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ABSTRACT

This report describes a study that utilized the qualitative methodological approach of the focus group, followed by interviews, to gauge the perception of senior educational leaders in Trinidad and Tobago on issues pertaining to school effectiveness. Specifically, the study sought to ascertain from primary and secondary principals, school supervisors, college lecturers, and leaders in the teachers' union factors of critical importance to the effectiveness of the school and the role of the school leadership in influencing the level of effectiveness. Among the variables suggested as important correlates of school effectiveness were student empowerment and the identification of starting points, which extended the concept of regular assessment. Also, while acknowledging the challenges engendered by a centrally controlled hierarchical system that at times hindered the role of the principal, participants emphasized the importance of school leadership and the need for a collective vision as critical characteristics of the effective school. (Contains 34 references.) (Author)

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Issues in School Leadership and School Effectiveness: A focus on Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

This study utilized the qualitative methodological approach of the focus group, followed by interviews, to gauge the perceptions of senior educational leaders in Trinidad and Tobago on issues pertaining to school effectiveness. Specifically, the study sought to ascertain from them factors of critical importance to the effectiveness level of the school, and the role of the school leadership in influencing the level of effectiveness.

Among the variables suggested as important correlates of school effectiveness were student empowerment and the identification of starting points, which extended the concept of regular assessment. Also, while acknowledging the challenges engendered by a centrally controlled hierarchical system that at times impacted negatively the role of the principal, participants emphasized the importance of school leadership, and the essentiality of a collective vision as critical characteristics of the effective school.

Issues in School Leadership and School Effectiveness: A focus on Trinidad and Tobago.

Like many countries that have come out of a fairly recent colonial past, Trinidad and Tobago, although having a long history of public school education at the primary level, does not have an extensive body of research on schooling and its effectiveness. This statement does not imply that schools have not been studied. There has been research into various aspects of schooling in an attempt at extricating process factors that might explain some of the variation in student performance (for example, Jules, 1991; Kutnick, 1994; Kutnick & Jules, 1988; Newton, 1986). However, there is still need for more research into schooling and its effects to create the data base of empirical evidence that should be an essential pre-requisite to policy decision making, implementation and school reform (Ellis, 2001).

Correlates of School Effectiveness

The school effectiveness literature has identified a number of variables as critical to the effectiveness level of the school. Among these are: (a) strong leadership; (b) high expectations; (c) school climate; (d) regular assessment; (e) community involvement; (f) shared vision; (g) clear school mission; and (h) curriculum (The Association for Effective Schools, 1996). While this cluster of characteristics is generally accepted as standard, there is no one characteristic or combination of characteristics that can be identified as the most salient to, or responsible for school effectiveness. It is the combined presence of the characteristics in an environment that lends support that affords success (Magana, 2000).

There is no disagreement with Magana's position. Nevertheless, as suggested by Dow and Oakley (1992), Edmonds (1979) and Leithwood (1994), tying all the strands together is the task of the school leadership. This view is in concert with Fullan's (1992) assertion that at the heart of any reform program is leadership. Similarly, at the heart of any educational reform effort is the principal who, in the context of the school, and because of his/her positional power, is by default the leader (Silins 1994).

Intuitively there is a sense to the logic of the above argument. According to Hoy and Miskel (2001) in a statement attributed to Bass, " leadership is often regarded as the single most important factor in the success or failure of institutions such as schools" (p. 392). This observation gives credence to Katz and Kahn's (1978) definition of leadership as "(1) an attribute of an office or position, (2) a characteristic of a person, and (3) a category of actual behavior" (Hoy & Miskel, 2001, p. 393). However, my review of the published literature emanating from the English speaking Caribbean confirmed the dearth of Caribbean empirical data on issues of school leadership and school effectiveness. A consequence of this absence has been a formulation of assumptions of school leadership and school effectiveness that is premised on the expectations as postulated in the extant literature of the more developed countries.

The implications of this reality cannot be underestimated especially when one considers that there is a direct influence on policy and practice through the continued dependence on external funding agencies for financing the various government projects (Louisy, 2001), and the use by these agencies of consultants with sometimes little experience and knowledge of the Caribbean circumstance. The challenge for developing nations therefore, is to forge a concept of school leadership, and identify characteristics

of school effectiveness that even if informed by the theoretical assumptions posited in the literature of the developed countries, are relevant to the culture, needs and realism of developing nations, some with very finite resources.

Being mindful of the above observations, this study attempts to capture the local context by garnering the opinions of educational leaders on (a) characteristics associated with effective schools in Trinidad and Tobago, (b) the priority attached to the identified characteristics, (c) the role of the school leadership in the operationalization of the characteristics, and (d) the overall impact of leadership on the effectiveness level of the school.

Method

This study utilized the qualitative methodology of the focus group followed by interviews of the participants and other senior educators. An advantage associated with the focus group is it generates multiple perspectives and allows for elaboration and consensus which often prove more challenging to elicit when utilizing other forms of data collection. Also, focus groups tend to have high rates of validity (Kreuger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). The follow-up interviews provided the opportunity for the participants to elaborate and clarify previous responses, and non-participants to deepen or broaden the perspectives that emerged from the focus group.

Identification and Selection of Participants

To ensure that the information realized was not only pertinent, but also illuminating (Merriam, 1998), all participants had to be senior educators in leadership positions in Trinidad and Tobago. Invitations to participate were sent to principals of primary and the various types of secondary schools, school supervisors, lecturers in the

College of Education and the School of Continuing Education, University of the West Indies (UWI), and the teachers' union. These persons were selected because of their knowledge of the education system, their experience and positions within the system, and their involvement in reform efforts at the national level. Consequently, they would have brought to the discussion their unique perspectives but framed within a national agenda.

Responding to the invitations, and thus comprising the focus group were: (a) three principals, two from the primary school, and one from a 7 year traditional secondary school; (b) one School Supervisor 111; (c) one School Supervisor 11; (d) one School Supervisor 1; (e) one senior lecturer in the College of Education, UWI. The interviewees were three of the focus group participants, one principal from a special school, and two senior educators.

Procedure

Facilitating the focus group were two educators with experience in conducting qualitative research. My role was that of observer and scribe. The moderator introduced the topic, explained the purpose of the focus group, and outlined the procedures to be followed. Each of the four questions was read to the group. The participants recorded their responses on four by six index cards, one card for each response. These responses were written on a flip chart, and provided the topics for the ensuing discussions. All discussions were audio-recorded and in addition, observations were noted.

Analysis of the Data

The analysis of the data, to a large extent reflects the conceptual framework postulated by Ely et al (1996). First the written data were collated and categorized, and initial thematic clusters were established. Following this step, the tapes were transcribed

and the data generated were coded, analyzed and the themes extracted. These extracted themes, together with the summaries of the collated data were used to identify thematic clusters.

As the analysis progressed, sub-categories were identified, and new categories formed. Each category was examined to identify the main thread, or theme that gave it meaning. Further examination of the data sought the emergence of common themes across categories, and linkages between the categories.

Kreuger, (1994) recommends conducting a second focus group comprising the same participants in order to test for inconsistencies. However, in the absence of holding a second session, themes extracted were used to generate questions for follow-up interviews, and draft copies of the focus group report and findings were emailed to participants for their comments. All interviews were conducted by telephone.

Discussion

The first question to the focus group asked participants to identify, based on their experience, factors they perceived crucial to the effectiveness level of the school. The identified factors were leadership, shared vision, clear school mission, student empowerment, teacher expectation, regular assessment, school environment, community involvement and the curriculum. The participants unanimously agreed that school effectiveness is a major concern at the present time, and determined that all the variables identified are "clearly vital to school improvement, and school effectiveness." However, the distinction was drawn between the theoretical acceptance, i.e., the espoused, and the operationalization, or implementation aspect, i.e., the manifested. As one participant wrote, "While all these correlates should be significant if we are to progress, … regular

assessment, community involvement, and truly shared vision are not always afforded the importance they should receive."

This disjuncture between theory and practice becomes a recurring theme. For example, the participants drew reference to the School Improvement Programme (SIP) in which schools were mandated to formulate mission statements. All schools responded to the directive, and theoretically all schools have mission statements. The issue of interest is "whether it (the statement) means anything beyond the tablet on the wall," thereby underscoring the distinction between participating in the process in response to a directive, and attaching meaning to the final product. The teachers might have participated, but never reached the level of involvement that signified a partnership with the school, that is, being part of a shared responsibility. A consequence of this participation versus involvement is, as time progresses, knowledge of the mission statement becomes limited to the location of the document.

Revisiting the issue of participating in the process versus giving meaning to the product, participants agreed that developing a mission was a continuing process. Consequently, there was constant need to revisit the mission, especially in the larger schools, where "principals not only have to articulate but must walk the mission to maintain consensus and so ensure a common focus. " But, achieving this common focus demands a sharing of the vision for the school, and just as importantly, a willingness to share the leadership. This view resonates with that of Hersey and Blanchard cited in Hoy and Miskel (1991) who suggest that the leader through his or her exhibited behavior "provides the necessary leader behavior while simultaneously helping the group mature and assume more of the leadership itself" (p.294). Therefore, in the same way that there

is a distinction between having a vision, and sharing the vision, a distinction is also drawn between the leader, the person, and leadership, the process. The challenge therefore is for the leader through the process of leadership to share the vision, infuse the values, and have the staff buy into the mission. (See Table 1).

Leadership: The Priority

"When it comes to education, nobody gets it right." Whether this statement by one of the participants is true or not, it captures the complexities involved in schooling. Nevertheless, bringing to mind Bass' view on the influence of leadership on the success or failure of the school, the focus group when asked to prioritize the variables associated with effectiveness, identified leadership and the school vision which informs the school mission. In linking leadership to the vision and mission, the participants reasoned that the leader must be able to visualize where he or she wants the school to go. The vision might not be clear. As a matter of fact, it does not even have to be initiated by the principal; but, it provides the starting point for building a shared vision.

As stated by one participant; "it is a set of politicizing, a kind of mobilization that has to go through as a leadership process before the school establishes a shared vision." Concurring with this view, Smith and Lucas (2000) explain that to build a shared vision for the school, the process must allow people to derive the "inherent satisfaction of re-creating the school together, with one another's support," (p.291). Indeed, the goal of the building process is that "each person sees his own picture of the organization at its best. Each shares responsibility for the whole … not just for his piece" (Senge, 1990, p.212). It is this ability to see oneself as an integral part of the organization that allows for continuance even in the departure of the leader, and thus answers the question, "What

would happen if the leader goes?" asked by one of the participants. The fact is, while the departure of the leader may be a loss to the school, a shared vision as postulated by Senge (1990), allows the school to continue striving toward its goal.

The issue of continuance really speaks to tradition. It is not accidental, but reflects the success of the systemic structures put in place to operationalize the vision. Related to the previous statement, the phenomenon was raised where in some communities, people refer to a school not by the official name, but as Mr. X's school or Y school, the name of a former principal who might have left the school many years ago. It is an interesting observation, and is an example of what Andrews, as cited in Brandt (1987), refers to as the pervasive power of the principal. Thus, the influence of the principal impacts the students' perceptions, and by extension, influences the perception of the community.

Acknowledging that in the present day absence of the "shared spirit of school and community" that these phenomena are less likely to occur, the participants nevertheless noted that there are still schools where principals have made such an impact that their names have become synonymous with the schools, or with quality education. These occurrences they contextualized within the framework of leadership succession planning, which could be conscious or unconscious, and persons buying into the vision of what the school should represent. As stated by a participant in the focus group, "It (the vision) is passed on in the spirit of people. They buy into it. ...The community may not understand why, but they accept it."

Student Empowerment and Starting Points

An interesting point raised was that of student empowerment, a concept that is rarely addressed, and which would be an issue of increasing importance in the new era of

universal secondary education. According to one of the interviewees, there is a relationship between the extent to which students feel encouraged and empowered, and their perception of the school as a place of learning. This concept, as was further explained, transcends the notion of high expectations for the students. It entails the incorporation of systems of support that give students confidence in themselves and their abilities to make decisions that are in their best interest and that of their colleagues.

The extent to which schools address the issue of student empowerment is not clear. However, the observations of the focus group participants were unambiguous, and in their deliberations, linked the issue of student empowerment to that of educational starting points. They noted that the instituting of secondary education for all students has compelled schools to reconsider their thinking with regard to student learning, to a consideration that all students can learn. The consequence of this reconsideration has demanded that schools be willing to recognize and identify the starting points from which the educational journey would begin, by devising strategies "appropriate to teaching the students where they are."

"If you do not start where the child is, you have lost the child." This statement coming out of the focus group emphasizes the importance attached to the identification of the starting points, and suggests a conceptualization that goes beyond that of regular assessment, as identified in the literature. With this understanding in mind, identification of starting points cannot be based solely on academic assessment, but must also be situated within the context of student culture. Therefore, there is a need to pay attention to the multiculturalism in the society that extends beyond race and religion, to be inclusive of class and the subculture that embeds the class.

Student Values versus School Values

The above argument provided the introduction for the discussion on the hiatus between the values of some schools and the majority of the students who attend those schools. This difference in socialization, thinking and valuing create an atmosphere ripe for misinterpretation. As was noted, student and teachers may speak the same words; however, communication style, interpretation of nuances, and the attachment of meanings suggest that they, students and teachers, in attending to different and sometimes disparate cultural cues, in reality, may be speaking different languages.

This is a challenge for the school leadership, especially in a multicultural, multi-religious society in which values and attitudes are influenced as much by ethnic and religious background, as by socio-economic status. As one person commented, it is very difficult for teachers to accept certain styles and characteristics of some students. However, the statement is also true of principals, and hints at a central issue of teacher and leadership preparation for working in this very cosmopolitan and multi-layered society.

This entire area of the orthogonal relationship between the values of the teachers and students has implications for school community relationships. One participant suggested that it may be necessary to train parents to have an understanding of their role as parents and partners in the education of their children, and more importantly, to have an understanding of what the school is trying to do. Clearly, the suggestion has merit. However, while it is true that some parents are less than supportive of the school, valuing students still remains the responsibility of the school. Also, one cannot assume that the parents are not aware of the school's agenda. It is possible that they are, and see their role

as protecting their children's self-esteem, thereby subverting the agenda in an effort to assuage the humiliation and emotional dissonance experienced by their children.

This view is not too far-fetched. London (2002), argues that "the ability of any group to spread the secular gospel, and to establish and declare its knowledge as 'education for all' is related to that group's power in the larger political and economic arena." (p.55). Thus, the school is by no means a neutral environment, but reinforces the economic relations in society through the transference of information (knowledge) that reinforces notions of what is acceptable, and "what good people are like" (London, p.55). This view was echoed by many of the participants. For example:

> Schooling, education seemed to be pegged to the middle class, upper class values. The content of the curriculum, what we have to learn, is really handed to us by the hegemonic group, because they have the greater stake in the society, to remain powerful, wealthy, and have high service. So they demand through the political directorate what they want these students to learn, to keep the country going, and to have it safe for them, to provide them with the labouring classes.

This issue of teacher and student values, and valuing student input generated a lot of discussion, and more importantly, raised questions salient to the relevance of the education afforded the students. If it is as London (2002) argues, and the above quote implies, then schools may not see the importance of addressing themes and issues specifically of interest to those whose economic status has positioned them at the lower end of the social hierarchy.

The issues involved are complex, and present a formidable challenge to the school leadership. Adding to the complexity, is the recognition that black, i.e., Afro- Caribbean

boys are under performing (Kutnick , Jules, & Layne, 1997; Miller, 1994), or as stated by one participant, are in "double jeopardy." Thus included in the equation is level of performance as an attribute of gender and ethnicity. Therefore, as stated by one interviewee, the question is not whether schools are effective, but effective for whom.

Many aspects of these challenges are beyond the control of the principal, and hence, school effectiveness as this relates to gender, in this case Afro-Caribbean males, has to be addressed from a broader social perspective (Jennings, 2001). The research has to move forward from an emphasis on gender comparisons, and begin placing greater focus on solution-oriented processes and programmes. Participants suggested that one approach is to expose students to a variety of cultures, instill pride in their roots and culture, while at the same time bringing them to a recognition of the universal values that are essential to successfully negotiate the modern world. Achieving this goal has implications for the curricular offerings, and suggests an approach to education that transcends the conceptualization that operationally defines effectiveness in terms of academic success.

Leadership and the Social Environment

The participants also identified the school's social environment as an area critical to the effectiveness level of the school, and looked at the relationship between the school leadership and the quality of the environment. The following quote succinctly captures their expressed sentiments: "Leadership sets the climate for the social environment." Macintosh (1991) made a similar assertion, stating that the leadership affected all aspects of the school's learning environment. Suggested by these statements is the critical role of the principal. He or she sets the tone and provides the impetus that encourages an

atmosphere of acceptance, openness, emphatic understanding, trust, sharing, and generosity of spirit, all of which affect the effectiveness of the school.

But, achieving the social climate depends on the kind of communication climate, or openness the leader allows. The leader has to communicate a sense of fairness and impartiality, objectivity and professionalism that must be seen by all. It is through an effective system of communication that incorporates dialogue and feedback and honest observations (Senge, 1990) that the environment that supports the vision is created. Often this is achieved through the ability of the principal to use mediating variables such as the various within-school organizational structures and committees to effect desired outcomes. However, influencing the social environment is not only limited to manipulating the mediating variables. The principal also has to negotiate with the wider community and sell to them the vision of the school, thus letting the community become an extension of the learning environment that the school wishes to foster.

Leader as Exemplar

In addition to the aforementioned factors influencing school effectiveness, the focus group also identified the school assembly, and the principal's role in the assembly, as an enhancer of the school's social environment. As stated by all, the assembly is a forum that facilitates student involvement. It is part of the school ceremony and has the potential to be "rallying points for the cause of the school." Participants noted that, in the traditional schools, the assemblies have survived, and are integral to the culture of the school. There is a sense of importance attached to the notion of "this is who we are," which fosters and maintains a feeling of togetherness, acceptance by, and belonging to the institution. This sense of belonging and togetherness is reflective of pride, not only in

the institution, but also in the school leader who must be seen as a flag-bearer of the standards and traditions of the school.

"The core leadership behavior is simple: be a model" (Senge, 1990, p. 173). This theme was emphasized throughout the discussions, and even more so, with respect to disadvantaged schools. The point was made that "many people believe that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are steeped in dysfunctionality." However, as one participant contended, despite the empirical evidence that appears to legitimize that perception, he believed, and was supported by the other members in the group, that students want to see someone in front of them setting the example. They want to see someone setting the tone, and exemplifying what is right and what is wrong.

According to one interviewee, as far as the students are concerned, there is no compromising in regard to what they expect of their teachers and principal. They expect their teachers, and even more so the principal, to exhibit the behaviours to which they, the students must aspire. This contribution was supported by examples of two schools in which the principals did not seem to understand the relationship between their attire and personal behaviour, and the expectations of the staff, students and parents. The results have been ongoing problems with staff and student morale, and a negative effect on the schools' social environment.

These observations bring to the fore the issue of teacher discipline and teacher efficacy; two areas of continuing concern to the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the general public. It is an accepted fact that there exists a direct relationship between the quality of teaching, the overall learning environment, and student achievement (Association for Effective Schools, Inc., 1996). However, in many instances, despite the

willingness of the principal to address such issues, and to take risks to improve the school environment, the system itself stymies the chances of success.

These imposed constraints are not restricted to the principal's authority with regard to school personnel, but extend to the authority to acquire resources for the school. This point was well articulated when one of the participants gave the example of a principal who, after raising funds to purchase a copier for the school, was reprimanded because he/she did not first get permission from the MOE. As stated by the participants, and cited by every interviewee, it is a case of being mandated responsibility with no authority; a sentiment that is captured in the phrase "the ideal of policy versus the reality of practice (Jennings, 2001).

Conclusion

Many of the concerns discussed have been raised by educators elsewhere and find support in the literature, for example, the importance of a shared or collective vision and the importance of the leader being perceived as an exemplar and model of professionalism by both staff and students. However, while these concerns may appear similar across the various educational contexts, they are rooted in a context uniquely Caribbean, and in some cases unique to Trinidad and Tobago.

The participants addressed the notion of student empowerment and starting points from which students should be taught. Whether the schools deemed effective empower students, or the students attending these schools are already empowered needs further examination. Of greater importance is the meanings attached to the terms student empowerment and starting points. The participants proffered a view that not only incorporated the use of regular assessment and teacher confidence in the students' ability

to succeed, but also emphasized the need to acknowledge and respect what students bring to the classroom.

Gender differential in academic performance is a topic of continuing debate, and directly relates to the quality of schooling and the extent to which schools can be deemed effective. The fact is, schools cannot be considered effective if a more than satisfactory proportion of males are not included among those benefiting from the effects of schooling. Indeed this concern warrants further investigation, and it is hoped that as more researchers locate an interest in this issue of gender differential in performance, their findings would lead to strategies that would address the imbalance.

Despite the limitations that can be expected from all qualitative research, there are implications to be drawn from the above observations. Addressing the issues of student empowerment and starting points, and improving the performance of the male student population has implications for teacher preparation programmes, and also for the principal selection process and the leadership preparation of the principal. Achieving successful outcomes to these complex issues demand not only skilful planning, but also school personnel and leadership that need to be culturally sensitive, and centrist in their appreciation of the existing cultural differences.

The issue of mandated responsibility without authority was examined in regard to teacher accountability. This concern reflects what Fiedler, cited in Hoy and Miskel (1991), calls in the contingency model of leadership behaviour, leader-position-power. This contextual variable is predicated on the degree of authority the leader has: that is the legitimate authority to hire or promote, or to take the kind of actions to address situations deemed not conducive to optimal performance of the organization.

These circumstances of imposed constraints on the principal's authority are, in fact, outcomes of a system of central control, and have implications for the level of innovation that can reasonably be expected from principals in their attempts to make their schools more effective. Indeed, the atmosphere of caution created by a system of hierarchical directives does have an overall negative impact on the educational policies that attempt to improve the education system. This issue of school leader effectiveness within a system that limits flexibility and authority is not addressed in the extant literature. However, it is a concern that is very relevant to the Caribbean, specifically Trinidad and Tobago.

The above concern directly relates to the issue of the leadership models or approaches most appropriate to the Trinidad and Tobago context. If it is as Senge (1990) argues, the system, i.e. the systemic structure, influences behaviour, then it is reasonable to expect that in a system so markedly different from those in the developed countries, the approach to leadership would reflect this difference. This is not to suggest that there are no commonalities across leadership, there are. According to Smith and Ross (1999), "there are a few seemingly irrefutable laws of leadership --- and thus some fundamental skills that every leader must master" (p.108).

The implications are many for principal preparation programmes. It is fairly straightforward to teach strategies for sharing leadership, building and sustaining a collective vision, and the many other leadership behaviours that would positively impact the effectiveness level of the school. The challenge is in preparing principals to be effective in a system that is centrally controlled, with very finite resources. Interestingly enough, the participants, even those who are now part of the central administration, spoke

about selectively ignoring directives from the MOE. As one principal stated: "One has to keep the vision always in mind, and at times forget about the ministry."

It is highly unlikely that the University of the West Indies (UWI) or the MOE, in their programmes and workshops, would advise prospective principals to selectively ignore directives. However, it appears that principals themselves have determined that to be effective, they have to be subversive. This of course, forces the consideration of an approach to school leadership that is very different from that which is found in the literature. As such, it places the onus on the UWI, the premier institution for preparing educational leaders, and the wider research community to seriously look at leadership approaches and behaviours with the aim of identifying those that may prove most effective in the Trinidad and Tobago context.

Despite the systemic limitations imposed on the principal, all agreed that the principal has the potential to influence the entire school environment, and as a result, impact the level of school effectiveness. There is much evidence of principals who have been able to turn around schools and set them on paths of continuous improvement. The priority therefore, is to document these successes, examine the approaches and analyze the leadership behaviours, and use the data in the formulation of leadership models or approaches that could be passed on to other principals.

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Table 1:

Distinctions between the Reality and the Ideal

Reality		Ideal
Espoused/Theorized	versus	Manifested/Implemented
Participation	versus	Involvement
Having a vision	versus	Sharing the vision
Talking the mission	versus	Walking the mission
Leader (person)	versus	Leadership (process)

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