

Leadership and School improvement in Small Island States – the case of Seychelles

Introduction

In school effectiveness as well as in school improvement literature, leadership holds a central position, both in terms of the change process and the outcomes of change. Over the past two decades, education reforms in many developing and industrialising countries have been strongly influenced by the underlying principles and strategies of the school effectiveness and school improvements movements (Dimmock and Walker, 2000). This is almost inevitable, as Dimmock and Walker (*ibid*: 145) point out: the ‘globalisation of policy and practice in education is in part a response to common problems faced by many of the world’s societies and education systems’.

The nature of the reforms vary, depending on the countries and their unique combinations of social, cultural, historical and political factors but they all aimed to enhance the capacities of schools to manage change and to become more effective in raising the level of student performance and achievements (Hopkins and Levin 2000). Among the countries that are experiencing such reforms are several small island developing states (SIDS), including the islands of Seychelles, which instituted a school improvement programme in 1996 (Bezzina, 2004). The programme was closely modelled on the British school improvement trends of the time, with emphasis on school self evaluation, the institutionalisation of development planning, school-based professional development and a shift towards a more participative style of leadership.

While acknowledging the potential of ‘policy borrowing’ to enhance opportunities for development in an increasingly globalised world (Phillips and Ochs, 2003; Dimmock and Walker, 2000), the ‘complex significance of context’ as Phillips and Ochs (*ibid*: 457) put it, remains a serious concern. In particular, the specificities of SIDS – as characterised by their greater level of vulnerability as a result of smallness, isolation from markets, ecological fragility, geographic dispersion and limited resources (Ballantyne, 1998; Louisy, 2001) – suggest that certain conditions and processes for school improvement prevail that would be different from those contained in models that have evolved in western industrialised countries. Furthermore, these authors note that SIDS have a tendency towards centralised systems, with government interventions in the public sector that usually go beyond the role of regulator. SIDS also have limited industrial development and economic diversification which all impact on their capacities to develop and harness the full potential of their human and natural resources (Centre for Environment and Development, 2002).

This paper briefly considers the impact of the school improvement programme (SIP) instituted in the Seychelles public school system over the past ten years, in the light of the specificities of SIDS, and focusing in particular on leadership roles and the extent to which these may have changed during the implementation of the programme. The issues raised here are based on a case study research project carried out in September and November 2005, in one of the country’s secondary schools involved in the SIP.

Profile of Seychelles

Seychelles is an island state in the western Indian Ocean, comprising 115 islands scattered over some 500,000 square kilometres of the ocean. The country has a total land area of 450 square kilometres, and a population of 80,410 people. 88% of the total population live on the island of Mahe, which accounts for approximately 35% of the total land area. A further 10% of the population live on two other smaller islands – Praslin and La Digue - to be found within a 40 kilometre radius of the main island, while the remaining 2% are scattered over the other islands of the archipelago. The country is characterised by its geographical remoteness and an unusually high degree of geographical dispersion. It has the highest per capita GDP amongst African countries – over US\$ 7,000 - and also ranks highest on social indicators (Ministry of Education, 2000c). The key sectors of the economy are tourism and fisheries.

The islands, originally uninhabited and then colonised by the French in 1770, became a full British colony in 1814, and remained so for over a hundred and fifty years. Seychelles gained its independence from the British in 1976. The origins of its education system has its roots in the colonial developments of that period, which was marked by only limited interest in mass education of any kind on the part of the colonial powers. In fact for most of the 19th century education was a matter left to the churches – mainly the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches – and other charitable concerns (Domingue 2001). Consequently the churches played a significant role in the institutionalisation of primary schooling, a process which was enmeshed in long standing debates over religion and language. Institutionalised and compulsory education was finally established in Seychelles in 1944, one hundred and seventy four years after the first French settlers arrived from Mauritius, then a colony of France. The religious orientation of the islands remains predominantly Roman Catholic, and English is still one of the official languages as well as one of the media of instruction in education.

The Seychelles education system

In 2006 the school system comprises 23 district-based primary schools, 10 regional secondary schools and three private schools. There are also 33 state-run pre-schools or crèches, which are usually located next to the district primary schools. Primary (six years) and secondary (five years) schooling are compulsory up to the fourth year of secondary, and the schools are located on the four largest islands of the archipelago. About 95% of the 21,700 (check) children in primary and secondary school system attend state schools; the other 5% go to one of the private schools which are all located on the main island of Mahe.

Post secondary education and training is provided by nine different training institutions, all state-owned, and courses on offer range from one-year certificates to four-year diplomas. Although Seychelles has no university presently, a number of linkage programmes with universities overseas enable students to study at degree or post-graduate level through split-site or distance learning programmes. A further hundred candidates per year on average go directly to universities overseas.

The budget allocation to education has been maintained at an average of 12% of national expenditure annually for the past two decades. During the same period an extensive programme of building renovations and the general upgrading of schools' infrastructure and facilities was implemented.

Schools and further education institutions are generally well-staffed with the pupil – teacher ratios at 15:1 in primary, 20:1 in secondary and 10:1 in post secondary institutions (Ministry of Education, 2000c). According to Ministry of Education statistics (1985 to 2005), there have been relatively small fluctuations in these ratios. At the start of 2005 there were 1,656 teachers in the state system and 85% of them had received some form of pedagogical training ranging from one-year certificates to B Ed's and postgraduate certificates. Almost all primary school teachers are Seychellois but in the secondary and post secondary sectors 11% of teachers are expatriates. The Heads of all schools and post secondary institutions are Seychellois. Almost all of them hold degree level qualifications in education and over half have been trained to masters degree level.

The education system is highly centralised, with the Ministry of Education holding all responsibilities for the financial, curricular and human resource planning and management of state education institutions. All state schools are answerable to the Schools Division of the Ministry, which sees to the implementation of education policies and provides support to schools in this regard. The majority of the senior managers of this division are ex-headteachers, and they are all personally known to all present school leaders. Heads and middle level leaders in schools have traditionally been concerned mainly with routine administrative matters, the supervision of staff and school discipline issues.

Over the past two decades the educational goals of the country have focused on the enhancement of quality through policies that aimed to enable schools to better cater for the wide range of abilities characteristic of comprehensive school systems. They have included recent initiatives targeting development planning at school level, greater accountability through a process of quality assurance, a review of the national curriculum with major input from schools' middle level leaders and a review of national assessment strategies (Ministry of Education, 2000a). It is in this context that a school improvement programme was introduced in 1995, in all state primary and secondary schools.

The School Improvement programme

The Seychelles School Improvement Programme was established with the support and assistance of the Commonwealth Secretariat, through its contribution to the work of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). The participation of the Ministry of Education in the activities of the ADEA's working group on Teacher Management and Support, led to the establishment of a Seychelles 'Country Working Group' (CWG) in 1993, with responsibility for developing a Country Action Plan aiming to improve teacher development, management and support nationally. The Group, comprising senior managers from within the Ministry headquarters as well as headteacher and teacher representatives, decided after wide consultation, on 'making school-based development the central axis of its Country Action Plan' (Ministry of Education, 2000b:

7). A model for school improvement for Seychelles was then proposed, based on a number of key concepts gleaned through participation in international seminars and workshops and contacts with leading British researchers in the field at the time. These key concepts are:

- Schools as the centre of change
- Co-ordinated support from the centre based on clear assessment of needs
- Staff development being central to school improvement
- Key role of evaluation
- Collaborative culture
- Action research
- School-based curriculum development
- Development planning as a key tool to manage change

(Ibid, 2000b: 8)

A School Improvement Project (SIP) was drawn up aiming to improve the quality of teaching /learning and student outcomes by creating a culture of self-evaluation and collaborative planning in schools. It also intended to empower staff to manage the process of change within their schools, with support from external agents (Ministry of Education, 2000b). The main strategies used were the institutionalisation of the process of development planning, the promotion of school-based professional development, the promotion of greater community participation and the strengthening of school leadership.

Following initial training of headteachers, in 1995, in the process of self-evaluation and development planning, all state schools started on a programme of school-based development planning, assisted by members of the Steering Committee (formerly the Country Working Group). A planning cycle lasts three years and schools are now in their third planning cycle.

A secretariat for the School Improvement Programme was established in 1995 and the Steering Committee drew up its own development plan to ensure continuous support to the programme. Five school improvement co-ordinators were appointed in 1996 to assist schools with the school improvement process, on a regional basis. They worked mainly through the schools' improvement teams (SIT), which are school-level, broad-based teams, with responsibility for the planning and implementation of the school development plans. The SITs are usually led by the headteacher. Emphasis on school-based professional development was further reinforced by the appointment of a professional development facilitator in each school; generally they are experienced teachers who assume the additional responsibility for planning and implementing professional development activities specified in their school plans. To further strengthen the capacities of school leaders, a joint training programme with a British university was started in 2003, leading to a masters degree in educational leadership. It is envisaged that by the end of 2007, over 75% of all school and post secondary institution leaders would have gone through the programme.

Characteristics of leadership

Effective leadership is widely acknowledged, by education researchers as well as practitioners, as being a key component in the achievement of school improvement. According to Harris (2002: 15) 'research findings from diverse countries and different school contexts have revealed the powerful impact of leadership in securing school development and change'. However, it is also accepted in the literature that effective leadership approaches in education may be as diverse as there are schools. It becomes difficult, therefore, to provide precise definitions of leadership. This notwithstanding, Fiddler (1997: 25) identifies two key features of leadership; they are:

- a sense of purpose and confidence is engendered in followers;
- followers are influenced towards goal achievement.

He goes on to note that what may be considered as appropriate leadership at any particular point in time depends on a number of factors : 'the context and its pre-history; the nature of the followers; the particular issues involved; in addition to the predispositions of the leader' (ibid: 25). Thus leadership styles may need to be varied in order to suit the prevailing circumstances.

Bush (2003) also notes that there is no agreed definition of the concept of educational leadership, but suggests that three main elements may be identified: the application of influence over others; the communication of strong personal and professional values and building a common vision for the school. He also points to the debate over the concepts of leadership and management which are sometimes considered as competing elements. Bush (ibid: 9) maintains that 'in practice, schools and colleges require both visionary leadership, to the extent that this is possible with a centralised curriculum, and effective management.'

The degree of power and control that schools and other educational institutions have on their internal management and functions is another important factor in the practice of leadership (Bush, ibid). The tendency for some systems to be highly centralised – especially in developing countries – gives rise to high levels of bureaucracy with the distribution of authority being tightly controlled from the top (Lauglo, 1995). The Seychelles education system is a case in point.

The context of leadership in Seychelles

Formal training of headteachers, in the areas of leadership and management, started in 1986 through a joint project with the University of Quebec, Trois Rivieres, in Canada. By the time the programme ended in 1992 some 80 school leaders had been trained to diploma level in school management (Ministry of Education, 2000). While this provided opportunities for heads to initiate innovative practices in their schools, the highly centralised nature of the education system and the lack of support for heads, meant that the enabling conditions to encourage them to put into practice what they had learnt were not present (Ministry of Education, 2000). They therefore tended to fall back on the traditional managerial roles, maintaining the schools and executing Ministry decisions. In the words of Hallinger (2004:70) they remained 'agents of stability rather than agents of change'. The School Improvement Programme (SIP), however, required school leaders who were able to bring about 'continuous improvement in teaching and learning by

creating a favourable organisational climate and developing a systematic process for keeping the internal conditions under review' (Ministry of Education, 2000: 20). Consequently, school management teams were expected to set clear goals, to encourage innovation and change, to promote staff and community involvement in school development, to ensure the professional development of staff and generally to nurture the development of a new school climate which would reflect continuous school improvement. These goals are enshrined in the vision statement of the SIP (Ministry of Education, *ibid*).

In view of the issues raised and the context described above, how have school leaders taken the lead and managed change in their institutions? Considering the assertions of the key role of leadership in school improvement advocated by the European based model adopted by the Seychelles SIP, to what extent can this pertain to the social and cultural context of a small island developing state? The research project described below considers some of the issues raised here.

The research project – a case study

This paper seeks to address these questions through examining the findings of a case study of leadership issues related to the implementation of the school improvement programme in a Seychelles secondary school. The case study approach was chosen because 'it allows the researcher to focus on a specific instance or situation and to explore the various interactive processes at work within that situation' (Verma and Mallick, 1999: 114). This facilitates the possibility of exploring what Foster (2004: 36) terms "multiple ways of viewing and interpreting 'reality'" within an organisation. The realities of each individual tend to be socially constructed and may differ depending on people's interactions with each other (Stake, 2000). Yin (2003:14) also points to the use of 'multiple sources of evidence with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion'.

The data sources comprised a documentary analysis of a number of documents directly related to school development planning and improvement initiatives in the school; semi-structured interviews with the two deputies and head of the school, along with nine teachers – three heads of departments (HoDs), the professional development facilitator (PDF), and five teachers; and observation of two School Improvement Team (SIT) meetings. The documents consulted included the school's development plans; evaluation reports (of both internal and external evaluations); professional development plans and minutes of meetings of the school improvement teams related to school improvement issues. The school was selected on the basis of size, being of average size for secondary schools in Seychelles, and for reasons of stability: the school was the first of the ten regional secondary schools established in 1990, and some members of the management team and the majority of the staff had been in the school since then. A new head and deputy for curriculum were appointed at the beginning of 2005, but the new head had been in the school for over ten years and had been a member of the SMT prior to this appointment.

The school is situated in a suburban area of the town of Victoria, (the only town and capital of the country), an area largely made up of housing estates, where most households are in the middle and lower income groups. The surrounding districts are characterised by a high concentration of small and medium sized industries and various small services centres. The school is a six to seven stream school, with a student population of 825 at the time of this study in October 2005. It had 63 teaching staff and 26 support staff. The senior management team of the school comprised a headteacher, a deputy head responsible for the implementation of the national curriculum and a deputy head for pastoral care. This senior management team (SMT), along with all the heads of departments (six in total) and the professional development facilitator, formed the school's management team. They also doubled up as the School Improvement Team (SIT).

The next three sections consider the issues of leadership raised through the questions posed above, within the context of the Seychelles school improvement programme, and in terms of the four main aspects of the programme: the school's vision / vision setting, the process and implementation of development planning, professional development and perceptions of leadership.

The school's vision

Analysis of documentary data

The documentary data indicated that the vision statement of the school was given at the start of each of the two development plans produced by the school so far (June 1999 – August 2002, and January 2003 – December 2005). It was also displayed on the notice board of the headteacher's office. The documents consulted gave no indication as to how the vision statement had been arrived at. Generally, links could be discerned between the vision statement and the priorities identified for action and the targets set in the development plans, but there was no further direct reference to it in the rest of the plan. There was no reference to the vision statement as such in any of the minutes of SIT meetings held in the school files for the 2003 plan, but some of the points raised implied its existence.

The school's evaluation reports of the development plans, however, seem to indicate that the practices of the school and the attitudes of teachers generally, did not appear to match with the stated vision. Several concerns were raised in these documents about the problems of 'low ability students' who ended up in the bottom sets or streams. However, no questions seemed to have been raised about the streaming and setting policy operating in the school at the time, even though it resulted in large groups of 'less able students' being placed all together in the bottom streams. Yet the situation seemed to be a source of frustration for many teachers as evidenced by comments from the yearly evaluation reports of both plans, from almost all departments. They made numerous references to the 'lack of interest of students in their studies', the discipline problems that teachers have to face in the lower streamed classes, teachers' difficulties in keeping control of such classes and in obtaining 'appropriate resources for low ability students'. By way of

solution two department reports suggested that there was a need for specialist teachers who should be trained to handle such students.

The points of variance between the school's stated vision and the reality of its day-to-day practices were also noted in the report of an external evaluation carried out by the Quality Assurance (QA) service of the Ministry of Education in August 2001. The QA team found that in spite of the school's main priority for that period being 'bridging the gap' between higher and lower achieving students, 'a focus on learning and achievement was not much in evidence in classes in the middle and lower ability range' (Ministry of Education, 2001: 5). The team remarked that while teachers were strongly committed to and had high expectations of students in the higher ability classes who were preparing for end of secondary school international examinations, the same did not apply to the lower ability groups.

Results of interviews

All twelve respondents were aware of the school's written vision statement but all except the headteacher, presented slightly different interpretations of it, emphasising various aspects of school life they felt were significant. Almost all the respondents believed that the vision did influence their work in various, and sometimes imperceptible ways, but they didn't think that it inspired their day-to-day work or that it was present in their everyday thinking. The head commented:

it doesn't seem to have that strong an influence on what they (the staff) do. Even the heads of departments do not always consider the implications of their actions in terms of the kind of vision that is supposed to be guiding us.

Observation of SIT meetings

During the two SIT meetings observed, the school's vision statement was discussed in the second meeting only. The issue was concerned with awareness-raising, the SIT having decided to display the vision statement in designated areas of the school and holding departmental level sensitisation sessions about the implementation of the new development plan.

Development planning and implementation

Analysis of documentary data

The development plans gave some indication of the process followed, which is that prescribed by the school improvement programme of the Ministry of Education. There was mention of different groups of people who had been consulted during the development planning process, including students and some non-teaching staff. However, the documents do not specify clearly all the persons involved and the processes used in determining the choice and order of priorities. The roles of the senior management team and middle level leaders in the planning process were not specified; and generally all the

documents are presented under the assumption that the reader is already aware of the process of development planning used, since they followed the Ministry's prescribed format. The SIP guidelines advocate for wide consultation with teachers, students, support staff, parents and the wider community and stipulate that the process should be led by the SIT.

The school's annual evaluation reports indicated that the implementation of the development plans was led and monitored by the SIT, which was chaired by the headteacher. Other members included the two deputies, four heads of department, representing broad groupings of the subject areas of the national curriculum the PDF and two teachers. The minutes of the SIT meetings for the 2003 plan indicated a degree of focus on teaching and learning issues, but most were in relation to classroom discipline and the availability of teaching and learning resources. There were few references to monitoring activities specifically related to the set targets. There was mention of classroom visits by some HoDs and the deputy head for curriculum in June 2005, but the reports were very brief and only referred to lessons being 'satisfactory' or 'not satisfactory'. Some follow-up visits were reported in October 2005, but again the number of visits and their purpose were not stated. No further action was recorded.

These activities were linked to one of the targets of the 2003 - 2005 Development Plan which was 'to set up an effective and systematic monitoring system for departments' (ibid:8). The school's yearly evaluation reports (1999-2002, and 2003-2005) produced by the SIT, suggest that monitoring of the implementation of the development plans remained a problem over the whole period. At the end of 2003 their evaluation report stated that:

...the Senior Management is not satisfied with the progress made at department level. There are various reasons. It is mainly due to inadequate and untrained staff members in some cases, inconsistency in keeping up-to-date records (p3).

Consequently it was decided to maintain the action plan for another year. The school's evaluation report of 2005 stated that this target was met in 2004 and was maintained in 2005. The only supporting evidence mentioned, however, was that 'observation sheets/ records had been used at department level, and that records of evaluation had been kept' (p8-9). At the same time it was reported under the rubric 'lessons learnt' that 'change of two members of the school management team has deterred monitoring and lack of teachers has prevented planned monitoring' (p9) which suggests that all did not go according to plan. No further mention of this target was made in the concluding section of the evaluation report.

The external evaluation reports of the Quality Assurance (QA) Service of the Ministry of Education commented at some length in both their reports (2001 and 2003), about the lack of focus on the monitoring of the implementation of the development plans. The QA team in 2001 found that although the management of the school 'had a clear understanding of their roles' (Ministry of Education: 6), members spent a good deal of their time dealing with internal disciplinary issues and various other crisis situations. 'This did not allow members of the team time to maintain a sustained focus on teaching

and learning' (Ibid: 6). Similarly, they found that heads of departments and other senior staff had 'well-defined roles in staff supervision and support but in practice, there was little monitoring of teaching and learning taking place' (Ibid: 6). They noted having had sight of 'a few records of classroom observations... but it was obvious that these were not being carried out consistently enough to have the desired impact' (Ibid: 6). Lesson plans tended to be sketchy and in some instances teachers had none to show, claiming that they were still with the heads of departments. The report noted that this 'raises questions about the purpose of monitoring by management, and the usefulness of feedback given to staff on their lesson preparation' (Ibid: 12).

With regard to monitoring plans at department level as well as at whole school level, the 2001 QA report concluded that:

In general, monitoring plans by departments had been well thought out. However, the roles of different members of the management team in monitoring and evaluation needed to be developed further, in order to give some indication of how the plan would be monitored at whole-school level.' (Ibid: 6)

They went on to suggest that 'focused classroom observations by the head of department would make an important contribution in this regard' (Ibid:7).

The QA team's follow-up report of 2003 observed that the school had made only limited progress with regard to the monitoring of the implementation of development plans. They noted a greater determination in the school's efforts to monitor teaching and learning more closely, and a strong move to develop assessment policies and establish differentiated assessment practices, but it appears that the reality fell short of the school's intentions. The QA team found that the senior management team was not able to carry out their planned monitoring activities (eg. to observe each teacher in the classroom at least twice a term, and the adoption of a common format for lesson planning) and the reason given was that they had to provide additional support to new unqualified teachers.

The evaluation reports of the SIP Secretariat emphasised the need to 'encourage the (school's) management team to take a higher profile lead in the development planning process' (SIP, 2003). By the end of 2004 the SIP's termly report noted that 'more focus is being given to the Development Plan' and that the management was making a co-ordinated effort to implement the development plan and to encourage a learning culture (SIP, 2004).

Results of interviews

With regard to the development planning process and implementation, all respondents agreed that it was initiated and led by the SIT and representatives of all departments. They explained that the SIT also had responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the plan. The senior management team also stated that monitoring of departmental action plans was done by the HoDs while the members of the SIT monitored the whole school action plans. It was reported that at department level this was done through weekly meetings of department staff where they checked on progress, examined students'

assessment results, and considered further strategies for action. The HoDs mentioned that the head and deputies and the professional development facilitator attended the department meetings occasionally; one of them added: 'they also attend professional development sessions at times, and do observe classes sometimes'. This last point was confirmed by the members of the SMT and by the professional development facilitator. The SMT also said that HoDs were expected to submit regular reports of their department meetings to the senior management.

Both the staff and SMT members interviewed referred to the many records which were kept in respect of students' academic achievements as well as records of their behaviour; the latter were maintained by the deputy head for pastoral care. They further pointed out that the gains from targets that had been achieved were maintained in various ways. One SMT member explained that 'maintenance plans are developed and they are part of the development plan; and they are monitored by the SI team'. They also gave several examples of strategies that had been implemented as part of the activities of the action plans – eg a permission card system that controlled student movement in and out of the school; the development of individualised learning plans in mathematics for year one students; involving peer educators in a behaviour management programme. However, in almost every instance the interviewees mentioned that, for various reasons related mainly to work overload and /or poor monitoring, the activities had stopped or were in decline. This was acknowledged by two HoDs amongst them, who pointed out that implementation, and in particular, maintenance of targets already achieved, were in fact problematic. According to them, there is a lot of paperwork involved, a lot of discussion but in practice proper action does not happen. One of them explained:

For example, earlier this week we had an evaluation meeting, and in the report it said that the problem of truancy had improved, but we know it hasn't. It's a serious problem in this school and we have yet to find solutions. One then wonders: is this to satisfy the ministry or is the process really having any effect?

An SMT member also stated that monitoring of the implementation of the plan and maintenance of achievements remained problematic:

Systematic monitoring remains a problem, especially in relation to teaching and learning. It has been difficult to keep the focus on teaching and learning; so many other things crop up, we never seem to have enough time, and so it becomes difficult to maintain what has been gained'.

One SIT member, also a HoD, felt that, in spite of the plans, the school 'was not very consistent in enforcing rules and regulations' that had been agreed upon through the development planning process. A second one stated that 'students, other than those in the top streams, are generally not interested in school and learning, and are content to simply be present or to get away from class'.

Another SMT member thought that aspects of certain problems linked to the management of the plans, had to do with the fact that strong linkages were not made between the targets set and what actually happened in the classroom. He felt that:

the emphasis should be on merging the plan/ linking it with what is happening in the classroom, not on keeping records of everything that happens without necessarily making these links.

And he pointed to the need for more support for the development planning process from the Ministry, especially from the National Institute of Education (the country's teacher training institution) which, he believed, should assist with action research and provide other expertise in school improvement. He felt schools did the best they could but the Ministry should give this process the status and attention it required to really make a difference.

Only two of the seven SIT members interviewed thought that the last plan had been satisfactorily implemented, in the sense that most targets had been achieved, at least in part. Two others, also HoDs, felt that development planning had only added to the workload of teachers, by attempting to tackle too many targets at once and through keeping too many records. They also felt that although they had opportunities to voice their views on such issues in department and SIT meetings, the points they put forward were often not taken up.

All members of the SMT believed that staff and students had opportunities to voice their opinions. Staff did so mainly through the weekly departmental meetings and students through the student committee. The SMT also agreed that a number of changes had taken place in the school that could be attributed to the school improvement programme. They cited in particular changes in the attitudes of teachers which, in their view, are manifested through a greater degree of openness and participation in discussion about their teaching. Two of them explained that there was a feeling of greater accountability amongst staff generally, and they gave examples of teachers who were taking more responsibility for dealing with behaviour problems; and heads of departments who were taking more interest in the pastoral aspects of students' lives. Generally they felt that co-operation amongst teachers had improved, especially at department level. The head also thought that:

it has made a difference to the way people perceive their work and the school generally. They are more aware of the School Improvement Programme and the benefits that it can bring.

Observation of SIT meetings

One of the meetings observed dealt with issues involved in the monitoring of the development plan. Monitoring of teaching and learning was a major concern of the school from the previous plan of 2003 – 2005, and as only limited progress had been made then, according to the plan's evaluation report, the issue remained on the SIT's agenda. One agreed action had been the adoption of a common daily lesson planning format by all departments. The meeting discussed six lesson observations carried out by the three members of the SMT, and commented in particular on the teachers' lesson planning. They had found that the commonly agreed lesson format was not always being used: three out of the six teachers observed did not have the required plan. When two members suggested that perhaps expectations of daily lesson plans from everyone was

not realistic, the head insisted that this had to be done as previously agreed. She went on to remind them of the discussion of the consequences of poor planning they had had during the school's auditing process at the end of the previous year.

Professional development

Analysis of documentary data

One way that the SMT and middle level leaders might have enhanced their leading and monitoring roles would have been through the weekly professional development (PD) sessions which are mandatory for all teaching staff. PD sessions would have provided opportunities for the clarification of school leaders' roles, strategies conducive to the staff community for monitoring and for providing feedback. The documents consulted made very few comments on the organisation and the impact of PD on teachers' practice. The school's evaluation reports of their development plans simply did not address the issue. There was no evidence of any attempt to link the monitoring activities of school leaders to PD. The PDF's termly evaluation reports of PD plans comment on the implementation of the plans and evaluate the delivery of the sessions, but they do not examine the impact of PD on the activities of the school.

Results of interviews

The SMT, SIT and non SIT members interviewed all agreed that the school's professional development (PD) activities had been instrumental in bringing about such changes. They believed PD had made a difference to most teachers, in terms of enhancing their awareness of school improvement initiatives, developing their subject knowledge, heightening their concern to reach all students and trying to cater for all abilities. They also said that the activities had helped teachers to keep better records of students' progress, to be more open about their teaching and to share experiences. Three teachers pointed to the benefits of specific PD sessions that had taken place over the past year, namely workshops on self-esteem and on exam writing.

In contrast to the positive views expressed above, all twelve respondents agreed that PD was received with mixed feelings, accepted because it was imposed, but with reluctance and resentment in some instances. Three SIT members thought that some staff members did consider it as useful, especially as a means of sharing their views and discussing common problems. The rest of the respondents thought that generally teachers did not find PD very useful although they themselves did not think this applied to them personally.

An SMT member pointed out that many teachers still considered the professional development activities as amounting to the school improvement programme, which, in their view, only took place on Tuesday afternoons: 'PD and SIP have taken on negative connotations in some people's minds partly because they see it as an imposition'. While they had several suggestions as to how PD could be organised to make it more acceptable to teachers, none of the SMT or SIT members felt they could bring about a change at

whole school level. They thought this would be a matter to be dealt with at the level of the Ministry.

Observation of SIT meetings

The first meeting included discussion of plans for a forthcoming professional development session aiming to encourage teachers' to take greater responsibility for pastoral care. The deputy head for pastoral care and the PDF were the ones responsible for the planning and organisation of the workshops, and they reported on their progress. The planning process continued in the second meeting with discussion of the best data collection method for obtaining students' views on the current pastoral care services of the school. The head proposed and insisted on focus group discussion, overruling three other members who had expressed reservations about this and had suggested questionnaires instead.

Perceptions of leadership

As this issue was not raised in any of the documents consulted, this section considers only the results of the interviews and the observation of SIT meetings.

Results of interviews

The questions asked related to the interviewees' perceptions of leadership and the type of leadership they thought was best suited to the school.

All respondents, except for the head, seemed to view leadership in the school in terms of personalities, and mainly that of the headteacher. Five SIT members referred to the 'leadership' or 'management' as being the head and the two deputies, while the five non SIT members interpreted leadership as 'the head'. Only one non SIT member included the HoDs and heads of year in his description of the leadership of the school.

Two thirds of the respondents, including all SIT members, believed that the leadership of a school should be 'consultative and collaborative', while remaining firm and taking 'a strong stance when necessary'. Five respondents, including one SMT member, thought that the leadership (meaning the head in this instance) should take a pastoral approach, showing understanding and compassion towards students in particular. Two of the teachers in this group were of the view that the students of the school needed a 'mother figure'.

The SMT agreed that there should be 'shared leadership' and that 'decisions should not be imposed'. The head was emphatic about the importance of shared leadership, pointing out that she did 'involve others, so that people understand that we are all leaders'. She felt that team work was developing amongst middle level leaders, something she tried to encourage as much as possible. These views were not shared by all respondents: five of them, three SIT members and two teachers, thought that the leadership style was rather authoritarian and not always diplomatic. All respondents, (not including the headteacher

who was not asked this question), agreed that they had numerous opportunities to take the lead in the school, through departmental, club and other whole school activities.

Observation of SIT Meetings

Both SIT meetings observed were led by the headteacher, who had a clear agenda for each meeting. The first meeting focused on aspects of the new (2006 – 08) development plan that were being implemented. The head checked on actions that had been agreed upon in the previous meeting – for example, that departments had displayed copies of the school’s vision statement in the designated areas; that HoDs had sensitised departmental colleagues on the implementation of the plan.

The question of who had what monitoring role also arose. While one HoD believed that it was the responsibility of the deputy head for curriculum (DH C) to check on whether teachers were using the appropriate teaching materials, the latter pointed out that in the first instance this was the job of the HoD. No clarification was brought on this point by the head and the subject was changed to student behaviour, it seemed, as a diversion to avoid further confrontation.

Generally all members of the SIT contributed to the discussions in both meetings, putting forward suggestions for action or suggesting new ideas at different stages of the meetings. There was an atmosphere of easy exchange, although there were times, such as the decision about the data collection method mentioned above, when other members simply deferred to the head.

Issues of Leadership and school improvement

It appears, from the documentary, interview and observation data, that the school’s leaders were guided by a vision arrived at through consultation at school level, but this vision is not yet embedded in the day to day functioning of the school. What it represents is not normally reiterated in the meetings related to school improvement; it is not wholly shared by the school community, as evidenced by staff’s diverse perceptions of what the school’s vision was. While there were some attempts in the present planning cycle to heighten the awareness of staff and students through school-wide displays of the vision statement, the practices of the school management and teachers did not seem to ‘live the vision’. This may be linked to the very prescriptive nature of the development planning process, leaving the school feeling it has to satisfy the demands of the Ministry in the first instance.

Satisfying the demands of the Ministry seems to be, at least partly, the motivating force behind the implementation of the development plans. All interviewees in this study talked about what *should* happen in the development planning process, and what the desired outcomes should be, in accordance with the Ministry’s expectations, rather than what they expected from the process. At the same time they all acknowledged the importance and usefulness of this planning process in bringing about and managing change. The school management along with the other members of the SIT, in particular, seemed convinced of the importance of development planning, and seemed to take the lead with

enthusiasm and confidence. The priorities identified for action in the development plans have a clear focus on what the school judged to be achievable within the three-year planning cycle, and a number of innovations had taken place.

However, the maintenance of the achievements of the targets set remained problematic, in spite of the school management's good intentions, and existing structures – such as the SIT and department level groupings - that might enable this to happen. This seemed to be linked to the inherent difficulties of sustaining a clear process for monitoring the implementation of the school's various action plans, in particular the monitoring of teaching and learning. One such difficulty is evidenced by the apparent lack of co-ordination between monitoring carried out by HoDs at department level and that done at school management level. There also seemed to be no clear process for bringing together the monitoring records and for providing effective feedback to teachers.

The lack of focus on the monitoring of teaching and learning may be an indication of the dilemmas faced by the school leaders caught in a transitory phase between performing the administrative and maintenance tasks routinely expected of them by the Ministry and taking on the leadership roles advocated by the SIP. While the Ministry's senior management supports the aims of the SIP, it continues to retain all control on all aspects of school management and development as it did prior to the introduction of the school improvement programme. Support structures subsequently put in place for the SIP also operate within prescriptive frameworks and are controlled centrally.

The style of leadership and staff's perceptions of it seemed to remain somewhat ambivalent, vacillating between the autocratic style of the traditional school administrator and trying to adapt to the leadership demands of the SIP. In spite of recent leadership training, school leaders have little support in trying to make the shift from one type of leadership to another, very often coming up against the walls of bureaucratic rulings. One apposite example is the unanimous belief at school level that professional development activities could be organised differently; but the school's management does not feel it is in a position to propose a different format to the Ministry.

Accountability also seems to fall short of that expected of leadership for school improvement: one example is, the reasons presented in the school's evaluation reports for not achieving the targets set regarding a monitoring system for teaching and learning (the management was too preoccupied with supporting untrained staff) are somewhat lame because in each instance this amounted to very few members of staff. However, this excuse did not seem to have been challenged by anyone, since it came up again during the implementation of the second plan. Similarly for the lack of evidence to back claims made in the school's evaluation reports about the achievement of certain targets – they seemed to have gone unchallenged. Of particular significance here are the comments, on development planning and school improvement, made in the external evaluation reports of the QA team; they seemed to have produced little effect both at the level of the school and in the Ministry.

The culture of small communities tends towards a reluctance to openly confront others (Benedict and Benedict, 1982). While in many instances the school leaders acknowledge

the dilemmas they face, they are unwilling to confront or challenge the centrally made decisions as this may entail opposing past colleagues, past students or figures of authority to whom they may feel obligated. Thus the headteacher, in the school improvement team meeting, preferred to avoid the possibility of confrontation between members of the team rather than take the opportunity to clarify the roles being questioned. School leaders appear reluctant to challenge the central authority they have to deal with on a daily basis, as the representatives of such authority are often past colleagues of theirs or persons well known to them on a personal level.

Conclusion – the future of school leadership in Seychelles

It would not be appropriate to generalise the findings of this case study to the whole school system of the country. However, these findings in conjunction with the researcher's professional experience of Seychelles schools and its education system (having worked in different parts of the country's education system for the past twenty years) suggest certain tentative conclusions that may be relevant.

It would appear that secondary school leaders have taken a rather ambivalent position towards the school improvement programme; on the one hand, acknowledging it and using it as an effective tool for planning and achieving set targets, but on the other hand accepting to be extensively constrained by the rigidity of the centrally controlled system. A similar attitude seems to prevail with regard to school-based professional development activities, which is seen by school leaders as an effective means of enhancing the capacities of staff, while at the same time they seem to feel they have no control on the modalities of the process. Considering the context in which school leaders find themselves operating, such attitudes may be an indication of their attempts to adjust to conflicting forces within a centralised system that is trying to retain bureaucratic control on schools, while adopting principles and strategies for school improvement that imply a certain degree of devolution of authority to schools and at least some financial autonomy.

A power shift will occur only if pressure is brought to bear by one or the other side. The SIP at least provides schools with a model and with strategies that they might use to pressurise the Ministry towards reconsidering the level of control necessary for effective school development. At the same time, the Ministry needs to address the paradox embodied by the SIP, on the one hand promoting a programme that encourages participative management and openness while strangling possibilities for innovations by retaining control of all other aspects of school planning and development.

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