School Leaders as Progress Makers: Opening a New Vista for School Leadership in Mauritius

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Abstract. This small scale study aims at exploring how far school leaders consider themselves progress makers. This is felt important as there is now much emphasis on schools to be more successful in terms of both academic and socio-economic outcomes. The challenge lies in knowing how to make it happen. A qualitative research was conducted. Furthermore, this article expands current knowledge on school leadership by reporting data gathered from a group of school leaders (n=6) who were mandated during their course in educational leadership to explore new vistas in school leadership and be pioneers as progress makers. Data gathered by means of a semi-structured interview, was analysed using the conceptual framework developed by Clampitt and DeKoch (2011)1 on transforming leaders into progress makers. The main findings illustrate how school leaders struggle to come to terms with the various strategies and tactics associated with progress makers. The study's implications for future practice and training of school leaders are also considered. The authors hint that school leaders can become progress makers, that is, that metamorphosis can occur, if they consider leading differently and use new leadership practices.

Keywords: Progress makers; School leaders

Introduction

Mauritius is an island state 2040 kilometers square with a population of approximately 1.2 million people. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country. As far as the economy goes, Mauritius is economically competitive, and has a friendly investment climate. Its Gross Domestic Product was $ 22.05 billion and Gross Domestic Product per capita income was $ 16, 820 in 2014. There are 168 secondary schools in Mauritius. 63 are run by the state and 103 are run by the private sector but heavily subsidised by the Ministry of Education. In some schools, because of their size there is only a rector, or a rector and one or two deputy rectors. There is approximately a dozen of co-educational schools and the rest is either for boys or for girls. The statistics available indicate that in 2013, there were 7795 educators for 113, 872 students in secondary education. In all for

that year, there were approximately 245, 000 in the pre-primary, primary and secondary. Education is free and compulsory from 3 to 16 years old. Hence this study which is contextualised to our local realities is an attempt to explore how far school leaders behave as progress makers.

Historically, school leaders were seen as those who would attend to the day to day running of schools in a rather routine way. Nowadays, things have changed and the role of school leaders has expanded. But one element which has come out strongly is that the school leader is central to the success of a school. "School leadership strongly affects student learning. Principals are central to the task of building schools that promote powerful teaching and learning for all students" (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p.3). Findings from studies conducted later also came to the same conclusion (Leithwood, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Reardon, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). School leaders are also seen as change leaders as they are no longer expected to maintain the status quo (Peterson, 2002).

At the same time it is now recognised that school leaders have a daunting role to play n bringing about increases in school achievement (Leithwood et al. 2004). Contemporary school administrators play a daunting array of roles, ranging from educational visionaries and change agents to instructional leaders, curriculum and assessment experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and community builders (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Running of a school is also seen as stressful, political, complex, and time consuming (Duke, Grogan & Yucker, 2003). At the same time, there is growing evidence of intensified accountability (Starr & White, 2008). There is furthermore more focus on results. Consequently, Heads of Schools are expected to be able to use data to drive decision making and assessment (Hellsten, Noonan, Preston & Prytula, 2013; Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

Hence we find that while the job becomes more demanding, we can query if there is time to innovate and meet the new challenges with new, more adapted solutions. Consequently, the need arises to find out more from Heads of Schools themselves.

Statement of the problem
Heads of Schools have to face many challenges in the day to day running of their schools. They are expected to create the appropriate climate which is conducive for learning. Heads of School also have to create the structures and practices which are necessary to help students achieve academic success. However, when we look deeper at the daily activities which are required to support what Heads of Schools need to do, we wonder when they have the time to act as progress makers. Yet this is what Heads of Schools need to become. Hence we find that there is need to investigate this issue further.

Research question
How far do school leaders consider themselves as progress makers?

Literature review

Clambitt and DeKoch (2011) developed a framework to define leaders who are progress makers. They found that there are seven strategies that these leaders adopt which make them progress makers.

Envision the future with calculated boldness.
Progress leaders do not take decisions boldly. They make calculations. This leads them to 'act with deliberation, design and planning' (p.80). Whilst they do not take rash decisions but 'act boldly when the right conditions prevail' (p.80). They are fully conscious that the context is dynamic and while they have to take this into consideration, they also need to stay focused on their vision. They need to think about growth and how to embrace opportunities which arise. They need to control their 'natural brashness' (p.70). In fact, 'they temper these impulses with calculation' (p.82).

Cultivate a focused flexibility mind-set.
While in most situation school leaders have to know where they are going and to determine strategies to move their schools in that particular direction, they also need to remain attuned to their environment. In fact, it seems essential to 'maintaining the dynamic tension between focus and flexibility' (p.105). It is believed that as successes are encountered, there is a tendency to replicate what has worked into other areas of the organisation. Yet as this is done, the organisation loses sight of its environment and it becomes rigid. It happens that 'success silently morphed into inertia' (p.107).

Enlarge the circle of engagement.
This involves deciding who to include and who to exclude. This also indicates getting the 'right people' (p.127). Furthermore it involves getting the 'right combination of people in order to create synergies' (p.126). There is need to have a balance in the team so that the team members can contribute productively towards the common goal. It is also essential that the team grows and develops as the initiative does.

Foster the growth of investment-worthy employees.
'Progress makers assume the responsibility of surrounding employees with the tools, experiences and challenges to fulfil their potential amid the storms everyday life' (p.150). This is done in a systematic way by ensuring that employees get tasks which help them build their competencies but they are also provided with constructive feedback. Progress makers can identify those employees who are able to adapt to changing circumstances, who are continuously learning and who embrace the organisational direction.

Seek, nurture and evaluate actionable ideas.
This occurs when progress makers 'quickly shift direction is fueled by intellectual restlessness bent on the never-ending quest for the next actionable idea' (p.169). Hence, progress makers are opened to changes and are ready to change their course of action. They look for 'incremental improvement or tweak to an existing process or product' (p.170). Therefore progress makers look for

ideas, nurture those they feel are right and evaluate them. All ideas which are accepted become actionable ideas.

Select, detect and correct the proper errors.
Progress makers learn from failures. They select what are considered as errors and they set up a mechanism to detect such types of errors. Then they correct the errors. They remain aware of the focus given to their organisation and in relation to this correct those errors which might threaten the feasibility of the goals identified for the organization.

Practice receiver-centric, strategy-based, feedback-driven communication.
Progress makers put emphasis on audience analysis. They anticipate 'how different groups of people will respond to a particular message' (p.221). Then they plan accordingly. Hence they try to be effective in their communication and they work on 'properly communicating particular messages" (p.221). Lastly, they get feedback. This allows them to 'check message fidelity" (p.224).

Methodology

For this study, as already indicated, qualitative method will be used. It was felt appropriate for this study because, as Rossman and Rallis (1998) have noted, "there are few truths that constitute universal knowledge; rather, there are multiple perspectives about the world" (p. 29). The qualitative method is relevant because it can express a richness and intensity of detail in a way that quantitative research cannot. Qualitative research methods allow for much more detailed investigation of issues - answering questions of meaning, such as why. More and more recognition is being given to the individual in the process, not just the observable effect of strategies upon a particular element. By exploring the Heads of Schools who have had leadership experiences, it will be possible to obtain "multiple perspectives" that further our understandings of this phenomenon. Each individual ascribes certain characteristics and attributes to any given situation.

Also there exists little research on the topic; therefore, qualitative methods are suited for this study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Since this study is exploratory in nature, the process of allowing the data to speak for itself further supports a qualitative method of inquiry. Given that qualitative methodology uses context, individual experience, and subjective interpretation, generalizability is not possible, nor is it a goal (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999). This method is also congruent with the nature of the research problem.

It is important to choose a data production "approach which will invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first person account of their experiences" (Smith et al (2009, p.56). Accordingly the present study has used in-depth individual semi-structured interviews (Coolican, 2004). The choice of semi-structured interviews permits a degree of structure to an interview where pre-identified issues can be explored and discussed (Denscombe, 1998).

These participants were interviewed. Cannell and Kahn (1968) have defined research interview as " a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information , and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description,

prediction or explanation". It involves the gathering of information through direct verbal interaction between individuals. Respondents can feel free to say what they think without subjecting their views to peer scrutiny, as in a group discussion (Gray, 2004). The interview serves the purpose described by Tuckman (1972) as, by providing access to what is "inside a person's head", [it] makes it possible to measure what a person knows (knowledge or information), what a person likes or dislikes (values and preferences), and what a person thinks (attitudes and beliefs).

Issues of credibility have been addressed by adopting a research method, which is well established and used in various studies which have studied the experiences of participants. Furthermore, we have developed "an early familiarity with the culture of participating organisations" (Shenton, 2004, p.65). We got to know the organisation prior to starting the research and tried to develop "prolonged engagement between ourselves and the participants so that we develop a real understanding of each other and build a relationship of trust (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Another measure to ensure credibility has been used "tactics to help ensure honesty in informants" (Shenton, 2004, p.66). Therefore each person has been given the opportunity to refuse to participate in the project so as to ensure that the data collection sessions involve only those participants who are truly willing to participate. In addition, probes have been used to elicit data. Also iterative questioning has also been used. We have looked for respondent validation or member check (Bryman, 2012). We have provided our participants with an account of what he or she has said during the interview. The aim of this exercise was to seek corroboration between what the participants have revealed during the interviews and the transcripts of these interviews. Furthermore, whilst we were conducting an in-depth analysis of the data collected, we have supported my arguments with verbatim extracts. This is important as validity implies presenting an accurate and truthful account of the participants' experiences (Coolican, 2004).

As far as the sample is concerned, purposeful sample was used. Only those school leaders following a course in educational leadership and management and who have explored school leaders as progress makers have been involved. This has limited the number to 6. These people represent 'information - rich cases for study in depth' Patton (1990, p.169). It represents a powerful case to opt for purposeful sampling. In fact Patton (1990) adds that 'Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research' (p.169). Thus as we study these participants, we are able to discern more thoroughly and get more in-depth understanding about the issue under study. The idea is not to make empirical generalizations. Patton (1990) nicely summarises the importance of using purposeful sampling by saying that 'information – rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study (p.169))

One issue which might look like a limitation of the study related to the use of only one form of data production tool. In fact, information was collected only from school leaders. The idea behind this exercise was to get school leaders to reflect on their lived experiences in order to make meaning out of them. Also in

line with principles of confidentiality and ethics, the participants have not been referred by their own names, but as Participant A, B, C, D, E.

Emergent themes and discussion
Firefighting

Participant B explained that leading school is "not an easy job". He added that "there is a lot of pressure from all corners". For participant A, it's like "treading on thin ice". Leading schools is described as "complex", "demanding" by Participant F. It would seem that school leaders take time to get used to the job and that as from that moment when they feel that they have mastered all the tasks that need to be done, they get into a comfort zone. They feel secured and confident with the way in which they are leading their school. They are many difficulties and expected events during a school day. Participant C said that "during a normal day, a school leader meets with many chaotic situations and needs to take a lot of decisions on the spot. We are reassured that there are other things going on as planned". The participants seemed to be engrossed in a lot of firefighting. Hence as far as the other aspects of school life are concerned, they tend to "hold on to what they know", "what has worked" explained Participant F. They lead in the same way and do not venture out of their comfort zone. Participant E added that he has taken "time and energy to master my leadership practices" and that he is "happy with the way he is leading his school". It would seem that the pride that school leaders take in their current leadership practices prevents them from embracing new leadership practices. Only participant E considered that "perhaps it's time to change". He considered that "holding on to the past might not be what a school needs". But this opinion is not expressed with a lot of confidence. At the same time, it would seem that leadership is a lonely position as the school leaders do not involve other people. They do not take any risk. They do not venture outside the beaten path. Hence school leaders show that they do not envision the future with much calculated boldness, nor do they take any bold incentive to enlarge the circle of engagement from employees.

Used to analyse an issue in a particular way – stick to the book

Another idea expressed by participant D is linked to their autonomy and the fact that they feel that they need to "stick to the book". This refers to the School Management Manual which is given to the school leaders and which explains how they need to lead the school. The education authorities have tried to cover most aspects of school life in the School Management Manual (SMM). Hence school leaders get used to analyse issues in particular ways and they thus remained "locked" and they do not consider "other ways" of doing things as mentioned by Participant F. Furthermore, Participant F revealed that the SMM is 'a blessing in disguise' as it helps in decision making but limits the scope of possibilities. Participant A explained that if other people want to bring suggestions, it has to be in line with the SMM, otherwise they are disregarded. Participant C talked about "reporting" and "having to explain in writing" how the procedures set down in the SMM have been followed. It seems that school leaders in this case are so focused on following the SMM that they do not allow other initiatives to be examined nor do they make space for other people to bring

their contribution. They miss the opportunities to judge the talents of their staff and collaborators. They are not able to fully foster the growth of investment of worthy employees. At the same time, school leaders do not eagerly seek, nurture and evaluate actionable ideas.

Easy way out
Furthermore, it would seem by the way that the school leaders relate events that happen at school and how they handle them that it times they choose they easy way out. Participant A explained that "there is so much to do". He thus added that "you need to move on". As a result of which they tend to take the easy way out and do not take enough time to consider other options. Participant B mentioned that if he "allows discussions about certain issues it would trigger further discussion". It would seem that their unwillingness to handle discussions or engage into discussions around issues prevent them from considering other options. They tend to opt for a "quick fix" as declared by Participant F. There is also an ego issue as school leaders do not readily enlarge the circle of engagement. Furthermore, we can also consider that school leaders here also, do not do much to seek, nurture and evaluate actionable ideas.

Procrastinate
On the other hand, though it might look contradictory, participants also mentioned that they tend to procrastinate at times. Participant A explained that there are some decisions that are "hard to take because of the consequences they might have on the school and on their careers". So some of them might procrastinate because they are "unsure about" what they have to do. Participant F is more direct in his answer, since he stated that "at times, we procrastinate because of we do not know how to complete certain tasks". Yet when prompted further, the participant does not seem to put time aside to reflect on the issue and consider other options. They tend to focus on saving face and thus inhibits acknowledging mistakes. School leaders thus do not engage in correcting errors.

Only one enthusiastic but others hold divergent opinions
Participant A explained that at times school leaders might be all fired up about a new strategy. They might feel that the school would benefit. However, their enthusiasm does not catch on the way that they expected it would. The staff does not respond with the expected enthusiasm. They react with indifference or with negativity. Participant B mentioned that there are "discouraging times". School leaders meet with people who spend time to criticise them for trying to do things differently instead of trying to analyse how the proposed change might be beneficial for the school. Participant F stated that "it's like swimming against the tide! It is tiring and discouraging!". This attitude thus becomes a major roadblock before they even get started. The school leaders are not able to seek, nurture and evaluate actionable ideas, even though they have tried to be inventive.

Unsuccessful past experiences
Participants explained that they have often attended workshops and seminars where they hve met powerful speakers. They first exposure was 'inspiring' and

they came back to school with new ideas. Participant C explained that following one of these workshops he has tried to adopt a new idea in his school. He added that at the beginning his staff adopted the initiative and they got on board, but it was difficult to sustain the momentum. Follow up efforts were laborious. After some time the initiative has had to be abandoned. Participant D mentioned that he too has tied new initiative but had to carry it alone. He had to back pedal as it was not feasible to lead the project alone. Consequently, although their experienced are different both school leaders felt that before they decide to embark on a new initiative they tend to be held back by their past unsuccessful experience. This tends to act as a potential drawback which keeps them from leading differently. This shows that the school leaders are not able to enlarge the circle of engagement.

Prejudice
On the other hand, participant E explained that he does not believe in the 'new wave'. He feels that in the workshops he has attended the speakers do not seem to be in touch with the realities of the audience. They tend to propose initiatives which are not feasible in the local context. The idea was also taken up by Participant D who felt that 'outsiders' cannot 'know better than us'. Participant F felt that the strategies which were proposed even if contextulised, "will not be appropriate". It would seem that this group of school leaders come with the preconceived idea that they will not learn anything worthwhile. Their prejudice seems like a major stumbling block which prevents them from taking advantage of new ideas. This is also related to their ego and ultimately they are not able to enlarge the circle of engagement.

Where to start
Another issue which crops up is linked to knowing where to start. Participant E mentioned that when embarking on a change journey, the most important thing is to 'know where to start'. He added that 'not knowing where to start or starting at the wrong moment might negatively impact on a new initiative'. Furthermore, Participant B talked about when he started a new project, he wanted to bring everyone on board. But this was 'overwhelming' and proved 'distressful'. He explained that he thought he communicated well but the others always complained about not having been properly informed. It was a bad experience. Participant F felt that "tasks can look so complex". Hence it would seem that not knowing where they should start impacts on their willingness to embrace change. School leaders cannot envision the future with calculated boldness. Additionally, they have not adopted a very effective communication strategy.

Evaluation and recommendations
It would seem that there is need for schools to work out on getting the proper background ready for them to be able to successfully become progress makers. An analysis of the comments made by the participants highlight various lacunas which can be tackled in providing a different kind of preparation or professional development to school leaders. We cannot ignore the comments made by Brundrett and Crawford (2008) and Hallinger (2003) who claim that 21st century leaders have not been effectively prepared to take up school leadership

position or the claim made in OECD Report on Improving School Leadership (2008) which states 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' (p.16). Hence in their preparation or professional development, school leaders need to come across opportunities that will allow them to :

Realise that school leaders are vital to the core purpose of schools.
When school leaders engage in various strategies which they feel will be beneficial for the schools, it is important for them to realise that the relationship between them and the student achievement has long been established. They are an important element in building the success of the school so that they need to come up with initiative which they can handle. There is need to maximise the effectiveness of the role of the school leaders.

Expand the capacity of the school leaders.
In order to adopt new practices, it is important to first take stock of the actual capacity of school leaders. Given their load of work, it is to be feared that they are at or nearing their practical limit. It is a fact that new and more and more challenging expectations are being placed on school leaders. In order for school leaders to expand their potential, there is need to provide them with more training which can help them to handle new initiatives more effectively, but also some kind of mentoring or coaching to allow them to get the support which they need. It is also important to use instructional methods which would give school leaders the opportunity to engage in discussion which would help to raise their critical consciousness. At the same time, school leaders must also be helped to see how they can support theory with examples. The relevancy of topics which are taught should be highlighted. In fact, the basis of the programme should rely on andragogy. When working with adults those delivery courses should apply andragogy. This is critical as adults learn in a different way. Attempts must be made to raise school leaders' pedagogical critical consciousness by studying case studies based on real examples, that is, evidence based practices. During their professional development, they need deeper engagement strategies so that the school leaders can undergo critical and transformative change. The school leaders could be encouraged to read controversial readings which could lead them to question their own biases. This could lead to situations where reflection informs practice.

Choose the strategies depending on their context
Another important element to take into consideration is the context. Since each context is different, school leaders have to realise that some strategies have a greater impact than others. When trying to become progress makers, school leaders have to bear in mind that they might not intervene on the whole framework. They need then to concentrate on those dimensions which they can change.

Focus on what can be done
Since there are seemingly growing pressure on school leaders and more challenges which now exist, then the school leaders have to focus on few strategies which they feel will impact more on the life of the school. There is need for school leaders to prioritise their strategies and to focus on those strategies which seem more efficient and more effective and which are within the scope of the school leader as well as the school. The school must have the necessary resources, physical and human, to implement the strategies. In times of such challenges, it is even more essential to constantly review the list of priorities which a school leader has to tackle.

Evaluate competing strategies
As we investigate how school leaders are as progress makers, we need to realise that there are other initiatives and strategies which are available and that at times school leaders find themselves overburdened with strategies and not very sure which one to use. All the strategies which are being proposed are credible and if properly implemented will certainly yield significant improvement for the school. Yet, the school leaders will have to determine which ones are the most important and which combination of strategies will work best for the school. They need to embrace the strategies which speak to their own context and run with it.

Develop supportive networks
It would seem that given the various constraints encountered by the school leaders, that they could among themselves develop a supportive network. This would provide them with opportunities to share ideas and projects. They could also provide emotional support and encouragement and provide assistance wherever needed. They could help to monitor projects and circulate to appraise the situation and provide suggestions and comments. This network will serve as a platform for school leaders to learn new practices and they could investigate ways to support other school leaders in leading their schools. The experience shared by the school leaders would serve to improve practice. These new educational intervention could induce school leaders to lead differently and adopt new leadership practices. Hence these networks will allow school leaders to find allies, access tools, share practical wisdom, and build collaborative strategies. Networking would indeed help them to share resources and information, devise an agenda, and engage in collective action within their schools.

Supervise, train and support teachers
School leaders must also be taught how to supervise, train and support teachers in carrying out projects which will lead to school improvement. In their quest to be progress makers, school leaders have to challenge the existing school culture. Consequently, they might need help in order to provide the appropriate support to the teachers. They need to show to teachers that they need to relentlessly review their practice and should be flexible and adapt to the current context. This is also what they themselves should be doing.

Conclusion

Hence, we find that there is need to have an inspiring training programme for school leaders. But there are also strong claims for continued professional development as the school system is dynamic. In the future, there is need to include knowledge and information on a variety of issues impacting the education sector. School leadership cannot be considered in isolation. There are other issues which are impacting on schools and school leaders must be able to see how to handle these issues simultaneously. The school leaders need to be empowered so that they dare to venture on new paths. School leaders are expected to redesign the existing organisational structures. Furthermore, we also find that they also have to redefine and redistribute leadership across the organisation. This will promote greater engagement and ownership from the staff. This in turn will promote student achievement. We also find that a change in the roles and responsibilities of school leaders. They would need to have more lines of communication with the different stakeholders.

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