

THE LEADERSHIP PRACTICE OF SETTING DIRECTIONS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MAURITIUS

Nathalie Congo-Poottaren*

Abstract:

This study investigates the leadership practice of setting directions in secondary schools in Mauritius. This issue is important because nowadays there is a call for school leaders to be accountable. For this study, a questionnaire was distributed to school leaders (n=23) to see how they address this issue. The data was analysed through a framework based on the various concepts which have emerged from a review of the literature on setting directions. Findings show that most school leaders believe that they are using the different strategies which are related to setting directions. Yet the author is of the opinion that school leaders have to be thorough about using all the strategies identified in the framework in order to be more effective and brings forward some suggestions could be used to better equip the school leaders for setting directions at school.

Keywords: Leadership practice, setting directions and school leaders

* Mauritius Institute of Education

Introduction:

One key element which all schools have in common is a school leader. Barth (1990) claims that the head of school is the key to a good school. In various studies the heads of schools are looked upon as the main factor which has contributed to the success of the school (Bell, 2001). This supports what was found in an earlier study by Edmond (1979) who claimed that 'the most tangible and indispensable characteristics of effective schools is their leadership' (p.22). The author even went further to say that 'administrative behaviour, policies and practices in the schools appeared to have significant impact on school effectiveness (p.16). The impact of the practices of the head of school on student achievement is also mentioned. Egley and Jones (2005) found that heads of schools have a greater influence of education than any other elements. The focus of school leadership today is on heads of schools' ability to transform a school environment so that its students and teachers can flourish.

Whilst talking about the importance of the head of school Heck, Larsen and Marcoulides (1990) observed leadership practices of head of schools are varied. Their main practice however, lies in devising strategies to 'impact teaching and classroom practices' (p.95) Heads of schools thus have to determine school goals, formulate the communication flow in the schools. Heads of schools also have to allocate 'necessary resources, supervising teachers' performance, monitoring student progress and promote a positive orderly environment for learning. (p.95).

Fullan (2009) claims that head of schools have to act as change agent thereby setting direction and encouraging engagement from all stakeholders. Heads of schools have to implement strategies which help to mobilise capacity. At the same time they develop leadership across the school. They also address distractions in an effective way while engaging in continuous evaluation and enquiry of practices. Leithwood and Reihl (2003) claim that 'in these times of heightened concern for student learning, school leaders are being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how much students learn (p.2).

This situation is also true for Heads of Schools in Mauritius. We have a population of around 1.2 million of people with an education system which is free and compulsory from the age of 3 to the age of 16. Students spend two years in pre-primary schools, 6 years in primary schools and 7 years in secondary schools. After the 6 years in primary schools they go through a national

examinations before moving to secondary schools. In Mauritius the level of expectations on schools to help students succeed academically and in other domains is a serious issue. Heads of Schools are now called upon to be accountable. Various forms of accountability now exist on Heads of Schools and they need to review and reinvent themselves in order to meet these new standards. This study concentrates on one aspect of school leadership which is setting directions.

Rationale for the study:

A lot of attention is given today to heads of schools. Policy makers target school leaders in their attempts to improve student achievement. Research persistently implies that leadership impacts student success in school (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger et al.1996; Leithwood et al., 2006; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

We have therefore decided to adopt a micro lens since we focus on the leadership phenomenon by exploring the actions of the head of schools themselves (Rodd, 2006). Our interest in the topic also stems directly from our professional roles as lecturers in charge of providing in-services courses to heads of schools in order to develop their leadership skills. Hence findings from this study could be used to inform training of future heads of schools, since there is according to Bloom and Sheerer (1992) 'a surprising lack of agreement about what constitutes minimum qualifications and how individuals should be trained' (p.138)

Aim of the research:

The aim of the study is to explore the leadership practices of heads of secondary schools in relation to setting directions for their schools.

Research question:

What are the leadership practices of school leader in the secondary schools in relation to setting directions for their schools?

Literature review and conceptual framework:

Research conducted by Leithwood and Day (2007) found that leadership is directly related to student learning. The head of schools contribute to the success of students (Brookover, Lezotte,

1979). Lezotte and McKee (2006) state that few schools have improved without the strategies implanted by their heads. In fact, research has identified various dimensions of leadership practices which influence student learning. The basis of this study is on an adapted model of the conceptual framework developed by Leithwood and Reihl (2005) on ‘a core set of leadership practices form the “basics” of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts’ (p.5). They came up with four broad categories of practices that have been identified as crucial for leadership success which can occur in any kind of organization: setting directions, developing people, developing the organisation and managing the instructional programme. For this study attention will focus on one of these core practice, namely setting direction.

Setting directions.

Setting directions is important. Hallinger (2003) claims that that mission-building activities on the part of the heads of schools are the most influential set of leadership practices. There are three core leadership practices which are associated with setting directions, namely building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals and high performance expectations.

a) Building a shared vision: In a study conducted by Schlechty (2000) it was claimed that if heads of schools do not have a clear vision for their schools, this will act as a major hurdle. Sergiovanni (1984) stated that schools that are successful have a clear vision, while Matthews and Sammons (2005) concurred that schools which lack a clear vision are unsuccessful. This issue has been widely researched in the literature and has been called by different name by different researchers. Bass (1985) refers to it as ‘inspirational motivation’ while Podsakoff et al. (1990) finds that heads of schools would develop leadership practices “aimed at identifying new opportunities for his or her unit...and developing, articulating, and inspiring others with his or her vision of the future” (p. 112). These strategies consist of formulating a vision for the school. Uchiyama and Wolf (2002) claim that it’s the vision of the school that helps schools achieve their objectives. Hence the role of the heads of schools is vital in framing the vision. Andrews, Basom, and Basom (1991) concurred that school leaders have to behave consistently with respect to the school vision. Cawelti (1984) found that ‘principals articulate goals, directions, and priorities to citizens, faculty, and students in their school (p.3). Findings from another study conducted by Silins and Mulford (2002) found positive and significant effects of a shared and monitored mission. It is up to the head of schools to create that shared vision (Papalewis &

Fortune, 2002). Waters et al. (2004) also find that the Heads of Schools need to inspire and lead new and challenging innovations. This vision needs to be clearly articulated (St Germain & Quinn, 2005). Additionally, heads of schools use language and communication to motivate different actions (Eriksen, 2001). Communication is crucial in developing trust, mutual respect, and clarity of function in an organization (Webb & Norton, 2003).

b) Fostering the acceptance of group goals: Leithwood and Reihl (2003) found that heads of schools need to engage in 'fostering the acceptance of the group goals' (p.6). Waters et al. (2004) find that heads of schools need to keep the goals in forefront of attention as well. Wilen et al., (2004) found that teachers need to be encouraged to develop a supportive climate by sharing their expectations and experiences concerning teaching and learning. Louis et al., (2010) explained that this can be done by focusing teachers' attention on goals for student achievement. Heads of schools need to devise strategies 'aimed at prompting cooperation among teachers and getting them to work together toward a common goal' (Podsakoff et al., 1990, p. 112). It was also found that when the Heads of schools formulate a vision, it allows stakeholders to focus their attention on driving the vision forward (Deal & Peterson, 1999). This claim is also supported by Sebring and Bryk (2000) who found that when heads of schools communicate the vision of the school it allows others to share that vision and to work towards its accomplishment. Heads of schools also determine the culture of their schools (Barth, 1990). Hence among the various duties of heads of schools there is their ability to help stakeholders focus on their engagement in the school. This is supported by Anderson (2006).

c) High performance expectations: Fullan (2003) called this morally based purpose of the organization. This implies having a system where all students learn. This moral purpose is also expressed by Kaiser and Halbert (2009) as formulating and implementing strategies to close the achievement gap between students. Furthermore, heads are expected to create high performance expectations. Leithwood (2003) claimed that 'effective leaders convey their expectations for quality and high performance' (p.6). Once goals are set, Leithwood and Reihl (2003) state that heads of schools also have to be involved in 'monitoring organizational performance' (p.6). This is also what Marzano and Waters (2009) recommend. Heads of schools need to monitor the achievement of organisational performance as well as academic performance. This would ensure

that the school is working towards meeting as well as examining the extent to which it is achieving its goals.

Methodology:

A mixed method is chosen in order to answer the research questions which have been identified. A mixed method is one where 'a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration' (Johnson et al., 2007). This method was chosen because it helps to answer the research questions from a number of perspectives. At the same time it ensures that there are no gaps to the data collected. It adopts an explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Quantitative research will address the first research question. Information from the first phase will be explored further in a second qualitative phase. Qualitative data collection will be used to explore important quantitative results with a few participants. The reason for following up with qualitative research in the second phase is to better understand and explain the quantitative results.

A questionnaire was designed based on the review of the literature on the core set of leadership practices related to setting directions. It was used to obtain quantitative data from the selected school leaders. The questionnaire was adapted according to the objective of the current study. The questionnaire was distributed to twenty- three heads of schools based on a purposeful sampling. All the participants were informed about the nature of this study. All the respondents were informed that the information provided would be anonymous. The information gathered from the questionnaire was analysed using descriptive statistics.

Limitations

Some limitations were identified. The findings of the study were limited by the validity and reliability of the instruments. It has to be noted that the relevance of the findings are constrained by the accuracy and perception of the participants. It is assumed the heads of schools answered honestly and interpreted the instrument as intended. It is also noted that since the questionnaire

used Likert-type questions, this does not allow participants to construct their own responses or allow the researcher to probe for further clarifications.

Data analysis

Since there are basically three parts to the questionnaire, there information gathered have been displayed using three graphs.

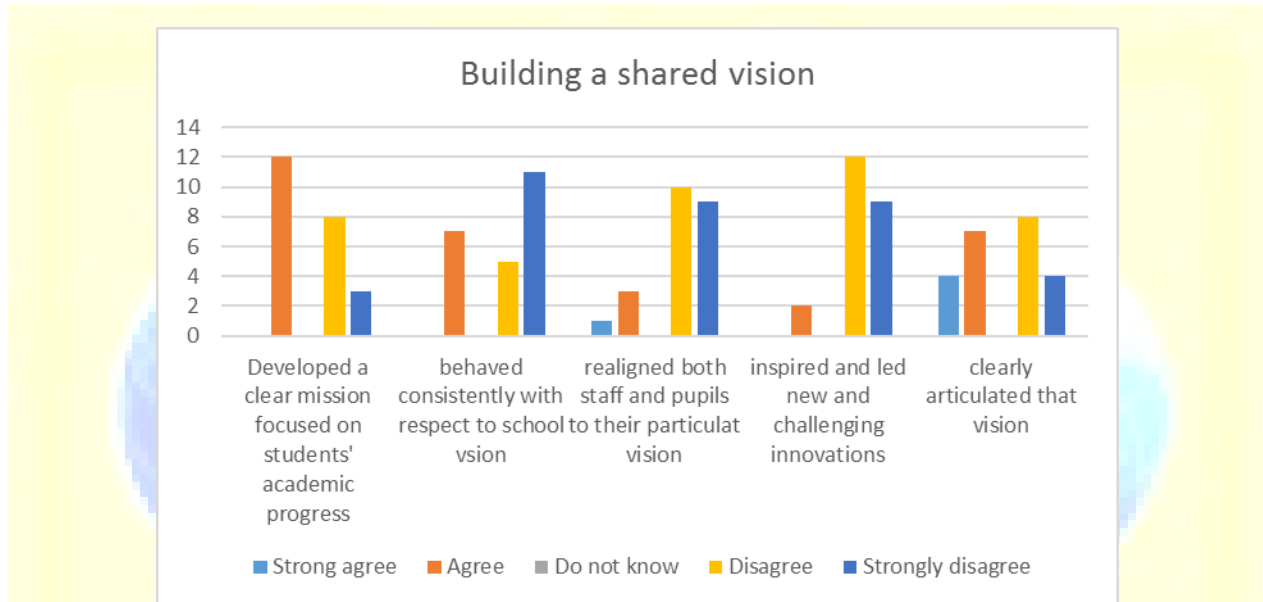


Figure 1 – Building a shared vision

An analysis of the responses from the 23 participants show that there seems to be a weak attempt from the Heads of Schools to develop shared vision for their schools in relation to improving student achievement. Only twelve participants agree that the heads of schools have developed a clear mission, while 8 disagree and 3 strongly disagree. Hence the findings are not in line with those of Uchiyama and Wolf (2002). Furthermore, only 7 participants found that the Heads of Schools behaved consistently with respect to school vision, while most of the participants either disagree or strongly disagree with that claim. Consequently we find that the responses given by the participants contradict what Andrews, Basom and Basom (1991) have found. Additionally, only four participants either strongly agree or agree that the Heads of Schools have realigned both staff and pupils to their particular vision. For this item, we again find that the participants do not find that most Heads of Schools have acted accordingly. This does not match what Harris

and Chapman (2002) have supported. The majority of the participants either disagree or strongly disagree with that claim. As far as inspiring and leading new and challenging innovations only two participants agree that Heads of Schools do engage in that practice. However, Water et al (2004) found that Heads of Schools need to inspire and lead new and challenging innovations although most participants do not agree with that. Lastly 11 participants either strongly agree or agree that Heads of Schools have clearly articulated that vision. However, most participants found that the Heads of Schools have clearly articulated that vision which is in line with the findings from St Germain and Quinn (2005).

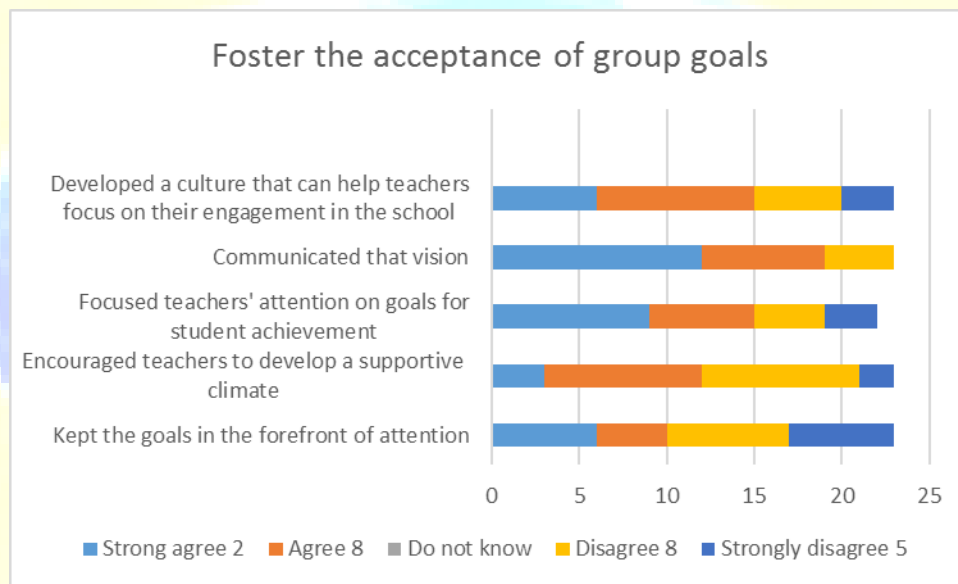


Figure 2 – Foster the acceptance of group goals

An over of the above figure tends to support that there is an attempt to foster group goals amongst the staff. 15 participants either strongly agree or agree that the heads of Schools work to develop a culture that can help teacher focus on their engagement in the school as found in Anderson (2006). 19 found that there is an attempt to communicate that vision. This is also what was found in Sebring and Bryk (2000). At the same time, 15 participants are of the opinion that heads of schools try to focus teachers’ attention on goals for student achievement which matches what Louis et al., (2010) found as a way to foster the acceptance of group goals. However, just above half of the participants revealed that there are attempts to encourage teachers to develop a supportive climate. While it goes in line with what Wilen et al., (2004) suggest, it is does not

seem to come out loud from the results above. Another interesting finding is the fact that only 10 participants either strongly agree or agree that the Heads of Schools keep the goals in the forefront of attention while Waters et al., (2004) found that this is what Heads of Schools need to do to setting directions in their schools.

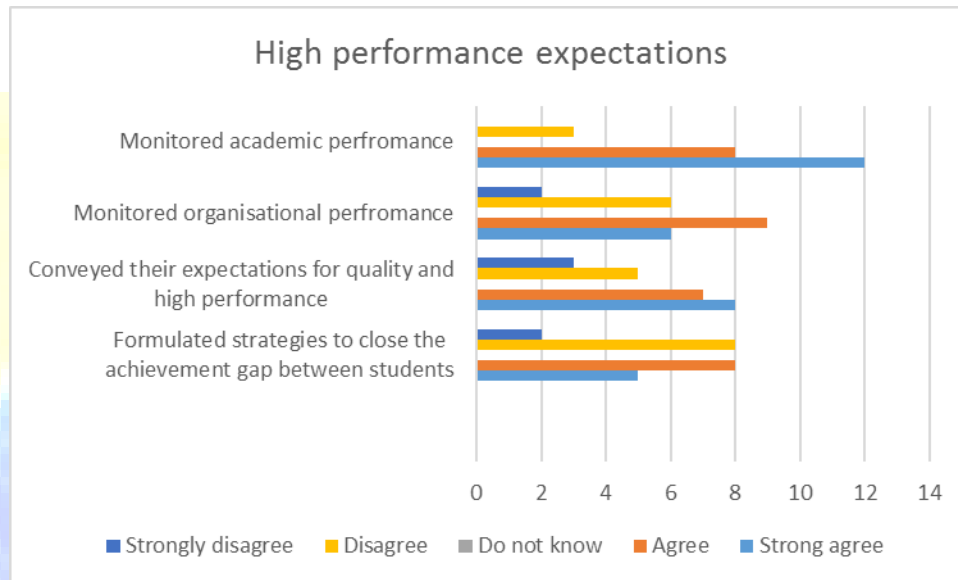


Figure 3 – High performance expectations

In general we find that there seems to be much agreement on the fact that the Heads of Schools foster high performance expectations. 20 participants found that Heads of Schools monitor academic performance as supported by Marzano and Waters (2009). 15 found that Heads of School monitor organization performance which matches what Leithwood and Reihl (2003) found. Apart from monitoring expectations, 15 participants also revealed that Heads of Schools also convey their expectations for quality and high performance as was found by Leithwood (2003). Finally, 13 participants found that Heads of Schools formulate and implement strategies to close the achievement gap between students.

Implications of the study and future directions

One major implication which comes out of this study is the fact that most Heads of Schools believe that they are use various strategies to set directions in their schools. On average they are of the opinion that they are attending to the various dimensions related to setting directions. Yet, an overall view of the situation reveals that there is yet much to be done for it to be fully visible

at school level. Heads of Schools have to invest more in promoting the various strategies which are involved in setting directions.

Another element which has to be taken into consideration is the culture which exists at school. All the various strategies which are available to the Heads of Schools concerning setting directions tend to indicate that there is need to have a collaborative culture. Hence Heads of schools should try to set the scene by creating a collaborative culture.

Furthermore, as Heads of Schools tend to develop that collaborative culture, they need to be read to listen to the voice of the teachers and to involve them in the various strategies which they are coming up with. They would need to find out how teachers can contribute to the plan and be ready to give teachers time to assimilate the changes and to adhere to them. Heads of Schools need to pace the changes in such a way that they suit teachers

It is also important for Heads of Schools to communicate well. If Heads of Schools want the setting of directions in schools to be the concern of all the stakeholders, then they need to communicate well in order to make it a shared vision. They need to be engaged in building relationships so that they can be effective in setting directions. They need to take bold decisions. They need to engage in reflection and see how they can be more effective in their leadership practice. They need to find out how developing the strategies for setting directions question the status quo and what they need to do to get the staff and other stakeholders out of their comfort zone.

Hence we find that, most Heads of Schools genuine feel that they are involved in setting directions. Consequently, as this has not come out loudly enough, then we can suggest that the leadership practice of setting directions should be given due consideration in the training of school leaders. School leaders should be exposed to situations where they have to explain, justify and reflect how they are going to set directions in their schools. At the same time they can take part in interactive workshop where experienced Heads of Schools could explain how they tackle this issue. They should be helped to develop their competencies and skills so that they can successfully drive the setting of directions in their schools. They need to be able to influence and impact on others.

Given what school leaders have revealed in the questionnaire, it will be tempting to conclude that their actions is grounded on the right strategies for setting directions. However, considering

all the aspects of the framework used, can provide a more solid grounding of what it entails to set directions at school.

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