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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Abstract: This background paper develops a case for adopting an indigenous approach to researching school leadership in Botswana. As an upper middle-income country Botswana has a stronger economy than many of its neighbours in the region, yet with respect to schooling it faces similar challenges which result from the ongoing legacies of colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Tikly 2020). Research has demonstrated profound tensions and contradictions within the school system, including fundamental disagreements about the purposes of education from traditional and Eurocentric perspectives (Tabulawa, 2003; Pheko & Linchwe II, 2007), and centralised policy decisions which overlook local realities in terms of language, curriculum, pedagogy and the school calendar (Tabulawa 2004, 2013; Pheko & Linchwe II 2007; Pheko 2008; Pansiri 2011; Mokibelo 2016). As we argue in this paper, the Covid-19 pandemic provides fertile ground for exploring school leadership in Botswana from an indigenous perspective. This background paper draws on African, indigenous and decolonial scholarship to outline an agenda and approach for researching school leadership in this context.

Key words: African education; Botswana; decolonising education; decolonising research; distributed leadership; indigenous research methods; school leadership; Ubuntu

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Introduction

This background paper develops a case for an exploratory study of school leadership in Botswana based on the principles and strategies of postcolonial indigenous research (Chilisa 2019). It outlines the rationale and design of the proposed study, which involves qualitative research in four Junior Secondary School communities in Botswana during the Covid-19 pandemic. Theoretically, the study draws from postcolonial, indigenous and decolonial scholarship (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Chilisa 2019; Tikly 2020; Dei & Adhami 2022), critical leadership studies (Evans 2022), and conceptualisations of leadership in education which extend beyond bureaucratic norms, to view leadership as a socially distributed practice (Uhl-Bien 2006; Grant, 2017; Harris et al. 2021). The paper starts by presenting the theoretical work which informs this study. After this, we outline key elements of the design of our empirical study which aims to advance understandings of school leadership in Botswana, with wider implications for policy, practice and research.

Coloniality in African school leadership

Recent years have seen growing attention to the ways in which *educational leadership* is shaped by ‘coloniality’, or the extension of colonial systems of domination into the postcolonial era (Khalifa et al. 2019; Elonga Mboyo 2021; Tikly et al. 2022; Bainazarov et al. 2022). As Grosfogel (2008) has observed, the withdrawal of colonial authorities in the mid-20th Century did not result in full decolonisation:

“The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same ‘colonial power matrix.’” (p219)

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) has proposed three dimensions of coloniality with continued relevance on the African continent:

- *Coloniality of power* – refers to asymmetrical relations which, at the global level, render African states politically and economically subordinate to Western powers; and at the national level, advance the interests of indigenous elites over ordinary citizens. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni has argued, “the founding fathers of African postcolonial states did not restructure inherited colonial states to make them accountable to the African people” (ibid., p6-7). The prevalence of extractive capitalism and disempowering forms of centralised authority on the continent reflect these aspect of coloniality.
- *Coloniality of knowledge* – refers to the domination of Eurocentric and Anglo-American perspectives and epistemologies over alternative conceptions of the world, in ways which devalue, or seek to silence or erase indigenous worldviews, and normalise oppressive relations (de Sousa Santos 2014).
- *Coloniality of being* – refers to the dehumanising effects of the conditions above; how they are experienced, materially and emotionally.

For the present study, Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2013) ideas are helpful for understanding the ways in which educational leadership itself, as a field of scholarship and practice, has been a

vehicle of coloniality on the African continent. We outline this case in brief, before considering entry points for responding to this in the context of school leadership research in Botswana.

With regard to the *coloniality of power*, the introduction of mass schooling during the age of empire was a key element of the colonial apparatus. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) has argued: "the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of chalk and the blackboard" (p9). Following violent territorial expansion, schooling was a means of mobilising Africans in the service of colonial interests, producing a subservient workforce with the white-collar skills needed to administer the colonial state (Nyerere, 1968). Epistemicide, or the attempt to erase indigenous values, knowledge and languages was an explicit function of schooling in this era, as reflected in the injunction to "*kill the Indian but save the man*", which became a school motto in settler states (Marsh et al. 2022, p689). The principal was the local representative of authoritarian rule, operating with delegated authority to implement centrally-developed policies and curricula according to European designs, which were intended to "wipe [out] Indigenous cultures, norms, languages, spiritualities, and epistemologies" (Khalifa et al. 2019, p572). As such, leadership structures in school were bureaucratic and authoritarian, aimed at securing compliance with the agendas of higherups (Harber & Davies 1997). In the decades since Independence many of these characteristics of leadership have endured in African schools. Despite the global shift towards decentralisation in education, and the widespread national-level adoption of policies for school-based management (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Burns & Köster 2016), many schools in the region retain strong top-down accountability structures with limited downward accountability to students and their communities, and limited room for professional discretion or school-level decision-making in key areas such as staffing and curricula (Majgaard & Mingat 2012; Mitchell 2017; Prew 2018; Tikly et al. 2022). In Botswana, research has shown how centralised decision-making with respect to languages, curricula and the school calendar tends to exacerbate existing social inequalities and power asymmetries, as the national model of schooling fails to meet the needs of historically marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities, and those from traditional farming and fishing communities (Pansiri 2011; Mokibelo 2016).

The *coloniality of knowledge* operates across multiple, interconnected domains with respect to leadership in African schools. The global education policy space is dominated by powerful Northern institutions whose preferred policy instruments and solutions tend to reflect Eurocentric perspectives and political agendas (Verger et al. 2018; Asgedom et al. 2019). In relation to school leadership policy, Eacott and Asuga (2014) have noted that:

"many post-colonial reforms are in fact providing the mechanisms through which Anglophone constructs are becoming universal and mobilized at the expense of indigenous constructs...[S]chool leadership preparation and development is serving as a mechanism for the universalizing of Anglophone constructs of leadership [,] despite substantive rhetoric in policy and scholarship that context, or localization of knowledge, matters" (p920)

Globally, scholarship in the field of education leadership is dominated by Northern researchers, with “the vast majority of published sources of knowledge [deriving] from a limited set of English-speaking, largely Western, Anglo-American societies” (Hallinger et al. 2019, p.363). Alongside its quantitative dominance in research publications, much of the foundational, theoretical work also derives from these contexts, so that even original work by African-based researchers is often framed using Anglo-American leadership theory (Eacott & Asuga 2014; Moorosi 2021). Beninese philosopher Hountondji (1997) describes this as a process of “scientific extraversion”, whereby African-based researchers orient their work towards Northern scholarship, as both an outcome and a cause of the “howling absence of [endogenous] theoretical work” (ibid., p2).

Developing a decolonial perspective on leadership in African schools

Despite the gloominess of the macrolevel picture outlined above, recent years have seen promising groundwork and some progress in efforts to challenge coloniality in school leadership research, policy and practice. This includes a growing body of school leadership research which is explicitly grounded in decolonial and indigenous perspectives (e.g. Pheko & Linchwe II 2008; Elonga Mboyo 2019; Khalifa et al. 2019), special issues in leadership journals such as *Educational Administration Quarterly* (2022, Volume 58, Issue 5) and *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership* (2021, Volume 6, Issue 3), and efforts to map the school leadership research evidence base in Africa (Eacott & Asuga 2014; Asuga et al. 2016; Hallinger 2019).

Developing an Afrocentric research perspective on school leadership requires careful attention to its philosophical and linguistic bases. As indicated above, an enduring challenge for African schooling is the reliance on models developed in Anglo-American contexts which implicitly serve as “reference societies” (Crossley, 2019) or exemplars to be emulated, in ways which downplay legitimate differences in values and perspective. Research which is sensitive to African worldviews has highlighted a collectivist orientation which stands in contrast to the “ontological individualism” of Eurocentric research traditions (Komatsu et al. 2021). A common reference point and example of this is the Southern African notion of Ubuntu, a communitarian belief system reflected in the maxim: “*I am because we are*”. Ugandan social theorist Sylvia Tamale (2020) has explained the continued relevance of this collectivist orientation in the postcolonial era:

“The shared values of communal life and group solidarity, embedded in the philosophical concept of Ubuntu...differentiate African people from modern Euro-American societies...[E]ven as individualism has penetrated the market-driven societies of neoliberal Africa, many fundamental aspects of African lives remain anchored in collective relationships and efficacy...where individuals are part of a unity that is interdependent and mutually beneficial.” (p.12).

In recent years a growing number of studies have taken the collectivist orientation as a starting point for examining leadership practices in African schools. For example, Elonga Mboyo (2019) considers the ways in which primary school principals in the Democratic Republic of Congo implicitly draw on the Ubuntu ethical framework as a means of

understanding and arbitrating between competing demands on schools' limited resources. Research has also shown how the collective orientation in the region can distinguish leadership roles and responsibilities in African schools from the globally dominant Anglo-American model. For example, Pheko and Kgosi Linchwe II (2008) explore the extent of alignment between traditional and bureaucratic conceptualisations of leadership in Botswana. Their work reveals fundamental tensions between individualised, position-based authority characteristic of schools as bureaucracies, and the sense of collective responsibility and agency favoured by teachers. The expectation of collective agency and downward accountability is captured by the Setswana proverb "*kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*", meaning a leader only exists through the consent of the community. Similarly, a recent synthesis of research exploring peer support practices in African schools found a basic expectation of mutual support and shared responsibility amongst students, who routinely take on roles and responsibilities in relation to the access and learning of their peers (Mitchell 2023). Carrying such delegated responsibilities for the proper functioning of a school is an aspect of management (Connolly et al. 2017), and this emphasis given to students' social *responsibilities* (over their individual rights) challenges mainstream accounts and expectations about the roles of different stakeholder groups within a school community (Mitchell 2023). Although we have focused exclusively on African research here, a recent meta-analysis identifies a collectivist orientation as a recurrent feature of indigenous and decolonising school leadership around the world (Khalifa et al. 2019).

The account above raises familiar concepts from the field of educational leadership, such as the view of leadership as a *practice* or process of social influence which emerges through the relationships and interactions of diverse stakeholder groups, including those without position-based authority (Uhl-Bien 2006; Harris et al. 2021), and the notion of distributed leadership, as a model of shared or collective leadership, where "the emphasis is upon *interdependent* interactions rather than individual and independent actions" (Harris et al. 2021, p439). While these ideas have gained some traction in school leadership research in the region (e.g. Mbugua & Rarieya 2014; Mitchell 2017), most empirical studies take an individualised, position-based view of leadership, with the majority (62.3%) focusing on the principal (Asuga et al. 2016). Moreover, there has been limited work to understand the participation and influence of different stakeholder groups within school communities. Doing so requires attending to the interactions and dynamics within school communities in relation to specific events or decisions, and paying particular attention to the ways in which language is used, such as proverbs, idioms and metaphors as carriers of indigenous knowledge (Banda & Banda, 2008; Pheko & Linchwe II 2008; Nhlekisana, 2016).

Responding to crises: an indigenous perspective on leadership in schools during the Covid-19 pandemic

In the paper so far we have established the rationale for an indigenous approach to researching leadership in African schools, and outlined the key elements of this. In this section, we describe the design of an original empirical study of leadership at junior secondary schools in Botswana during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In several ways, the Covid-19 pandemic provides fertile ground for studying school leadership in Botswana from an indigenous perspective.¹ Firstly, due to its economic status as an upper middle-income country, Botswana has limited access to Official Development Assistance (ODA) (Calleja & Prizzon 2019) and as a consequence has less involvement from external actors and agencies than many of its neighbours in the region (Mitchell et al. 2022). Secondly, although the education system is highly centralised, the public health crisis led to gaps in, and disruptions to, the flow of central guidance from government ministries and departments to schools. As such, there is a distinct opportunity for exploring localised and idiosyncratic priorities and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic within school communities. As we have noted already, the national school system in Botswana has received particular criticism for its lack of contextual sensitivity (Pansiri 2011; Mokibelo 2016), and we do not assume that the absence of clear central directives led to a dramatic reversal in circumstances and relationships. Indeed, as Khalifa et al. (2019) have noted:

“colonizing educational leadership practices...are so systemically embedded in schools that leaders will automatically reproduce them unless intentionally contested” (p598)

However, we anticipate that the necessity for local adaptation and innovation in responding to the pandemic (e.g. Al-Fadala et al. 2021) will prove to be a productive space for exploring the dynamics of leadership in this context. In developing a theorised account of the agendas, participation and influence of different stakeholder groups, we seek to contribute an African model of school leadership during crises as a means of informing wider education policy, practice and research debates.

The questions guiding this study relate to *schools’ responses to the Covid-19 pandemic*, and *the participation and influence of different school-level stakeholders in decision-making around this*. We have focused the inquiry on junior secondary schools, marking the final years of compulsory basic education in Botswana. At this age, there is an expectation of student involvement in processes of school leadership, and other relevant stakeholder groups include principals and the senior leadership team, health and safety officers, parent and teacher representatives from school governance structures, and key figures within the community such as the village chiefs (*dikgosi*). Fieldwork will be conducted at four schools and associated villages in the Southern and North-East regions, based on the principles of indigenous research and African community-based participatory research (Ibhakewanlan & McGrath 2015; Chilisa 2019). Communities’ accounts of school leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic will be discussed in Setswana through ‘talking circles’ according to norms reflected in Botswana’s *Kgotla* system.

The study itself takes place through a partnership between researchers at the University of Botswana and University of Bristol, with sponsorship from the Perivoli Africa Research

¹ Research evidence on school leadership during this crisis in Botswana is almost entirely absent. For example, in June 2022 we searched the Scopus academic database to identify relevant peer-reviewed studies of school leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic. Of 2973 publications around the world, none related to the Botswana context.

Centre. It is part of a wider initiative to address historic inequities in international research partnerships through the funding of African-led research (Gebremariam et al. 2023).

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