THE INFLUENCE OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP OF PRIMARY SCHOOL HEADS ON TEACHERS' COMMITMENT IN MAURITIUS

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Abstract - *One of the leadership functions of the school head that impacts the core mission of the school – effective teaching and learning- is instructional leadership. Teacher commitment is an important element that contributes to effective teaching and learning and the school head is a determining factor in realizing this mission. Numerous studies have been done on instructional leadership and teacher commitment, yet not much is known about the perceptions of teachers and headmasters on the role of the headmaster as an instructional leader and how the latter's role impacts teacher commitment in the primary school context. The actual instructional practices of the school heads were also explored. A descriptive mixed research approach was used to explore this phenomenon in ten primary schools in the Educational Zone 3 of Mauritius. The cluster sampling technique was used; a survey was carried out among 150 primary school teachers and focus group interviews were conducted among teachers and headmasters. The findings of this research confirm previous empirical studies: primary school heads are perceived as doing visioning and goal setting; they build a positive school culture and support teachers and students to improve the teaching and learning process; they manage the school resources and empower others as well as encourage the professional development of teachers. This study recommends the creation of a collaborative platform that promotes a community of practice among teachers and school heads to enhance teacher commitment.*

Keywords: *collaborative; community of practice; effective teaching and learning; practices*

INTRODUCTION

The Mauritian Educational System is facing numerous challenges with the rapid changes and increased complexity of today's world. In this respect, it is primordial for schools in Mauritius to prepare students to face the upcoming challenges of this highly demanding environment. There are restraints of education policies, which need to be considered like "*No Child Left Behind*", "*Education for All*", and more recently the "*United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*" Our small island is not spared and we have to abide by those international standards to ensure that national policies and reforms can cater to the holistic development of the child.

The Government of Mauritius has left no stone unturned and has taken several steps to increase access, ensure equity and improve the quality of education through various educational reforms, namely the Master plan (1991), Master Plan (2000), Ending the Rat-race Competition in Primary Schools (2001), the World Class Quality Education for All (2008) and the Nine Years' Continuous Basic Education (NYCBE) in 2015. However, as stated in the *Policy Paper on Educational Reform* (1996), our system lays too much emphasis on academic excellence and the overall system is too much examination-oriented. The main aims of the latest reform which is being implemented are to stop the fierce competition at the primary level, to encourage the professionalization of teaching and learning, and finally yet importantly, to improve students learning at all levels by reducing the number of dropouts among learners. The NYCBE targets at yielding a higher level of learner achievement (World Bank, 2017).

Despite all these educational reforms, the degree of success differs from one school to another. It has been observed that success depends greatly on the initiatives taken at the school level, namely, setting clear goals, monitoring the instruction, and protecting instructional time) but largely directly or indirectly on school instructional leadership skills of headmasters "hands-on leaders, engaged with curriculum and instruction issues, unafraid to work directly with teachers and often present in classrooms" (Loed & Horng, 2010). Indeed, the school head should lead the learning by leading the work (practices) and leading the way (attributes) (Education Improvement Research Centre, 2022). However, identifying what effective headmasters do differently in practice to build such a school teaching and learning environment remains a subject of debate (Murphy, 1988).

Furthermore, the education system in Mauritius is centralized with the Minister of Education being the sole authority over the operation of schools (Education Act 1957, Part II Section 3). However, a traditional top-down approach does promote student learning but it hinders organisational learning: it does not allow for flexible learning that promotes the matching of the educator's teaching styles with the learner's needs and learning styles (Chrispeels et al, 2008).

The headmaster, as the school head, has the task of translating educational policies and decisions of the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology into concrete desired actions at the school level using his or her development strategies. All the educational policies and the Education Act currently in force bind the headmaster. From the Scheme of service of headmasters, as prescribed by the Public Service Commission of Mauritius, the duties of headmasters are mostly administrative (Public Service Commission, 2014). However, international evidence suggests that educational reforms' progress depends largely on the headmasters' and educators' capacity. Leadership styles adopted by headmasters are therefore critical. What happens within a school depends primarily on the headmaster: what and how he communicates, the decisions taken at the school level, how he involves his staff in the implementation of the policies, and how he guides them all toward the vision (Ng, Nguyen, Wong & Choy 2015). Educators who are at the grass root level, are the prime actors in the implementation process as they are the ones responsible for the teaching and learning process. The success of a school not only lies on the hard work and determination of the headmasters but as well as on the commitment of the educators, who are at the grass root level. To make the school a successful one, the headmaster must adopt the appropriate leadership style. Aydin, Savier and Uysal (2013) and Ibrahim and Wahab (2012) maintained that the success of a school depends largely on the leadership style practice at the school by the headmaster. Pont (2014) Ibrahim and Wahab (2012) found that schools that achieve high success in academics are led by a headmaster who has the qualities of effective leadership. There are several leadership styles that a headmaster may adopt, namely: transformational leadership, autocratic, democratic, instructional, and laissez-faire, among others. However, instructional leadership is considered very important as it can produce effective teaching and learning among educators and students (Hallinger & Heck, 1996. Instructional leaders can influence educators' teaching approaches which in turn are directly related to student learning and therefore academic performances.

In a quest for quality education in public primary schools in Mauritius, primary school headmasters must be able to lead their schools to high achievement for all pupils. To be in line with the new government policies, all headmasters must try to shift from their traditional role of administrators to that of instructional leaders. This current study attempts to identify the impact of the instructional leadership of headmasters on educators' commitment in primary schools. The findings would give insights into the most appropriate instructional leadership strategies that may influence the commitment of educators and hence provide the conditions required for the headmaster to create a more conducive teaching and learning environment. The researcher considers that the starting point to improve educators' commitment is to have good instructional leadership whereby the headmaster covers all the dimensions of instructional leadership: this is in line with the Hallinger and Murphy model (1985). The objectives of this study are as follows:

a)   To investigate the influence of instructional leadership roles of headmasters on educators' commitment.

b)   To recommend strategies to headmasters to increase the commitment of their educators in schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

For this study, the researcher opted for a descriptive research design to describe the various aspects of the instructional leadership roles of headmasters and their impact on educators' commitment in public primary schools in Mauritius. Descriptive research aims to shed light on current issues through a process of data collection that facilitates the description of a particular phenomenon that might have otherwise gone unnoticed (Dudovskiy, 2016). The advantage of this research design is that it can combine elements from both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Data handled quantitatively were gathered via the survey questionnaire to educators and qualitative data were gathered via the informal focus group interviews of headmasters and educators. Cluster sampling was used in the selection of schools to participate in this study. Cluster sampling is where the whole population is divided into clusters or groups. Subsequently, a random sample is taken from these clusters, all of which are used in the final sample (Wilson, 2010). In this study, the population from which relevant data was collected consists of educators and headmasters of ten sampled public primary schools, in Zone 3 of Mauritius. A total number of 125 educators were asked to participate in the study. 10 primary schools participated in the study, with around 150 educators in all including general-purpose educators, Asian language educators, holistic educators, ICT support and support educators.   The survey was sent to the schools through the headmasters and educators were asked to participate in the study. Of the 125 educators asked to participate in the study, all 125 responded to the survey. However, of the 125 educators who responded, 118 educators completed the survey.

The questionnaire meant for educators was designed in such a way as to obtain descriptions of the instructional roles performed by their respective headmasters as per the five core competencies mentioned in the literature review. The questionnaire was used to determine whether primary public-school leaders displayed high or low-frequency characteristics in terms of instructional leadership roles in connection to the five core competencies, namely *Visioning and Goal Setting, Building a Positive School Culture, Supporting Educators and Students to Improve, Managing School Resources and Operations* and *Cultivating Leadership Qualities in Others and Promoting Continuous Professional Development*. These roles were an amalgamation of Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Murphy (1990) and Weber's (1996) models. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which their headmaster demonstrated the specific instructional roles. A five-point Likert Scale was employed for a response system: 1 (Almost Never), 2 (Seldom), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Frequently), and 5 (Almost Always).

To answer the research questions of this study, 5 hypotheses have been tested using the Chi-Square Test of Independence and Crosstabulation Analysis. The 5% level of significance has been used for each test. Before the tests were conducted, for each of the sub-sections related to the 5 core competencies an overall mean rating has been calculated by the respondent by aggregating the ratings of each statement and then taking the average, using the *Compute* function of *SPSS*. Furthermore, 2 proxies (calculated in the same way using the *Compute* function) have been used to represent commitment: *Positive Commitment* and *Negative Commitment*. For each test, 2 Chi-Square tests were conducted, one with *Positive_Commitment* and one with *Negative_Commitment* as the dependent variable.

The semi-structured focus group interview on the other hand targeted both educators and headmasters. With focus group interviews, the researcher can explore the perceptions of people, the meanings they put forth, and their definitions of situations and the construct of reality (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The Braun and Clark (2006) model was used as a guide for the thematic analysis of the data obtained from the interviews. The Braun and Clark (2006) six steps of data analysis was used as a guide for the thematic analysis of the data obtained from the interviews, namely:

familiarization, generating initial ideas, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation, debriefing, member checking, thick descriptions, and verbatim statements were used for the analysis and interpretation of the findings. All ethical considerations were observed as per the Data Protection Act (2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined five hypotheses to determine the influence of the instructional leadership roles of headmasters on educators' commitment.

Hypothesis 1:

H_0: Clear visioning by headmasters has no impact on the commitment level of educators.

H_1: Clear visioning by headmasters impacts the commitment level of educators.

For both tests, the p-value < 0.05 (0.000 and 0.001) (Appendix 1). For both tests, the null hypothesis is rejected. At the 5% level, there is significant statistical evidence to suggest that visioning and goal setting on the part of the headmaster have an impact on the level of commitment of educators. This was reiterated during the focus group interviews of Headmasters, where the latter agreed to the fact that indeed visioning and goal-setting role of an instructional leader does have an impact on educator commitment. "*For an educator to be committed, he/she should know what is expected from him/her. Only then, he/she will be able to perform his/her task effectively and efficiently. Without proper visioning and goal setting, everyone would be working in a different direction,*" as emphasised by the headmasters.

Educators strongly believed that visioning and goal setting help in giving direction to the work. Knowing what is expected from them motivates them in performing their daily teaching. "*Without visioning and goal setting, how can we know what is expected of us? The vision and goals should be simple, clear and achievable. All those involved directly or indirectly with the school should be aware of the vision and goal of the school because we must not forget that for a school to function well, all stakeholders must work hand in hand to make it a success. If this is the case, we, educators feel motivated to give the best of ourselves.*"

Hitt and Meyers (2017) viewed vision as an element that induces commitment among staff in a school community. They also defined vision and goal setting as powerful motivators. The study has indeed proved that visioning and goal setting does have an impact on educator commitment.

Hypothesis 2:

H_0: The school culture has no impact on the commitment level of educators.

H_1: The school culture impacts the commitment level of educators.

For both tests, the p-value > 0.05 (0.788 and 0.054) (Appendix 2). For both tests, the null hypothesis is not rejected. At the 5% level, there is no significant statistical evidence to suggest that the school culture has an impact on the level of commitment of educators.

The p-value is in contradiction with what the headmasters and educators stated. Headmasters from the focus group defined that, "*Building a positive school culture is important for the smooth running of the school. We spent a large amount of our time at our place of work, so we feel it is important to feel good and happy. A stress-free environment, no tension among colleagues.*" This was reinforced by the interviews of the educators where the latter stated, "*A positive school culture is important to feel motivated, to get the zeal to work. Positive school culture is the thriving force that makes us want to get out of bed and come to work.*" Educators 1,3 and 4 from focus group 1 also added, "*We do not feel motivated or enthusiastic to come to school, knowing how the school environment is. There is no fairness among staff members and the environment is full of negative vibes.*"

This finding contradicts what Rehman, Khan and Waheed (2019), Smith and Amushigamo (2016) and Wilhem (2016) observed. According to them, an educator's commitment lies in the school culture and in the instructional leadership roles of the headmaster to ensure it happens.

Hypothesis 3:

H_0: Headmaster support for improvement has no impact on the commitment level of educators.

H_1: Headmaster support for improvement impacts the commitment level of educators.

For both tests, the p-value > 0.05 (0.216 and 0.212) (Appendix 3). For both tests, the null hypothesis is not rejected. At the 5% level, there is no significant statistical evidence to suggest that headmaster support for improvement has an impact on the level of commitment of educators.

For this instructional role, the p-value again is in contradiction with what the headmasters and educators stated. Headmasters from the focus group said that "*Supporting educators and students is our key role. Without our support, the educator, the student nor the school will be able to function properly. It is through this support that we learn from our mistakes, improve and learn.*" This was supported by the interviews of the educators where the latter stated, "*Indeed the support the headmaster gives us is the motivational element in our everyday work. Without the support of the headmaster, it is difficult to work and the motivation or commitment is not present.*" All the educators from the focus group interviews agreed that support from the headmaster plays an important role in both educator and student motivation and commitment to improvement. Educator 2 from focus group 3 further added, "*Schools, where no support is obtained from headmaster, is simply like leaving someone in the desert without any means. The educator is here to deliver the work and works from 0900 to 1530. The small additional effort and commitment are not present.*"

Data collected from focus group interviews of both headmasters and educators do not match with the inferential analysis obtained from the p-value from the survey. Research done by and Leithwood (2012) is aligned with the focus group interviews and according to these researchers, school leaders do have a considerable influence on educators' commitment and motivation.

Hypothesis 4:

H_0: School resource management has no impact on the commitment level of educators.

H_1: School resource management impacts the commitment level of educators.

When *Negative_Commitment* is used to represent commitment level, the p-value = 0.018 < 0.05 (Appendix 4). The null hypothesis is rejected and at the 5% level, it can be concluded that there is significant statistical evidence to suggest that school resource management has an impact on the level of commitment of educators.

However, when *Positive_Commitment* is used as a proxy for commitment level, the p-value = 0.068 > 0.05 (Appendix 4). The null hypothesis cannot be rejected. At the 5% level, there is no significant statistical evidence to suggest that school resource management affects the level of commitment of educators.

Overall, based on the Chi-Square tests, one cannot determine whether the commitment is impacted or not by school resource management by the headmaster.

However, based on the interviews of headmasters, they identified that managing school resources and operations do have an impact on the educators' commitment and motivation. "*It is obvious that educators who have got all the facilities and resources needed for the smooth running of the classroom, feel more motivated to work. They usually do the little extra to bring better results and always work towards improving the classroom results.*" The same conclusion has been reached when educators were interviewed. Educators 2, 3 and 4 from focus group 3 claimed not feeling motivated since they do not get the support needed. "*The headmaster does not feel responsible for managing the school resources nor ensuring that the educators have everything they need in their classrooms. We cannot always take from our pocket and it is not worth doing the extra effort since the headmaster does not feel the least concerned.*"

Leithwood (2012) and Day, Gu and Sammons (2016) found from empirical evidence that educators' commitment depends largely on the ability of the headmaster to manage his school resources and operations effectively. However, both the interviews conducted by the researcher and the literature review are in contradiction with the survey results.

Hypothesis 5:

H_0: Promoting continuous professional development has no impact on the commitment level of educators.

H_1: Promoting continuous professional development impacts the commitment level of educators.

For both tests, the p-value > 0.05 (0.508 and 0.309) (Appendix 5). For both tests, the null hypothesis is not rejected. At the 5% level, there is no significant statistical evidence to suggest that promoting continuous professional development has an impact on the level of commitment of educators.

Even the headmasters during the focus group interviews were unable to agree on the degree of influence that cultivating leadership skills in educators can have on educator commitment. Some believed that "*Leadership skills are important skills to be developed in educators. They are the leaders of their class and future leaders of schools.*" Yet, some headmasters responded, "*Educators should not be involved in any type of leadership qualities and they should abide by what their headmaster decides.*" However, in contradiction to the focus group interviews of headmasters, educators feel that opportunities should be given to them to develop leadership skills. "*Building our leadership skills helps in our understanding of the school administration decisions and we feel valued.*" Consistent with the educators' interviews, Leithwood (2012) and Day et *al.* (2016) found that headmasters have a positive influence on the educators' level of commitment through intellectual stimulation via collaboration and involvement of educators in decision-making and development of leadership skills.

CONCLUSION

The researcher highly believes that instructional leadership and delivery of the skills is a mammoth task that headmasters alone might not be able to execute thoroughly. Though the expectations seem realistic, the achievement of such instructional skills remains a headache for many headmasters.

Besides the five elements mentioned above, it seems that headmasters also need to have ethics of care and empathy towards their educators. Motivation from headmasters with tangible and intangible rewards such as recognition of the work done by the educators positively impacts the educator's commitment and motivation.

A direct and close interpersonal relationship between the headmasters and educators tends to close the relationship gap and educators, where the latter will strive to be noticed by the headmaster through their commitment to the work being done.   This study also believed that delegation of responsibilities can develop a culture of quality teamwork, commitment, and healthy competition among staff members.

Another strategy that seems to have a positive influence on educator commitment is the involvement of parents in education matters. The participants of this study (educators) strongly believe in establishing an effective school-home partnership. Parents should be involved in a collaborative effort in helping in the monitoring of learner performance at home and be the support structure in terms of providing educational materials as well as emotional and social support to the child for the latter to perform well.

The researcher in this study is also of the opinion that constant interaction among educators, students, and parents seemed to have a positive impact on student performance and motivate educators in the teaching process, and all school headmasters should be aware of such positive benefits.

The researcher asserts that headmasters need to be conscious of the vulnerability of the staff members (educators) and display an influential instructional leadership role in a manner appropriate and relevant to the circumstances. The headmaster needs to have a knowledge of the abilities and to some extent the background of the educators to decide on the kind of leadership approach to adapt to for instructional matters.

It appears that the headmasters need to balance all areas of the instructional leadership styles as proposed in the instructional leadership model (Hallinger & Murphy Model). Although it seems to be

practically impossible for headmasters to lead effectively in all aspects of instructional leadership as per Hallinger and Murphy model, shared leadership practices and involvement of all stakeholders could be a fruitful strategy helping in reducing the leadership gaps.

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