THE SHIFT – FROM CRAFTING EDUCATORS TO CRAFTING FUTURE SCHOOL LEADERS

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Abstract

This paper relates the journey of two faculty members who were initially involved in teacher education, but who had to re-invent themselves in order to help transform experienced teachers into aspiring school leaders. We realized on the very onset that transforming scholars into leaders advocated a paradigm shift in the way we teach. Through an action research two main innovative teaching strategies were designed namely seminar - based teaching and teachers enacting leaders in role-plays. Data were collected following concept of reflection-in-action. Observations during class, focus group discussions and feedback questionnaires were the main methods of data collection. Analysis of the data was done using Kouzes and Posner's (2002) five descriptors of leadership characteristics. Findings from the first cycle catalyzed changes to our practice and subsequent cycles confirm that individuals can be leaders in their own right when they are provided with the space and opportunities where theories become lived experiences and where they could develop their own approach to leadership.

Keywords: school leaders, seminar-based teaching, enacting leaders in role-plays.

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Introduction:

The call came when the need to train aspiring school leaders was felt. The Mauritius Institute of Education which has as its prime mandate to dispense teacher education now had to provide courses for the aspiring school leaders for secondary schools. This necessitated a new programme and new instructional methods. As faculty members, we had to review our knowledge on leadership in order to meet the expectations of our students on and about leadership (Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan 1993).

Although Mauritius is a small island, off the west coast of Africa, with a population of about 1.2 million of people, we too have to deal with the major trends which are affecting school leadership. In Mauritius, our education system follows a 2-6-7 structure and it is compulsory from the age of 3 to the age of 16. Students start their pre-primary at the age of 3 and spend 2 years there. They then move to primary schools for 6 years. They must at that point go through a national examination before proceeding to secondary schools. There, they have 5 years to go to reach the school certificate level and two more years to reach the higher school certificate. Just like in other countries in the world, there is also a lot of emphasis on schools to do well. School leaders have found themselves having to implement technological improvements in an attempt for their schools to do better. At the same time, as Mauritius is engaged in international test such as the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), there is even more pressure on school leaders to perform well and for the institution which is charge of providing courses for the aspiring school leaders to be effective.

All academics involved in teaching face the ontological dilemma – Are the way the programmes taught living up to the aspirations and needs of the trainees? This depicts the age old debate about the dichotomies between theory and practice. Such concern is true for all types of programmes and, also to this particular one on leadership, which is the object of our research. We are constantly reminded that we have to focus our decision-making as far as our pedagogical practices are concerned on meeting the needs of our learners (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, &LePage, 2005). Emphasis is also put in the literature on teaching that there is need for those engaged in the teaching learning process to keep learning and to relentlessly review their practice, to be flexible and to adapt to the current context (Cole & Knowles, 2000). Darling-Hammond (1998)claims that it is important to develop a whole variety of instructional selection so that the environment will be conducive for learning.

At the same time we cannot remain indifferent to the claim made by Brundrett& Crawford (2008) and Hallinger (2003)who found that the 21st century school leaders are not been effectively prepared to take up school leadership positions. This claim is further reinforced by a comment made in OECD Report on Improving School Leadership (2008, p.16) where it is mentioned that 'There is a growing concern that the role of school principal designed for the industrial age has not changed enough to deal with the complex challenges schools are facing in the 21st century'.

Hence the purpose of this study was to investigate whether the typical field instruction practices that were being used to teach the modules adequately served educators/leaders needs and expectations to become future school leaders. Within an action research framework, the following questions were explored:

(a) How to involve and engage teachers to think as leaders?

(b) How to make learning experiences meaningful to these neophyte leaders?

(c) How to assist teachers in the process of 'shaping' them into leaders?

Conceptual framework:

Kouzes and Posner (2002) conceptual model was used to guide us in our mission to meet the aspirations of our students. As has been widely found in studies conducted on school leadership, school leaders are required to be intensely involved in various issues that directly affect student achievement (Cotton, 2003). It is also claimed that school leaders have to develop a culture of continuous learning (Chase & Kane,1983).

Day et al. (2010) came forward with a series of claims about successful school leadership. They found that school leaders are the main source of leadership in their schools. As such they need to set direction and reorganise the school in such a way that expectations and standards are aligned. Hence all the stakeholders are inspired to follow the direction set by the leader. They also claimed that school leaders need to define their values and vision, to build trust and to build relationship internally and externally. Furthermore, it is also established that they are passionate about teaching and learning and have a commitment to students and staff. They also need to tailor their leadership practices to the context of their schools and attend to the needs of their students and staff. School leaders are also aware that they need to adapt their approach according to the differences in context and may need to put in greater efforts in some schools. Additionally, school leaders also have to motivate their students and staff, build collaboration amongst

stakeholders and develop a learning culture in schools. Next they also need to decide which strategies they need to implement first. Hence the need to prioritise is important. In this context, the school leaders need to define their priorities and if need be, they should be ready to challenge existing structures in order to promote students' progress and achievement. They are also expected to share leadership and restructure the leadership team and to promote a wider distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities. Consequently, when we have examined the forms of leadership which school leaders need to adopt, we found that the model provided by Kouzes and Posner (2002) is suitable to be used as our conceptual framework.

This model provided the necessary practices and behaviours that school leaders need to display. Many studies (Abu-Tineh, Khasawneh&Omary 2009; Sandbakken, 2004; Taylor, 2002) have used the model and it was found truly representative of highly effective leadership practices. Kouzes and Posner have five principles summarised below.

Principle	Actions
Model the way	Leaders show the way and provide signposts along the way to guide others. They pursue standards of excellence and model the way for the staff to follow
Inspire a shared vision	Leaders strongly believe that they can make a difference. They have a very clear vision for the organisation and encourage the staff to buy into their vision.
Challenge the process	Leaders challenge the status quo strongly believing that there are ways to develop the organisation.
Enable others to act	Leaders do not work alone but build teams and encourage collaboration. They seek ways to engage the staff and create a safe atmosphere and provide opportunities to empower them.
Encourage the heart	Leaders believe that hard work should be recognised and rewarded. They celebrate success of staff.

Table 1: Kouzes and Posner's conceptual framework

These principles are described as actions which leaders use when they function at their personal best in order to achieve significant organisational growth. We decided to use the five principles

as our benchmarking and see that whether our teaching provides such spaces to allow the emergence of tomorrow leaders.

Method:

To conduct an in-depth exploration of the central phenomenon—reflection-in-action—we used a qualitative research design, an approach that has been demonstrated effective in collecting data regarding individual perspectives and experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2005; Heppner, Wampold, &Kivlighan, 2008). Hence this study focused on examining "in-action" reflective teaching strategies based on Schön's (1983) conception of reflection-in-action. The action research approach was opted as its emphasis is upon practice, collaboration, reflection and interpretation (Altrichter, et al.1993). By examining our practice, this study provided insight on how to enhance teaching and learning of leadership concepts and would add to the literature regarding leadership education.

The action research was carried out throughout three semesters. While focusing on our aim we generated ideas about how we might improve our practice. We consciously chose one possibility and acted on it. This led towards the development of a plan of action, the implementation of the plan, the observation of the action, the reflection for further planning and subsequent action. In the context of this research, data was collected using a student feedback questionnaire, focus group discussion and observations in class. Purposive and theoretical sampling procedures were adopted. The informed consent principles were used to address the question of ethics. This is an on-going process in which we were very careful and sensitive to participants' reactions during data collection, and ever prepared to renegotiate consent every now and then.

Data analysis:

Using Schön's (1983, 1987) concept of reflection-in-action and the 'axial coding' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), analysis of the data began with the researchers performing the processes of bracketing and coding in order to identify recurrent characteristics. During the "bracketing" phase of a study, key statements that relate directly to the phenomenon were identified (Patton, 2005).The key statements were interpreted and then examined for what they reveal about the recurring characteristics of the phenomenon. When bracketing was completed, the themes that had emerged were reconstructed under the Kouzes and Posner (2002) framework: (a)

challenging the process (b) inspiring a shared vision (c) enabling others to act, (d) modeling the way, and (e) encouraging the heart.

Cycle 1

Cycle I revealed the tip of the ice-berg. It was through the analysis of the student feedback questionnaire that we took stock of the situation. We became conscious about the teaching strategies which were wholly dominated by the module content coverage and not addressing the fact that these educators wanted to understand 'how to become leaders and how to relate leadership theories to day to day running of a school'. It was evident from the responses of the students that we were not preparing in an effective way. This is also what was mentioned byBrundrett& Crawford (2008) and Hallinger (2003).There was an urgent need to bring change to our practice and create new avenues for students to think as school leaders. A focus group discussion was then organized to get the views of trainees and also to know about their expectations.

Summary of findings from the focus group discussion

Lectures are too theory based; I have not learnt anything new; Very good lecture but does not show how to become leaders; Too many notes to write. Should be more practice based; Should help us to apply the theories in actual life situation. Should provide opportunities that relate to our context.

Cycle 2

The seminar- based learning model was planned**.** Resource persons who are school rectors from different schools were invited to share their experiences on a common platform. The idea behind was that these people would come and share their personal best leadership experiences of leading the school and thus enable the link between theory and practice to be more 'visible'. Students were very enthusiastic to hear the stories of these successful school leaders. We believed that this would address their interest and it would engage 'the attention curiosity and involvement of the students' (Tomlinson &Imbeau, 2010, p.16).

However we were still not at ease with the way things turned out as we could observe that most of our students did not participate in this activity. They were mere spectators. After the interactive workshop we organised another focus group discussion.

From the focus group discussion, the following main points of contention were gathered:

> *These stories are only telling us what worked in their context…but my school is different.*

> *These Rectors are in the schools since a long time and as such they get everyone to collaborate but what about new rectors. They did not tell us about what they did in case of disagreement. They were people who were well known in their field before they became rectors, as such command respect. How about if you are very young compared to your staff?*

During the debriefing session we took stock of the situation and realized that we needed to find yet new ways of teaching 'leadership theories'. Our aim here was to make students become active participants instead of being passive recipients of knowledge. After much reflection we came up with the idea of role-play. Role-play is a participatory and experiential learning method that emphasises 'learning by doing'. Research undertaken by Ip, Linser and Naidu (2001) established that the move from traditional lectures, seminars and tutorials, to role-playing significantly transformed the learning and teaching processes**.** Furthermore role-play can be particularly effective in bridging the gap between academic knowledge and everyday life (Maddrell, 1994). Another key strength lies in the ability of role-play to encourage 'students [to] take an active part in their own construction of knowledge' (Duveen& Solomon, 1994, p.580.)

Cycle 3

The role-play we planned was the enactment of being the school leader who had to tackle one specific issue. We took care to select those issues which were from school context which were familiar to students. Examples of issues given were; student high absenteeism rate during third schooling term, planning end of term exams, drugs at school, lack of laboratory equipment/resources, implementation of a change, conflict management, discipline problem, teacher absent from work, cleanliness of school premises, parents and teachers meeting and so on. We also provided students with the opportunity to choose a sub topic within the main topic (Heacox, 2002). Each student was given 20 minutes to enact their role as the school leader and show how they would proceed when faced with such situation. We focused on giving students ' clear and appropriate criteria for success, focus on real-world relevance and application, promote creative and critical thinking; allow for varied modes of expression' (Joseph, 2013,p.102).

Students had mixed feelings when informed about the role-play. Students found it "difficult, stressful, and frustrating as most of them could not see how they would proceed". We had to plan tutorials session and provide adequate support by attending to their queries. Throughout the role-play process, we could observe despite students' misgivings, the real change that had occurred and how they took ownership of their learning. We encouraged product differentiation as the students demonstrated what they have learned in a variety of ways and could apply their knowledge and skills (Tomlinson, 2005a). We were also concerned to providing challenging learning experiences which are appropriate for our students (Santangelo& Tomlinson, 2009). We also relied on the fact that 'as each student presents the information on their sub-topic, the whole class learns more about the topic in general' (Joseph, 2013, p.101). We were concerned by the transformational actions which they would propose which would show that they have developed that ability to engage with theory in context. We wanted the students to show that they can extrapolate and make solid links between theory and practice.

After the role-plays we had a focus group session where students' responses were centered about how they felt on the 'role play' and how this has helped their learning.

Data analysis using the Kouzes and Posner (2002) model

Principle	Some responses
Model the way	I had to 'research' the whole issue and take the opinion of all. I had to work achievable objectives. I had to set the pace myself I had to give examples by being a model. I learned a lot from the role-plays of my friends I could see different leadership styles
Inspire a shared vision	The way my friends tackle the issue provided many examples which I had never thought of. If I become a head of school I will share my vision with all my staff so that they know what is expected from them Sharing solutions/doubts is the best way to inspire others and make others involved.
Challenge the process	I like the way we had the opportunity to challenge the way things

	were proposed. It was interesting to see how others gave example from their context and how the same issues could be tackled in another way. Biases and prejudices were out in the open
Enable others to act	The most interesting part is that all of us had a 'say', we were able to voice out our opinion on school matters and have first hand feedback and comments
Encourage the heart	Students were positive and described role-plays as "fascinating, interesting, fun, realistic and effective. I really felt as a 'rector' and I thank the tutors for this.

Table 3 – Comments of participants categorized according to Kouzes and Posner's framework

The achievement:

Much learning took placethrough the animated conversations that followed the role-play presentations and different viewpoints were taken on board. The students were able to reflect on their experience. They were able to talk through the various aspects of leadership and that greatly helped to make clear the connections between theory and practice. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.46) talk about acquiring 'professional maturity'. The leadership theories came to life when students came one by one to do their presentations. Our classroom became a place where students became more creative as they became more engaged in their own professional learning-which included working with other teachers in communities of practice. Once the beginning leaders were given the role of leadership, they actively sought challenges and opportunities to implement their vision. They were keen to convince others of the rightness of their vision.

It was such an awesome experience to watch the neophyte leaders not only acknowledging the work of others in their respective organization but also the emergence of the intra – group dynamics. There was a celebration of learning taking place where everybody was learning from each other. During the presentations sessions everybody felt that they were leaders and through their presentations they could share their dream how they would lead their organisations. There were many misgivings and queries, but atthe end all these formed part of the learning process. They were showed a glimpse of what was awaiting them in case they are called upon to lead. No amount of telling and lecturing could have done so. Theories became alive, and tangible.

Our research findings have given opportunity to unveil unsung leaders who hopefully will help shape their identity and better understand the complex issue which is that of leading .We trust that this endeavour will show them the way to shape their own practices and the pedagogical spaces in their field. It is hoped that they have developed the necessary poise to use the new learning which they have acquired during the role-play sessions and the discussion which followed.

We believe that researching our own practice has brought about positive, challenging, open and transparent learning cultures. We have had to shift from crafting educators to crafting aspiring heads of schools. We had to redefine how we taught and our own understanding of what we were involved into. We hope our work encourages risk taking and guide others. We believe that we need to consider crafting aspiring heads of schools within a 'partnership mentality' (Lefever-Davis & Heller, 2003) which involves addressing both theory and practice.

Significance of the study:

Below are the major aspects of this study:

First, as an insider action researcher, we were able to investigate our practice that has resulted in new areas of personal-professional development foci, prompting shifts in our practices. These new knowledge can be plough back into the leadership programme which should provide space for leaders to emerge as 'empowered agency'. Kouzes and Posner (2002) have described their model as providing a 'set of skills' and as such these skills can be 'strengthened, honed, and enhanced if we have the proper motivation and desire, along with practice and feedback, role models and coaching" (p. 323). As a result of which it would be important to include in leadership programmes components which aim at developing the skills described by Kouzes and Posner (2002).

Second as teachers became more engaged in their own professional learning they naturally grew in their willingness to engage in leadership activities and gained further leadership abilities. They were 'empowered agency' and came to believe they could 'make a difference' in their own site. They must have more opportunities to perform leadership practices as developed by Kouzes and Posner (2002) in an environment where they will receive constructive feedbacks. They need to encounter critical incidents or trigger events which will help them in their process of becoming empowered agency. At the same time they must engage in critical reflection as this will help them examine the process, the content and their beliefs about the situation.

We also need to highlight the fact that there is a strong need for aspiring school leaders to personalize their learning experience. Whilst they were keen to learn about leadership and its underpinning concepts, they also wanted to know how they would apply what they are learning in situations that are specific to them. They were eager to understand how they would bridge the gap between theory and praxis. Consequently, it was important for them to see and experience the strong connections which exist between theory and practice. It is also clear that there is need for the training which aspiring school leaders receive to keep pace with their changing role.

What kind of implication for the School Leadership Programme ?

In future, School Leadership Programme should include a module on work-based experience. This module could aim at demonstrating leadership skills in real life situations at schools. A work-based experience component would provide trainees with an understanding of the nature of the challenges and issues that they would face as school leaders and would build their capacity to apply their learning in the context of real workplace operations. Hence opportunities to experience real leadership should be available. Trainees would be provided an expansive learning environment where there would be a clear commitment to and an understanding of their dual identity as learners and learning to lead the way.

There is need to improve the delivery methods that would promote knowledge acquisition at the formal cognitive level through more work-based experienced, cohort seminar groups, case studies and problem-based learning. At the same time, it is important to focus also on methods which will promote skill and attitude development. Preparing future school leaders requires that faculty members involved in such a programme should be fully conscious that in order to succeed it requires more than tacking on activities. There is need to review how the instructional methods that faculty members are using are addressing the knowledge and skill development of future school leaders. There is also need to consider what strategies could be included where students will be required to engage in their role as school leaders. The right balance between learning theory and putting the theory into practice should be found so that the school leaders are not caught off-guard when they are in real life situations. Hence it is important to craft the training of aspiring school leaders in such a way that it allows them to engage with good practice in their schools.

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