This paper is part of a symposium on
School renewal: Issues concerning professional responsibility, personal responsibility and pedagogy for improving the lives of students, teachers and school leaders

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Leadership, School Effectiveness and Staff Professional Development: The Case Study of a School in Uganda

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Abstract

To date, only a few studies of school improvement, school renewal, learning environment and action research have been undertaken in Uganda and none have been at the early childhood level. The present study evaluates one early childhood institution’s attempt to improve the school effectiveness and classroom-learning environment that teachers create, through positive leadership and on-going professional development.

This longitudinal study implemented over four years, involved the investigation of factors that influenced school effectiveness, teacher professional development and students’ outcomes in an early childhood institution in Uganda, including the development of child-centred learning environments. The reported research is my personal reflective journey and experience when I was principal of the early childhood institution for four years. The study made use of action research methodology with a framework of school effectiveness and school improvement. Uganda’s rapidly expanding education system and largely teacher-centred mode of delivery makes this study timely because the study provides potentially significant insights into how a school improvement program can provide a sustainable means of professional development.

Objectives

This paper reports the findings of a longitudinal study that investigated the effectiveness of a professional development programme implemented in an early childhood institution in Uganda. The objectives of the study were:

- To evaluate the success of a professional development program, developed using action research methodology incorporating Stoll and Firk’s, 1996, Halton Approach for Effecting School Change and Fullan’s 1992, School Improvement Framework, in terms of:
  - school effectiveness;
  - student achievement; and
  - school enrolment.

- To investigate the extent to which the professional development program bought about sustained changes in classroom learning environments.

- To investigate whether links were established between effective leadership, professional development and school improvement.

Background to the Study
A Historical Background on Uganda

Uganda became a British Protectorate in 1894. In the late 1950s and early 1960s; Uganda was called the Pearl of Africa. The colonial structure of government remained in place with very little modification until a form of central government was instigated in 1953. The British had laid down necessary infrastructure for success. Makerere University; internationally known for its tropical medicine program and Mulago Hospital were well regarded institutions throughout the world, and industry, agriculture and trade were flourishing. On the other hand tribal, religious and political differences made the task of government very complex (Government of Uganda, 2002).

In October 1962, Milton Obote became the first Prime Minister of Independent Uganda. Obote's own political ideologies were directed to creating a United Republic. He did this by abolishing all kingdoms and effectively alienated himself from most fractions of the population. This was done in the name of establishing "One Nation, One People, One Parliament". The constitutional crisis in 1966, unearthed Major General Idi Amin, who was now head of an army Obote could not do without. Effectively, the military were the policy implementing body for a civilian administration. This situation prevailed until the January 1971 when Amin ousted Obote, and took over as Head of State. Killings in the army, where Amin's tribesmen engaged in systematic massacres, were the first signs to a watching public of the madness to follow. The Asian exodus in 1972 was one of the most significant events in Uganda's history. It has scarred Uganda for the rest of its national life and the wound, only now beginning to heal, was open for nearly a quarter of a century (Government of Uganda, 2002).

Milton Obote won his second reign in December 1980 and this came to be known as the Obote II reign. Worst of all for Ugandans, Obote had no control over the army, whose senior officers systematically plundered government coffers, and whose ranks looted and raped the population. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni was sworn in as President of Uganda in January 1986. The distorted and violent policies of a whirlwind of governments had left Ugandans without a true belief in their leaders.

Infrastructure whether the judicial system, the constitution, roads, agriculture, health, and education, had completely broken down. Infrastructure redevelopment was the starting point for the new government. The magnitude and impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis also had a grave impact on the economic and social life of Ugandans. Education, rehabilitation in all spheres and awareness have been the key areas targeted by government programmes initiated. With political stability since 1986 and infrastructural redevelopment underway, the Government was able to focus on the ailing economy. Currently 80% of the population is agrarian and rural. The Government published a White paper on education in 1991, since the early 1990s there has been a steady expansion of the education system (Government of Uganda, 2002).

The Aga Khan Education Services (AKES)
The Aga Khan Education Services (AKES) is one of four agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) an international non-governmental organisation and developmental agency, supporting activities in the field of education. AKES currently operates more than 300 schools and advanced educational programmes that provide quality pre-school, primary, secondary, and higher secondary education services to more than 54,000 students in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Tajikistan. AKES is also developing new schools in Kyrgyzstan and Madagascar and studying the feasibility of services and facilities in Mozambique (AKES, 2002).

Programmes to improve educational quality have been built into the AKES system since the early-1980s. Field-based teacher training was launched in Pakistan's Northern Areas in 1983. School improvement experiments began at the same time in Sindh province in Pakistan, where AKES introduced child-centred teaching methods, and in Tanzania, where new techniques for secondary school teaching in English, mathematics, and science were implemented in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (AKES, 2002).

The leading characteristics of the work of the Aga Khan Education Services are:

- The continuing pursuit of excellence in educational practice and management
- The pursuit of this excellence in diverse and challenging settings;
- Child-centred teaching methods;
- A special emphasis on female education; and
- School-based teacher training.

The Aga Khan Education Service was set up in Kampala, Uganda in mid 1993 and rehabilitation and establishment of the Aga Khan Nursery School was the first project of the AKES in 1993. I was appointed Principal in December 1993 and worked at the school until September 1997. In January 1994, the Aga Khan Nursery School opened its doors and the school started with 39 students and 5 teachers. It was to this small teaching team that I communicated my vision and introduced a strategy of classroom improvement, school effectiveness and professional development.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Linking School Leadership and Professional Development to improve School Environment*

The new paradigm of management emphasizes an environment in which growth and empowerment of the individual are the keys to success. Many educators believe that the school is a learning organisation and that a school climate that maximises human potential can be developed, monitored and sustained (Costa, 1994). Leaders must know how to cultivate and sustain learning under conditions of complex, rapid change (Fullan, 2001). In successful schools, leaders hold professional values that are first and foremost about learning. Risk-taking, experimentation and voicing opinions are essential ingredients for change. Leading by personal example provides an impetus for
others to follow. Demonstrating trust builds confidence and encourages confidence in others (Wallace, 1997). There are five themes in leading for change: vision, understanding change, developing relationships, knowledge building, coherence making (Fullan, 2001). The present study examined how I; in the role of the school principal, implemented the school improvement program, influenced the school-level environment and brought about sustained change among teachers.

**Action Research Cycle**

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1992, p. 16) action research is “concerned with changing individuals, on the one hand and, on the other, the culture of the group or social institution to which they belong”. Action research is motivated by a quest to improve. It is participatory, involving research through which people work towards the improvement of their practice. Action research involves a self-reflexive spiral in which strategic planning, achievable steps, implementing the plan, observing and evaluation, reflecting and then replanning, further implementation and further reflecting, are involved as the cycle continues. Action research in the case of this study was designed to bridge the gap between research and practice (Somekh, 1995), thereby striving to overcome the perceived persistent failure of research to impact on or improve practice especially in the developing world. In this study, action research combined reflective practice, empowerment of the teachers, professional development, active learning and collaboration (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

**Field of Learning Environments**

Rutter and his colleagues (1979) estimate that students spend in excess of 15,000 hours in the classroom during their school life, therefore, the environment that students are exposed to becomes extremely important. The influence of the learning environment on the process of education has received a great deal of attention from educational researchers during the last three decades (Fraser, 1994, 1998). Much research has been carried out into the relationship between student achievement and the quality of the classroom-learning environments. Consistent and overwhelming evidence from these studies suggest that the classroom environment strongly influences student achievement (Fraser, 2003).

Research specifically on classroom learning environments took off about 30 years ago with the work of Walberg (Anderson and Walberg, 1968) and Moos (1974) which spawned many, diverse research programs around the world (Fraser, 1998). During this time, several approaches have been used in conducting research in the field of learning environments. Although earlier work often used questionnaires to assess learning environments, the productive combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Tobin & Fraser, 1998) and use of interpretative research (Erickson, 1998; Tobin, 1998) is increasing rapidly in the field today. This interpretative study draws on and contributes to the field of learning environments to investigate the school and classroom learning environments created as a result of the implementation of a school improvement and renewal program.
Effective Schools

I was influenced by the characteristics of effective schools outlined in the Halton Approach by Stoll and Firk, (1996). Twelve characteristics are outlined that fall into three main categories:

1. A common mission: which a shared and communicated vision of school goals. The principal plays a major role in communicating this vision to teachers, parents’, and students’. The principal has a commitment to and responsibility for this vision. Within the category of a common mission are clear goals, shared values, beliefs, and instructional leadership.

2. An emphasis on learning: characterised by teachers who have and convey high expectations to their students. Teachers also use a variety of teaching and monitoring strategies to create curriculum materials that are linked to school goals. Within this category are the characteristics of instructional and curriculum focus, teacher collegiality and development, high expectations and monitoring of student progress.

3. A climate conducive to learning: where morale of teachers and students is high, where there is recognition and incentives. The classroom-learning environment is attractive with work displays and attention paid to comfort. It is also inviting to parents and members of the community, who are involved in and supportive of the life of the school. Under this category are the characteristics of student involvement, responsibility and behaviour, of parental and community involvement and support, of recognition and incentives and physical environment.

School Improvement Program

The aim of the study was to evaluate the success of a program designed to improve the classroom environment created by teachers at a private early childhood institution in Uganda. The program was designed to develop reflective practice among the teachers in the school, to link practice and research, to promote collaboration and to empower the teachers through involvement in the study at all stages. Thus a combination of effective leadership, mentoring and professional development was used to enhance classroom environments and improved the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning in the school.

During the course of the program a cyclic action research model of professional development was developed, in which on-the-job training, workshops, peer-coaching and mentoring were coupled with leader support and regular feedback. I was influenced by Fullan’s (1992, 2001) model of change and school improvement. According to Willis (1999), reflective practice is a way for teachers to understand, critique and improve their professional work. The reflective practice cycle involves describing activities that are used during teaching, appraising them, suggesting ways in which they can be improved in future sessions and planning for subsequent action. An integral part of the school improvement program involved the encouragement of reflective practice at all stages. Finally, continuous support through weekly workshops,
professional development courses and contact with peers and the head teacher was used to encourage sustained change.

As principal of the early childhood school, I used Michael Fullan’s 1992, model of the three interconnected cogs of the wheel, where the teacher as learner changes the classroom-learning environment, under the leadership of the principal and brings about school improvement in the school. Research in western countries indicates that successful educational change is achieved by treating the individual school as a unit and ensuring that the school principal is a key player who mentors teachers repeatedly as they deploy new skills in their classrooms (AKDN, 2004). My study tested how far this formula held true in a unique post-conflict context where many of teachers have no more than high school education themselves and where the extreme shortage of funds dictates that materials and training had to be concentrated in Teacher Resource Centres to which individual schools and teachers have access (Hopkins, 2001).

Interpretative Framework

The present study employed an interpretative framework, drawing on elements of the constructivist (Schwandt, 1994; Taylor, 1994; von Glasersfeld, 1993) and critical theory (Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994) paradigms. The constructivist perspective assumes that there are multiple realities in which the researchers and their subjects create their own understandings (Schwandt, 1994; von Glasersfeld, 1993). From this perspective, the present study was emergent in both its design and nature. The critical theory perspective implies that reality is shaped over time by social, political, cultural, ethnic and gender factors (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemologically, this paradigm assumes that the values of the researcher will influence the inquiry.

The framework for analysis emerged from the case study and was shaped by the introspective data available from long-term collaboration in which both the head teacher and the teachers in the school were involved in reflecting on their teaching to improve the classroom learning environment and school effectiveness (Wallace & Louden, 2000). The present case study made use of interpretative and ethnographic analysis from multiple research methods.

Methods and Data Sources

This interpretative study (Erickson, 1998) was carried out over four years (1993-1997) and used a qualitative case study and action research approach in which I, as the school principal was involved in action research. The aim of the study was to evaluate whether a professional development program, aimed at improving the classroom environment that teachers created, was successful.

Sample

The sample consisted of all 22 teachers of one private early childhood institution in Kampala, Uganda. These teachers were involved in the professional development and school improvement program. Of the 230
students that attended the school, 80 students were involved in the study. This sample consisted of students aged between 5 and 6 years old.

Gathering of Qualitative Information

An important consideration for the present study was the inclusion of culturally sensitive methods of data collection to ensure that information would take into account social action that is "locally distinct and situationally contingent" (Erickson, 1998, p.1155). Qualitative information was gathered at each stage of the programme using discussions and in-depth interviews with teachers, classroom observations, anecdotal records and narratives written by the researcher.

Action Research for Organizational Change

Action Research as a methodology supports teachers in their struggle with the challenges related to their classroom practice; as they reflect on these challenges (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993). Elliott has defined Action Research as the 'study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' (1991, p.69). Altrichter, et al put Action Research into a classroom context and argue that teachers use Action Research methodology to explore how they can ‘...improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as the conditions under which teachers and students work in schools' (1993,p.4). It was important that teachers in the school understood the changes and believed in the changes, only then could they change their own practice.

Figure 1: The Action Research Cycle developed at the school

Thus Action Research methodology developed in the cyclic model shown in Figure 1 provided a model for teachers to recognise and reflect upon their
practice in the new school and their own classroom, bring about improvement. Action Research provided a way to include classroom teachers in the important discourse about teaching and learning (Connell, 2002). The importance of action research is not to be underestimated, because it provides teachers with a legitimate and more appropriate alternative to traditional research designs' (Hopkins, 2002). Hopkins (2001) recognises that a teacher's perception of research involves time that most busy teachers cannot afford. By recognising that a teacher's first and most important role is to teach, this study confined itself to improve teaching practice within the classroom and bring about change in the classroom learning environment and student learning in a rehabilitated school in a post-conflict country.

The head teacher as a mentor

Tilley (2002, p.17) strongly asserts; "Mentors need to be committed to the educational exercise and to take an interest in the personal and professional development of the mentee. Mentors need to be flexible enough to tolerate and appreciate the uniqueness and individuality of the mentees". As a principal in a school, in one of the poorest countries in the world, I had

- To learn to listen,
- To understand and explore cross-cultural sensitivities,
- To understand that most of my teachers had experienced trauma and grief,
- To deal with differences in levels of training and of opinion;
- To learn to ask open questions;
- To be flexible, innovative and creative;
- And to use these skills for the benefit of my teachers

Before taking up my position as the principal of this early childhood institution in Uganda; I had worked as a teacher in three other developing countries, I was passionate about teaching especially teaching in the developing world. I believed in creating and developing a classroom-learning environment that was comfortable, caring, fair and respectful. I had clear expectations that reflected my assumptions and I sought to express these to my teachers, directors, parents and students; I was well organised and flexible and was excited by this challenge of establishing a school in a complex situation of post-conflict, poor infrastructure, limited funds, poverty and HIV/AIDS.

Professional development,

Professional development in the school was school-based where the whole school was a unit of change, where there was on-going professional development of teachers. The emphasis was on enhancing teacher’s general pedagogical expertise; there was a focus on the adoption and use of “child-centred” activity oriented methods of teaching and learning. A professional development plan for the year was developed with the help of teachers and weekly professional development sessions were held in school on a Thursday afternoon with the staff over a period of two years.
Classroom observations and interviews

Classroom observations and interviews with all teachers were carried out on an on-going basis each month for 2 years. In addition, four teachers were selected for more in-depth data collection. These teachers were selected as a representative sample of the staff, ranging in experience, qualifications and grade levels. Classroom observations were made on a weekly basis in each of these teachers’ classes. In addition, in-depth interviews about the school improvement program and the associated professional development were held at least once every two weeks.

Discussion

Three issues were at the heart of change initiatives in the school:
1. The teachers and I in the school began to understand the change process;
2. We built a professional learning community of teachers at the school level;
3. In the fourth year of the school we began focussing on an outreach program to assist and help other early childhood institutions in Kampala.

The success of the school improvement program was measured at four levels: the school, the classroom teacher, the principal and the student level.

At the school level

At the school level, implementation of the school improvement program was found to increase interaction between the head teacher and the teachers, increase teacher cohesiveness and teacher collaboration and improve teacher self-efficacy. The school improvement and professional development programme was a systematic approach to school-wide improvement that incorporated every aspect of a school - from curriculum and instruction to school management. There was a commitment to child centred learning, curriculum development and pedagogic development. There was a focus on teacher learning, professional development and leadership training. The whole school was considered as the unit of change and capacity building. As a whole school team we aimed at making the improvement sustainable.

At the classroom teacher level

At the classroom level, the results indicated that teachers who were involved in the program developed student-centred classrooms, incorporated cooperative learning in their lessons and used learning centres than those teachers that joined the school later. The teachers began using team teaching, as there were a group of three teachers in a class. They had weekly planning meetings where they developed strategies suitable for their group of children. There were attractive student displays in the classroom. Teachers began to use locally available low cost material to make resources. Their planning reflected making the teaching and learning experience more child-centred.
At the student level,

At the student level, an overall improvement in student achievement (literacy and numeracy) was noticeable over the four years and student enrolments increased sevenfold. A program and a process were designed to enable all students to meet challenging academic content and performance goals of the Ugandan primary system that was exam oriented. Beginning with 39 students in January 1994, the school had 240 students by mid –1997 with a waiting list. The students at the school were happy, responsive, energetic and had high self esteem and this was measured by classroom observations, parent feedback and discussion, teacher feedback and talking to students.

At the school principal level

During the crucial first years of establishing the school, I found I was the curriculum leader and mentor for the teachers, initiator of the professional development program, a manager of resources available for the school. I was also a public relations officer trying to secure the active co-operation of parents, the community, the school board and education officers, and responsible for budget preparation and maintaining on-line budgetary control. I also had to attend to school management issues and other organisational meetings. At the end of the study, I felt that a clear vision and leading by personal example influenced and improved the effectiveness of the school improvement programme. I had developed a school induction and appraisal policy for new teachers, and initiated a school development plan with the teachers listing measurable indicators and outcomes. I developed a policy and procedures manual for the school that was presented to the school board.

I gained a wealth of experience and knowledge that comes from practically working in a situation of post-conflict and I have benefited tremendously from this experience. I have understood complex issues of grief and trauma, human rights violations and admired the resilience of my teachers and parents to survive against great odds.

Educational Importance

This study is important because it is one of only a handful of studies in the field of school improvement in Uganda, and it represents one of only a few studies worldwide that have focused on the learning environment at the early childhood level.

The study is valuable because it has the potential to create a clearer picture of how leaders and teachers can work together to create positive attitudes and improved academic performance. The study is significant in that, by evaluating a professional development course, designed to improve the classroom environments that teachers create, it provides a guideline for future leaders and teachers to improve school effectiveness. The study provides tentative guidance for improving student achievement at the early childhood level.
In addition, the findings of the study provide useful and practical information to leaders wishing to improve the school-level environment. In turn, the study indicates how positive contexts established by leaders can encourage teachers to create positive classroom environments. The study is significant because it provides far-reaching implications for educational institutions concerning how professional development and leadership is linked to school improvement.

The main strength of the initiative was that there were no school improvement and capacity building initiatives at the early childhood level in Uganda; in that sense the effort was a pioneering effort. The whole program was conceptualised to fit into the educational culture of Uganda where there is a desperate need for curriculum and teaching programmes to directly impact student learning in achievable and practical ways (Hopkins, 2002b).

References


