

Chapter 42

New Principals' School Culture Awareness and School Change

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ABSTRACT

An influx of new principals having improved base-entry qualifications has raised some concerns about principal-school 'fit' in Trinidad and Tobago. This chapter encompasses findings on three new principals' professional judgment in relation to their leadership and its impact on their schools, focusing on their school culture awareness. A multi-method case study approach is adopted. Findings suggest that the new principals' school culture awareness is indirectly associated with school change, having informed both what they attended to (their improvement foci) and how they did that (leadership practice and strategies).

INTRODUCTION

Many have wondered how a new principal determines the practices and strategies to be used to lead school improvement. Whilst new principals may wish to re-culture their schools, their leadership may not always affect the kinds of school change intended. This may be because of the influence of existing school cultures (Lee-Piggott, 2016) but may also be the consequence of the new principals' professional judgments.

Revision to educational leadership policy enacted in T&T to usher in system-wide school reform and improvement has resulted in an influx of new principals, within the primary school system, who possess the now mandatory requirement of a Bachelor of Education with specialization in Educational Administration. In essence, what it means to be a principal in the T&T context has changed over the years and continues to change. However, this has also prompted public concern over principal-school 'fit'. In particular, the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), the body responsible for recruitment, selection and disciplining of members of the teaching service in T&T, has made a number of revisions in order to better match the personal attributes and competencies of principal candidates to the profiles of schools (TSC Plans and programs, 2012). However, while there is prolific educational research being conducted in T&T, little, if any, focuses on the professional lives of new principals that can inform the TSC's ac-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3438-0.ch042

tions, thereby justifying the need for the current study. Also, the study contributes to the international body of knowledge on new principals as most originate from developed countries and not developing ones such as Trinidad and Tobago.

This article presents findings that discusses new principals' cultural awareness, which forms part of their professional judgments, and answers the research question: *What is it about how new principals lead which helps or hinders them in achieving school change and improvement?* This research activity formed part of a wider study which investigated new principals' leadership and school culture (Lee-Piggott, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

For this study new principals are defined as fitting into stages 1-3 of Weindling's (1999, 2000) transitional stages of headship model: entry and encounter – stage 1; taking hold – stage 2; or reshaping – stage 3. Therefore, a new principal is one in role for a maximum of approximately two years. School culture is defined as a dominant pattern of behaviors and beliefs held by school members that act as a frame of reference for the way they interact with others and do their work at the school. This conception of school culture does not discount the individual agency of school members or the existence of subcultures in the school (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

School Change

Research on school change generally fall into two interconnected traditions: school effectiveness (SE) and school improvement (SI), which includes school- and practitioner-based action research (Thomson, 2010). SE research, in particular, has been criticised for emphasising academic outcomes over the 'how' of school change recognised by SI research (Stoll & Fink, 1996), through which the dominant message is that all schools *can* improve. However, in using the term 'school change', this chapter does not presuppose that all schools *do* improve under the leadership of new principals.

School change according to Morrison (1998, cited by Earley & Bubb, 2004) is defined as:

...a dynamic and continuous process of development, growth... transformation, a flow from one state to another..., leading to a realignment of existing values, practices and outcomes. (p. 34)

This change process consists of three phases:

- Initiation, which includes acknowledgments of a need for change, readiness for change, planning and gathering resources and support for the change;
- Implementation or putting reforms into effect; and
- Institutionalisation, describes whether or not reforms become a part of every-day practice (Miles, 1986; Fullan, 1991, both cited by Stoll & Fink, 1996).

Earley and Bubb (2004) added a fourth stage, outcomes. However, most school change initiatives realise short-term improvements or fail altogether, according to Fullan (2001b) and Miles (2005), because they neglect or devalue the feelings and thoughts of teachers, the main implementers of the reforms

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