Revealing the Essential Characteristics, Qualities and Behaviours of the High Performing Principal: Experiences of the Jamaican School System*

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Abstract

This study used the qualitative research approach to explore the essential factors which defined the high performing principals in the Jamaican school system. One hundred and twenty five (125) of 999 principals from three types of public schools and six regions were identified by regional directors in consultation with education officers and senior education officers as high performing. Twenty (20) of the principals identified and the six regional directors were interviewed for this phase of study. The analysis of data was focused on placing the factors associated with high performing principals into categories based on the consistent patterns of behaviours, characteristics and abilities which emerged during the interviews conducted. The findings were classified into nine categories: personal philosophy, personal qualities, leadership skills and behaviours, support for student growth and performance, students' academic performance and achievement, staff development and relationship, community development and relationship, relationship with the formal structure, and the enhancement of the physical environment.

NOTE: This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the **National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA)** as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. In addition to publication in the Connexions Content Commons, this manuscript is published in the International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, [1] Volume 5, Number 3 (July – September, 2010). Formatted and edited in

*Version 1.4: Mar 8, 2011 2:53 pm +0000
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Connexions by Theodore Creighton, Virginia Tech and Janet Tareilo, Stephen F. Austin State University. This publication is also cataloged in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC).

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Principals within the Jamaican school system have traditionally earned the respect of the citizens from the communities where their schools are located and the general public because they were perceived as performing an admirable job of managing their schools. It was sufficient then to provide the learner with a basic education because that was enough schooling for a population where the vast majority performed jobs which required an unskilled or semi-skilled workforce. With the passage of time, the demand for a more effective education system has become a deafening cry. One of the recommendations for strengthening governance of the education system put forward by the Task Force on Educational Reform (2004) indicated that "all principals are to get continuous training in school management and leadership in a variety of accredited institutions" (p. 36). Further, the assessment of the performance of schools in the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examinations became a point for intense discussion after *Gleaner* Staff Reporter, Anderson (2004) published the findings of a study by Dennis Minott who stated that ineffective performance of schools was as a result of the poor quality of leadership provided by principals. While it was unlikely that the quality of leadership was the only, or even the main factor responsible for the weak performance of students in the CSEC examinations, the leadership provided by principals plays an important role in the overall performance of the education system. As Dinham (2005) indicated:

1.1.1

There can be little doubt from an examination of research findings that leadership is important in developing effective, innovative schools and in facilitating quality teaching and learning . . . .This is particularly the case in education where so much of what happens depends on collaboration, commitment, trust and common purpose. (p. 340)

The study sought to identify those principals who were rated as high performing by their supervisors and then to elicit from those so identified what were the essential factors associated with their effective performance.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

The theoretical underpinning for this study rests on the notion that the characteristics and behaviours of principals who demonstrate high performing leadership are determined, among other factors, by the given context in which the leaders have to function. While schools across the world may have similar goals and objectives, the situation under which these are to be accomplished will require different strategies, skills, competencies and abilities. Kopp, MacGregor and Watson (2008) emphasized the fact that leadership effectiveness can be difficult to evaluate because of other constraining variables on the organization. For developing countries such as Jamaica, many of the constraining variables may be very different from those which obtain in the developed countries. For example, the massive overcrowding of the school, poor and inadequate facilities, and the unacceptable high level of illiteracy being experienced are a few of the contextual factors which require a specific kind of leadership intervention by principals (Task Force on Educational Reform, 2004). With context being a vital factor in determining the nature and type of leadership that is exhibited by principals, it is incumbent on researchers to identify what is unique, specific and important about high performing principals in the Jamaican public education system: bearing in mind that there are literally hundreds of factors, characteristics and behaviours which seem to be associated with effective or high performing principals, on the international landscape. Further, effectiveness may not be viewed and measured in the same way as obtains in developed countries which have achieved qualities of performance

after systematic intervention over a significant period of time. Developing countries such as Jamaica are at a stage where the principals are required to focus on a wide range of responsibilities in order to have a real impact on the performance of the schools they lead. As part of the attempt to build a culture where change is based on evidence emanating from the research that reflects the experiences of the principals themselves, there is the likelihood of a greater affinity to the findings and increased possibility of the findings being incorporated in the package of strategies used to improve the role of principalship. In addition, the evidence and findings may represent best practices which can be readily transferred within the Jamaican context and also used as a basis for verifying those factors which have already been associated with high performing principals.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify the high performing principals in the three types of schools (primary, upgraded secondary and traditional high) in the Jamaican public education system and determine the factors that these principals identified as being responsible for their perceived effectiveness.

1.4 Research Question

What are the characteristics, behaviours and qualities that high performing principals in the Jamaican public school system identify as being responsible for their positive performance rating?

2 Theoretical Framework for Effective Leadership

The literature on leadership is replete with broad and specific factors which are responsible for leadership effectiveness. Hoy and Miskel (2005) citing Yukl (1994) said that "the leadership literature is huge with over 5000 published studies, and the number continues to increase by the hundreds each year" (p. 407). One could easily conclude that the study in the area of school leadership is exhaustive, but the fact is that there is a continued effort in both developed and developing countries to adequately address the problem of performance in the school system. Thus, research continues apace on effective and high performing principals. Rossow (1990) indicated that while there is agreement that the role of principals is one of the elements that is responsible for effective schools, there was no agreement regarding the factors that are responsible for this impact. Further, even if the role of the principal was vital for effective schools, that role is changing and becoming even more complex.

2.1 Early Leadership Studies

The study of leadership has identified three phases. The first phase was represented by trait leadership which was based on study of the traits phenomenon. Linking traits with effective leadership, Hoy and Miskel (2005) divided traits into three categories (a) personality, which includes self-confidence, stress tolerance, emotional maturity and integrity; (b) motivation, which includes power needs, task and interpersonal needs, expectations and achievement orientation; and (c) skills, which include technical, interpersonal and conceptual skills. The second phase of leadership studies focused on leadership behaviours, which gained prominence as a result of the Iowa Studies, Ohio State and the Michigan Studies. All three studies demonstrated that when attention is given to the human side of the workplace, performance is usually enhanced (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004; Hanson, 2003). The third phase of leadership studies was associated with the given situation in which leadership has to be practiced. For this approach, leadership emphasizes the interaction of psychological traits, the behaviours of leaders and actual situations, which focus significantly around contingency and situational leadership (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004).

2.2 Leadership and School Performance

Determining the factors responsible for effective schools has been the focus of intensive research for the past five decades. Three positions have emerged since. The first comprehensive investigation which considered the role of schools in students' performance came out of a study conducted by Coleman (1966), which concluded that family background was central to the academic achievement of students and the impact of schools was limited or none at all. This position came under severe criticism when numerous studies done in the 1970s and beyond demonstrated that there was a relationship between school achievement and school improvement (Gamage, Adams & McCormack, 2009). The second position, related to students and school performance, focused on the school factors which were responsible for school achievement. Based on studies conducted and reviews of others related to the subject matter, Edmonds (1979) acknowledged that the role of school leadership was a central factor in determining the quality of performance in schools. However, Edmonds placed school leadership among the school factors which were responsible for effective schools. The third and emerging trend is that while school leaders are critical to school achievement, distributed leadership would further enhance school effectiveness. As Dinham (2005) pointed out "the focus of attention has moved from leaders to leadership with the importance of delegation, collaboration, trust and empowerment being increasingly recognized" (p. 341).

There is also a parallel view which says that even if leadership is playing a significant role in schools and students effectiveness, the performance of schools and students can only be sustained and further improved by systemic improvements. As Peurach, Holmstrom and Glazer (2008) pointed out that "the logic of systemic improvement marks a sharp movement toward the development of schools as rational systems organized to support student achievement" (p. 3). Olson (2008) endorsed this view by pointing out that "by approaching leadership as an organizational quality, institutional theory offers a more complex and less hierarchical perspective of social interaction and organizational dynamics than the more dominant technical-rational model" (p. 8).

3 Methodology

3.1 Selection of High Performing Principals

The qualitative method was applied to gather and analyze the data for the study. Regional Directors (through written correspondence) were asked to identify effective or high performing principals who, based on their evaluations, were performing in accordance with international standards. Ten (10) factors were identified as the criteria for judging and selecting the principals. These factors were based mainly on those published by Reynolds (2003) who indicated that "the field now has a body of agreed-upon insights into what constitute the excellent leadership qualities and methods shown by effective or exemplary principals or headteachers" (p. 1). Among the factors identified were (a) a sense of mission for the school community and education in general, (b) instructional leadership—focusing on the quality of teaching and learning, (c) building strong relationships with community and parents, (d) including staff, parents and key constituents in a participative approach in the life of the school, (e) hands-on monitoring of staff and school performance, and (g) improving academic performance—CSEC, Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT), etc.

Although regional directors have overall responsibility for the operation of the schools, they were asked to consult with the education officers who had direct responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the performance of the principals and schools they were assigned. The education officers and senior education officer for each region along with the regional director made up the panel who selected the high performing principals. In addition, the regional directors were also required to rank principals based on their judgement of the principals' performance against the criteria established. This exercise produced a list of 125 principals employed in three types of schools—newly upgraded secondary schools, traditional secondary, and the third category included primary, all-age, and primary and junior secondary schools.

3.2 Interviewing Principals and Regional Directors

Twenty (20) principals and six regional directors were interviewed in order to identify the factors responsible for their classification of high performing principals. The principals selected for the interview were those who were ranked 1, 2 or 3 in each type of school for each region. Each principal was visited at his or her school and the interview conducted lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. In addition, all six regional directors who had supervisory responsibility for principals in the school system were also interviewed. In both cases, interview guides were used as part of the interviewing process; however, the respondents were asked to speak freely about the activities, actions and strategies they employed to realize the high rating. Each interview was taped using an EMP3 player in order to retain the conversation and dialogue encounter with interviewees.

3.3 Selecting and Categorizing Factors Responsible for Principals' High Performance

A qualitative approach for the first phases of this study was used because the main objective was to determine the factors that were specific to the high performing Jamaican principals. Stake (1995) pointed out that meaning can be derived from a situation after collecting enough information on instances identified. As each interview was conducted efforts were made to categorize those factors responsible for the performance of principals. Fitzpatrick, Sanders and Worthen (2004) also advised that the analysis of data begins at the same time that the collection of data is being conducted. Further, the researcher or "evaluator is formulating categories, reviewing field notes, and collecting more information until different perspectives begin to be fully revealed" (p. 360). Based on this approach to data collection and analysis, nine categories which reflected the factors related to the performance of the high performing principals were identified.

3.4 Findings and Discussions

1. The high performing principals demonstrate a philosophy or strong set of beliefs and personal conviction about the role of education and the needs and position of the learner.

The high performing principals in an almost unified natural response shared a strong philosophy regarding the role of education and schooling in the development of the learner. They believe in the supremacy of the learner in the process of schooling so there was a strong conviction that all the programmatic activities carried out by the schools should be geared toward addressing the needs and interests of the learner. As J. Brown (personal communication, September 14, 2007) said:

3.4.1

I have always said to my school and my teachers that whoever we get and whatever you have regardless of their circumstances–be the best. It is that philosophy of doing well with who you have that encouraged other persons to come . . . and as they came and we developed, the successes went out there and brought about more successes.

The principals' own sense of commitment to education is as a result of their view that such education is the main vehicle for assisting persons to achieve economic independence and social mobility. Commenting on the role of personal beliefs, Speck (1998) said that "as a principal, you must remember that your core beliefs must guide your actions. Commitment to these beliefs will sustain your efforts to improve the school" (p. 83). Further, the high performing principals see education as playing a vital role in personal development and providing the competencies to function in the world of work and achieving their own potential. These principals believed that one could not be effective if there was not a personal love for the learner and a confidence in young people's ability to take the country to the next level of development. The principals' beliefs and convictions came about as a result of both positive and negative experiences in the education system, the influence of other principals and leaders who they knew or worked with over time, and their own personal admiration for the profession. Leithwood (2005) captured the internal factors that the principal brings to the principalship. These include "key dispositions, skills, and cognitive styles. Dispositions common to many leaders include tremendous passion and enthusiasm for the education of children" (p. 622).

The high performing principals embrace the tenets of the philosophy articulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Task Force on Educational Reform (2004) report, which is "every child can learn, every child must" (p.11). They believe that even if all the children cannot achieve established performance standards, they can all realize a level of performance that will allow them to function in society. One high school principal articulated her vision of the comprehensive approach that she is taking to the education of students in her school in these words.

3.4.2

Education cannot be limited to academics, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. It has to be the total development of the child. Academic learning is not any more important than social and emotional learning, than spiritual learning. I believe that all these things are important to the development of the sort of disciplined, worthwhile citizen that we need for our country because education must have a purpose. You (the learners) are being educated so that you can help society. It (education) is not an end in itself and so the whole concept of service . . . (S. Samuels, personal communication, June 11, 2007).

There is no doubt that a principal's belief regarding education is a central factor influencing his or her leadership behaviour. Asbby and Krug (1998) summarized this position by emphasizing the fact that "your philosophy involves values so dear that they guide your life and can never be compromised" (p. 54).

2. The high performing principals demonstrate strong individual fortitude, qualities and abilities, which are the central personal elements responsible for their success as principals in the school system.

The high performing principals see their role as the person in charge of and responsible for the outputs of the school as an important personal goal. They demonstrate the personality, abilities, capabilities and personal drive to perform and achieve. D. Jackson (personal communication, September 14, 2007), commenting on what drives his enthusiasm as a principal, said that "the most important thing is the fear of failure. I am a very competitive man and I don't want any other school to be better than my school . . . you must be a pioneer, you must be the first, you must be at the cutting edge." They seek to engage fully in those demands or problems that are challenging and require much determination, wisdom and fortitude in order to overcome them. This ethos is highlighted by Dinham (2005), who pointed out that successful principals "exhibit the characteristics they expect of others such as honesty, fairness, compassion, commitment, reliability, hard work, trustworthiness and professionalism" (p. 347).

The high performing principals reflect constantly on the problems which schools have to address on a daily basis and advance solutions which are shared with teachers and other constituents for consideration. Y. Kirkland (personal communication, July 20, 2007) when asked to describe what motivates her said aptly that ". . . wanting the best for the students. . . wanting to see them do well; sometimes I wake up and ideas will come to me as to what I could do or what else to do to motivate the teachers, what to do to motivate the students".

They are motivated to action by their own successes and by situations, incidents and individuals that they encounter. The initial desire to become principal is never coincidental. These persons are inspired by the work, commitment and dedication of persons whom they have observed, heard about, worked with or encountered from outside or inside the education system. N. Blake (personal communication, June 29, 2007) described her motivation as follows:

3.4.3

You learn how to care for each other, you learn to support, you learn to give; and also, if you have the right mentors, you are encouraged to want to see the world as well. In rural Jamaica you are always being told that you need to fit in and you need to catch up and you need to reach out and if you really listen to those voices telling you that then it stays in your system for your entire life.

The high performing principals are self-confident and believe in their ability to provide leadership for the school to achieve the goals and objectives being pursued. They spend time on the ground monitoring,

observing and intervening in order to manage and maintain a balance between and among all facets of the school. Both interpersonal and communication skills are assets which are exhibited by the high performing principals. These qualities enable the high performing principal to build personal relationships with staff members, students, the community and other stakeholders, vital to the building of trust and a climate of openness and respect. The importance of personal qualities in effective leadership has been highlighted by Hoy & Miskel (2005); Yukl (2002); Immegart (1988); and Stogdill (1948). As Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004) pointed out, there are studies currently being done "comparing the relationship between traits and leadership effectiveness. The results of these studies are stronger and more consistent than the earlier traits studies" (p. 141) in demonstrating a relation between personal qualities and effective leadership.

3. The high performing principals provide leadership that is visionary, engaging, passionate, visible and demanding but they always depend on the collective energy of the staff and school community to achieve performance targets.

The leadership can be characterized as situational but it is also transformational. All the principals interviewed indicated that the actions they take are based on the nature and type of situation that they have to address. At the same time, the nature and complexities of schooling require that they generally seek the involvement of the teachers and staff in making decisions. As J. Brown (personal communication, September 14, 2007) speaking of her determination to build the academic programme and winning the commitment of her staff asserted: it "is (about) people sharing your passion, sharing your vision, because without that kind of team effort you could not go forward."

Much consultation goes on, especially in relation to academic matters. This is the most pressing concern for most of the schools even though they are rated as high performing. The high performing principal sees his or her role as critical in articulating and implementing the vision and mission of the school. The business of where the school is headed, what is to be done and how it should be done are major responsibilities for the principal. The principals operate within a context that is beyond the limits of the school; that is a context where their actions are influencing and are being influenced by the needs of the immediate community and the society in general. Working closely with the teachers and the school boards in some cases, much time is spent clarifying the plans for the school. In a few cases, consultants are engaged to assist with the development of the plan. E. Walker (personal communication, August 16, 2007) captured the sentiments of the high performing principal as he seeks to get the staff to be a partner in the process of school development:

3.4.4

I listen to the people and I believe that we should have participatory decision making. . . It should be full involvement of the staff. And so you talk about collaboration, consensus and listing to your colleagues. You get the cues from the staff, find out what their needs are, what are the things that are best for the school, and then you take it from there because if you are going to unleash on them all your ideas, as good as they may be, it will not work. You'll have to get them to buy into them, so where I have a vision I share my vision with them. They see the vision and they buy into it. . .

High performing principals are true institutional builders. They transform the school to a point where parents and students actively seek to enrol in the schools they manage, whether these schools are newly upgraded secondary, traditional secondary, primary, all-age or primary and junior high schools. The high performing principal demands high quality performance from all constituents, and he or she in turn demonstrates by words, deeds and actions the same or higher quality of performance. The high performing principals are standard bearers for high performing schools. They constantly use the tradition, successes or good name of the school as a platform on which to build. They work with other principals, who are able to address similar problems affecting their schools. Even in small rural communities within a region or geographical area, best practices are identified and transferred. High performing principals promote a culture where continuous achievement is paramount for everyone in the school, and they apply leadership which is open, trustworthy and confident. Further, high performing principals demonstrate strong technical competence which is apparent in how both academic and administrative matters are handled in the schools.

While the principles of transformational leadership (Hoy & Miskel, 2005) are practised and fully endorsed by high performing principals, a situational approach to leadership is the dominant type of leadership behaviour that they expressed. Gorton, Alston and Snowden (2007) said that "the nature of a particular situation is considered to be the most important variable determining how the leader operates" (p.12). With a focus on the given situation, leadership has to become adoptive and therefore deployed to match the desired impact (Hanson, 2003). Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004) commenting on the situational leadership model of Hersey and Blanchard (1988) said that "matching the situation with the appropriate leadership style" (p. 170) is central to the effectiveness of leadership.

4. The high performing principals envision their most important role as one of providing the platform and support system to facilitate the development and achievement of the students through programmatic activities which target their personal needs and aspirations.

It is clear from the words spoken by the principals that their interest for the children and students is not peripheral but a deep commitment and affection for children and young adults. This view was expressed on numerous occasions by the principals during the interview sessions. This was most prevalent among principals who headed primary, all–age and primary and junior high schools. Those principals who were in charge of secondary schools sought to get close to the students in order to understand their concerns and needs. N. Blake (personal communication, June 29, 2007) identified the type of relationship she has encouraged her teachers to develop with students in the absence of strong family support at home:

3.4.5

I also want to encourage the teachers to be more caring teachers . . . being a caring big sister, mother-daughter relationship with the students, or big brother . . . father type relationship with them (the students) so that they (the teachers) can encourage them and share with them in any small way. . . their real experiences.

One of the primary functions of the principals is to inspire the students to make greater personal commitment to their school and education. High performing principals provide structure to support the activities related to all aspects of life of the school which is rooted in the belief that the expectation of students is best realized in a system where guidance and support represent a central approach to how the school functions. This is evident in the discipline that is demanded, the academic rigour that is promoted and personal development in terms of dress code and personal etiquette. Correct values and attitudes are promoted on every occasion to guide students' behaviour both inside and outside of the school. As S. Samuels (personal communication, June 11, 2007) indicated:

3.4.6

Whether they are within the school community or the wider society, as [. . .] High School young ladies they are guided by the basic value 'I will conduct myself at all times with dignity and self control'. . . because I believe that there are certain things that are so important.

There is a clear belief that the school has a responsibility for developing these competencies because there is no guarantee that the home is in a position to play this role. *In loco parentis* is truly alive even at a time when the popular view is that parents must play a greater role in the schooling experience of the children. In addition to the promotion of strong values and an ethos of responsibility among students, the principals also support students' performance through a wide variety of interventions ranging from physical facilities, new and enhanced academic programmes, new technology including computers, and software to enhance learning including those for literacy. In addressing problems related to following instructions, applying critical thinking and listening skills, the [. . .] High School developed the learning enhancement programme or curriculum guide. Outlining the purpose and scope of this effort S. Samuels (personal communication, June 11, 2007) said:

3.4.7

We worked and developed a curriculum that we call the learning enhancement programme. All grade seven students now for the past two years go through that programme. We divided the classes in two, so the teacher only has twenty. The curriculum guide is really for parents and students. Each child coming into the school gets the curriculum guide, so that they know what we are going to be working with. This is the learning enhancement programme.

The focus on facilitating the learning process is seen by most principals interviewed as essential if student performance is to be improved at all levels and types of the schools. These challenges are significant, especially in the upgraded secondary schools and clearly not absent from the traditional high schools. In the case of primary schools, literacy is one of the main challenges, and the provision of adequate and appropriate support system is seen as necessary by those principals.

As Leithwood (2005) said "dispositions common to many of these leaders included a tremendous passion and enthusiasm for the education of children. This enthusiasm or passion was typically harnessed to an ethic of care, a set of values about social justice and the equitable education of the students" (p. 622). Moos, Krejsler, Kofod and Jensen (2005) elaborating on the concern demonstrated for the learner indicated that successful school principalship was "child-centered and committed toward improving teaching and learning" (p. 571).

5. The high performing principals see academic achievement as one of, if not the critical and most important, goals of the school system, but they differ based on school types regarding what should constitute this achievement.

There is a strong view by the majority of high performing principals that children should be given every opportunity to perform so that they can realize their own potential and worth. Therefore, alternative strategies must be found to assist the learner to demonstrate competencies that are marketable for the workplace or a place in a tertiary institution. For the newly upgraded secondary school, this is achieved by adding new programmes or providing examination options. Students are provided with new curricula or programme options which include improved or new technical vocational programmes, music, and performing arts, among others. In most cases these are new programmes being introduced, which are not a part of the set programme offered under the aegis of the MOE. These programmes are funded by the school themselves through fund-raising efforts and/or donations from private entities, locally and abroad. The same approach is taken towards the examination which students do. High performing principals feel that with the chronic learning problems facing some of the students, the CSEC should be complemented by other examination options. Students are encouraged, therefore, to sit a variety of examinations. These include the Secondary School Certificate (SSC), Jamaica School Certificate (JSC), City and Guilds, qualifications in ICT programmes, among others. As C. Murray (personal communication, June 13, 2007) pointed out "even if the only immediate use of the certificates obtained by students is to have them on the walls above their beds, then that may be the start that will inspire them to build on what they have accomplished, even if not seen as significant by others."

For the traditional high school where academic performance has remained at a high level, the concern for the principals is the maintenance of performance levels with incremental gains each year. The emphasis is to achieve higher grades in the passes each child receives in the subjects he or she is doing. The learners are challenged to sit more subjects than what is offered by the school, and they are expected to make high scores even though they are personally responsible for preparing for the examinations. Targets for performance are constantly revised and academic performance is monitored at regular intervals in order to identify deficiencies. For some schools, targets for student performance are tied to teacher evaluation and performance measures. Of interest, is the move by some of these principals to get their students directly involved in community programmes designed to assist the infirm and disadvantaged. The aim is not only to provide assistance but also to enhance values of kindness and giving.

For the primary and similar types of schools the preparation of the students for GSAT is the area of focus for high performing principals. C. Grant (personal communication, February 07, 2008) speaking of the academic achievement of the school said:

3.4.8

We are an academic oriented school, we are not the school that enters all the competitions . . . we are not on television or entering, entering, because my main focus is academics. We have had a good track record in all our grade fours . . . right now, 2006 to date, we are the leading primary school in the grade four literacy test that was published by the *Observer* (newspaper) last year, we have a good GSAT average within the MOE.

They seek to select or develop intervention programmes which target the needs of those students who are weak. Providing training opportunities for teachers at the basic school level is one approach that high performing principals use to address the problem of literacy at the primary level. Dealing specifically with the problem of illiteracy, E. Walker (personal communication, August 16, 2007) outlined his accomplishment:

3.4.9

We created a reading room and assigned a reading specialist to it. We placed students who were very weak in that group, and we tried to help. We have seen that we have borne fruit where students who came in were unable to read initially and at the end of a period they were able to read and that was a great achievement.

But equally important is the involvement of the parents in counselling and training programmes that will prepare them to participate directly in the children's learning process. Some schools have instituted programmes which provided parents and guardians with the skills to support their children academically, while at the same time assisting them to cope in an environment with standards, rules and regulations. Moos, Krejsler, Kofod and Jensen (2005), reporting on a study of successful school principals in two Danish schools, showed that student learning was a central emphasis of these schools. The transformation of the education system has targeted all levels of the education system for intervention (Task Force on Educational Reform, 2004), which will further enhance the work that is now being done by many of the high performing principals.

6. The high performing principals see the quality of the staff and specifically the academic staff as a critical factor in achieving quality academic performance and developing the social and coping skills of the students.

One of the primary roles of the principals is to recruit and retain competent staff who will be able to effectively assist the school and principals to achieve challenging goals and objectives. Of importance is the involvement of staff in the decision making process, especially related to those issues that will affect them or the students with whom they work. Even where issues being addressed are not critical to their job or teaching and learning, the teachers are consulted, because the principals recognized that their knowledge and experience may place them in a position to provide informed responses. Speaking of the quality staff members working her school, Y. Kirkland (personal communication, July 20, 2007) pointed out that "people will stay here overnight to put things in place (if a function is planned at short notice). . . that's the type of staff we have right now . . . people are here who are very caring, who are very thoughtful."

High performing principals facilitate and support the continuous development of teachers in light of the changing needs of the students and the determination that all teachers must be fully prepared to engage the students in productive learning. C. Christian (personal communication, July 10, 2007) outlined the requirements for her teacher:

3.4.10

First of all the teachers must be on time. They must be regular in attendance. They must plan-planning is key. And we meet once per week for planning in the different grades. The teachers must be aware of the needs of the children. I tell them that when they come here from 8:00 to 2:30 it's business. We're running a business.

As a principle, the high performing principals believe that teachers should have the required qualification in order to be effective. This is especially true in regard to the content areas that the teacher is required to deliver to the students. The same is also true of the teachers who do not have the appropriate teaching

techniques and strategies to teach effectively. Some high performing principals establish and maintain a strong system of supervision of school and classes in order to ensure that the academic performance of the students is properly managed. However, one of the major challenges facing other principals is the quality of supervision, especially in regard to the management of the academic performance of students. Leithwood (2005) said that "effective principals place a high value on teacher learning and fund staff development inside and outside the school" (p. 251). Dinham (2005), commenting on the issue of professional development, said that outstanding principals provide every opportunity for the academic staff to acquire new competencies in order to perform their job more effectively. Speaking to the deeper impact of professional development, Dinham said that "through empowering, encouraging and supporting teachers to become learners, these leaders acknowledge and foster the leadership of others" (p. 351).

7. The high performing principals build strong supporting relationships with the external community which is differentiated by school types but enriched by a symbiotic relationship between schools and parents, especially for primary and upgraded secondary schools.

The evidence is convincing that schools of all types that are performing outstandingly are those which have community as the base of their existence. However, the most successful at building community support are the traditional high schools. In addition to the traditional form of the parent-teachers associations (P.T.As.), the traditional high schools have systematically built strong alumni which have become the backbone for sustaining their facilities in terms of expansion and upgrading activities. D. Jackson (personal communication, September 14, 2007) said that:

3.4.11

What we get from the alumni groups, I do not know if any other school has achieved that . . . When I came to this school in 1999, the alumni associations were almost nil. I took it on myself to go to the various associations, one by one, to restart and re-organize the various alumni. The last one we restarted was the one in Florida. Today it is the greatest . . . it is the most active and prosperous alumni.

Further, strong relationships have also been established with business organizations which provided a variety of support ranging from equipment and facilities for academic programme support to meal programmes for students experiencing economic problems.

The newly upgraded high schools struggle to build community relationships, especially among alumni. More progress is made with building relationships with business organizations, but they do not bring the level of consistent support like that provided by alumni from traditional high schools. Their short history of the newly upgraded schools is a mitigating factor. For all types of schools the community approach is also present within the relationship among principals from similar schools where ideas are shared to deal with common problems. Thus best practices are garnered from each other.

The involvement of parents in providing support for their children is a major strategy used by the principals at the primary level. However, high performing principals are also cognizant of the deficiencies of some parents in their ability to manage their children, so they implement training and education in parenting skills. This is especially evident among primary school principals. In some cases, training is provided in basic occupational skills or the offering of courses for further education. Where literacy is a problem among parents, high performing principals seek to provide classes to address the problem. This means at least some schools with high performing principals are taking direct responsibility for and acting to enhance the performance of the children. For primary schools, the community relationship is especially important. C. Blair (personal communication, June 29, 2007), for example, speaking of the importance of community relationship said that:

3.4.12

I really worked with them (community) and some of them worked with me. Altogether there is a good relationship because if you are going to be (recognized) in the community, there are certain standards, certain rapport that you'll have to develop so as to get along. You will have to buy into them. We involve

them a lot here at school. We use them as resource persons. We use them to assist us in whatever way they can so that they see themselves as a part of the school community.

High performing principals are less likely to blame the MOE for giving them weak students because they are responsible for newly upgraded schools. Instead, they find creative way to achieve performance. Rather than resisting or avoiding change, these principals expose the school to the opportunities and pressures brought by change. Rather than being inward looking, they are aware of the wider environment, including other schools and systems, the community, society, businesses and government. They seek out, foster, and utilize external networks and resources to assist with change, especially for improving student performance. Arnold, Perry, Watson, Minatra, and Schwartz (2006) emphasized that "the ability to establish personal relationships with all members of a school community is central to the work of an effective principal" (p. 3). Dinham (2005) highlighting the importance of external relationships said that "these leaders place a high priority on establishing and maintaining good communication and relationships with external stakeholders. . . These principals are prepared to seek outside assistance when they cannot solve problems" (p. 344).

8. The high performing principals proceed with initiatives that they determine to be necessary even when they come in conflict with the policy of the MOE or regional offices.

High performing principals recognize that the progress that the schools make rest largely in their hands. Therefore, inadequate resources or policy and regulations which may curtail or retard the programmatic activities are obstacles they strenuously resist. They therefore spend less time criticizing the MOE for not solving their problems and more time finding creative and innovate solutions to the problems which confront them. D. Jackson (personal communication, September 14, 2007) described the relationship as "very cordial. You will need a cordial relationship because you depend on the MOE to sometimes approve things for you . . . if you don't keep a cordial relationship, they can make things difficult for you." These principals indicated that they embrace the principle which says that if there are activities and projects they can do without MOE intervention, then they should actively pursue them on their own initiative. At the same time policies, regulations and procedures of the MOE will not become a shackle. It is therefore customary for the principals to pursue those activities that the school community decides are critical for making the desired progress. J. Brown (personal communication, September 14, 2007) spoke of the success of the sixth form programme although the MOE did not support it:

3.4.13

It is rewarding that although the MOE has not taken responsibility for our sixth form, we are offering sixth form to about sixty students. And I must tell you too, that the University of the West Indies for two years gave us special invitation for some of our sixth formers to enrol in their programmes when they noticed the performance of students who have spent seven years and who went right into the University.

The high performing principals conceded that they will challenge these policies, regulations and procedures even at the risk of being sanctioned. Even with the air of defiance, they indicated that they sought to establish strong working relationships with the MOE officials because ultimately they make decisions regarding the allocation of resources, especially in a period of severe scarcity. For most high performance principals, the school boards play a significant role in the life of the schools. These boards are always active with highly trained and qualified persons at the helm. It is clear from the interviews that some boards are able to play a more influential role because of the 'type of contacts' they can mobilize in the wider society.

School boards in the traditional secondary schools seem to have a greater impact on the schools they serve than the boards for newly upgraded secondary, primary, all-age and primary and junior high schools. Regional offices are not seen by the majority of high performing principals as having a significant impact on what they do, and some were even critical of the role being played by some education officers who were assigned to their schools. High performing principals nevertheless seek to maintain cordial relationships with the regional offices.

Dinham (2005) best described the nature of the relationship between the outstanding principals and the education administration. "These leaders use the discretion available to them and push against administrative and systemic constraints when necessary. At times, they tend to be ahead of the system and profession and

act as ground breakers" (p. 345). The scarcity of resources which is the factor that will enable principals to solve many of the problems they face is at the base of many of the antagonistic relations between the MOE and the high performing principals.

9. The high performing principals posited the view that, in addition to facilitating learning, the physical environment and the quality of the facilities are true representations of the conscience of the school and the pride the school community has in itself and stakeholders

The biggest challenges echoed by high performing principals are the presence of the shift system and the overcrowding, which are features symtomatic of many of the upgraded secondary, primary, all-age and primary and junior high schools. They expressed the view that the school could improve their performance much more rapidly if the required time and space were provided so they could function as they ought. Notwithstanding the chronic problems with school plants and facilities, these principals are challenging the odds. Some schools are adding classrooms using the school fees, funds donated by alumni and businesses, or funds from activities specifically aimed at raising money for building construction. These principals have installed equipment such as computers, software programmes to assist with literacy, and multimedia facilities to enhance teaching and learning. E. Walker (personal communication, August 16, 2007) addressing the need to build capacity in the use of computers said that:

3.4.14

I solicited assistance from business entities outside the community because this is a community that doesn't have any businesses. We solicited the support and we were able to get about eight computers. That really got the programme off the ground and we were able to introduce the use of computer from grade 4 through to grade 9. It assisted in the reading programme because we had a reading problem.

Because of the daily security threat being experienced by many of the schools with high performing principals, they have installed security features to safeguard both person and property. Further, in order to make the school environmentally friendly, high performing principals are creating green areas. This will not only improve on the aesthetics of the school surroundings but also contribute to the overall health of the children.

The learning environment is a critical factor in enabling schools to achieve both the academic and personal needs of the students (Jones & Jones, 2007). The high performing principals are cognizant of the need to deal with the environmental and physical needs of the schools and students alike and are aggressively seeking to provide the appropriate remedy even without the required support from the MOE.

4 Conclusion and Reflection

As the literature indicated there is a multiplicity of factors related to effective or high performing principals but in the Jamaican context, the nine broad categories presented constitute the characteristics, abilities and behaviours associated with the high performing principals of Jamaica. Based on the interviews conducted with the high performing principals by the researcher, the most consistent factor that was highlighted by all principals relates to personal factors which include personal strengths, qualities and abilities. Closely associated with the personal factors is the philosophical outlook or the set of beliefs which guide their thinking and overall leadership behaviour. The nature and style of leadership would be the third factor which underpins the characterization of the high performing principals.

Although the findings of this study have revealed the essential characteristics, qualities and abilities of the high performing principal, the possibility of continuously finding a competent replacement is a daunting possibility. The next stage of the process of development will be to achieve systemic improvement where the functions, systems and subsystems of the school are geared to meet the academic needs of the students. This approach is consistent with the principles of distributive leadership where leadership is defused and displayed throughout the organization (Sergiovanni, Kelleher, McCarthy & Fowler 2009), enabling systems and subsystems to function in accordance with standards. Thus, the need for the high performing principal would be reduced significantly. However, as Marzano, Walters, and McNulty (2005) confirmed in their review

of studies on leadership and school performance, there was a positive relationship between effective principals and student achievement. Effective principalship makes a difference. It means, therefore, that for emerging countries like Jamaica, a greater number of high performing principals will have to be provided to lead the charge for improved student performance and the transformation of the education system.

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