

## **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN SMALL ISLAND STATES – the case of Seychelles**

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#### **Introduction**

The school improvement programme instituted in the Seychelles school system was inspired by developments in school improvement approaches occurring in Britain in the mid-1990s. The guiding concepts of the programme consider school improvement as a process for initiating and managing change; and the fundamental principles underlying these concepts maintain that 'student achievement must be the *raison d'être* for any educational change' (Hopkins et al 1994: 12, original italics) and that 'change, if it is to mean anything at all, has to have an impact at the classroom level – on the hearts and minds of teachers and students' (ibid: 24).

This paper presents an evaluative case study of school improvement initiatives in the Seychelles. It examines the complexities of borrowing a school improvement model from a larger and more open system and the possibilities for adapting it to the local needs. It also considers the significance of the small island and centralised contexts into which the school improvement model was imported. In so doing, the research attempts to determine the factors that may help schools in the SIDS context to develop the internal capacity to improve.

The study attempted to capture the multi-faceted nature of the Seychelles School Improvement Programme and the multiple forms of people's understanding of it, by examining its most salient aspects from the perspectives of different stakeholder groups, through the case study approach. A 40% sample of the country's state secondary schools were studied, using documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews and observation of meetings as the main means of data collection.

#### **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 (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1992) . 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, 2000: 7). A model for school improvement in state schools was 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 were:

- 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, 2000: 8)

A School Improvement Programme (SIP) was drawn up in 1995 with the aim of improving 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, 2000). 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.

The programme was launched in all state schools in 1996, after a series of training workshops for headteachers, and with the support of a centrally based steering committee and newly appointed SIP co-ordinators and facilitators at school level. To further strengthen the capacities of school leaders, training in educational leadership to masters degree level was offered through a joint training programme with a British university. Presently all state school headteachers hold such a qualification. It should also be noted that state schools constitute 98% of all schools in the system.

### **The research project**

The research investigated the factors that may have had an impact on the development of internal capacity in Seychelles secondary schools, particularly in relation to the school improvement strategies (as stated above) adopted in 1996, as part of a national reform aiming to enhance the quality of education at all levels of the school system. More specifically it aimed to determine the extent to which:

- there was a shared vision within each of the sampled schools;
- the schools' development plans were considered central to actions related to teaching and learning - actions taken within the school during a given period of time;
- staff's professional development activities took place in the sampled schools and their relations to teaching and learning;
- participative leadership styles existed in the sampled schools.

The study also attempted to examine teachers', school leaders' and SIP leaders' perceptions of the influence of these phenomena on classroom practices, and it tried to identify factors that may enhance the schools' internal capacities to improve, in the context of SIDS.

### **The research approach**

The case study approach was chosen because, as noted by Verma and Malick (1999: 114) 'it allows the researcher to focus on a specific instance or situation and to explore the various interactive processes at work within that situation'. 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) and the positions they hold. Yin (2003:14) also points to the use of 'multiple sources of evidence with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion'.

Four state secondary schools (out of a total of ten) from different parts of the country formed the sample for the study. The data sources in each school comprised:

- documentary analysis of a large number of documents directly related to school development planning and improvement initiatives, at school and Ministry levels;
- semi-structured interviews with 12 school personnel - the two deputies and the headteacher who formed the school management team (SMT), as well as nine teachers (who consisted of the professional development facilitator (PDF), four School Improvement Team (SIT) members and four non SIT members); and six Ministry based SIP leaders who had been involved in the conceptualisation or were still involved with the implementation of the Programme;
- and observation of two School Improvement Team (SIT) meetings.

### **Findings of the research**

The next four sections discuss the findings of the study in the light of the perceptions of the different groups of respondents and in terms of the four main aspects of the programme: the introduction and institutionalisation of development planning and school-based professional development, the strengthening of leadership capacities and shared visioning at school level.

#### ***Development Planning***

In the views of most teachers, SMT members and Ministry based SIP leaders the School Improvement Programme has brought about certain far reaching and long term changes in the schools. All schools in the state system now have three-year development plans which target specific areas for change within the school. The plans are generally linked to the schools' visions and their implementation is led by SITs. All schools follow the development planning process which involves auditing, prioritising areas for action and target setting, monitoring the implementation of action plans, regular review and evaluation of the impact of the action plans. Each aspect of this planning process is discussed below.

In the self-auditing exercise, by the third planning cycle, all the schools had narrowed down consultation to teachers only. This seemed to have the effect of limiting the scope for self-evaluation; documentary evidence suggests that there was little reflection on teachers'

classroom practices and on students' learning. The process was further restricted in three of the schools, where the prioritisation of areas for action was carried out by the SIT only. This raised issues of staff commitment to achieving the targets, even if action planning at department level was considered to have promoted more collaborative work among teachers.

Perhaps as a consequence of the limited critical reflection inherent in the schools' auditing exercise, only about half of the targets set in each school's current plans were directly related to teaching and learning. Of these many lacked rigour in the way they were stated and in the statement of their associated success criteria. Difficulties in measuring their impact were apparent in every development plan evaluation report. There is considerable reliance on the professional judgements of SIT members and the PDFs, but in view of the limitations of SITs - in two of the schools the teams were meeting only occasionally and were not very systematic in their approach to the implementation of the development plans - this may be doubtful. Little change was therefore evident at classroom level. Very few respondents (only four school staff and three Ministry based SIP leaders) questioned the type of evidence schools collected or criticised the wording of targets.

All members of the three groups consulted in this study – SIT and non SIT members in schools and Ministry based SIP leaders - felt there were adequate mechanisms in place for the effective monitoring and evaluation of the action plans. Within the schools there were the SIT, the SMT, and curriculum co-ordinating committees that brought together Heads of Departments and SMT members; from the Ministry school improvements co-ordinators provided support to school leaders and teachers in the implementation of their development plans. Yet the monitoring of the implementation of action plans seemed to be one of the biggest hurdles in the SIP. Systematic monitoring did not happen for a wide range of reasons. The effectiveness of the SIT and the SMT were limited by a number of factors both internal and external to the schools. Regular review and evaluation of action plans were done but they seemed to take place primarily in response to the Ministry's requirements rather than for the schools' own purposes.

Nevertheless the SMTs, as well as the majority of teachers, believed there had been improvements in many aspects of school life, especially in terms of better internal communication, greater collaboration and sharing among staff within and between departments, for example in the development of school policies, and instructional materials.

The Ministry based SIP leaders felt that teachers were becoming more open about their classroom experiences and practices, and they were more prepared to take on additional responsibilities to their normal teaching. The development planning process was considered a valuable tool for bringing about systematic change in schools by all participants. However, they also observed that it was not making much difference to students' performance and ways of sustaining improvements remained elusive. Many reasons were cited, mostly related to weak processes of monitoring and evaluation of action plans, inconsistencies in their application and a general 'lack of time'.

### ***School based professional development***

The institutionalisation of school based professional development was considered as another achievement, especially in the sense that all schools organised scheduled PD activities on a weekly basis. This had been a requirement of the Ministry from the inception of the programme.

There was almost unanimous acceptance of the concept of school based PD and many teachers involved in the study claimed it had made a difference to their teaching, although the external Quality Assurance evaluation reports found no evidence to support such claims. The co-ordinating role of the PDFs were appreciated by SMT members and teachers alike, and in one school staff felt that the PD plans reflected their expressed needs. Planned PD activities in the four schools were sometimes directly connected to their areas of priority for action. On the whole, however, less than a quarter of the planned PD activities were directly linked to teaching and learning and two of the schools were not even organising the required PD sessions during the period of this study. Many teachers from three of the schools expressed concern that PD plans did not take account of their needs. Almost all of them objected to the timing and the compulsory nature of PD and some noted that heads tended to leave all matters related to PD to the PDFs.

### ***Perceptions of leadership and shared vision***

The study found divergent views about the type of leadership in secondary schools, and the impact it had on school improvement, often depending on respondents' roles in the schools or, in the case of Ministry based SIP leaders, in relation to schools.

The Ministry based SIP leaders thought that, while schools had all the mechanisms in place to enable the practice of a more distributed style of leadership, school leaders remained autocratic in their approach. They felt that this was linked to issues of self-confidence and tradition.

School leaders maintained that they encouraged the participation of others in decision-making and they promoted collaboration among teachers. They believed their styles of leadership were appreciated by staff and students, and that teachers shared their perceptions of what the schools were trying to achieve. The SMTs of the four schools expressed allegiance to the schools' visions and believed that to some extent staff were also guided by them.

The significance of the schools' visions did not seem to feature strongly in the teachers' views of leadership. Their greatest concerns were related to student learning and student behaviour. Most teachers seemed to favour more autocratic styles of leadership, with staff at three of the four case study schools feeling that the actual management were laissez-faire or lacked firmness. A need for firmness on the issue of student discipline was mentioned by many of the teachers interviewed.

### **Significance of the SIDS context**

Typical of centralised systems and small states, reform strategies tend to be top-down in orientation, although it should also be noted that in practice, this can be mitigated by the 'short power distances' (Bray, 1991: 27) between senior managers and school staff. This applies to the Seychelles SIP, which was initiated and led from the centre by a group of Ministry-based middle managers, who were attempting to promote school empowerment through the adopted school improvement strategies. The situation brings to light a number of paradoxes.

The smallness of the system and the SIP proponents' personal knowledge of it (including almost all school personnel) enabled them to push through an innovation that could have a wide and

significant impact on the whole system (Bray, 1991). The model adopted, however, assumed the existence of a degree of school autonomy, coming as it did from a system (England) where school based management is the norm. This has proved difficult for school leadership in particular. To a large extent the contextual factors involved in importing the model into a highly centralised system do not seem to have been fully taken into consideration (Philips and Ochs, 2003). Few adjustments were made at central Ministry level, while schools were expected to become more proactive and focused on bringing about change from within. At the same time the implementation of the programme was done through a prescriptive approach, which obliged schools to proceed in a rigidly uniform fashion.

For all the groups involved in this study, issues of accountability surfaced in a number of different ways. The adopted school improvement model implies the establishment of accountability processes throughout the system (Hopkins, 1996; Reynolds et al, 1996). The various stages of the development planning process demand commitment to a shared vision and to achieving the associated goals. School based PD activities aim to enhance staff capacities to achieve the targets they set. Distributed leadership seeks to share responsibilities among staff to lead actions so that everyone may feel involved in achieving the targets. Support and monitoring mechanisms for the SIP, set up by the Ministry, attempt to reinforce these aspects of accountability (Ministry of Education, 2000). However, evidence from the study suggests that the whole notion of accountability has been accommodated by a highly selective approach to development planning both at school and Ministry levels.

At school level, the self-auditing process has been rendered 'unthreatening' by teachers omitting to question their classroom practices and assumptions about teaching and learning. The selected actions then target other areas such as behaviour management and organisational issues. Basing the evaluation of the achievement of targets largely on the SITs' professional judgements, without the intervention of regular external evaluation, in a climate where the demands of the Ministry are perceived as the most significant, appears to sideline the need for evidence-based reporting. Rigorous monitoring of the implementation of action plans thus becomes less important; it avoids the need for applying too much pressure and possible confrontation with others (Bray, 1991).

At Ministry level, there seems to be awareness of these on-going accommodating processes, and similar strategies seem to prevail. There is strong insistence on documenting plans, record-keeping and reporting; there are no clear mechanisms that link successful implementation of the development plans with school performance, and the central planning and policy making arrangements barely acknowledge the specificities of individual schools. Ultimately, schools' development plans are approved by the senior management of the Ministry but the mechanisms to ensure effective support – financial support in particular – are not considered adequate by schools. This undermines the Ministry's position as gatekeeper, making it difficult to demand greater accountability from schools. Although the Ministry claims to fully support the improvement strategies of the SIP, it has not considered the need to question its centralised power position during the past ten years of the programme's existence.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that the established model of school improvement, derived from large-scale education systems such as that of the UK, requires customisation to be suitable for small island states with centralised management systems. It can be argued that the impact of centralisation is tempered by the effects of small size, because there is sufficient space for mutual adaptations between the various stakeholders, and for the optimisation of the application of the model within a SIDS context. The limited scale of the school system, personalised work relationships, the 'short power distances' (Bray, 1991: 27) between policy makers and schools, and the inclination towards consensus may serve as positive factors in the process of adaptation. Additionally, school leaders and teachers' understanding of the processes of the adopted model, and their acceptance of the concepts of the SIP, should facilitate the possibility of moving to a second phase in the SIP where schools could take the lead in re-positioning the Programme to make it more suitable for their particular circumstances and purposes. With the advanced leadership training programme instituted four years ago, many school leaders should have the capacity to review school practices vis-à-vis the SIP and take ownership of the Programme. A clear articulation of a shared understanding of the evolving model – which this study hopes to contribute to - should make it easier for all stakeholders to clarify their roles, establish common purpose and bring the focus of school improvement on teaching and learning.

**Key words:** school improvement; teacher professional development; leadership.

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