

## The challenges of novice primary school heads in Mauritius

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### ABSTRACT

The paper aims to contribute to the limited literature on the challenges faced particularly by the primary school headmasters. It contextualizes the problem to the current educational reform in Mauritius. The mixed-methods approach was adopted to examine the daily experiences of headmasters in three selected primary schools. A semi-structured questionnaire was administered with 100 teachers to analyse the challenges experienced by their novice headmasters, and the novice school head of each of these schools was interviewed to explore the reasons behind these challenges. The novice heads suffered from professional isolation; they are overwhelmed with administrative management; their incapacity to manage learner discipline due to lack of parental support in implementing the reform; and they cannot support the implementation of digitalized education. The study was limited to the perceptions of teachers about the challenges met by their novice headmasters. An in-depth interview with these novice school heads would have provided other challenges that were more important to them in their leadership practice, or a survey with a large sample of novice headmasters would have added more input to the study. Implications are provided for the novice school heads and for the Ministry of Education to look into the possibilities for professional development opportunities in school leadership. As a unique study into the challenges of novice school heads in the primary school context, it offers insights to the educational authorities who would be able to design a framework of school leadership for this neglected category of heads.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mauritius is on its way to becoming a Knowledge and Regional Educational Hub in the African region to offer quality education open to all without distinction [1]. During the past few years, the educational sector has been the arena of great transformations and innovations to promote both quality and access in education nationwide to meet the forth sustainable development goal. The current Prime Minister has, on diverse occasions, reiterated his vision for transforming the island into an educational hub. The Ministry of Education is currently implementing the Nine Year Continuous Basic Education (NYCBE). This has resulted in the attribution of more power, authority, and autonomy to school heads to manage their school effectively [2]. Yet, the Minister of Education averred in the School Management Manual for Headmasters that many primary school heads need to be supported in their leadership practice.

In the context of Mauritius, the roles of the head master of the primary school are, *inter alia*, to verify the appropriateness and relevance of the schemes of service and daily notes of teachers; to supervise and guide all teachers posted in the school in collaboration with the school inspectorate, deputy headmaster and deputy headteachers; to monitor the implementation of the school curriculum; to give on-the-job training to deputy head masters and deputy headteachers on the administration and management of the school; to take refresher courses and other courses, as and when required; to form part of educational committees and curriculum panels; to deal with parents and other members of the public; to organise school-based staff development programmes for teachers; to ensure the successful implementation of government educational projects at the school level; to enlist parental and community participation and support in the school management; to ensure the proper distribution of foodstuffs and other requisites; to help in the preparation and running of examinations and tests; to conduct the inventory of school furniture, materials and equipment; and to use ICT in the performance of their duties [3]. Not only should the headmaster manage physical and human resources, but they must also manage financial resources in terms of grants provided by the government and fund-raising activities; they must furthermore ensure effective internal and external communication, and be a good instructional leader and learner discipline manager [2].

The school head of primary schools assumes an array of management tasks and activities that impact on their performance as the school leader. They are required to manage the whole school's instructional, financial, infrastructural and human resources in an environment which keeps on evolving. Everybody looks up to the headmaster to fulfil all these functions in the most effective way [4]. Citizens are asking for quality and value-for-money services, effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of service [5]. School leaders are often expected to be '*superhero-like*' to effectively satisfy the needs of pupils, teachers and other stakeholders [6]. The question that arises from these professional exigencies as school head is: can novice school headmasters effectively lead primary schools?

According to the School Management Manual for headmasters [2], school heads refers to Deputy Headmasters (DHMs), Acting Headmasters (AHM), Headteachers or Headmasters (HM) who occupy leadership positions in primary schools offering education to children aged five to eleven. Novice heads of schools are those who are with less than five years' experience in the post of headmaster [7]. According to Asfaq [4], they face many problems in their school leadership. So, are these novice headmasters prepared to effectively manage schools in Mauritius? Are they prepared for school leadership? [8] claimed that without effective preparation, many new newly appointed school heads flounder.

Attributes and responsibilities of school headmasters: A primary school headmaster would be effective in assuming the management tasks and activities, assigned to them when they have certain attributes and responsibilities. These attributes are knowledge, character, values, beliefs, ethics, and skills [9]. Within the leadership framework of Ancona [10], the leader should be creative, visionary, sense-making and able to build and maintain positive sustainable relationships with the teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents, and other stakeholders to effectively manage the schools. This is in line with the features of the most successful school pointed out by Bennett [11]: visible leaders, consistent practices, engaged staff, detailed expectations, clarity of culture, high staff support, all learners matter and attention to detail. Indeed, Wallace Foundation [12] highlighted the following responsibilities of the school leader that encapsulate the features of a successful leader, namely defining school leadership responsibilities; shaping a high vision of academic success for all learners; creating a conducive and safe climate that promotes collegiality; dispersing leadership within and outside the school to market the school vision, and enhancing instruction to promote the core mission of the school – effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, the multifarious role of the school headmaster also includes duties such as planner, mediator, initiator, administrator, negotiator, decision-maker, appraiser, and pastoral caregiver [13]. The leadership roles of the school headmaster imply direction, aligning, motivating and inspiring people. Leaders must allocate resources, deal with budgets, and organise the school; so, the head has a dual managing and leading role [14].

In Day et al. [15] ascertained that the leadership of the headmaster is the driving force for improving the effectiveness of the school, as he/she acts as the catalyst that unleashes the capabilities of that organisation'. [16] added that "effective school leaders are key for reforms, especially leaders who focus on capacity building and develop other leaders who can carry on. Nevertheless, with tremendous changes in the school context and the demands of the society [4], the roles of the headmaster have become complicated [17], especially in the context of the educational reforms in Mauritius. Thus, school heads will need to develop new sets of skills and savoir-faire with increasing accountability. Ontario Principals Council [18] identified the following 21<sup>st</sup> Century leadership skills that the school heads must have to be effective leaders: emotional intelligence, critical thinking and analytical skills, problem-solving skills, creativity and innovation, personal and communication skills, technological skills, organization skills, personal management skills, teamwork and collaboration, partnership development, community outreach, development and engagement, antiracism, equity and inclusiveness, and global awareness and understanding. Moreover, in the OECD Report 2012,

[19] stated the following as the changing profile of headmasters: shaping the future (strategically); leading learning and teaching; developing self and others; managing the school; securing accountability; and strengthening community; building relationships and developing people; developing the organization; human resource management; change management; aspects of lifelong learning; and administration. It is obvious therefore that school leadership has become challenging for the long experienced headmasters and newly appointed (novice) headmasters in leading their schools.

Challenges of the novice school head: Being in a headship or school leadership for the first time is indeed an exciting, exhilarating, but complex and difficult experience [20]. Lizotte [21] pointed out that the role of headmasters has become daunting, complex, multilayered, and multi-dimensional. These experiences are “overwhelming and pressure-filled induction “reality shocks” [22]. As they function in their newly appointed post as novice headmasters, they encounter many leadership and management challenges namely curriculum knowledge, lack of time, budget management, and policy knowledge [23]. Moreover, Clarke [24] grouped the major challenges faced by headmasters as ‘*dealing with the system*’, ‘*dealing with people*’, ‘*dealing with self*’ and ‘*dealing with place*’. The most challenging tasks for them are: dealing with low-performing teachers, administrative paperwork, aligning a work-life balance, and aligning the school’s goals with the societal needs. When dealing with the system, the school headmaster is overwhelmed with so much workload that teachers are no more interested to become school leaders [25, 17]. In addition to their daily management [26], they have to perform leadership duties such as visioning with the school stakeholders in an attempt to establish a positive school climate and culture of learning and teaching among the teachers and the pupils. They also have a lack of managerial training [27] and they cannot understand and implement successfully important policies, procedures, practices, initiatives and projects of the government [28]. Indeed, Wamba [29] justified this state of affairs: training is ad hoc, idiosyncratic and does not seem to follow a specific pattern. However, when training and professional development opportunities are provided to school leaders, they become more efficient and effective [30]. Furthermore, novice headmasters lack proficiency in ICT [31].

The school heads need to be well trained to maximise the potential of educational technology and its application at school. When dealing with people, novice headmasters have to deal with the shadows of the previous school head still influencing the school practices [25]. They must then build and nurture a new school culture, which is not necessarily to their organizational expectations. Changing the practices, procedures, policies, rules, and regulations of the school may be a huge challenge. Poor teachers-head relationships and resistance to change from teachers to the authority of the new head may weaken the school fabric [32]. Besides, collective knowledge and a community of practice involving all stakeholders lead to more effective school leadership and performance. Mendels [33] added that schools cannot function alone. However, when there is a dysfunction of such relationships, the school leader is likely to fail. Novice school heads may suffer from professional isolation, whereby they do not get any support and collaboration from other school stakeholders, and therefore they become depressed [34]. According to Kelly and Saunders [35], novice school heads experience professional loneliness during the first three years of headship because of their lack of experience and incompetency to do networking with others. Yet, Weindling and Early [36] maintained that this isolation is rather an initiation ceremony of leadership and it is inevitable; though it may be low and temporary [37].

Many studies have been done in areas of leadership in schools in Mauritius. However, they all studied the concept in secondary schools. The concept of novice primary school heads has never been studied. Yet, many primary schools are being led by this type of school heads. The lack of research in the Mauritian context on this theme has led to the objectives of this current study. The objectives are: 1) to determine the nature of the leadership tasks of the novice headmasters of primary schools; and 2) to analyse the major challenges that these novice heads face in their leadership practices.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

A mixed-methods approach was employed to investigate the primary teachers’ views of the leadership of the novice school heads in the post in their schools and about the challenges they met in leading the school. This approach allowed the researchers to capture many aspects of the study, namely the credibility or integrity of the findings; the context that may help to generalise or validate the findings; illustration, whereby the qualitative data help to explain the quantitative data; utility, which may make the findings more relevant to the practitioners; and to encourage and analyse the diversity of views of teachers and novice school heads about the latter’s leadership [38]. It enabled a deeper and better understanding of the complexity of the work of novice school heads by uncovering the challenges they met in doing their job.

The respondents and the participants were selected through purposive sampling as they were the key informants about the phenomenon of school leadership of novice headmasters in primary schools. The goal

or purpose for selecting the specific study units is to have those that yield the most relevant and plentiful data, given the topic of study [39]. The teachers and the novice school heads were those involved in the primary school setting where the study was carried out. So, it was obvious that their perceptions, views, feelings, and opinions, through interviews and questions, would help collect the most significant data about the practices in which they are engaged daily. For the selection of the novice school heads, the expert sampling was employed as they were the experts in the field of 'novice' leadership. Expert sampling was used to confirm validity of the findings from the data obtained from the questionnaire administered to the teachers [40].

For the purpose of this study, three primary schools were selected. Each school was headed by a novice schoolmaster, and the total number of teachers in the three schools was 113. There were 100 teachers selected because of their willingness to respond to the questionnaire and they were easily accessed for the administration of the instrument. This sampling technique is inexpensive, fast and easy. To determine whether novice heads were facing challenges and to examine the perceptions of primary school teachers on the leadership roles of school heads, questionnaires were administered to teachers and interviews were done with the three selected novice school heads. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A gathered general information on the respondents; Section B investigated the teachers' perceptions of the roles of a novice school headmaster, and Section C investigated the teachers' perceptions of the challenges. 100 questionnaires were administered and the response rate was 92%. The interview schedule consisted of four questions, namely what are your roles as a school head?; what are your current leadership styles?; what are the challenges you are currently facing?; and how do you overcome these challenges?

The quantitative data were analysed by using the SPSS 23.0 software and Microsoft Excel to run statistical tests. The computed data were converted into charts, tables and diagrams to illustrate findings for interpretation. On the other hand, the qualitative data were analysed by following the five steps of [39], namely compiling, disassembling, reassembling and arraying, interpreting and concluding. After the interview, the transcripts were gathered. The researchers organised and analysed the data. The Review tools in Microsoft Word were used to highlight the relevant quotes that explained the quantitative data. The data were disassembled to identify the emerging themes and they were reassembled for interpretation and conclusions.

A pilot test was done to ensure the validity of the questionnaire and the Cronbach's Alpha test gave a value of 0.959, a relatively high level of reliability and acceptance. To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the researchers used a self-reflective journal, in which they continuously critically reflect on themselves as "the human, being the instruments of their own research" [41]. This enabled them to reduce their bias from their own past professional experience as primary school teachers. Member checking was also used after the final report on the data. Besides, verbatim statements from the participants were used in analysing and interpreting the data. Though the purpose of the study was not to generalise the findings since the sample size was not large enough for that purpose and the study was context-bound, the findings may be transferred. The study allowed the readers to have sufficient information about the characteristics of the selected respondents and participants, and the natural setting of the study so that they may experience a congruence of their setting, features, and experiences with those found in the current study. Ethics were considered with reference to the Mauritius Data Protection Act (2017) which ensures that the rights of the individual, in terms of anonymity and confidentiality, are protected.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The different roles that the novice headmasters perform in the selected primary schools as perceived by the teachers, and the associated challenges the former face in executing them, are discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### 3.1. The lack of collaboration from teachers

Though 71.7% of teachers agreed that their school headmaster develops a set of school goals, 33.7% of teachers responded neutral to the factor, "Reflects goals in curriculum planning". This may imply that the goals the headmaster sets for the school are not shared or are not SMART. There is a lack of visioning about their instructional leadership role. This is succinctly explained by School Head A who pointed out that:

*"Devising and sharing of goals is essential for the smooth running of the school although, at times, some teachers may not agree on the same goals and visions."*

The organizational goals do not coincide with the teachers' personal and professional goals. The school heads find themselves working alone, without the collaboration of the teachers. School Head B illustrated this professional isolation by stating that:

*“Goals are difficult to attain given the workload of administrative tasks and I am working alone.”*

Though they recognised the importance of collaborative practice, they are deceived by the attitudes of teachers. School Head C complained that:

*“Devising goals is very important as they help people to know what is expected from them, but my teachers do not collaborate in teams, and they do not share the same concern. This does not help me to improve school performance.”*

The perceived isolation negatively impacts on the professional experience and success of the novice leader [42]. This is consistent with the claim of Sheninger that instructional leaders must articulate and share their school vision to ensure effective school performance by creating a leadership synergy from the teachers primarily [43]

### 3.2. Administrative overload

Interestingly, most of the teachers agreed that administrative tasks like planning of time-table (62%), calendar of activities (69.6%), instructional resources (58.7%) and assessments (44.6%) are properly performed. So, most school heads perform their administrative duties so that the school runs smoothly. However, only 50% of the teachers agreed that headmasters ‘Carry out class observations’ and ‘Provide feedback to teachers’. These findings revealed that the administrative duties outweigh the instructional duties of the heads. This was because they were accountable to the School Inspectorate Division more for administrative procedures and processes daily than the instructional role. To illustrate this challenging role, School Head A vehemently expressed that:

*“We are overwhelmed with work. I start to work the moment I arrive, that is, at 8 30 a.m. and leave my chair to visit Class X only to stretch my legs and get some physical exercises.”*

In [16], Fullan confirmed that school heads are often overloaded. In the same vein, School Head B stated that:

*“I have to prioritise and do the most important tasks such as responding to emails and check if the staff is absent and work out replacements. When my Deputy is here, then I can visit the classes.”*

In contrast, School Head C opined:

*“The school clerk accomplishes some of the office work and I visit one class per day but I sign the daily notes of all teachers every day.”*

Therefore, though novice school heads are overwhelmed with administrative tasks, their role may be less challenging when their clerk works collaboratively with them.

### 3.3. Leadership incapacity for learner discipline management

87% of the respondents agreed that school heads manage learner discipline at schools. The latter ‘regularly talk on discipline to pupils’, ‘give orderlies to teachers’, ‘invite outside officers’ and ‘adopt corrective measures’ to maintain discipline among pupils. Consistently, School Head B pointed out that:

*“Inviting outsiders involves lengthy procedures.”*

School Head A shared the same view:

*“Our student population is about 910, we talk to children every day on discipline and appoint teachers at different sites for orderly duties during recess.”*

School Head C added:

*“I organise orderly duties and also talk to children during assemblies but I meet resistance from pupils and parents who are politically connected to politicians. This is a constant fear each time I try to use punitive discipline against the indiscipline pupil.”*

A study on learner discipline in secondary schools in Mauritius by [44] identified the interference of politicians in learner discipline management as a cause for the growing public problem of learners’ lack of discipline.

### **3.4. Less scope for transformational leadership**

According to a significant percentage of the respondents, novice school heads can hardly engage parents and other stakeholders in school development programmes (31%), facilitate the implementation of the current Nine Year Basic and Continuous Schooling reform (30.4%) and can motivate teachers to use innovative teaching and learning methods (30.4%). The novice heads are not in a position to get the active participation of the school stakeholders. School Head B complained:

*“Parents are always dropping at school to complain rather than to help.”*

School Head C concurred:

*“I try to bring an equilibrium between pupils, educators, and parents and work together to make things work smoothly for everyone but that is not easy.”*

It is not easy for the novice heads to create a community of practice that would help them to transform the school into an effective one. Hetland and Hetland [45] ascertained that transformational leaders develop autonomy in their collaborators, instil the power in them to solve problems by maintaining trust in their leadership potential. However, this study revealed that the novice school heads have difficulties in collaborating with parents particularly. So, the transformational leadership as a catalyst to facilitate and motivate stakeholders cannot be adopted by the novice heads, who should be agents of change in schools.

### **3.5. Lack of electracry**

The respondents were asked whether their school heads could effectively use ICT tools to perform their duties. It is found that no one strongly agrees on the factors ‘Frequently uses ICT tools to perform his duties’ and ‘Builds networks with other schools to share information online.’ This is because school heads find paperwork easier to use than using technological tools. Besides, networking is not yet part and parcel of school leadership practices in Mauritius: everything is coordinated by the School Inspectorate Division. Interviews from the school heads are consistent with the findings from the survey with the teachers. The congruency is justified by the statement of School Head A:

*“I can manage simple operations on my computer but I need help for complex ones.”*

Another justification was made by School Head B, who stated that:

*“I do not know how to check and send mail.”*

It is obvious therefore that using technological tools to better perform their leadership tasks is very challenging for novice heads of primary school. Indeed, Grady [31] postulated that the 21<sup>st</sup>-century school head needs to develop skills in e-leadership.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

From this study, it is clear that headship is the most important organizational position in primary schools. With the wave of decentralization, school heads are attributed with more autonomy and power to make decisions and assume them for greater accountability. Nevertheless, having experienced teachers fitting in the shoes of a novice school head is very challenging. They are not automatically vested with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century leadership skills to be effective school leaders, particularly in the educational reform context of Mauritius. Much preparedness is required in terms of knowledge, styles, skills and professional experience. The school heads need to be strategically focused and develop and use all their leadership competencies and

resources existing within and beyond the school community. It is only within this leadership lens that the novice school head may lead a culture of change to contribute to the successful implementation of the educational reform in Mauritius.

The study contributes to the knowledge base by examining the nature of the leadership roles of the novice school heads functioning in primary schools in Mauritius. The findings from this study allow a better understanding of the challenging nature of such type of school heads which may have a negative impact on their leadership performance and the effectiveness of the school where they are posted. They also act as a catalyst in informing the Zone Inspectorate Division and the policy implementers at the Ministry level to improve the working conditions of such novice heads and to prepare any professional development plan to make them more effective.

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