

# A South African High-Needs School: A Case of Context Driven by History

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*High needs schools in South Africa are characterized by student populations living in hazardous environments coupled with extreme poverty and language disparities, resulting in challenges that are interwoven with cultural and societal norms. This paper presents characteristics of leadership that enable student success in school from one high needs, high-performing school in Cape Town, South Africa, utilizing a case study methodology following the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) research protocol. Literature reviewed highlights the context specific to high needs schools in South Africa, including historical context, leadership characteristics, instructional considerations, and implications for school culture. This study utilized a qualitative approach coupled with analysis framed through the High Needs Schools Leadership model. Data were collected from personal interviews with educators including school leaders and assistant school leaders as well as site-based observations, and concurrent archival document analysis, revealing the importance of several key themes: 1) Community Understanding, 2) Value-Based Decision Making, 3) Equity, and 4) Persistence. By considering the findings of this study, system and school leaders can enhance their awareness of factors with the greatest potential to significantly and positively impact educational settings for students in high needs schools.*

**Keywords:** *high needs schools, transformational leadership, social justice leadership, inclusion, equity, contextual understanding*

High needs schools in South Africa are characterized by student populations living in hazardous environments coupled with extreme poverty and language disparities, resulting in challenges that are interwoven with cultural and societal norms. This research presents characteristics of leadership that enable student success in school from one high needs, high-performing school in Cape Town, South Africa, utilizing a case study methodology following the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) research protocol. The ISLDN protocol was and appropriate tool the goal of this study was to explore critical aspects of leadership in one high needs school (Baran & Berry, 2015). As the purpose of the High Needs School Strand (HNS) of the ISLDN is to determine various qualities of leadership critical to leading high needs schools focused on learning, leadership, and context, the guiding research questions were:

- What fosters student learning in high needs schools?
- How do school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in high needs schools?
- How do internal and external school contexts impact individual and organizational performance in high needs schools?

Literature reviewed highlights the context specific to high needs schools in South Africa, including historical context, leadership characteristics, instructional considerations, and implications for school culture. This study utilized a qualitative approach coupled with analysis framed through the High Needs Schools Leadership model. Data were collected from personal interviews with educators, including school leaders and assistant school leaders, as well as site-based observations, and concurrent archival document analysis, revealing the importance of several key themes: 1) Community Understanding, 2) Value-Based Decision Making, 3) Instructional Considerations and Equity, and 4) Persistence. By considering the findings of this study, system and school leaders can enhance their awareness of factors with the greatest potential to significantly and positively impact educational settings for students in high needs schools.

## **Literature Review**

### **High Needs Schools in South Africa**

Schooling conditions are closely linked to social contexts and manifest in inequitable access to pedagogical, institutional, economic and social opportunities in South Africa (Robinson, 2014). Spaul (2013) claims that there are, in effect, two different public-school systems in South Africa based on the analysis of several educational attainment databases. The smaller, better performing system accommodates the wealthiest 20-25% of students who achieve much higher scores than the larger system, which serves the poorest 75-80% of South African students. “These two education systems can be seen when splitting pupils by wealth, socio-economic status, geographic location and language” (Spaul, 20013, p. 6).

South Africa issued its most recent education law, the South African Schools Act (SASA) in 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). According to the SASA, all school governing boards of public schools must supplement government funding, by charging school fees and conducting other reasonable forms of fundraising. The option to eliminate school fees is limited to the schools that have been declared no fee schools (Department of Basic Education, n.d.). Under this act, according to the Department of Basic Education’s recent update, national statistics of targets for school allocation reveal that the no fee threshold for 2017, 2018, 2019 is determined as ZAR 1243, which is the all learners in quintiles 1 to 3 (60% of the public-school learners nationally) in South Africa

(Department of Basic Education, 2017). These schools are labeled as no-fee based on their position in the economic scale and may also be considered as the high needs schools of South Africa. However, all high needs students do not attend no-fee schools (Shangase, 2018).

South Africa is ranked as the most unequal country in the world (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018). The disparities in distributions of power, resources, and wealth among groups of South Africans have their roots in history. These historically originated disparities, therefore, appear in South African education as in its many structured systems, and thus, generate unequal schooling conditions.

### **Racial and Class Segregation**

Racial segregation of schooling was one of the most obvious de jure segregation practices in the historical context. Surprisingly, South African schooling was not initially racially segregated, and the 19th-century Cape mission schools admitted both black and white students (Morris & Hyslop, 1991). However, with the rise of racial and imperialist ideologies in the late 19th century, a segregated structure was established that continued through 1994 (Morris & Hyslop, 1991; Leonie, 1965). In 1953, The Bantu Education Act, which was a South African segregation law, legalized several aspects of the apartheid system passed by the Apartheid regime.

Tsoaledi (2013) defines Bantu education as “an inferior type of education that was designed to maintain the subordinate and marginal status of the majority racial group of the country” (p. 2). He further explains that while the stated divisions were between Bantu education for Blacks and an educational system for Whites, additional intermediate hierarchies in the educational system and general society existed. According to the Bantu Education Act of 1953, each ethnic and racial group had its own department of education. At the time of the apartheid regime, there were only four recognized racial groups which were Blacks, Indians, Coloreds, and Whites. Among these, the majority Blacks were at the bottom of the classification ladder. Apartheid education in South Africa, as an example of extreme internal colonization, sustained and strengthened hierarchical views of society and fostered an ideological consciousness of superior-inferior, master-servant, and ruler-ruled structure among all groups in South Africa. During the ruling of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, black students received about a fifth of the funding of white peers. In addition to limited resources, black students were taught almost no science or math, and the independent missionary schools providing high quality education to indigenous students were also shut gradually by government (Morris & Hyslop, 1991). In spite of the fact that de jure segregation in South Africa was eliminated in 1994, race remains a strong predictor of poverty in South Africa, with black Africans remaining at the highest risk of being poor (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018).

In the post-Apartheid society of South Africa, class inequality increasingly replaced racial inequality as a major obstacle to an equitable schooling system. As the black middle class moved into white suburbs, their children benefited from the better resourced schools found there (Abdi, 2003). After Nelson Mandela became president in 1994, he replaced the school system segregated by race with one divided by wealth. Regardless of this reform, the former racially separate education departments still remained important categories for the future of education. Besides the large performance gaps between former black schools and former white schools based on the analysis of former departments, the relationship between former education department classification and socio-economic status is also revealed from the comparison of these important categories (van Der Berg et al., 2011).

Mandela's government attempted to expand access to education by relocating state funding, yet poverty still has a persistent role in South Africa's education system as a demonstration of the eternal legacy of apartheid (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018). As is in most of the African countries, rural areas have the highest poverty concentration in South Africa with almost 60% percent of the poor living in rural areas when poverty measured at the national lower-bound poverty line of ZAR 758 per person per month. (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018).

### **Linguistic Inequity**

Another educational issue in South Africa is the linguistic inequity which continues to be shaped by the historical legacy of colonial rule and apartheid (Brook Napier, 2011). English is still viewed as the language of power and access (Hunter, 2015), while African languages are perceived as offering little economic value in today's South Africa (Kamwangamalu & Tovares, 2016). Statistical estimates reveal that African language speakers constitute 79.5% of the total South African population, which was estimated at 50.6 million in 2011 (Mbekwa & Nomlomo, 2013). Regardless of the fact that the majority of South Africans speak African languages as their native tongues, none of the African languages are used as languages of instruction after the third grade of schooling. Currently, most schools in which the majority of students are not English- or Afrikaans-speaking choose to use first language in grades 1, 2 and 3 and then transition to English as the language of instruction in the fourth grade (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016).

### **Violence**

Hazardous conditions add an additional layer of complexity in South African schools. News reports reveal a surge in school violence, with a recent headline stating, "Schools in South Africa are becoming more violent" (Daniel, 2018). The Minister of Education called on law enforcement officials to come together to develop additional security measures. Videos depicting student-on-student violence are frequently posted on the internet. The African National Conference, the governing body responsible for oversight of education, has also called for increasing security in schools. Daniel (2018) emphasized that school violence is "especially apparent in impoverished areas whereby trauma manifests as a result of inhibitions and disillusionment" (para.9).

Mncube & Harber (2017) studied the contextual factors that contribute to school violence in South Africa by considering internal and external conditions. In addition to outside factors such as gang activity, drugs and weapons, they assert that internal factors play a larger than expected role in South African schools. Internal causes of school violence include corporal punishment, sexual harassment, and high rates of teacher absenteeism. Training for teachers and school leaders in restorative justice and other alternatives to corporal punishment are offered as suggestions for mitigating school violence. The authors suggest that educator preparation programs should include courses related to school violence in addition to school safety.

The National School Violence Study conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP, 2017) revealed that four-fifths of South African principals reported incidents of student violence against other students in 2016. Alcohol, drugs and weapons were reported as persistent and pervasive problems, even at the elementary school level. Students reported easy access to alcohol and guns in their communities, an external factor that aligns to the findings of Mncube & Harber (2017). Corporal punishment is common, both at home and at school. The CJCP (2017) asserts that a collaborative approach is needed to reduce school violence. The organization

calls on governmental agencies, community leaders, parents and educators to develop strategies to address societal issues that impact schools.

### **Instructional Considerations**

Formal principal preparation was not common in South Africa until 2007, when the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) implemented an Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership (Bush & Glover, 2016). Mawdsley, Bipath and Mawdsley (2014) emphasized the essential leadership characteristics of principals in effective schools in South Africa, which the authors identified as functional. Successful school leaders demonstrated emotional intelligence and were skillful in casting the vision of the school by engaging the collaborative actions of faculty, staff and students in alignment with the vision and mission. A key suggestion was that principals of dysfunctional schools have opportunities to observe in functional schools with similar contexts and challenges to learn about effective instructional leadership and management strategies.

Bush and Glover (2016) posited that instructional leadership is the key lever for improving schools in South Africa. The successful instructional leader provides coherent and consistent expectations for teaching and learning that are clearly communicated to teachers, students and the school community. The authors recommend that principals routinely analyze data, engage in collaborative instructional planning with teachers, and monitor instructional practices in the classroom. Because of the challenging contexts of high-needs schools in South Africa, more directive leadership actions are needed until the school is in a functional state (Mawdsley et al. 2014).

Smit and Scherman (2016) examined the school as a social system and asserted that relational leadership and the ethics of care are leadership characteristics that can reduce school violence and enhance the instructional environment in South Africa. Relational leaders focus on students, teachers and the community rather than on themselves. Leadership is viewed as a collaborative endeavor with stakeholders, rather than a set of individual, directive actions by the principal.

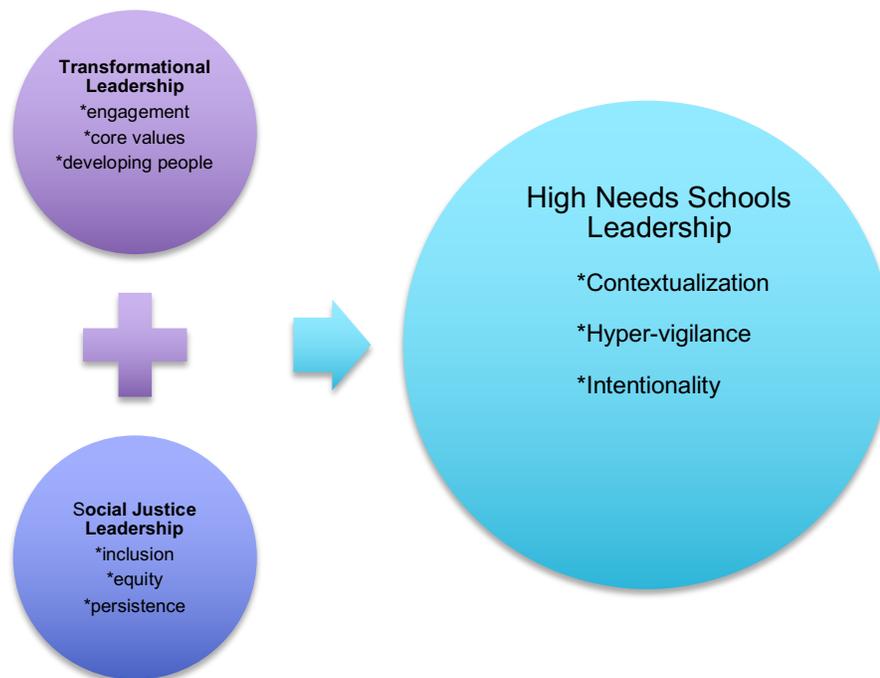
Safety and order are essential foundational factors in the establishment of a functional school culture that focuses on teaching and learning. The Umhlali Project is one example of a current collaborative project in South Africa that includes the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, The University of Cape Town, and the Masifunde Learner Development. The project is funded through 2020 by the Human Dignity Foundation and Comic Relief. It is an early crime and violence prevention project that focuses on individuals, schools, families and communities. The school safety component provides training on the National School Safety Framework, mentoring and coaching for educators on the framework, and extra-curricular programs such as art and drama. Substance use and abuse workshops are offered for teachers, students and families. Child protection training is provided for faculty and staff. The goal is to implement the project in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. with the goal of replication in communities and schools throughout the nation (CJCP, 2017).

In their study of school leadership and management in South Africa, Bush and Glover (2016) emphasized the principal's primary role of ensuring school safety and securing the necessary resources for the school. Mawdsley et al. (2014) asserted that students are the priority of effective school principals, who organize the school around meeting the particular needs of students, such as hunger and poverty. The professionalism and attendance of teachers are concerns in dysfunctional schools in South Africa. Successful principals of high-needs schools demonstrate high expectations for faculty and a strong commitment to working with and for the community.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework selected for this study is the High Needs Schools framework, originally coined by Berry, Cowart Moss, and Gore (2019). The frame combines principles of both social justice theory and transformational leadership theory to offer a set of beliefs focused on contextualization, hyper-vigilance, and intentionality. According to Berry, et al. (2019), “Social justice leaders believe systems that provide separate programs effectively provide unequal levels of instruction, lead to the marginalization of particular students, and create situations where these students receive an inferior education.” Resultantly, successful leaders in high needs contexts work to create school climates and set goals focused upon providing an equity and inclusivity for all students (Theoharis, 2007). The theory also heavily relies on the work of Furman (2012) who conceptualized social justice leadership being as action-oriented, persistent, and transformative. This characterization led to the inclusion of transformational leadership theory as part of the High Needs Schools conceptual framework.

According to Leithwood and Sun (2012), Transformational Leadership theory assumes a small number of specific leadership practices increases both the commitment and effort of organizational members toward achieving group goals. These practices include setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program, and they dovetail with the operational definition of social justice to create the tenets of the High Needs Schools conceptual framework (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* High Needs Schools Leadership

According to Berry, et al. (2019):

This model is more than combined principles from Transformational and Social Justice Leadership. Rather, it is a contextualization of the beliefs and behaviors of leaders in high needs schools. Without an intentional desire to understand the context of their schools and

communities, leaders in high needs schools may persistently pursue equity and inclusion, but they may not understand the core values that encourage students and communities to engage. Without this understanding, leaders will struggle to develop faculty and staff who can authentically connect with their students and communities.

## **Methods**

Through the use of qualitative case study methodology, researchers are able to explore or describe phenomena in context using a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The benefits to utilizing thematic analysis include that it works with a variety of research questions, can be used to analyze multiple types of data, and can produce data-driven analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

This qualitative case study presents data from one high needs high school in Cape Town, South Africa, utilizing thematic analysis through the lens of the High Needs Schools Leadership model. The school was purposefully selected because it met the criteria for high needs schools related to contextual factors including socioeconomic status and external challenges including a high crime rate. Data collected from the school included multiple interviews with the school's leaders and assistant leaders and concurrent document analysis. The case was bound by time and setting with all data collection taking place in the school highlighted during the 2017 calendar year.

## **Sample**

### **The Ganglands in Cape Town, South Africa**

The roots of gang activity in the urban ghetto of Cape Town, South Africa, are deeply tied to the socio-historical factors that have shaped its communities and illustrate the challenges of a socially, economically, and racially fragmented city. The area known as "The Ganglands" was earmarked as a relocation center for those forcibly removed from their communities by the legislation of the Group Areas Act of 1950. The communities from which people were removed were then declared to be 'white areas' and included communities such as Lower Claremont, Windermere, Newlands, Plumstead, Simon's Town, Tramway Road and District Six (Field, 2001). In addition to uprooting nuclear families from their homes virtually overnight, this legislation also decimated extended families, neighborhoods, and thus, entire societies.

While so called 'street gangs' existed in the original communities during the pre-apartheid era, as a result of the relocation, those gangs developed into sophisticated, violent crime rings which preside into the current day over various illegal activities including drug running, extortion, money laundering, robbery, and prostitution rings (Kinnes, 2000). Because these relocated communities, also known as "coloured" communities as a result of the demographics of the residents who inhabit them, remain at a distinct socio-economic disadvantage in the post-apartheid era, gang activity runs rampant within them. According to Wilson and Ramphela (1989) these gangs continue to wield great power because of the constant struggle individuals face between trying to provide for their families and the lack of legal resources available to them to do so within the relocation communities.

Gang members are able to appeal to families and young people, especially young boys, through seemingly harmless initial interactions. For instance, according to Bowers (2005),

They exploit the situation and where they would offer people money to buy electricity, to pay rent and in favour they will ... just innocently ask the person 'Listen this is not

everybody's business, but can you keep this parcel for me?' And that is how gangs get that kind of hold.

Because these gang members are frequently the only individuals within the community with disposable income, they are viewed by young people as community leaders. As members begin their relationships with these young people in seemingly harmless ways, it is difficult to break free of the hold they have on their communities. By the time the magnitude of the criminal activity has been unraveled, it is often too late for the young people to turn back. Add this to the lack of legal means by which people can make a living in these communities, and the stage is set for continued gang proliferation. In these contexts, the gang leaders and members become powerful role models as they propagate the message that there is money and, thus, social power vested in these illegal activities (Bowers, 2005).

The Ganglands provide the backdrop for the Manenberg School and serve as the homeland for the school's leader, Mrs. Ashra Norton. What follows is the story of how she, The Leadership College's courageous leader, has made a difference in the high needs community of Manenberg, Cape Town, South Africa.

### **The Leadership College Manenberg School**

The Leadership College opened in Manenberg in January, 2010, with forty learners (referred to as "leaders"). The school, also called TLC (The Leadership College) is a private school where leaders who are identified as showing academic promise are able to obtain an education inclusive of uniforms, books, and other materials free of charge. 100% of TLC's enrolled students receive financial aid to offset their schooling costs. Originally opened in a local Mosque, as the school grew, its leader, Mrs. Ashra Norton, began to look for alternative locations that could accommodate its growth. As a member of the Manenberg community, she knew that one key to the school's success was that it be located within the actual geographic footprint of the community, as previously, students who had shown strong academic promise were forced to attend schools in other areas of the city, often an hour or more away. In considering the best location for the school, she opted for a place that served as hallowed ground for the rival gangs in the community – the gangs' battlefield.

In deciding to place the school in this location, Mrs. Norton knew that she would have to gain the blessing of the local gang leaders if the school were to be successful. Over the course of several months, she met with each of them, one at a time, to obtain their support. Citing the need for a safe space for students to learn as well as the desire to honor the lives lost on all sides of the gang wars, Mrs. Norton plead her case. Ultimately, every gang leader agreed to allow her to build The Leadership College on the former battlefield. Currently, the school resides in this location and serves over 500 leaders.

TLC follows four core values which form the foundation of its educational program. These values include merit-based entry, leadership development, entrepreneurial training, and expertise in university and career placement. While the school was originally designed to address the needs of Muslim students, because the Manenberg community is now more diverse from a religious standpoint, students of faiths including Muslim, Christian, and non-denominational are currently enrolled in TLC.

Leadership development is a cornerstone of the student experience at TLC. This development includes modules throughout the curriculum as well as guest speakers and individual coaching sessions aimed at helping students internalize the school's core values and use them to

guide their matriculation. To this end, each student completes a Culminating Project during his or her final year at TLC, aimed at addressing an area of need within an African community.

Students also participate in entrepreneurial training throughout their time at TLC. Designed to give them the skills to create innovative solutions to challenging problems, this cornerstone aids students in developing the confidence required to succeed in entrepreneurial endeavors. It also introduces them to ways to motivate and lead that provides a strong counter narrative to the gang activity they encounter on the streets of their communities.

Finally, because students living in the Manenberg community have historically struggled with college and career placement beyond school, TLC offers students multiple pathways to success beyond their school experience. These include assistance with college application and scholarship processes and career counseling. TLC's career office maintains relationships with graduates in an effort to track student progress and give them ongoing support beyond their time at TLC.

### **Mrs. Ashra Norton, Founder, The Leadership College, Manenberg**

Ashra Norton founded TLC in January 2010. A lifelong resident of Cape Town, South Africa, hers was one of the first families forcibly relocated to the Manenberg area in 1966 as a result of the Group Areas Act of 1950. The act divided South African residential areas along racial lines with designated areas for Blacks, Whites, Indians, and Coloureds, and as a hers was a family of Indian descent, they were forced from their home. In sharing the story, she relayed,

As a young child, I can vividly remember the soldiers knocking on our family's door. We had only a short time to gather our belongings and load onto a box truck with other families from the area. We were a family of seven children, my mother, and my father. Before we were relocated, we lived in a house with a piano that was near a park. Afterwards, the government officials gave us the key to our new home, and we lived in a tiny, two bedroom flat. Ultimately, my father got ill, and our mother raised us on a disability grant.

Norton attended the Silverstream Primary and High schools. Although a strong student, she was not afforded the opportunity to attend university in her chosen field of pharmaceuticals, because in the 1980s, if an individual was non-white, his or her options were limited to the fields of education, social work, or nursing. Mrs. Norton ultimately opted to continue her studies in the field of education. At the time, the government offered scholarships or bursaries to coloured and black students for teaching.

During her studies, an early project on gangsterism and drugs solidified her resolve to use her platform as an educator to impact change in her community. As a part of that project, she had to interview all of the local gang leaders, leading her to better understand the contexts that lead individuals down that path. Additionally, the project showed her that many gang leaders were extremely intelligent and highly performing individuals whose skills had been directed in negative ways. While the initial outcome of her project lead her to obtain scholarships for promising students who were economically disadvantaged, there was an enormous shortcoming to the plan. Because it provided scholarships for strong students to attend high performing schools, this meant that those individuals were attending school outside their home communities. She ultimately determined that a more sustainable path to change was to create a school for high performing students within their own communities as doing so would both mitigate any barriers to attending the school and thus, the idea for TLC was born.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Community Understanding**

Perhaps one of the most fundamental elements of TLC's success is its leader has a comprehensive understanding of the struggles its students face in the community. The students living there face obstacles from poverty to cramped homes to lack of food and options to lack of professional role models. However, Norton leveraged these challenges as springboards for positive action. Norton shared, "Because I was bred in Manenberg I know about the yearning, especially by the children and the youth. We have brilliant children in this community and they have big dreams," (Arbarder, 2017). Because Norton grew up under similar circumstances, but at a time where even fewer options were available to people of color, she understands first-hand the impact that even simple graces can have on a student's trajectory. This empathic lens guides the decisions she makes on behalf of TLC's learners.

### **Value-Based Decision Making**

In considering TLC's successes, one might look to student performance as one indicator of impact. In 2016, the entire Manenberg area of Cape Town received 71 subject area distinctions, and 68 of those came from TLC. Further, while the average matric pass rate in Manenberg was 71%, TLC saw a 92% pass rate. While these numbers are impressive, they are not simply attributable to a strong class of students. Rather, they grow out of a context that includes targeted decision making aimed at fostering student success. As one example, Norton shared that students frequently arrive at the school's gates at 7:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning. They will spend their days sitting under a tree in the school yard and studying because the school offers them a safe place to do so. She shared,

You must keep in mind; these students live in 2m x 3m houses where they can't even walk straight up into because it's too low. There's no food, there's no mom, no dad. They come here and feel tranquility and peace.

Her decision to open the school on a Saturday in order for students to have a safe place to study stems from her deep understanding of the challenges of trying to do so in the cramped homes that surround the school. Add to this a lack of parent support due to work schedules or absenteeism, homes that are overcrowded with multiple family members, and additional factors including the constant pull of illegal activity on the streets, and the decision to open the school on the weekend became an easy, low cost way to address a need with dignity.

### **Instructional Considerations and Equity**

In creating the instructional environment for TLC, Norton worked to organize the school in such a way that it met the needs of the whole child while simultaneously addressing areas that might inhibit achievement, and in so doing, created an environment conducive to academic attainment. One of the school's core values, merit-based entry, ensures that each child educated at TLC has the academic ability to meet the school's rigorous instructional expectations. However, once a child is accepted into TLC, additional supports including a community-based teaching force, a tailored instructional day, and material aids are put into place to further ensure success.

Because of TLC's high academic achievement, staff turnover is not a significant issue. However, when openings do arise, Norton is committed to employing the highest quality staff to meet student needs. To this end, while vacancies are met with numerous applicants from throughout Cape Town, the majority of TLC staff members are lifelong Manenberg residents who both understand the unique challenges of the area and who are committed to the school's ongoing role in the community. By leaning heavily on staff members who are grounded in Manenberg, TLC offers the students role models beyond gang leaders. This model also affords staff members the opportunity to continue to live in the community while building their careers in a high-performing environment.

The school meets the instructional needs of students through an innovative organization of the academic day. TLC separates students by gender for the majority of their classes in order to mitigate any distractions that heterogeneous classes might foster. The school day also includes breaks for snacks and meals as well as features such as prayer breaks for students of the Muslim faith. The inclusion of each of these elements provides a structure for academic success by acknowledging and addressing the differentiated needs of the students.

Every TLC child receives a blazer, full school uniform, and school supplies at no cost to the families. Additionally, the school offers a feeding scheme and even includes social services such as mental health support, often facilitated through the pro bono work of professionals, as part of the school's educational package. However, Norton is quick to point out that among the most important elements of maintaining a strong school culture is ensuring that all supports are offered in a manner that affords the families' dignity. As one example of this, Norton shared how they provide for students needing extra assistance with feeding during the school day.

I insist that we maintain people's dignity. I don't like soup kitchens where people have to stand in line, because those strip people of their humanity. Therefore, we do it very discreetly. We make the sandwiches, give them to the class teacher and they'll know who the children needing help are. They'll slip the sandwiches into the children's bags as if it comes from home.

This commitment to helping students while maintaining their dignity grows from equity focused decision making that undoubtedly stems from Norton's own experience as a child. When one's dignity has been erased, there is much rebuilding that must be done in order to help that individual hold self-efficacy. By offering supports to students and families in a way that leaves their dignity intact, TLC is able to provide for needs while at the same time building a school and community structure that is grounded in the belief that every student is valuable and should be met with the specific supports he or she needs.

## **Persistence**

Gangs and drugs are a daily reality for the children who attend TLC. For instance, one commonly shared story is that of a young boy who was walking to school when an adult was shot to death several feet in front of him as a part of the area's gang activity. The boy actually stepped over the man's dead body and continued onto school. This context stands in sharp contrast to the inner walls of the TLC campus where there is an air of calm. Norton shared,

I'll show you the spot that was the war zone for the two rival gangs, where the Americans and the Hard Livings fought it out. That is now where we have about 14 classrooms. These are places where students not only feel safe, but where they also understand the magnitude of the history that took place here. Now, they are making a new history for Manenberg on this same ground.

Norton's own persistence, both in her belief of the importance of providing a rigorous schooling option for high performing students in their home community of Manenberg and in working with the area's gang leaders in order to make this belief a reality, serve as a model for other leaders. Because she refused the idea that the best way to educate these students was to remove them from their community, she has been able to build and sustain a school that serves as a beacon of hope while at the same time, embracing the history of Manenberg.

### **Conclusion**

This paper presented the characteristics of leadership that enabled student success attributed to one leader of a high needs, high-performing school in the Ganglands area of Cape Town, South Africa, utilizing a case study methodology following the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) research protocol. Literature reviewed highlighted the context specific to high needs schools in South Africa, including historical context, leadership characteristics, instructional considerations, and implications for school culture. Findings revealed the importance of several key themes including: 1) Community Understanding, 2) Value-Based Decision Making, 3) Instructional Considerations and Equity, and 4) Persistence, and showed that courageous leadership, when coupled with contextualized understanding, can have lasting, positive impacts on students. By considering the findings of this study, system and school leaders can enhance their awareness of factors with the greatest potential to significantly and positively impact educational settings for students in high needs schools.

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