



Investigating how school leaders negotiate their role as instructional leaders in secondary schools in Mauritius

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Abstract: *This study aims to investigate how school leaders negotiate their role as instructional leaders. A qualitative research approach was chosen and data was collected from school leaders (n=6) by means of an interview. Major findings include the tensions which school leaders feel when they conduct class visits and the lack of understanding which they feel exists in relation to what an instructional leader is supposed to do. School leaders recognise the importance of instructional leadership but they also feel that they have not been fully prepared to endorse that role. Chief development needs as observed by school leaders include better training, more tools, and time to develop the skills of an instructional leader.*

Keywords: *Instructional leadership, school leader*

I. Introduction

Instructional leadership has been used in many educational systems and it is now that we are talking of its use in schools in Mauritius. In Mauritius, education is free and compulsory from the age of 3 to the age of 16. Students spend 2 years in pre-primary, 6 years in primary and 7 years in secondary. Since education is free and students have free transport to come to school and the government also pays the examinations fees for students taking part in school certificate and higher school certificate, there is usually high expectations on schools to perform well. Coupled with these, the educational authorities have just set up a Quality Assurance and Inspection Division whose mandate is to ensure that schools deliver quality "education".

There is thus a lot of pressure on the school leaders to be more involved with what is going on in the classroom. Additionally, the importance of the school leader on the performance of a school cannot be ignored. As noted by Day et al (2010) "school leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions" (p.3). They are also expected to be more visible in the classroom and to guide teachers in their practice. As mentioned by Ingvarson, Anderson, Gronn and Jackson (2006) "In recent years, the context within which school leaders work has been characterised by increasing complexity in expectations for school leaders and greater demands for accountability" (p.9). They also talked about the "intensification" of school leaders' work and the impact that it is having on their leadership. Coupled with that the call for accountability requires school leaders to review their leadership. As they embrace instructional leadership, school leaders are stepping out of their comfort zone and are treading on new grounds.

At the same time, school leaders cannot forget that they impact on students' performance. This is described by Leithwood and Seashore-Louis (2012) who claimed that "to date, we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" (p.3). So we see that the school leader is an important figure in the school. A review of the literature on school leadership also points to the fact that the school leader must be able to display certain predispositions. He/she must be "as great a teacher [as] your teachers, as great a learner as your teachers, and the person who provides the goalposts for excellence" (Hattie, 2002, p.8). This puts a lot of pressure on what school leaders are supposed to do and how they are supposed to be. Consequently, there is reason to focus attention on how the school leader negotiates his/her role as an instructional leader. Knowledge gathered from this study can be used to review the training programmes for aspiring and practicing school leaders in Mauritius. It will also help to advocate that practicing school leaders attend workshops and seminars on this issue.

II. Statement of the problem

In Mauritius, there is now renewed interest for instructional leadership as the educational authorities are going for standard-based accountability and there is also increasing demands that school leaders be held responsible for how students perform at school (Hallinger, 2005). They have just set up a Quality Assurance and Inspection Division which will be responsible to monitor the quality of teaching and learning in schools. At the same time, schools are called upon to provide evidence of students' success. Consequently, school leaders are expected to

take up the role of the instructional leader. Hence it is felt relevant to investigate how school leaders negotiate their role as instructional leaders.

III. Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate how school leaders negotiate their role as instructional leaders.

IV. Literature review

A. Definition of instructional leadership

The concept of instructional leadership is not new. It has existed decades ago, but has lost its importance as time went by. However, as there is now a system which puts a lot of emphasis on providing evidence of students' achievement (Hattie, 2008), the concept of instructional leadership has been revamped. Hattie (2012) defines instructional leaders as "Principals who have their major focus on creating a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high teacher expectations for teachers and students" (p. 84). This definition encompasses a wide array of actions which an instructional leader does.

B. Uses of instructional leadership at school.

In fact, instructional leadership encompasses a series of activities which the leader performs (Robinson, 2010). An instructional leader determines the objectives and prospects of the school. The school leader needs to determine in which direction he/she wants the school to move. He/she must also be aware of the environment in which it is operating and act accordingly. This will involve developing a shared vision and determining how to fulfill it (Cotton, 2003, Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

The school leaders also ensure that resources are made available to achieve them. This involves helping teachers meet their instructional needs. School leaders would thus be "mobilising resources" (Andrews, Soder & Jacoby, 1986). As school leaders attend to the instructional needs of their teachers, they can ensure that an efficient use of these resources is done in order to achieve maximum student achievement.

Furthermore, the leader is also involved in teaching and learning by being directly involved in planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching. As mentioned by Robinson et al. (2009) "[the] more leaders focus their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater is their influence and impact in terms of improved student outcomes" (p.28). This implies that the school leaders would be visiting classrooms for instructional purposes. He/she would be seen in classrooms.

He/she is involved in curriculum design, implementation and evaluation (Cooper et al. 2005; Cotton, 2003, Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The school leaders also use data in order to adjust the curriculum or its implementation in order to suit the needs of the learners (Fullan, 2005; Guskey, 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This can even lead to combined efforts to design focused instructional approaches and strategies to meet the needs of the learners.

Moreover, he/she also encourages teachers to go for professional development and even organises such activities. Here mentioned should be made to school leaders leading a learning community (Fullan, 2002; Marzano et al. 2005). The school leaders would be using data and feedback from teachers in order to determine the professional developmental needs of teachers and would attend to these needs. It was also found that school leaders might need further training to "leading the professional development of others" (Earley et al., 2002).

Additionally, he/she works in ways which will ensure a conducive learning environment. This involves working on the school culture and climate. The school leaders work to be providing praise for effective teaching. Rules and regulations would be clear and concise. Collaboration and cooperation are privileged through open and free communication.

V. Methodology

The objective of this study was to investigate how school leaders negotiate their role as instructional leaders. Consequently, a qualitative research design was selected as is well suited to the study of the experiences of school leaders (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

Data has been collected from those school leaders (n =6) who are following a course in educational leadership and who have been exposed to instructional leadership. Furthermore, this small sample allowed in depth study of the phenomenon and is adequate for the type of research undertaken (Patton, 2002).

Interviews were conducted (Patton, 2002). This allowed for the emergence of 'thick description' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and for the interviewer to ask more questions to clarify understanding. Furthermore, the transcripts were analysed and emergent categories were found.

VI. Discussion on emergent categories

A. Knowledge

All the six participants explained that they dreaded this exercise and they did not know exactly what they would have to do in class and how the teachers would take it. Participant E explained that a session or two on instructional leadership is not enough to convert them into instructional leaders. Yet Fullan (2002) and Marzano

et al. (2005) have found that as an instructional leader, the school leader leads a learning community. Hence although the school leaders have the basic knowledge of instructional leadership they still need to explore the concept of instructional leadership and find out how to make a most effective use of it.

B. The outsider

Additionally, participant C revealed that he was “not at ease” and felt like an “intruder”. This is also how participant D must have felt as the teacher “kept looking at him as if looking for approval”. The teacher also wanted to know what the school leader was writing down. One participant mentioned that the classroom atmosphere was “heavy”. This is far away from the findings of Cotton (2003) and Leithwood et al. (2004) who found that sharing leadership creates the kind of collaboration and relationship which is open and non-judgemental.

C. Paperwork

One participant explained that he has “a lot of paperwork” and he is thus “very busy”. All the participants mentioned the fact that they like to conduct class visit, plan curriculum with teachers but they also felt that priority must be given to office work. Participant A nicely summarised that element by saying that “at least in my office, I know what I am doing!”. However, an instructional leader is involved in monitoring curriculum and instruction and is involved in unpacking the curriculum with the teachers and making instruction more relevant to the learners as supported by Marzano et al. (2005).

D. Not enough time to analyse and discuss instruction with teachers

Furthermore, it was felt that even when school leaders do find the time to conduct class visits, they do not have enough time to analyse and discuss instruction with teachers. Participants A and B explained that they have to visit teachers and fill in a report. However, participant A explained that apart from that he does not find time for feedback and follow up visits. Yet, as an instructional leader, the school leader is involved in discussing the curriculum implementation and how lessons are conducted. There is need to ensure that while discussing with the teachers, attention is given to ensure that the learning experiences which are essential for the learners are available (Marzano et al. 2005).

E. Resource persons – experts

Five participants explained that they have invited resource persons to conduct seminars, intensive workshops so as to provide their teachers on the spot further training and to be exposed to new knowledge. Participant C mentioned the fact that he feels that ‘my teachers will gain more if they were to listen to an expert!’. This supports the claim that the school leader creates a learning community and attends to the needs of the learners (Marzano et al. 2005).

F. Knowledge of the subject matter.

Participants explained that they have moved from being teachers to school leaders. They knew only the subjects which they were teaching when they were teachers. They do not have the necessary knowledge of the teacher’s subject area and this prevent productive and effective conversational give and take needed for quality feedback. Yet when we talk about instructional leadership we are referring to a leader who has built a vision for his/her school and who is working to have a successful school. This tends to suggest that there are additional efforts which the school leader must make (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

VII. Analysis of findings

The findings above reveal that school leaders do not fully implement instructional leadership. They are aware of the details of instructional leadership but they do not apply it in a systematic way. They still feel constrained by their other responsibilities which somehow they feel are more important and which deserve to be given priority. Furthermore we find that their relationship with their teachers is not conducive for instructional leadership. We can infer that there is not enough trust among them or that school leaders are not used to move outside of their office. We also need to consider the teachers and how are going to react to the presence of the school leader in class.

Furthermore, there is also the part on curriculum design, implementation and evaluation. Teachers might feel that they know more how to attend to the needs of their learners than an outsider. However, it is important for them to understand that there is need to make space for the school leader. Yet given the abundance of literature on instructional leadership and of its benefits for the educational system as a whole, it is urgent to reflect on the means which can be used to give instructional leadership all the attention that it deserves.

VIII. Future directions

The professional development needs of school leaders in respect to instructional leadership have to be attended to. There is need to provide school leaders with more exposure to instructional leadership and how they are to go about fulfilling their duties. This could be done through case study analysis, role plays and interactive workshops.

School leaders must set up a proper structure at school for instructional leadership. All those involved in the school must be aware of this structure and understand why the school leader is also an instructional leader. Information about the role of the instructional leader must be available for all to know.

School leaders must also learn to delegate, use information and communication technology, and develop efficient time management skills so that they can have more time to conduct class visits, discuss about the curriculum and determine the goals for the school. They need also to work on the school culture and school climate so that they can set up a system which promotes instructional leadership as well as teaching and learning.

There is need to develop a solid partnership with teachers built on trust, integrity and respect. This will help to gain teachers' commitment. Hence, there is need to develop cooperative, collaborative and flexible structures. At the same time, all the planning and the implementation decisions have to be discussed between the school leaders and the teachers. Openness has to be practiced. It is also advisable to hold regular meetings between the school leaders and the teachers.

It is important for school leaders to share leadership. This involves bringing all the stakeholders on board and getting the teachers to exert leadership power. They could be encouraged to develop their own teaching strategies and to empower their colleagues. The school leader could work in ways which will develop a collaborative culture among the teachers to encourage them to share and collaborate. They could also be encouraged to develop projects and conduct action research at classroom level and at school level. This will help them to improve their practice.

School leaders must also develop a system whereby they come to gather data in order to help them assess the situation at school and to take informed decisions. Furthermore, they need to encourage teachers to use and analyse the data that are available so that they can have a clearer picture of the situation. As a first step, they need to use data themselves in their analysis of the school's performance and infuse their decisions with facts and figures.

However, the school leaders need to be aware of their specific contexts. Whilst research supports the use of instructional leadership, school leaders have to remain sensitive to their specific contexts. They need to respect and respond accordingly to the different contextual factors which affect their schools. In fact we can notice that both teachers and school leaders need to learn how to handle the different expectations which arise as a result of the school leader acting as an instructional leader. This leads us to see that the school turns out to be a learning organisation.

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