

PRINCIPALS' SERVANT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR IMPROVED SCHOOL PERFORMANCE: FROM SOUTH AFRICAN FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS OF THE CHALLENGING CONTEXT

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Abstract. *There is a rich body of academic research focused on servant leadership practices and school performance in South African public and faith-based schools. However, there is a notable gap in research on how these principals deal with the challenges of accountability for quality academic performance in challenging contexts. Consequently, this article aims to explore principals' experience of servant leadership and accountability for improved school performance in challenging contexts in faith-based schools and identify mechanisms such schools apply to deal with these challenges. The study applied a qualitative research method with a case study design. The target population comprised six principals who were purposefully and conveniently selected from faith-based schools operating in challenging contexts in three rural provinces of South Africa. The researchers collected data using semi-structured interviews and followed a thematic approach. Key findings of the study indicated that principals of faith-based schools while practicing servant leadership apply the following principles to enhance school performance: Promoting common vision, enhancing collaborative climate through teamwork, inculcating positive relationships among teams, and practicing integrity and credibility as core values. Furthermore, participants further indicated that through the practices of these mechanisms they are able to respond to the call for accountability demands in challenging contexts. The findings further revealed that faith-based school principals of the challenging contexts sometimes find it difficult to keep the momentum due to absenteeism, teachers' retention, and lack of community involvement.*

Keywords: *Servant leadership, Accountability, School Performance, Faith-based schools, Challenging context*

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Introduction

There is an increasing demand for school principals to be accountable for school performance (Marsh, 2016). Furthermore, Welch (2015) pointed out that ever-changing contexts of socio-economic nature pose challenges for school leaders to look at their leadership role from different perspectives in order to improve school performance in the challenging contexts where school performances continuously remain unchanged. Consequently, school principals are faced with challenging demands and expectations in various forms of accountability from multiple stakeholders. This study uses the theory of servant leadership to understand the aspects employed by the leaders of faith-based schools to balance their leadership practices and accountability for academic performance in the rural context.

Accountability for school performance has always been the central aspect of the education systems worldwide (Walker, 2015). As such the role of school principals is always associated with the demand for school performance. Multiple duties such as administrative, and managerial coupled with the high demand for academic performance in rural contexts emphasised the principals' accountability. School leader's accountability for academic performance has been a focal point in global education sectors for decades (McDonnell, 2013;

& Walker 2015). This emphasis on accountability is not any different in the South African rural context.

Challenges of the South African rural schools, such as poor parental involvement, which creates a paradoxical situation for the improvement of school performance due to multifaceted circumstances such as parents' illiteracy, poverty, broken family cases, poor parental involvement, teachers' absenteeism amongst others (Mbokazi 2015, p. 472; Oakes & Maday, 2009; Heystek, 2022). Amid circumstances of this nature, school principals find it difficult to continue with their work while influencing the context that affects their work and school performance. Furthermore, it is also noted that sometimes school governing body (SGB) members are not experienced or qualified to perform their expected duties, although they are a key component of the interaction between the school and the community and principals' accountability (Zulu, Bhengu & Mkhize, 2021, p. 16).

Academic research thus far emphasised principals' accountability mainly on the nature and impact of external accountability policies and mandates on principals' work (Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012), particularly on academic performance, school-based management, learning targets and data use, and curriculum innovations (Cheng, 2009; Lee et al., 2012; Walker, 2015; Walker & Ko, 2011). From this generic focus on all schools, this study is interested to learn how faith-based school principals manage their accountability while practicing the principles of servant leadership in their contexts with the aim to have improved academic performance. This study specifically focusses on this issue since there have been limited studies on this specific phenomenon in the South African context (Sikhakhane, 2016).

Faith-based schools, like public schools are subject to governments' educational requirements prescribed by the *South African Schools Act of 1996*. Furthermore, these schools are overseen by their respective independent school authorities who in turn report to the country's Department of Basic Education. In addition to that, there is a parental demand seeking a better education for their children from faith-based schools. This implies that school principals of Faith-based schools wear triple hats, namely, one of the Department of Basic Education, of the umbrella bodies for the specific independent schools, and parental demands. There are multiple accountabilities demands placed on school leaders which are increasing expectations from various stakeholders Wang (2021). School principals are basically held accountable to anyone who forms part of the school team, including learners, parents/guardians, educators, communities, the umbrella bodies, Department of Education, and the entire school system.

Consequently, how school leaders in challenging contexts practice servant leadership and respond to accountability for academic performance in their challenging contexts is the empirical question for this article.

Faith-based schools selected for this study also form part of those schools in the rural context. On the other angle regardless of the challenges schools situated in poor rural communities' encounter "tiny band" of them provide some of the highest quality education Taylor (2014, p. 73). This is confirmed by the steady progress of some of the rural faith-based schools in matric results in matric outcomes. There are those that are performing heroic deeds while under difficult conditions and serve as role models for the rest of the system.' Three of these 'tiny band' of schools are the focus of our study through the lens of servant leadership to study how they practiced the principles of servant leadership while maintaining improved academic performance. Greenleaf (1977, p. 55), who coined the term "servant-leadership", noted, "principals/administrators who work in faith-based education contexts should be fundamentally predisposed to exhibiting principles of servant-leadership in their day-to-day lives, as that can result in bringing positive outcomes".

The constant decline in quality academic performance in disadvantaged contexts increases demands on principals' leadership and management of the schools. Amidst the

difficult working conditions principals are always under pressure ensuring improved outcomes in the schools (Du Plessis, 2017).

Faith-based schools are not immune to the contextual factors that challenge their leadership and enhance the demand for accountability. Despite the innumerable factors that challenge their leadership, accountability for academic performance rests with the school principals. These principals are expected to balance their leadership and accountability while at the same time supporting educators to ensure sustained academic performance.

The following questions will address the phenomenon under investigation:

- i. How do school principals of faith-based schools in rural contexts balance their servant leadership and accountability for sustained academic performance?
- ii. What strategies can be adopted to balance school leadership and accountability in faith-based schools in rural contexts for the improvement of sustained academic performance?

The main aim of this article was to explore how school principals of faith-based schools in rural contexts balance their leadership and accountability for improved school performance. In line with this we aimed at exploring strategies that could be adopted to balance school leadership and accountability in faith-based schools in rural contexts for the improvement of sustained academic performance. In this qualitative research we employed individual semi-structured interviews to collect data from six principals of the rural schools who were selected through purposive sampling from three South Africa rural provinces.

Context of the Faith-based schools

According to the Department of Basic Education, in South Africa, there were 1 855 registered independent schools, which constitute 7.3% of all 25 574 South African schools (Department of Basic Education, 2020). Of this total, an estimated 1253 schools belong to faith-based denominations and are coordinated by the National Alliance of Independent Schools of South Africa (NAISA). Schools that were selected for this study are solely those schools that form part of schools coordinated by NAISA.

The decision to focus this article on faith-based schools was made due to the fact that faith-based schools are distinct because of the unique characteristics and ethos, which shape their aims and environments (Halstead & McLaughlin, 2015; McGettrick, 2015; Sacks, 2004). At the same time, their distinguishing characteristics are influenced by the specific faith of that school, religious traditions, and the protocols used to select learners and hire staff (Halstead & McLaughlin, 2005; McGettrick, 2005). This context, values, and beliefs influence their procedures and the leadership practices of principals.

This category of schools is unique due to its characteristics, ethos, and religious traditions that characterize them (McLaughlin, 2015, p. 89). These schools possess a “dual identity” and “dual missions” (Grace, 2009, p. 146). This dual character is an upshot of the competitive market and accountability forces created by government policies, and of the reforms and influences from the religious communities that oversee the schools (McGettrick, 2015: p. 106). Consequently, these leaders are held accountable for school performance both to the government and their umbrella bodies. In South Africa, faith-based schools represent a wide range of religions and faiths and in their majority function under the auspices of the National Alliance for Independent schools of South Africa (NAISA).

Leadership of faith-based schools and accountability

This study focused its attention on faith-based school leaders’ experiences of their servant leadership and accountability for improved academic performance in their contexts.

In Faith-based schools integrity of school principals is of paramount importance and integrity and accountability go hand in hand. According to Shula, Heystek & Van Vyck (2022, p. 16), “if people do not believe in a leader, they will not believe the leader’s message”. Some academic scholars argue that to be believed, leaders at these schools must personify the life they advocate (Brown, 2015, p. 212). They must act consistently with their beliefs (Hallinger, 2018, p. 70). Furthermore, the leader of a faith-based school needs to lead a life of integrity Hallinger (2018, p. 68). It is also recommended that school leaders are expected to combine the professional and spiritual aspects of their lives as they serve and are accountable to the school community for academic improvement (Edwards (2014, p. 56). Furthermore, the practices of leaders are value-driven (Striepe, Clarke, & O’Donoghue 2014, p. 94). Their perspectives however on leadership are shaped by their own philosophy and spirituality and enhanced by that of the affiliated faith of the school. The exposition also served as the basis for the investigation regarding servant leadership theory. This study is underpinned by the theory of servant leadership Greenleaf (1977) to understand how principals balance their leadership and accountability for improved school performance- in the rural context.

Researchers call this the wide spectrum of stakeholders forms as hierarchal web that influences principals’ work in the forms of political, legal, bureaucratic, performance-based, moral, professional, and market accountability (Bracci, 2009; Wallenius et al., 2018). In this concept accountability is seen as a relational and hierarchical forming different layers with specific stakeholders. School leaders are accountable to their own staff, to their SGBs, to the legislation that guide their work (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013). These authors further noted that accountability demands from various actors complicate principals’ work and render it more contextual and unpredictable. However, their study focused on public schools whereas ours solely looks at how the principals of the faith-based schools in challenging contexts experienced their servant leadership practices and accountability for the improvement of academic performance. Consequently, the next section describes the nature of servant leadership.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the theory of servant leadership Greenleaf (1970 and 1977) to understand how principals balance their leadership and accountability for improved school performance- in the rural context. The phrase “Servant-leadership” was coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970. Greenleaf the originator of the theory, notes that servant leadership exists between two extremes: leader-first and servant-first. According to Greenleaf (1970, p. 27) servant leadership:

“Begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is a leader first. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served”

The above reference indicates that the empowerment and well-being of others is crucial in servant leadership practices. Such perspective is regarded as “a new leadership approach [that] attempts to enhance the personal growth of workers and improve the quality of the organization through a combination of teamwork, shared decision-making and caring behaviour” (Taylor, 2007, p. 404).

In his initial essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf (1970) states that a leader’s quest for a specific outcome is easy to identify, but difficult to explain (Greenleaf, 1977: p. 48). He further notes that effective leaders possess the ability to point others toward the same goal. However, the one who identifies the goal must garner the followers’ trust because the followers share the burden of risk. In other words, servant leaders share and delegate the task

as such they are able to balance their leadership role and accountability that follows of their role.

Spears (2019, p 7) summarised the works of Greenleaf and developed ten characteristics that are normally accepted among leadership researchers as characteristics that identify leaders as servant leaders. These are “listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth, and building community”. These ten characteristics are generally acknowledged as the foundation of servant leadership. These characteristics are believed to guide the leaders to balance their role as leaders and accountability for the outcome. The current literature summarises these characteristics of servant leadership as focused on developing others, teamwork (collaborative work), inculcating relationships through community building, persuasion and enhancing common vision.

Focused on development of others

The first crucial aspect of servant leadership practices reflects both the actions of a servant who leads and of a leader who serves. It is denoted that servant leadership is based on the overarching action of caring for others and this dimension is seen as an “other-oriented approach to leadership” (Franco & Antunes, 2020 & Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Greenleaf (1977, pp. 13–14) conceptualises the vital aspects of this criterion by asking, “Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”. Franco & Antunes (2020, p. 351) emphasise that servant leadership is based on the overarching action of caring for others and Eva et al. (2019, p. 114) see this dimension as an “other-oriented approach to leadership”. Some researchers define servant leadership as follows: (1) it is ‘others’ oriented, (2) the priority is about the needs and the interests of the followers, and (3) it develops others to be leaders themselves (Eva et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is an understanding that servant leadership practices extensively promote a sense of harmony, and unity among the teams and enhances people's perceptions of their communal duties and responsibilities (Gultekin1 and Kara, 2022: P. 136).

Greenleaf (1977) points out that servant leader is known as a leader with a genuine concern about the hopes and needs of his followers and this paradigm makes servant leadership different from other types of leaderships. Therefore, regardless of the contextual challenges, as the leaders practice its principles followers are motivated and in their turn improve the quality of teaching and learning process. Due to its ability to create a positive working climate among teams and motivate employees towards their professional commitment servant leadership may become the most widely used model in the coming decades (Northouse, 2018).

Servant leadership through teamwork

Servant leadership extends beyond the desires of the self-ego and builds a working climate that generates the employee’s empowerment (Shula, Van Wyk & Heystek, 2022). The inspirational and moral component of servant leadership is important for the development of teams. Teachers are more likely to work collaboratively as a team if they have inspirational and moral confidence in their leader (Shula, 2023). Irving and Longbotham (2007) examined the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness which further smoothed the accountability demands which was to be placed on the principals alone. Moreover, to the extent that servant leaders are also models of virtue, we expect the followers will strive for excellence in their teams (Wang, 2021, p. 48).

Inculcating positive relationships

The previous study indicated that servant leaders have a critical responsibility for developing the school community and building a caring relationship with all school stakeholders (Shula, Wyk & Heystek, 2023). Undoubtedly enhancing positive relationships should serve as a mechanism for effective school leadership (Zulu et al., 2018, p. 32). Within this ambit of concern for others, servant leaders have a critical responsibility for developing the school community and building a caring relationship with all school stakeholders. Furthermore, it is believed school leaders of faith-based schools through their endeavour to inculcate positive relationships with their teams gain their confidence, improve the working climate, minimise the challenges of the context and improve the school performance together as a team.

Integrity, trustworthiness as model

Kgatle (2018) describes the servant leader as a model of integrity, trustworthiness, and intelligent reasoning. Furthermore, the study of Ling, Lin & Wu (2016) confirms that servant leadership can be effective at different organisational levels, including schools, and this leadership style enhances service delivering behaviours in leaders. Consequently, through their integrity and trustworthiness they live what they preach which serve as a source of inspiration to followers to improve the working conditions in the school.

Methodology

To understand the servant leadership practices and accountability by faith-based school principals we employed a qualitative research design with an interpretive paradigm. Mokala (2021) posits that a qualitative research methodology the aim of the interpretive paradigm in research is to understand the subjective experience of the participants. Furthermore, Creswell, Hanson, Clarke Plano & Morales (2007) posit that researchers who use an interpretivist or constructivist mode usually depend upon the perspective of the respondents in connection with the phenomenon under study. Consequently, in order to explore servant leadership practices and accountability for school performance in challenging contexts, this researcher had to interact with the participants and work with data located within the qualitative approach. Hence it was our interest to learn from the experiences of the leaders in their natural environment.

We employed a case study method to have an in-depth exploration of the present-day phenomenon within its natural setting (Yin, 2018), which is the servant leadership practices of principals in a challenging context and their management of the accountability. Similarly, (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2018) further affirm that the case study approach aims to depict the reality of what it is like to be in a specific life situation. Rule and John (2011) further point out that a case study is a systematic and thorough investigation of a specific occurrence that is context-based with a view to generating understanding.

As case studies are descriptive in nature, it was necessary to identify “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002: p. 230). Consequently, we used purposeful sampling as the sampling strategy for this study. We decided to use this strategy, understanding that purposeful sampling could assist in the identification of significant understandings and practices of leadership and can enable a study to unearth significant similarities or differences between the varied contexts (Patton, 2002). We were of the view that the use of purposeful sampling would enable rich, descriptive cases to be developed by creating an in-depth personal level of understanding which aligns with the rationales of the interpretive perspective and case study design.

The three faith-based schools that were selected for the study comprised one Catholic, one Anglican, and one interdenominational school, operating in challenging rural contexts.

Two key factors were considered when the researchers selected the particular schools. The primary factor was that the schools needed to represent the definition of the study of a faith-based school. In other words, the selected faith-based schools needed to have distinct aims and environments that are influenced by the affiliation of the schools with a particular faith. The second factor is that the schools needed to be representative of the varied types of faith-based schools found in South Africa operating within the challenging contexts.

The researchers employed semi-structured interviews as the method for this research as they would afford more flexibility than structured interviews, the opportunity to probe more deeply into an issue, and for people to construct meaning as well (Burns, 2000). Thus, semi-structured interviews were consistent with the paradigm and the interpretivist theoretical perspective within which this research existed. At each school the principals and deputy principals were selected as participants, thus six individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews were between thirty and fifty minutes in length. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and made available for validation and verification by the participants.

Since data in qualitative research is prepared, organised according to either text, diagrams, or images, and then reduced into themes through coding and condensing the codes we then decided to present as tables or discussions (Maree, 2016, p. 104–126).

The researchers took the following steps in the process of data analysis. After reading data collected a preliminary thematic framework was constructed to identify the topics that would be refined into themes. This was followed by the indexing and rearranged sections of the data that would belong together. The data was reviewed carefully to refine the data items and to ensure that they would cover the same aspects (Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor & Barnard, 2014). Moreover, the deductive analysis makes use of a priori codes to obtain the second level of understanding. These codes were clustered around the major themes of the phenomenon and the theory of action. To respect the views of the participants, I have used in vivo coding in the categorisation (Chiniaral, 2016, p. 27).

In qualitative research, trustworthiness relates to how the perceptions of the participants have been represented in the final account (Cresswell & Miller, 2004). To demonstrate trustworthiness, it was important that we needed to provide a detailed account of the methodological approach adopted in the process of collecting and analysing the data (Bailey, 2007). One approach to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is by the use of four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Research results

In this section, we discuss the interview findings related to the role of school principals as servant leaders and accountability for quality performance in faith-based school in the challenging contexts of South Africa. Our discussions with the leaders of faith-based schools focused mainly on the characteristics of servant leadership and mechanisms used to be accountable for school performance. Therefore, the findings revolved around five main themes namely, leading as a team, inculcating positive relationships, common vision, credibility and integrity.

Promoting a common vision

School principals of the challenging contexts are of the common view that promoting a common vision is a great source to respond to accountability in servant leadership practices. Principal E shared: everyone should understand what happens in the school, be it parents,

teachers, learners and also our stakeholders. In fact, they should be involved from the very beginning.

Principal C shared similar comment: The goal of the school should be clear to everyone. I'm here to build the school community but not alone. I'm here as a steward of the values and ethos of the school but not alone. The vision and values I shared before belong to everyone. I firmly believe that where there is a common vision there is a common accountability.

Principal A further on this note: our common vision holds all of us accountable for our actions and decisions in our schools. Consequently, our school has been one of the best performing schools in this province while operating under challenging circumstances due to the common vision we have created. As a result, it is safe to say that having a common vision is essential for the effective servant leadership practices especially in servant leadership and school performance.

Leaders of faith-based schools of the challenging contexts are convinced that by inculcating a common vision they are able to respond to the demand for accountability of school performance. These links to the characteristic of community building where servant leaders are able to create a conducive working environment for the good of the school.

In the academic research conducted on the principals' servant leadership in the contexts of disadvantaged public schools in Gauteng, educators indicated that their principals practiced servant leadership techniques such as organisational stewardship, and a persuasive approach in their day-to-day practices (Swart, 2022). These practices are believed to be partly responsible for the improvement of academic performance in those schools.

Leading as a team

School leaders indicated that they are aware of the challenging context in which they are working. In this context, faith-based school leaders value the aspect of leading as a team which according to them serves as one of the mechanisms to deal with accountability and improves the teaching learning process in the school.

The central meaning of the category, 'leading as a team', was encapsulated in Principal B's comment:

I think in servant leadership one becomes part of a team, and it's about shared decision-making. I base this on my experience here at my school. My school is known as one of the best schools in the province. It is the best not because the principal is the best, but because everyone is committed, and everyone is going the extra mile to ensure its excellence. All of us speak the same language and wear the same mask ... and we have one vision as a team and that is to see our school prosper, our children succeed. We are accountable together.

The comment of this participant is representative of a common perspective among the school leaders, that leadership involves the interactions of groups of people instead of being confined to an individual position of authority. Under 'leading as a team' resulted in establishing and maintaining relationships, 'establishing teamwork', and 'establishing a common vision'. This further eases the accountability of the principals for school performance because every aspect of school progress is shared.

Inculcating positive relationships

Principal D noted:

Relationships underpin many aspects of our school's daily life. Relationships are crucial, they are crucial in the classroom, and they are crucial in the staff room. There is no teamwork without positive relationships, there is no improved academic performance without positive relationships, and there is no success at all in any aspect without building positive relationships. Consequently, we are all in the same game from the beginning till the end. Relationships are backbones for our success and accountability.

Deputy Principal C highlighted during the discussion, “We believe in relationships. However, relationships work where there is teamwork, teamwork becomes effective where there are positive relationships. Being accountable to each other is the bases for our accountability to the higher authority and our umbrella bodies as faith-based schools. That has a significant amount of impact on school performance in general”.

Principal A further noted on the same matter, “... in order to succeed in establishing positive relationships and teamwork there has to be a common vision. It is only where there is a common vision that schools’ academic performance gets improved, and this is where servant leadership comes in and here is where the accountability comes in”.

The essence of this theme is mirrored by Duignan (2012:119) who emphasises that effective leaders should always facilitate and inculcate teamwork and collaborative leadership for the success of their organisations and share responsibility. In addition to that, the participants are in agreement with Chiniara and Bentein (2016) who pointed out that united team members work together to accomplish the set objectives and this coherence trickles down to the support of other groups within the work.

Credibility and integrity

Faith-based school leaders noted that in their servant leadership they are called to act with integrity and show credibility in whatever they do and act.

Principal C noted:

[A]s leaders of faith-based schools, if we are not credible in every aspect and do not maintain integrity in our acting and leading, our efforts become fruitless from all angles. I always tell my colleagues at any given opportunities, let us practice what we preach to our children.

Under the same note Principal D noted:

For me Serving as a servant leader in this context, while responding to the call for accountability of school performance entails listening to others, being ready to accept criticism and particularly leading by heart.

This was further in line with what Principal B had noted:

Regardless of the context, demand for quality performance I ought to be humble, put the school’s interest ahead of my own. I don’t do this to be praised nor applauded but to show credibility and integrity. Again, to be credible and do things with integrity I ought to be a good listener, listen to others, listen to myself sometimes and ask if I’m on the right truck.

It was evident that the school principals are able to internalize the values that they upheld in their servant leadership practice in connection with accountability through active listening honesty and integrity. Furthermore, the first characteristic servant leadership which is listening is the source for leading with integrity and credibility in their day-to-day leadership and accountability.

Discussion

This study attempted to establish relationship between principals’ servant leadership and accountability for school performance in challenging contexts. The following questions guided the entire research: How do school principals of faith-based schools in rural contexts balance their servant leadership and accountability for sustained academic performance? And what strategies can be adopted to balance school leadership and accountability in faith-based schools in rural contexts for the improvement of sustained academic performance?

Faith-based School leaders have external accountability demands, such as those legally enacted through the district school boards and the agencies to which the independent schools belong to, and these bureaucratic accountabilities play a large role in contemporary principals’

daily work and academic performance. The main questions that guided the whole study are formulated as

School principals in this study described that they experience multiple struggles and demands imposed on them for improved school performance in their contexts. They indicated that they are accountable to themselves, their school community, the Department of Education, and the umbrella body to which their schools are affiliated. However, the findings under this section indicate that principals of faith-based schools perceive their principalship in faith-based schools as a moral call to serve in integrity, honesty, and selfless love and commitment.

Participants further reported that some of the mechanisms through which they cope with demanding accountability are the time they spend with their family members, retreats, and debriefing sessions.

School principals of faith-based schools reflected on servant leadership practices for improved academic performance in their challenging contexts. Participants shared that leadership of faith-based schools in challenging contexts is demanding and they are required to perform a wide range of leadership tasks that are linked to influencing staff and learner matters whilst acting as serving leaders at the same time. P2 noted, “sometimes I forget that I have a responsibility of my family besides the school” whereas P4 noted that time with family members, debriefing sessions, collaboration, and relationships create mechanisms where he is able to balance his accountability and leadership for improved school performance in the demanding contexts”. Through heartfelt commitment to servant leadership principles there has been continuous quality academic performance in their respective schools.

The aspects of teamwork shared by the principles in this study makes an echo to the concept posited by Duignan (2012, p.119) who emphasises that effective leaders should always facilitate and inculcate teamwork and collaborative leadership for the success of their organisations and share responsibility. In addition to that, the participants are in agreement with Chiniara and Bentein (2016) who pointed out that united team members work together to accomplish the set objectives and this coherence trickles down to the support of other groups within the work. This is more relevant to the challenging contexts where leaders work under strenuous situations due to the absenteeism of the teachers and other socio-economic factors.

The perspectives of the participants further resonated with (Wallenius, Juvonent, & Varjo, 2018 & Leithwood K (2020) who defines trust as a “leader’s willingness to be vulnerable to the followers based on the confidence that the followers are honest, open, reliable and competent”. Lasater (2016) explains the key considerations in the process of development of trusting relationships in schools as respect for one another, personal regard for others in the school environment, honesty, integrity, and openness.

Conclusion

Establishing relationships, inculcating teamwork, integrity and honesty, inculcating a common vision are some of the mechanisms that have improved the quality of school performances in these contexts and are key actions performed by principals in faith-based schools to deal with demands for accountability. School leaders of faith-based schools believe that the servant leaderships principles approach served as the basis for improving the quality of education and academic performance at faith-based schools. It was further discussed that developing the staff and getting the community involved are crucial aspects of the success of academic achievement at schools. This research suggests that servant leadership may serve as an indication that principals who want to improve the quality of education at schools may emphasize the servant leadership approach.

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