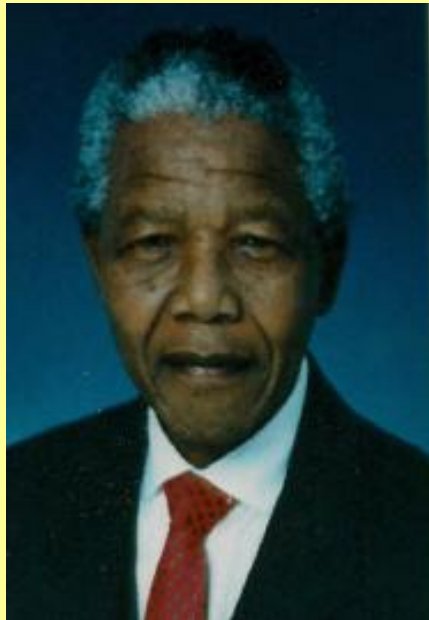


A Tribute to Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela: A Transformative Educational Leader

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” - Nelson Mandela -

Leaders encourage, enable, and empower others to reach shared goals. Nelson Mandela, who passed away on December 5, 2013, was clearly an outstanding leader. Over the past week, people from around the globe have celebrated the tremendous contribution that he made as an ANC organizer, freedom fighter, moral voice for democracy, and ultimately the first freely-elected President of South Africa, and subsequently as an illustrious international statesman.



In this tribute to Nelson Mandela, I celebrate the significant contributions he made as a transformative educational leader. As someone interested in the development of educational leadership expertise, I think that there are some very valuable lessons to learn by viewing Nelson Mandela not only as a great political leader but also as an educational leader.

Four key aspects of his leadership in education merit our consideration; namely, the meaningful shared educational vision that he promoted, the dedicated leadership network of educational leaders he empowered, the initiation of a culture of learning and teaching, and his personal leadership style that allowed him to have such an enormous impact on his country and the world. Let us take a closer look at each of these pillars.

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela

The First Pillar: A Shared Vision of Democratic Education

First, Nelson Mandela's educational leadership was based on a set of strongly held moral convictions. As the following textbox quote from Anthony Sampson's *Mandela: The Authorized Biography*, shows, as early as 1964, at the Rivonia Trial, in which he was tried and then sentenced to life in prison, Nelson Mandela was deeply committed to the establishment of a free, democratic and inclusive South Africa. This deeply held commitment provided the underlying moral purpose for all of his educational leadership efforts.

“During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities.” He paused and looked at the judge: “It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve.” Then dropping his voice, he concluded: “But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die” (Sampson, 1999, p.193).

As his lifelong friend and biographer, Mary Benson, reports in her insightful book, *Nelson Mandela*, “On Sunday 11 February 1990, hand-in-hand with his wife, Nelson Mandela walked through the prison gate. Gray-haired, very tall, upright and slim, he was greeted by wildly rejoicing crowds” (Benson, 1990, p. 266). As Mary Benson so aptly notes, in his televised speech to the world, he included the same words that he had used 27 years earlier at the Rivonia Trial. Inaugurated as President in 1994, his moral vision would serve as a guiding light in his efforts to enhance education within South Africa.

Pillar Two: Developing a Culture of Learning and Teaching

If a deep commitment to a free, democratic and inclusive South Africa was the first pillar, the second was his strong belief in the power of education. As the lead quote for this essay shows, Mandela appreciated the central role that education plays in the life of a nation, especially one that had suffered from the debilitating effects of apartheid. As the following textbox quote indicates, he deeply understood that the teaching-learning process was the key to reconciliation and the long-term healing that the South African people so urgently needed.

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite” (Mandela, 1994, p. 749).

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela

His understanding of the central role that education plays in the life of a nation prompted him to think strategically about how it could be used. As a superb educational strategist, within a relatively short time, he facilitated the development of legislation entitled the South African Schools Act (1996) that laid out a comprehensive plan to address the severe educational inequalities that existed under the apartheid system. The textbox below shares some of the rationale from the preamble of the Act and gives some sense of the enormous educational change challenge that Nelson Mandela and his colleagues faced at that time.

WHEREAS the achievement of democracy in South Africa has consigned to history the past system of education which was based on racial inequality and segregation; and

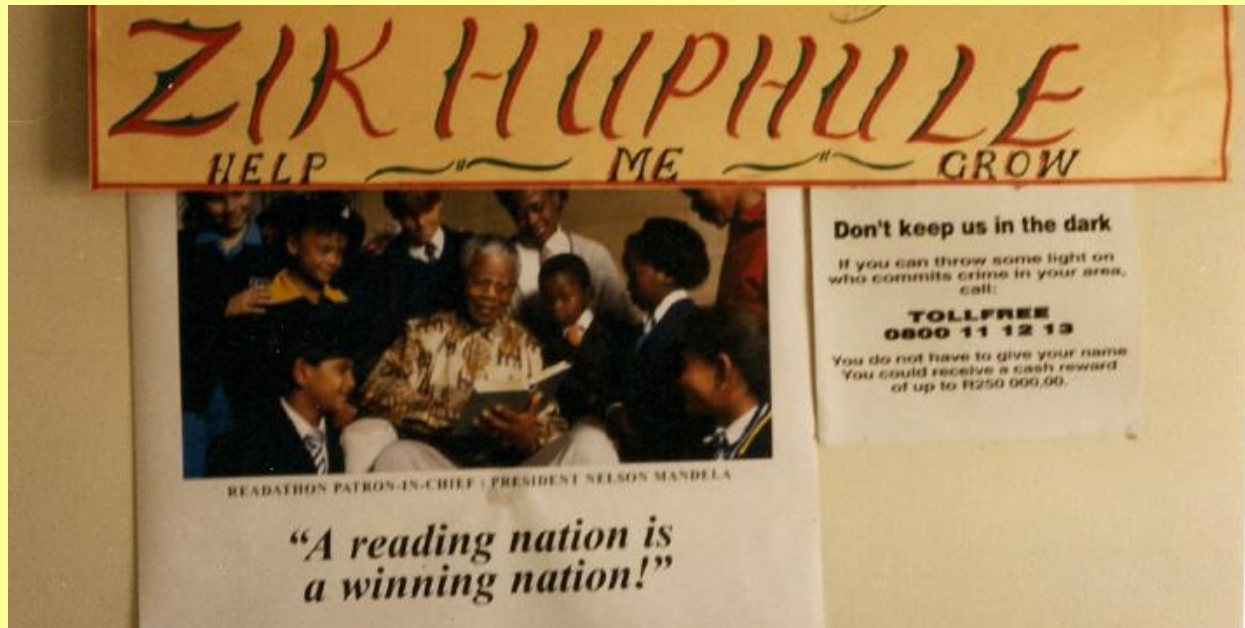
WHEREAS this country requires a new national system for schools which will redress past injustices in educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people's talents and capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, contribute to the eradication of poverty and the economic well-being of society, protect and advance our diverse cultures and languages, uphold the rights of all learners, parents and educators, and promote their acceptance of responsibility for the organisation, governance and funding of schools in partnership with the State (South African Schools Act, 1996, p. 1)

During discussions with his ANC colleagues and thoughtful educational policy makers, Mandela quickly came to realize that the apartheid regime had generated a culture of resistance to education rather than a culture of learning that promoted it. Within a short time, he actively supported the goal of establishing a culture of learning and teaching within the schools of newly-free South Africa.

In March 1997, during a speech at the JB Simelane High School in Soweto, he announced the start of a national campaign to foster a culture of teaching and learning. The initiative was co-ordinated by a highly respected Catholic priest, Father Smangaliso Mikhathshawa, who had personally suffered house arrest and torture during the apartheid regime. As the Deputy Minister of Education, he was in a position to work well with the provinces, while accessing national support for the campaign.

In addition to the written documents, seminars, and related press releases, as the following picture shows, President Mandela, personally modeled the cultural change process both in his speeches and via the images that were shared in the press as well as on classroom walls throughout South Africa. In fact, the photo that I captured of the poster created by the pupils of Zikhuphule Primary School in Middelburg, Mpumalanga, shows that as early as September 1995, President Nelson Mandela, as the Readathon Patron-in-Chief, was modeling the importance of reading, which is so much a part of a culture of learning.

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela



Nelson Mandela and his colleagues clearly understood the strategic importance of establishing a collaborative and positive culture and the challenge of actually implementing it. To support the campaign, they took steps to change the way schools were managed based on the most up-to-date leadership practices. The informative document, *Changing management to manage change* (1996), published by the National Department of Education in Pretoria underscores the commitment they made to facilitating the establishment of a culture of learning and teaching at that time. Unfortunately, as recent media reports have shown, the challenge of establishing a positive culture of learning and teaching remains a pressing one.

Pillar Three: A Dedicated Leadership Network

As noted above, Nelson Mandela and his colleagues, understood the importance of developing a meaningful shared vision and the critical need of establishing a culture of learning and teaching within the schools; however, they also recognized the central role that educational leaders, at the national, provincial, and school level played in trying to implement these crucial goals and objectives.

In the late ninety-nineties, I was privileged to meet a number of key educational leaders who worked at the national and provincial levels through my involvement with the Canada - South Africa Education Management Program. Established in 1995, the program was supported by the Canadian International Development Agency for a five year period. Colleagues from McGill's Faculty of Education and the Quebec school system, provided management training and support to educational leaders at the national level as well as in the following three provinces: Gauteng, Free State, and Mpumalanga.

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela

In a series of meetings with national and provincial leaders, I was impressed by their dedication, expertise, and willingness to learn from leadership practices in other jurisdictions. I also had the opportunity to visit many schools, ranging from sadly impoverished farm schools, to under-financed primary and secondary schools, where we were greeted with smiling students and interested teachers.

I also had the opportunity to work closely with principals and vice-principals in several provinces. I was deeply moved by the distressing stories that they shared about their personal and professional experiences under the apartheid regime. I will always remember one morning in Middelburg, Mpumalanga when I had completed a rather lengthy, and I hope not too boring seminar, when forty or so school administrators closed the session by singing their beautiful national anthem, Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika, God Bless Africa. It was one of the most moving experiences that I have had as a teacher and one that symbolized to me the deep commitment of our South African colleagues to overcome the enormous challenges that they were facing and are still facing.

Pillar Four: A Humble, Yet Persuasive, Leadership Style

The above three pillars of Nelson Mandela's leadership, speak to the purpose, challenges, and educational strategies that he and his colleagues established in post-apartheid South Africa. In closing it is important to appreciate that his personal style of leadership allowed him to encourage, enable and empower his colleagues and help move them towards the goal of establishing a democratic, free, and inclusive educational system.

As noted above, a significant part of his success was his ability to make strategic decisions and use his superb powers of persuasion to encourage the diverse network of educators to take ownership for the initiatives that he began.

Clearly, he was a charismatic and dynamic person who was viewed by his peers as a leader throughout his life. At the same time, part of his personal appeal was his ability to listen, and work well with others so that he could get things done.

His humility as a leader was one of the great secrets of his success. In fact, as the final textbox shows, he believed in leading from behind. At the same time, he recognized that leading from behind was especially effective when things were going well; however, on several occasions, he also stressed that in the midst of difficulties, it was essential for leaders to step forward and take responsibility for the situation and lead from in front, which, of course, he did on many occasions.

As a leader, I have always followed the principles I first saw demonstrated by the regent at the Great Place. I have always endeavoured to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my opinion. Oftentimes, my own opinion will simply represent a consensus of what I heard in the discussion. I always remember the regent's axiom, a leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go on ahead, whereupon, the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind (Mandela, 1994, p. 25-26).

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela

It was this mix of personal charisma, driving moral purpose, strategic decision-making and personal leadership style that I believe enabled him to be such an outstanding political leader and, a transformative educational leader. South Africa and the world are fortunate that he was with us and I, like countless others, mourn his passing but celebrate the life of this outstanding leader.

Educational Leadership Lessons from Nelson Mandela

So what educational leadership lessons can we learn from the life of this great man? First, collaboratively develop a meaningful, inclusive and ethical shared vision (Fullan, 2003; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Second, foster the establishment of a collaborative culture of lifelong learning (Bryk, 2010; Killion & Roy, 2009; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Third, enable and empower a distributed leadership network to implement the vision and facilitate learning (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Lambert, 1998; MacBeath, 2005). Fourth, adopt a leadership style that encourages others to make a contribution and allows them to develop a sense of ownership that is in line with a democratic vision of education (Lambert, 2008; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Wall, 2008).

As one can readily note, Nelson Mandela was using positive and productive leadership methods that are congruent with recent educational leadership scholarship.

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A Tribute to Nelson Mandela

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