their schools. Chapter four, titled *Reimagining Schools for Improved Learner Performance* (Blignaut, 2021), reflects on South African schooling and learner performance disparities. The author advocates for an asset-based approach to address school challenges. He zooms into resilient schools and positive deviance as tools for applying this approach. The fifth chapter, titled *Responding to School Violence: Accounts of Heads of Departments Towards Safe Schools* (Ngobese & Ramrathan, 2021), focuses on departmental heads, a lower management level in schools. The chapter centres on a critical issue of school violence and explores the role of departmental heads in this regard. Among other practices exercised by the departmental heads are initiated school-based policies to mitigate violence, as well as dialogue and extra-curricular activities to humanise their schools.

Making Visible Teacher Leadership Practices in Private and Public Schools (Naicker & Ballard, 2021), chapter six of the book, focuses on teacher leadership performativity in schools categorised as independent and public schools. It presents a rich tapestry of practices of teacher leaders in these two school contexts. Chapter seven, *It's Just Not About the Funding...: Artful Research Learning for Cultivating Creative, Reflexive, Ethical Ways of Thinking About Schooling, Quintile[ing] and Teachers' Lives* (Pillay, 2021) narrates the lived experiences of a teacher in a quintile four township school. While the chapter shows the desperateness of the teacher owing to the multiple challenges experienced in a township school, it also highlights the possibilities of collage inquiry for school leadership research. Collaging, an arts-based research method, was a memory trigger to engage the teacher's lived experiences. The author describes collage inquiry as a space for research that allows playful and reflexive thinking. It enables a nuanced and flexible lens to view schooling and educational experiences. Chapter eight, *The Entrepreneurial Leadership Role of Principals: Doing More With Less Financial*

Resources (Mestry, 2021), proposes entrepreneurial leadership as a skill school principals need. The chapter presents a clear differentiation between school categories (quintiles) and illustrates the realities of affluent and poor schools. An entrepreneurial leadership role is recommended for all school principals. Some entrepreneurial practices revealed in the chapter are innovative ways of generating income, austerity measures such as doing more with less, judicious selection of service providers and negotiating prices. Chapter nine, *The Conundrum of School Governance: Alternative Ways Through the Maze* (Xaba, 2021), contributes to the scholarship of school governance. The chapter critiques the establishment of School Governing Bodies, its functioning and structuring. To address the challenges of school governance, proposals are suggested, including the scheduling of SGB elections during the third quarter of the school year so that newly elected members can be capacitated before assuming duty in January of the following year. Another proposal is extending the term of office of all SGBs to five years to enable the full implementation of strategic development plans. *Crush The Chalk”: School Leader’s Co-Creative Networking For Enhancing Schooling, Relations and Lives* (Pillay & Dube, 2021), the final chapter in the book, presents the lived experiences of principals leading schools in poverty-stricken communities of the KwaZulu-Natal province. The authors are critical of the justness of the quintile ranking system. They present vignettes of good leaders who work under trying conditions but still find ways to turn their schools around.

Overall, the book is easy to read and coherent. All chapters contribute to the underpinning theme of school categorisation in South Africa. Through the perspectives of principals, teachers, departmental heads and other stakeholders, the book provides significant insight into school categorisation and its implications. It reflects the contexts in which schools are located; these contexts are characterised by unequal access to resources and opportunities, among others (Spaull, 2013). This scholarly contribution by Ramrathan et al. (2021) taps into an important issue of the context-leadership relationship. Scholars such as Bredeson et al. (2008), Diamond and Spillane (2016), Klar et al. (2020) and Spillane (2005) have highlighted the significance of context and perceived context as an active leadership constituent. The book acknowledges the significance and variation of contexts; the authors paid attention to the features of contexts and tried to understand practices exercised by leaders in their contexts. For this reason, I think the book holds scientific merit.

It is worth noting that strength variation in terms of scholarship among chapters was detected. I could discern that a combination of early career and established researchers contributed to the book. While mentorship and availing publishing opportunities to emerging scholars are ideal practices, measures to ensure the quality of early career researchers’ contributions must be devised. In conclusion, the book undoubtedly tackles critical issues in the leadership, management and governance of the diversity of South African schools, and the book will undoubtedly receive the attention of postgraduate students, academics, education officials, school management teams and researchers.

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