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Unpacking the Role of the Portfolio in Preparing Future School Leaders to Take up School Leadership Positions in Mauritius

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Abstract:
This study aims to investigate how building a portfolio helps in preparing aspiring school leaders to take up leadership positions since there is now a call for more accountability on their side. Using a qualitative approach, data is gathered from five trainees who are following a course in educational leadership and management. Findings reveal that these aspiring school leaders have a positive view on how the portfolio has prepared them to take up school leadership positions in the future. Nevertheless, the author claims that the aspiring school leaders should be exposed to more tools, strategies and tasks as the challenges which exist at school are so daunting.

Keywords: Portfolio, school leaders

1. Introduction

Long ago much emphasis was laid upon establishing that students would know a 'certain domain' (Birgin & Baki, 2007). Hence attention was focused to the behaviorist approach to instruction. This approach is teacher-centered and favours traditional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Besides the types of assessments associated with this approach do not enhance students' conceptual understanding but concentrated on only small and discrete components of learning and memorisation (Dochy,2001). At the same time, society called for students who be problem-solvers, who can analyse data and present them in different ways (Dochy, 2001). There was also a major paradigm shift in the way teaching and learning was done as the constructivist approach based on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky gained momentum. Constructivist approach encourages students to construct their own learning. This approach does not assume that students are blank states. Instead, it presumes that teachers are to act as guides, constructivism requires a teacher who acts as a facilitator 'whose main function is to help students become active participants in their learning and make meaningful connections between prior knowledge, new knowledge, and the processes involved in learning'(Copley , 1992).

Whilst talking about the importance of the head of school Heck, Larsen and Marcoulides (1990) observed leadership practices of head of schools are varied. Their main practice however, lies in devising strategies to 'impact teaching and classroom practices' (p.95) Heads of schools thus have to determine school goals, formulate the communication flow in the schools. Heads of schools also have to allocate 'necessary resources, supervising teachers' performance, monitoring student progress and promote a positive orderly environment for learning. (p.95). In Mauritius, although we are nearly 2.1 million people, we have started to raise funds for this project. There are 165 secondary schools and 103 are government officials and the rest belong to the private sector. There is now increased accountability as we have just had a new government.

Fullan (2009) claims that head of schools have to act as change agents, thereby setting direction and encouraging engagement from all stakeholders. Heads of schools have to implement strategies which help to mobilize capacity. At the same time they develop leadership across the school. They also address distractions in an effective way while engaging in continuous evaluation and inquiry of practices. Leithwood and Reihl (2003) claim that 'in these times of heightened concern for student learning, school leaders are being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how much students learn (p.2).

Research conducted by Leithwood and Day (2007) found that leadership is directly related to student learning. Various studies found that the head of schools contribute to the success of students (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Walhstrom, 2004). Lezotte and McKee (2006) state that few schools have improved without the strategies implanted by their heads. In fact, research has identified various dimensions of leadership practices which influence student learning. The basis of this study is on an adapted model of the conceptual framework developed by Leithwood and Reihl (2003) on 'a core set of leadership practices form the"basics" of successful leadership and arevaluable in almost all educational contexts' (p.5). They came up with four broad categories of practices that have been identified as crucial for leadership success which can occur in any kind of organization: setting directions, developing people, developing the organisation and managing the instructional programme.

While looking at the tasks of heads of schools and the skills they need to display, there is need to question whether traditional assessments can produce the kind of heads of schools needed today. At the same time we find that in higher education, there is also a movement away from traditional assessment. There is, in fact, a call for greater accountability, more effective learning and authentic assessment at higher education (Palomba & Banta, 2001).

For decades, artists, architects, stylists and many other professionals have presented their works in the form of a portfolio. Portfolios have become the means by which they would demonstrate their competencies (Heywood, 2000). Portfolios are also regarded as a more authentic assessment practice (Mayer & Tusin, 1999). This method of assessment is also in line with the principles of constructivism. At the same time, whilst students are collecting, synthesising and organising information in their portfolios, they are also reflecting on what they are doing and this triggers further reflection and learning (Dolan & Fairbrain, 2001). There is also a wide range of research on the importance of portfolio in higher education. It was found that they can be used at any level of study including undergraduate, graduate and doctoral studies (Klenowski & Lunt, 2008). Portfolios have also been cited as an effective tool for learning, assessment and professional development in higher education (Klenowski, 2002b). Brown and Irby (1997) supports the claim that the portfolio is an important tool in the preparation of school leaders.

1.1. Statement of the Problem
Building a portfolio forms part of many training programmes. It is not considered only as an assignment but as a full fledge module and students are usually given more than a year to compile their portfolios. They are given a list of tasks which they have to complete. Building a portfolio has many advantages (Gallagher, 2001; De Fina, 1992). The main concern is to establish how the building a portfolio helps in to prepare aspiring heads of schools to take up leadership positions.

1.2. Research Question
The main research question is:
How has the building up of the portfolio contributed to prepare aspiring heads of schools to take up school leadership positions?

1.3. Significance of the Study
This study will provide further insight into the way the training of aspiring heads of schools is done and could suggest improvements which could be brought. It will also help to provide valuable information about the relevance of portfolio in the training of aspiring heads of schools.

2. Literature Review/Conceptual Framework

2.1. Portfolio
There are many definitions of a portfolio. Genesee and Upshur (1996) defined the portfolio as "A portfolio is purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to the students and others their efforts, progress and achievements in given areas". While Burksaitiene, Teresevicˇiene and Kaminskiene (2011) define portfolios as "a purposeful collection of a person's work that illustrates his/her efforts, purposes or achievement in one or in more given areas". Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991) also offer a definition of portfolio which centers around nearly the same idea as they claim that a portfolio is a "collection of students' best work or best efforts, student-selected samples of work experiences related to outcomes being assessed, and documents according growth and development toward mastering identified outcomes". According to Arter and Spandel (1991) a portfolio is a collection of work which the students collect with a purpose and demonstrates to others the efforts which have been put into achieving learning outcomes. This definition lays emphasis on the portfolio as demonstration the process of learning. This is also in line with what Grace (1992) found. Collins (1992) uses a metaphor to define a portfolio. According to him, a portfolio is a 'container'. It contains the evidence which students have purposefully collected. Hence it focuses on the product while Grace (1992) focuses on the process. Winsor and Ellefson (1995) come up with a definition of portfolio which encompasses both concepts. They claim that 'portfolio is a fusion of process and product. It is the process of reflection, selection, rationalization, and evaluation, together with the product of those processes' (p.68)

Another important aspects of the portfolio is the fact that it is also going to be assessed. Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991) claimed that portfolio assessment allows trainees to show their progress, what they have achieved and their self reflection in various fields. Besides, essential to authentic assessment in educational theory is the principle that trainees should be able to demonstrate rather than tell what they know and can do (Cole, Ryan & Kick, 1995). Portfolio contributes to the growth of trainees as it asks trainees to select evidence which reflect their performance (Birgin & Baki, 2007). It also calls upon trainees to include items which reflect their performance as individuals. Simon and Forgette-Giroux (2000) also found that portfolios can help trainees to include items which show evidence of cognitive, behavioural, affective, meta-cognitive and developmental dimensions. It is ongoing so that it shows trainees' efforts, progress and achievement over a period of time (Birgin & Baki, 2007). In fact, we can say that a portfolio reveals the learning process which trainees go through whilst working towards the final product.

As well as receiving feedbacks, trainees can review their performance and progress (De Fina, 1992). Thus it helps tutors to have a holistic picture of each trainee (Baki & Birgin, 2004). Zubizarreta (2004) also supports this view as he mentions the fact that portfolio allows the measurement of multiple dimensions of trainee progress. As trainees are engrossed in building their portfolios, they engage in reflection on their own learning. There is an increase in metacognition which helps to improve the self-confidence of trainees. McNamara and Deane (1995, p.21) claim that portfolio provides "a more complete picture of our students' ability, effort, and progress".

Furthermore, Asturias (1994) and Micklo (1997) found that portfolio allows trainees to develop their skills at monitoring their own work. While Valeri-Gold, Olson, & Deming, (1991) defined portfolio assessment as an assessment wherein students become "active learners and questioning thinkers" (p. 298). They have to apply what they have learned in real situations and this shows their professional growth and development (Barnett, 1995, McLaughlin et al., 1998). As explained by Barnett (1995), "portfolio provides a direct connection between preservice preparation and on-the-job performance as well as encouraging a stronger link between theory and practice" (p.203). Future school leaders have had to take decisions that learn to take risks.

3. Methodology
A qualitative approach to research is adopted. Data will be gathered through open-ended interviews. Open-ended interviews which are " a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information , and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation" (Cannell & Kahn, 1968) will be used. As far as the sample is concerned, purposive sample is chosen as the study focuses on five trainees who have gone through portfolio assessment. A reflexive attitude has been adopted all through the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 276).

3.1. Emerging Themes

3.1.1. Puts the Trainee at the Centre of Learning.
All five participants explained in their own terms that right from the beginning, the tasks given to them required them to put themselves in the shoes of a head of school. Hence applying content to real situations as described by McLaughlin et al. (1998). They have to make that transition from teachers to heads of schools. Participant B said "I am now Head of School! What do I so?". This has somehow forced them to see how leading a school is not as easy as they thought. Another participant explained that he had always seen things from teachers' point of view, but as Heads of School he had to take into account various other dimensions that make the task of leading a school rather daunting. He said that "there are so many things to consider. So many papers to fill". In order to answer the questions they had to apply what they have learnt during the course, but this could not be done in a linear way. They had to be creative and consider various options as asserted by McNamara & Deane (1995). They had to anticipate and prepare themselves accordingly. Participant C explained that it was challenging to think as a Head of School. This is in line with what Valeri-Gold, Olson, & Deming, (1991) found. At the same time, participant C mentioned that just as they are put at the centre of learning, they need to know how to put their learners also at the centre of learning. The portfolio alone is not enough. They need other skills.

3.1.2. Mind Laboratory
Furthermore, participants also explained that they had to develop their mind laboratories. Participants A, C and D had to see themselves leading a school and anticipate problems which might arise and how they would deal with these problems. Participant C talked about developing new strategies to deal with the issues while Participant D talked about having to face new issues which they have not yet met in schools where they have worked. They reflected that they had to structure their answers in such a way that they demonstrated their application of what they have learned. At times they wanted to write a lot in case they are not on target, but they realised that they had to be selective. Participant C explained that it involved a lot of using his mind as if it were a laboratory and he had to conduct experiences. This follows what McNamara and Deane (1995, p.21) found. Participant A explained that he wanted to show everything that he has learnt but had to choose. This process of choosing what to put in the portfolio lead them also to consider how they take decisions and how they handle that whole decision making process. Participant A realised that a head of school has to take a lot of decision and live with them. Hence this is also what Brown and Irby (1997) have found. But as they explore their mind laboratory, there is also a strong feeling among the participants that there is a gap between being empowered and having to act in real life situations.

3.1.3. Productively Time Consuming
All the participants revealed that it took them quite a long time to put the portfolio together. At times they felt that they could have used their time more productively but it was only when they finished that they realized that they have indeed been very industrious. Participant E explained that it "a tedious and time consuming activity". They had to read extensive on various topics. They had to go through what they did in class. Participants B and E also had meeting and group works with friends to thrash out various issues which were posing problems. They had to assess what they would put in the portfolio and choose to omit some information as mentioned by Birgin & Baki (2007). He got frustrated at times and he felt that he was not making much progress. Participant A explained that he learnt how to come back to it and forge his forward. This provides information on the teaching and learning process (Collins, 1992. They also explained that much time went into reflection. They had to go back to their previous experiences which might prove valuable to them, they had to think and learn more about themselves by the way they behaved then and how appropriate would these kinds of behaviours be as heads of schools. This is also what De Fina (1992) found. It also helped to clarify situations and put things into perspective. These exercises helped them to improve their learning skills. Simon and Forgette-Giroux (2000) also talked about the fact that trainees would include items which show evidence of cognitive, behavioural, affective, meta-cognitive and developmental dimensions. Hence it seems that the portfolio has equipped the participants with some important skills but it is also vital for them to remain open to other experiences which can shape their views of school leadership.

3.1.4. Defining Their Philosophies Education and Leadership and Their Vision Statements

Participants A and C explained that they had to define their philosophy of education, as well as that of leadership. They had to express themselves and use the 'I', 'my' and 'me'. They had to defend their beliefs and their philosophies. Participant A said that "My philosophy of leadership is based on three board principles which are to truly value people, work hard and persist, and live by rules". They also expressed their visions for learners, teachers, curriculum, instruction and assessment, for the organisation and for the professional development of teachers. They moved into putting theory into practice (Barnett, 1995). They had to think about various issues concerning the mission of the school and the basis for its functioning. Again, Participant C explained that he had to enact the role of a head of school and he had to show his ability in giving the school its driving force (Cole, Ryan & Kick, 1995). Hence building a portfolio would seem an ideal tool to prepare trainees for their future career as school leaders as claimed by Brown & Irby (1997). However, although they know what they want for their schools, and in which direction they want to led them, they also need to know how to take their schools there. They need further skills and strategies.

3.1.5. Tools to Evaluate the System

Participants D and E explained that as they were building their portfolios, they have had to come up with 'tools' which helped to define their position. Hence, they felt that these tools could be useful in the future as they could be used to evaluate the system which exists at school and help them to identify the strengths and weaknesses which are there. Participant B also explained that he had to gather information from practicing heads of schools and he even had to discuss some of his proposals and suggestions with the heads of schools and got their feedbacks. He explained that he got to learn about existing bureaucratic procedures which by law, school leaders have to follow. This contributed to help him refine his thinking. This is in line with what Winsor and Ellefson (1995) found.

3.1.6. Enhancing Capacity

Participants A, C and E explained that they learnt how to enhance capacity at school leadership level. There seems to be a well established fact that building the portfolio and submitting it for assessment has made them more aware of the task which lies ahead and how their capacity is enhanced. This is linked to what Arter and Spandel (1991) found. Participant D explained that he feels 'better equipped to help the students to meet the various challenges which they might be facing". Participant A felt 'he has risen to higher standards". This he explained is the result of having had to reflect on issues which concern school leadership. He explained that he is now better aware how relationships between stakeholders might either hinder or promote the ability of schools to push forward major reforms. Additionally, he explained that he needs to refine this communication skills and he talked about 'connectivity'.

3.1.7. Use of Research to Infuse Understanding

All the participants explained that they had to read a lot in order to support their arguments. They came to realise that there are studies which have been conducted on issues which are of interest to them. They found that best practices are there already. Participant B explained the need for benchmarking. He said that he "did not have to re-invent the wheel". All he needed to do was to look for the information and see how he can use it in his own setting. This was also what Adam (1998) claimed. Furthermore, he also revealed that the amount of reading that he had done has also exposed him to what other school leaders are already doing and how they are proceeding.

3.1.8. One-Size Fit All

Participants A, B, C and E remarked that a feature which emerged from their research was the tendency to have one-size fit all policy. The participants explained that when building their portfolios they came to the conclusion that they have to pay attention to the uniqueness of the situation. Participant B explained that although he used what he found in the studies conducted on that issue, he had "to adapt to situations to which I am familiar". This helped him to develop solutions that were specific to his context which was also found by Barnett (1995). At the same time he also felt he would need also other tools to help him in leading a school. The tasks in the portfolio served as eye opener on the fact that leading a school is a complex issue. As he reflected on the issue, he also realized that the other tools/teacher strategies such as case studies, role plays in enacting school leaders, interacting workshops with existing rectors, watching films followed by debates and open discussion and mini-project where he had to investigate an issue of concern at school and relevant to a school leader, has also helped him.

4. Conclusion and future directions

Specifically, the findings indicate two major issues: first, a significant endorsement of the fact that putting together a portfolio contributes to developing the skills, knowledge and competences of aspiring heads of schools and second, a slight contradiction is expressed by the fact that the participants themselves feel that that the challenges of so daunting that they may need more tools and skills.

The findings revealed that the participants relied on putting together a portfolio impacted on their learning. The findings also highlighted the critical role of the portfolio in promoting the professional development of participants and developing their skills in critical thinking and continuous self-evaluation in order to achieve high quality standards in leading/managing schools. The portfolio proved to be an important pedagogical tool that enabled the participants to keep records of what they were doing, reflect on their practices and bring about necessary changes wherever needed with a view to improving themselves professionally. Concurrently, it is hoped that this experience will help them manage their institutions in a more effective and efficient manner. At the same time, the findings strongly support the inclusion of putting up a portfolio as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the professional training of

aspiring heads of schools. It helped in developing in participants a strong sense of realism as far as the expectations that the profession has of its members.

This study explored the relevance of putting up a portfolio in the training programme of aspiring heads of schools. Participants express the needs for other tools and strategies which they need to be exposed to so that they are better prepared for taking up school leadership positions. The findings indicate that there is need for improved preparation and training heads of heads of schools. There is need to review what other programmes have to offer to future heads of schools. Furthermore, it is important to study the context and the specific contextual factors that affect each school and to find a whole range of strategies and tools which have to be incorporated in a judicious way in school leadership programmes. Additionally, emphasis should be laid on transferability.

Aspiring heads of schools may need to have a follow up from the portfolio. They should be involved as far as possible in selecting topics and issues or concerns which have arose from their portfolios. They should be given a platform whereby they could discuss their concerns with their peers and even with practicing heads of schools. This would promote a deeper level of learning. They could be encouraged to deepen their knowledge on issues related to school leadership and to inform their thinking with research. They should be encouraged to contextualise what they are learning so that it becomes relevant for them. They should also be encouraged and supported in their own learning. Additionally, there is need to encourage continuous inquiry which is embedded in what is happening at school. In order for aspiring school leaders to get a clear picture of schools, the tasks in the portfolio must also be related to geography, ethnicity, history and culture as these issues heavily impact on schools and indirectly on heads of schools.

Hence we find that building a portfolio is a powerful tool in preparing aspiring heads of schools to take up leadership position. The aspiring heads of schools have become active in their learning. They have acquired higher order thinking and problem-solving skills. Yet it is not enough. There is need to incorporate other strategies, tools and tasks to help them develop all the skills that they would need for that job. These would then compel a leader to action and he/she will be able to formulate a future for the school that grows out of his/her reflections and knowledge gathered during the course. He/she will be able to build a bridge between theory and practice.

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