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Investigating the usefulness of Fiji's future school leaders' programme

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Abstract

This research examines the school leaders' perceptions on the usefulness of the Future Leaders' Programme (FLP) which they themselves had undergone prior to taking up leadership roles in schools. Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered by means of document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 20 rural and 20 urban school leaders (former participants of FLP). The major findings to come into sight are: first, FLP helps build confidence in teachers to take up leadership roles, secondly, it assists in the understanding of education policies and successful implementation of the new reforms in education; and finally it makes teachers' move away from the traditional leadership style and prepares them for the 21st century leadership. Overall, both the rural and urban school leaders' perception is that FLP enables them to improve their leadership skills and prepares them to be better school leaders. This study, by providing information on the usefulness of the FLP, is likely to be of interest to the Ministry of Education (MoE).

Keywords

Introduction

In the 21st century, society and policy makers have focused much attention on schools and schooling. This is because only through education can we develop the knowledge and skills that are vital for the countries' economic growth, social development, and political vitality—and for the success of our future generations (Port, Nusche, & Hopkins, 2008). Therefore, school leaders' tasks have broadened and intensified, and require a new framework for practice. All in all, there is a need to redefine and broaden school leaders' roles and responsibilities. This means changing the way school leadership is developed and supported. It implies improving incentives to make leadership in particular more attractive for existing heads and for those who will be taking up school leadership positions in the future (Port, Nusche, & Hopkins, 2008).

The teacher knowledge should be gained through effective, planned, ongoing professional development PD sessions designed to improve school personnel (Burke, 2000). In Fiji, the Future Leaders Programme is a training programme organised by the MoE for future school leaders to equip

them with appropriate leadership skills as a succession plan to take over leadership roles in schools. The table 1 gives the number of teachers who have been trained in the past four years.

Table 1.   Number of Participants

Year	Male	Female	Total
2011	68	34	112
2012	93	70	163
2013	116	66	182
2014	98	67	165

Source: (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Participants include some Heads of Departments as well as the prime target of Assistant Heads of Primary and Secondary schools. Since the FLP has been running for more than five years now, it seems a suitable point to take stock of the perceptions of teachers who have undergone the Future Leaders training and now have become school leaders. How do they now—after some years in the front line—rate the usefulness of the FLP? The research questions that guided this study were: 1) What are school leaders perceptions on the usefulness of the FLP conducted by the MoE? 2) What do school leaders' perceive of the impact of the FLP on students' learning and teaching? 3) Do school leaders perceive that MoE is providing adequate training for the teachers to take up leadership roles in schools?

Background

Where the leadership quality of the school leaders is poor, teachers' performance is severely hindered (Timperley, 2008). School leaders need support if they are to overcome stubborn barriers created by the norms of school culture—autonomy, impartiality and defence to seniority (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007). New school leaders, for whom it is a time of both survival and discovery, are concerned about learning more on policies and new reforms (Huberman, 1989). MoE is therefore fully committed in ensuring that all future leaders are fully aware of the expectations ahead of them in maintaining high standards in their respective schools. The FLP hopes to develop in the pool of potential future school leaders with the 21st Century leadership skills. Skills are not learnt overnight; it takes time and practice to master them. Fullan (2007) explains that only leaders who are well equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to sustained improvement in students' achievement. Hargreaves (2000) reminds us that educational reform is an international phenomenon, which is why it is important to recognise PD as a universal concept, allowing us to identify and reflect on the changes in education with the lapse of time that have created the need for change in PD.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) observed a quarter of a century ago that teachers undertake PD to become better teachers and school leaders. Even today, PD is still considered to be the most promising and most readily available route to growth on the job. A decade later, Guskey (2002) concurs that educational PD programmes is a way to provide a pathway to increased capability and greater professional satisfaction. PD programmes should be planned with a focus on student learning goals (Guskey, 2003). A bottom-up approach in planning should be used in an effort to ensure students' success. PD planners should gather data on student progress and evaluate this to determine their (the students') needs before planning PD activities. Lingam (2012) also suggests that relevant stakeholders should be consulted before planning PD programmes. While the focus of the educational system in Fiji in the past seemed limited to provision of 'basic education' to as many as possible, the current trend shows a shift towards better provision of holistic education of a better quality, and this warrants productive teachers in the nation's teaching service (Lingam and Lingam, 2013). Teachers and school leaders are also motivated to participate in PD programmes when they believe gaps exist in their practice. This claim emphasizes the need for high expectations but achievable goals, not only affecting teachers and school leaders' motivational levels but also maintaining their positive self-efficacy (Fullan, 2007). As acknowledged, the performance, and in turn productivity of teachers, depends not

only on their pre-service training but also on continuous PD programmes while they are in-service (Smith & Gillespie, 2007).

The teachers and school leaders need to be convinced that they will be able to practise the new knowledge and skills they have learned from attending the PD programmes. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) have commented that PD will never amount to anything until teachers become inquiry-oriented, skilled, reflective, and collaborative professionals. Thus, from the point of view of sustainability, it is important for teachers to share with their colleagues the knowledge and skills learnt in the PD (Guskey, 2003). This is supported by Sharma (2012) who stated that creating a learning culture inherent in working conditions that value collaboration and constructive feedback was important for sustainability. The effectiveness of teachers' PD is also determined by the teachers' own belief and their motivation and commitment level (Lingam, 2012). With this understanding, the main aim of the present study was to investigate the usefulness of the FLP as far as enhancing the knowledge and skills of the school leaders are concerned.

Methodology

The design for this study intentionally employed a qualitative method, focusing on the phenomenological aspect of qualitative research to allow the study to incorporate school leaders' perceptions, both emotional and intellectual, about FLP. These perceptions of school leaders were built on the basis of their own experiences as a leader after attaining the Future Leaders training.

The study involved the sample from the population of the 2014 school leaders who had attended the FLP prior to becoming a school leader. Forty school leaders (20 rural and 20 urban) were selected randomly with the help of the Professional Development Unit (PDU) of the MoE. The participants went through the semi-structured interview which lasted for approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and later transcribed.

After transcription of the participants' interviews, the data were analysed using the interpretational analysis method (Barnard, 2004). The data was compiled, coded and categorised. This categorization of the data was an essential step in determining the correlations between the interviews.

The researcher's experience as a participant, and later as a trainer of FLPs, had a strong connection with the phenomena being studied. The prior knowledge of the research topic allowed the researcher to select the interview process to obtain a more comprehensive descriptive understanding of school leaders' perceptions of FLP. Through the interview process, this study provided a wide range of experiences and knowledge of FLP. Broken into various segments, the interviews contained questions designed to elicit responses on the perceptions of the purpose and value of FLP, knowledge gained, and the impact on future leaders. The study utilized semi-structured open-ended interview processes and some confirmatory document analysis. Prior to the implementation of the research, a few educators were asked to read and evaluate each question to ensure clarity and validity (Barnard, 2004).

McMillan (2004) campaigns the use of triangulation in qualitative research to enhance the credibility of the data. Triangulation provides other means of verifying data, allowing one to use multiple approaches to investigate. Thus as well as interviews, documents associated with FLP were also examined, which included the past future leaders' programmes that had been used to run training sessions and selection criteria for participants.

Findings

The interviews of the 40 school leaders are analysed in Table 2 under the identified themes. For each of the themes, a summary of comments and the quotes of the participants' responses are also included.

Table 2.   Identified themes from the responses with summary of comments and quotes

Identified themes	Summary of Findings	Examples of quotes of participants' responses
Most important things learnt in FLP	• School Planning • Change Management • Types of Leadership Style • Problem Solving • MoE Policies and Procedures	*The three most important topics to me were roles of leaders, problem solving and qualities of leaders.* (L5, 2014) *Policy, school planning and change management were very important. (L9, 2014)* *Problem solving methods, types of communication and types of leadership were very important to me.* (L21,2014)
FLP's impact on new leaders	• Brought a change in their leadership style	*Has made a drastic change to my life and teaching career. Now I see myself as a successful leader both for school and my community. Have adapted well in my leading role, not only in the school culture but in teaching and learning.* (L19, 2014) *Helped me improve and uplift the standard of my work as an administrator. Have gained more courage and confidence compared to the past.* (L28, 2014) *Made me change my attitude and carry out my role more effectively.* (L12, 2014)
Importance of FLP	• Instils the essence of a good contemporary leadership • Creates conducive environment of teamwork • Helps to achieve targets and improve results	*Enables the leader to become visionary. Maximize efficiency to achieve organizational goals. Have better relationship with staff and stakeholders.* (L9, 2014) *Expectations of leaders in the 21st century are dynamic so leaders need to be trained in such a way as to meet the needs and demands for the development and achieving the goals in the People's Charter.* (L15, 2014) *These things are the core business for a leader in education. It equips the leader with the knowledge that enables him/her to perform his/her duties, roles and responsibilities well. It helps them to build healthy relationships with stakeholders.* (L24, 2014)
Content relevance	• All suitable for inducting new leaders	*All issues raised with future leaders were important.* (L1, 2014) *All modules were important as per need.* (L3, 2014) *All things covered were very important and relevant.* (L27, 2014)

The content of the FLP were similar to the one given in Table 3. It was divided into two phases.

Table 3.   Future School Leaders Programme 2014

Phase I (5 days)	Phase II (5 days)
• Holistic view of leadership and management	• Internal assessment
• The manager's role	• Classroom based assessment
• Modelling high standards of performance	• National examinations and blueprint
• Working relationships	• How safe are our schools
• Effective communication skills	• OHS policy
• Leadership	• Disaster management plan
• Theories of leadership	• Emergency evacuation plan (EEP)
• Power and influence	• Building codes
• Decision making	• Retrofitting guidelines
• Organisational culture	• Organisational risk
• What is change?	• Corruption risk, hot spot weak concept
• Why the need for change?	• CP2R management process
• Understanding change and behaviour	• Applying the CP2R concept
• Organisational change	• Understanding planning alignment
• Leaders, managers and change	• Designing of school plans
• Changes in the Ministry of Education	• Monitoring plan implementation and reporting
• How to manage change	• Roles and functions of the school committee and the school leader
• Understanding the principles of school planning	• School financial management
• Guidelines to planning and self-assessment	• Monitoring of grants
• Self-assessment	• Ministry of Education policy and legal requirements
• Planning for school improvement	• Procedures, processes and acquittals
• Overview of school leaders handbook	• Financial management procedures in schools
• Structure, alignment, umbrella policies, activities and presentation	• Budget planning and control
• Action research briefing	• Overview of process
• Discussion and identifying tasks	• Roles and functions of the school committee and the school leader
	• Vision, planning and MOE policy framework
	– policies of the MOE
	– policies and overview
	• Child labour
	• Educational intervention and child protection policy in school
	• Behavioural management policy in school
	• Customer service policy in schools
	• General orders, PSC code of conduct
	• Employment rights act, protection
	• 2013 constitution
	• Suicide prevention
	• Dealing with depression

Source: (Ministry of Education, 2014)

Discussion

On the basis of the underlying research questions, the findings of this study are now discussed.

What are school leaders' perceptions on the usefulness of the FLP conducted by the MoE?

As stated in MoE's vision and mission, quality and holistic education are buzzwords in almost all educational contexts in Fiji and the Pacific. To fulfil the vision of the MoE, school leaders have insisted that programmes such as FLP are very important. But the effectiveness of any training programme is very much dependent on its content. Topics like *School Planning, Change Management, Types of Leadership Styles, Problem Solving, MoE Policies and Procedures* were said to be very important for the FLP. The school leaders felt that all the topics form the foundation of a good leader because of the contribution they could make to achieving a good-quality and holistic education for the children of Fiji. The findings resonate well with the opinion of Fullan (2007) who claims that the educational system in the past seemed limited to basic education, whereas the current trend shows a shift towards accessing quality, and holistic education, and this warrants productive teachers in the nation's teaching service (Fullan, 2007). This is because educational service delivery depends on the quality of teachers and school leaders available at any point in time in the teaching service. This is also acknowledged by Smith and Gillespie (2007) who mention that the performance, and in turn the productivity of teachers, comes from not only pre-service training but also continuous PD programmes while they are in service.

The findings show that most participants regarded FLP as very useful, important and helpful for their leadership role. The leaders appeared to have the perception that PD programmes were the means to solve all their teaching problems and helped in their professional growth. The reforms by the MoE have placed teachers into challenging positions outside their knowledge areas at times, thus programmes such as FLP help find solutions.

What do school leaders' perceive of the impact of the FLP on students' learning and teaching?

The findings revealed that leaders attended the programme because they wanted to become better leaders, enhance their leadership skills, self-esteem, and problem solving skills in order to enhance students' learning and teaching. This is very much supported by Fullan (2007) and Guskey (2002) who state that PDs enhance leadership skills, problem-solving skills, bring equity in diverse teacher populations which promotes student learning.

New school leaders, for whom it is a time of both survival and discovery, showed that it was very important to attend the FLP; a few were only concerned about learning more on policies and new reforms implemented by the MoE, which is consistent with the findings of Huberman's (1989) study. However, the experienced leaders were on the stabilization stage and were more concerned about improving their knowledge in leadership areas, new leading styles and about new educational policies, which also supports the Huberman (1989) study.

The poor leadership quality of the school leaders is a hindrance to teacher's performance (Timperley, 2008). The findings showed that most of the participants regarded the programme as important in acquiring new knowledge and skills to help them lead the school effectively in order to enhance students' learning and teaching. The findings of the study agree with Fullan (2007) who claims that knowledge and skills of leaders could enhance learning and teaching if school leaders are to be equipped to implement the new developments in education successfully.

Do school leaders perceive that MoE is providing adequate training for the teachers to take up leadership roles in schools?

The findings of this study suggested that currently, apart from the FLP, there was no other programme in place to look into the sustainability of the future school leaders. The findings also showed that the

workshops and seminars conducted by the MoE were only for selected school leaders. The participants mentioned that in many cases the school leaders did not share the knowledge acquired through the PD programmes they have attended, which were organized by the MoE and other professional organizations.

As previously noted, Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) had commented that PD will never amount to anything until teachers become inquiry-oriented, skilled, reflective, and collaborative professionals. If PD is not shared with the colleagues, ultimately it will be a waste when the person who attended exits from the field. If school leaders have not been sharing the knowledge, the failure to do so is particularly lamentable. Therefore, continuity of FLP is deemed necessary and MoE should make sure that all future school leaders go through the FLP programme and not only the selected few.

Conclusion

As different leadership styles have been applied in the past depending on the time, the leadership in the 21st Century is different. Studies have proved that leadership is a critical component for sustainable school reform. In any country in the world, reforms taking place in educational organizations throw up more and more challenges to improve learning at school and Fiji is no different. Everywhere, PD programmes such as the FLP will continue to be vital.

This research study identified that the FLP has been having a positive impact on school leaders. This finding implies that PD for leaders is important, to ensure the continuation and improvement of their effectiveness as leaders. In general, teachers' PD is viewed as a platform for professional learning. As teachers develop better content knowledge through participation in PD programmes, they become more confident with their own practice. Consequently, as the leaders developed a better understanding of the leadership, they were able to address the issues that their students and teachers faced with the fast-changing demands of learning and teaching. Most importantly, leaders' PD experience also allows them to keep up with the changes taking place in the education system and as a result ensures that learning and teaching remain relevant to their students' needs.

According to the research findings, the topics that school leaders consider important to FLP include: *School Planning, Change Management, Types of Leadership Styles, Problem Solving, and MoE Policies and Procedures.* Leaders' perceptions of what makes a PD programme effective are influenced by several factors. One of the major clusters of factors contributing to the overall effectiveness of any PD for school leaders is a strong focus on enhancing the knowledge and skills of the leadership as a sure way to improve learning and teaching at all levels of the school's operation (Guskey, 2003).

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