MANAGEMENT OF EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION OFFICERS IN TURBULENT TIMES

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Introduction

Social life is filled with contradictions and the work of education officers (EOs) is no exception. The origin of these contradictions lies in the shifting balance between environmental turbulence that favours an approach which is flexible and facilitative, and environmental stability, that makes possible planning for long-term coherence. Turbulence refers to the organisational state where internal systems and procedures are rapidly subjected to pressures and demands emanating from environmental changes. Paradigm shifts in education from a social welfare perspective to that of economic restructuring, simultaneous centralisation of policy control function and devolution of certain management and service functions, are recent examples of factors that have caused turbulence in educational organisations. Conversely, stability would denote the continuance of existing practices within the education system, uninfluenced by internal and/or external changes and demands (Fullan 1993, Wallace and McMahon 1994). Some short-term changes and adjustments may disturb the internal relationships and alignments. To preserve these internal relationships and alignments, therefore, some form of long-term coherence becomes necessary.

This paper discusses the role of EOs in the present turbulent times in Fiji and other small island countries of the Pacific. It begins by exploring the role of EOs relating it to the relevant international literature. It goes on to suggest some ways in which EOs might rethink their present and future roles and responsibilities. The main focus of this paper is on the primary functions of EOs, that is, the creation of opportunities for the provision of quality education.

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for learners - children as well as adults. Of course this function is shared by their colleagues at the levels above and below them. The term ‘education officers’ in this paper refers to officers ranging from Chief Education Officers to District Education Officers in Fiji’s education system.

The role of education officers

As middle level managers in the education system, education officers play an increasingly important role in executing government’s education policies. In doing so they interpret, prioritise, implement, monitor, supervise and evaluate the respective policies, programmes and projects. They also provide feedback from policy users to policy makers so that any shortcomings can be addressed. It can be said, therefore, that EOs perform a ‘cushioning’ role between policy-makers and policy-users.

In the small island states of the Pacific in general, and Fiji in particular, the role of the EOs has been largely ‘inspectorial’ and ‘fault finding’. Velayutham (1988: 61) explains inspection as:

a process by which the organisation or its external authority monitors the organisational activities and ensures that the minimum standards of services and facilities are provided, and the assigned goals and objectives are achieved.

Velayutham (1988) advocates a supervisory leadership role for educational administrators or managers and not inspection. He considers ‘supervision’ as a process of improving the teaching-learning process and the conditions related to it. The supervisory leadership role has not been sufficiently demonstrated in the present work of EOs in Fiji and other island nations of the Pacific.

The inspectorial role of EOs has been inherited largely from the colonial era. The education systems in these countries have continued to be academic and Western in orientation. Emphasis on credentials and preparation of students for externally-set examinations have continued in the post-independence period. The inspectorial style of discourse that was brought in by the colonial administrators has been maintained to a large extent in the present day work of EOs. This is because most educational administrators, and parents alike, felt that this was the
most appropriate approach to control the teaching-learning situation in an examination-oriented system.

In the case of Fiji, the basic role of EOs is drawn from PSC circular No. 7/83. This document also shows the relationship among the various administrative and professional levels of the education system. After a cursory look at the various duty statement documents, it can be safely argued that the present work of EOs is geared largely to seeking conformity and stability rather addressing inconsistencies and suggesting desirable changes. For example, this is seen clearly in the job description of senior education officers. It specifies the duties and the percentage of time spent on each. In the present context of a dynamically complex environment (Fullan 1993, Wallace and McMahon 1994) and an unknowable future (Stacey 1992) in Fiji and other island nations of the Pacific, any ready-made duty statement would be superficial. Now that these countries are independent and are charting their own courses of national development, education in general has a more dynamic role to play. As ‘key players’ in the education system, the role of the EOs needs to be more facilitative, enabling and creative. Their duty statements should clearly have a ‘decision-making space’ that can accommodate working resolution of the tension between seeking coherence and yet retaining flexibility. This suggestion finds support in Qovu’s (1996) study. He notes that often principals are not able to comply with their written duty statements because of the many unanticipated demands on their time.

It must be noted that the lack of success of schooling in Fiji and other island nations of the Pacific has led to changes directed at improvements at the school level. Studies in this regard have stressed the need for instructional leaders at the school level (Velayutham 1988, Sharma 1992), improved teacher (Muralidhar 1989) and administrator (Velayutham 1994, Sharma 1996) preparation, increased teacher and parental participation in school site management (Sharma 1993) and a host of pedagogy-related changes directed at upgrading the quality of education (Thaman 1993).

There is insufficient similar research-based information on the effectiveness of the contribution of EOs in Fiji as well as international literature. But do EOs in reality have any impact on school heads, teachers, learners and parents? This is a critical question that needs exploration. Barr and Dreeben (1983: 3) remind
us that "education would be a strange organisation indeed, if superintendents had no impact upon principals...". Similarly, Pfeffer explains that leaders at the higher organisational levels should have greater impact on the quality of education because, being in a centralised set-up, they have more exposure to educational innovations and have more discretion in decisions and activities.

Bhindi (1988), however, points out that the work of EOs in the Pacific is administratively decentralised. In other words, while the decision-making power remains with the Ministry of Education headquarters, facilities and services are deconcentrated for administrative convenience. Bhindi (1988: 19) goes on to point out that:

the provision of divisional education offices in Fiji, area offices in Tonga, and district ‘desks’ in the Ministry of Education in Kiribati address the questions of efficiency, improved services, and implementation of national government policies. The education officers serving in these offices have prescribed roles with defined, limited authority. The offices operate as “agencies” or “branches” of the Ministry of Education headquarters.

This paper, therefore, argues for increased involvement of EOs at the school level in Fiji and other Pacific countries. It is likely that such involvement will create a more balanced system of both centralised and decentralised control of education. With this new image of EOs and the emerging trends of school-site management and teacher professionalism, the promotion of quality education becomes the responsibility of everyone rather than that of school level personnel only. For this to happen, it is necessary for those taking up the job of EOs to be successful instructional leaders and facilitators. This is because they can be influential in the development of goals at various levels in the education system, the selection and supervision of school heads and teachers and the establishment of school, district and nation-wide instruction and curriculum plans. With instructional leadership experience, they can contribute enormously to creating many of the organisational conditions for quality education.

The relevant international literature (see for example Abbot and Caraches 1988, Musella and Leithwood 1988) suggests that there is little top-down ‘reach’ into
the classrooms. In the case of Fiji, many EOs consider establishing a good relationship with school boards and teachers as more important than improving the learning process. While the role of school principals is curriculum facilitation (Sharma 1992), this paper argues that the most important role of EOs is the facilitation of the teaching-learning process at the school level. Understandably all education officers cannot reach the classroom; nevertheless, within their delegated responsibility, the focus should be on the 'learner'.

Facilitative role

The present leadership role of EOs is clearly focused on power relationships, generally in terms of a top-down model of power relationships, rooted in the notions of classical bureaucracy (Abbot and Caracheo 1988). Reform literature has, however, focused on the notions of participatory management or power from the bottom rather than the top (Pfeffer 1981). Although educational management in developed countries highlighted the need for such enlightened practices, no serious attempts have been made to adopt them in the South Pacific. The few school systems that attempted such changes did not ultimately succeed. A good example of this is the school-based curriculum development initiative in the United Kingdom. Moves are now being made there to return to a national curriculum with a tight regulatory framework to monitor its delivery (Lofthouse 1994). In Fiji and most other Pacific countries, religious organisations and local communities 'own' and/or 'manage' many schools. The origin of this pattern of school management goes back to the colonial era when the respective governments were unable to provide education to all their citizens. The practice has continued in the post-independence era.

In this type of school governance, the EOs not only have to mediate national education policies but also to facilitate the demands emanating from the local communities. Dunlap and Goldman (1991) refer to the latter as a facilitative management approach. According to them the concept of facilitative management examines power in terms of a leader's activities designed to create or sustain favourable conditions for the organisation to achieve its aims and objectives. It allows individuals to enhance their individual and collective performance in an organisation. The concept does not argue for either a top-down or a bottom-up notion of power. Rather, it looks at the exercise of power by administrators in terms of a set of assumptions about superiors, peers and
Dunlap and Goldman (1991: 13-14) list the following four categories of activities leaders engage in when they are employing a facilitative management approach:

- They help arrange material resources that provide support for educational activities.
- They select and manage people who can work together effectively, paying attention to both the skills and the personalities that comprise the mix.
- They supervise and monitor activities, not to exercise hierarchical control, but to stress feedback and reinforcement and to make suggestions.
- They provide networks for activities, adding members to groups, linking groups to activities elsewhere, helping groups to "go public" with activities, and diffusing new ideas.

As already emphasised, such a facilitative role can help in discovering some working resolution of the tension between seeking coherence and retaining stability. Further, this can also help build 'learning organisations' (Fullan 1995) in which an EO can be seen as an initiator, facilitator, teacher, researcher and learner. The new work of EOs in the Pacific should be to help build schools into self-renewing learning organisations.

In a traditional sense, Pacific schools have been primarily the organisations for formal learning. Writers such as Fullan (1993, 1995) and Velayutham (1996), however, see educational institutions as learning organisations. According to them such organisations can cultivate the desired and concerted action to learn from their own past and present actions and experiences with new ways of learning, management and forging relationships. EOs have a significant role to play in this direction. And to perform such responsibilities successfully, their leadership qualities and their approaches will have to be transformational in
character. In this regard, EOs may find the following suggestions of Fullan (1993) beneficial: (a) push for change but allow self-learning to unfold; (b) take work as a journey rather than a destination; (c) see problems as friends and as sources of creative resolution; (d) involve all concerned in vision building; (e) value both individualism and collectivism; and (f) recognise every person as a useful member of the team. Clearly the emphasis in Fullan’s suggestions is on ‘staff development’ and we also believe that this is the primary responsibility of EOs.

In brief, then, the new role of EOs that we are advocating has to be characterised by strong leadership rather than following a well-written duty statement. This is because educational reforms in post-modern society are inherently complex, dynamic and highly political. Educational communities make contradictory and competing demands on educational leaders (in this case EOs) and their organisations. In this context, building learning organisations, employing a facilitative approach, seems a correct career path for EOs. This notion finds support in the following comments of Velayutham (1996:8):

The schools of the future will have to be learning organisations besides serving as organisations for learning. Their leaders have to recognise the dynamic complexities and rapidity of changes in and around their schools.

Conclusion

All in all, three conclusions seem warranted. The first relates to the multiple roles of EOs -as initiators, facilitators, teachers, learners and researchers. These roles are not only ‘all in one’ but also different at different levels in the education system. This is supported by Sharma’s (1995) study of the Vocational Education and Training Programme in secondary schools in Fiji. He found that EOs may be the users of the policy at the Ministry headquarters level, but they are change agents at the school level.

As initiators of educational innovations, EOs should be well informed of the
relevance of innovations, the readiness of people to receive them and the resources needed to implement them. As facilitators, they must make provision for vision-building, initiative-taking, evolutionary-planning and staff development. In the teacher’s role, they should provide opportunities for individuals to release their potential and reward them for their initiative. As researchers or learners, they take a ‘critical’ stance. Through action research and self-reflection, it may be possible to address organisational issues and problems and learn from their strengths and weaknesses.

The second conclusion relates to upgrading personal academic and professional qualifications. This is made in light of the fact that ‘education is a lifelong process’. The South Pacific region is fortunate to have a regional university. There are a number of programmes which the University offers through its external, summer school and part-time modes. Its Educational Administration programme is particularly relevant to the needs of EOs and other educational leaders. The Governments of the Marshall and Solomon Islands, in collaboration with the University of the South Pacific’s Institute of Education (IOE), have introduced this programme as in-country projects for their school heads and educational leaders. Lecturers travel from the USP’s Laucala Campus to these countries to coordinate this programme. Both these governments have pointed out that the preparation of school heads has not kept pace with the emergence of a large number of secondary schools. A number of educational administrators in Kiribati have benefited from the USP’s Diploma in Educational Administration in-country programme. Education officers from Fiji and other Pacific Island countries can and should benefit from this programme as well.

The final conclusion is not new. This relates to a personal code of ethics. Ethics here refers to ‘what is right and what is wrong’. Besides the General Orders, lessons on this can be obtained from any religious book. It is emphasised that in the promotion of quality education, practices such as ‘favouritism’ and ‘nepotism’ should not in any way interfere with the work of EOs.

Finally, over the years the work of EOs has become increasingly complex. The job has never appeared more difficult as we know it through our previous education-related experiences. The job, nonetheless, has become a more
interesting as well as a more challenging one.

References


