

## Some Effect of Contextual Realities in Prismatic Societies Underlying Instructional Supervision in Primary Schools

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**Abstract:** If societies are indeed different, it is not unreasonable to reaffirm the argument advanced in that theories and principles of instructional supervision are not necessarily universal. In consequence, there is need to construct instructional supervisory strategies and educational goals that are appropriate to the nature and operation of educational organisations in developing countries. Supervision of instruction in developing countries exists in different contexts from developed countries. It is therefore incumbent to understand the various contexts that instructional supervisors carry out their tasks. This paper looks at some of the contextual realities of instructional supervision in prismatic societies.

**Keywords:** Contextual realities, prismatic societies, instruction, supervision, primary schools.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper uses the theory of the "prismatic society" to discuss ways in which the actual process of instructional supervision and its effectiveness in developing countries is affected by both continuities and contradictions stemming from their cultural and socio-economic location.

In his book, *Administration in developing countries*, Riggs [1] developed the theory of the prismatic society in order to understand the conflict between the highly differentiated and relatively autonomous models of organisation imposed at the time of colonialism and the less differentiated indigenous models of organisation. However, as Harber and Davies [2] aptly argue, the theory has retained its relevance during the post-colonial period of "fragile states," as Fuller [3] calls them.

Arguably, Riggs [1] is suggesting the developing societies are prismatic because they contain both elements of the traditional and elements of the structurally differentiated societies. In prismatic societies, therefore, traditional and modern practices and values co-exist in the same organisation – though not always in a harmonious way. People in these societies are usually trapped between their contextual realities and the desired replicas of primary schools in developing countries. They stumble awkwardly as they attempt to move towards the established Western models of instructional supervision. Riggs [1] makes parallel arguments pertaining to developing countries:

*Indeed, the emphasis in much administrative literature is rather more on the prescriptive side than on the*

*descriptive side. The so called principles of public administration take the following form: Authority should be commensurate with responsibility; staff functions should be separated from line functions; Communications should flow upwards as well as downwards; equal pay for equal work. We need not question the usefulness of such maxims. I only wish to point out that prescriptions which are valid in one context may be harmful in another. In other words, we need a pretty complete descriptive and analytical understanding of what now exists before we can make useful judgements about what we ought to do, about what changes should be made. The model of administrative behaviour, as of economic, was inspired by the experience of Western societies in which markets bureaucrats existed and corresponded, at least approximately to the image conveyed by the model. We are not to assume, however, that the situation in "transitional societies" can be properly described in these terms, although we may be tempted to do so.*

So organisations in developing countries, including schools, do not necessarily operate as a Western observer may assume because their contexts are different:

*Hence many formally administrative structures in transitional societies form out to be more facades, while the effective administrative work remains a latent function of older, more diffuse institutions [1].*

As Harber and Davies [2] point out, Riggs [1] was principally concerned with an analysis of institutions of central government and public administration in developing countries. This study however, argues that Riggs' [1] theory of prismatic society is also a very useful instruments for understanding how principals of primary schools operate within the context of schools as organisations in developing societies. We now examine some theories on how schools in prismatic societies operate as they do as a result of the impacts of contextual factors.

Primary schools in developing countries are predominantly bureaucratic and authoritarian even is their actual operation does not necessarily conform to the tenets of models of bureaucracy. Arguably, part of the reason for this lies in inherited colonial forms of education and the post-colonial internal influences of what is understood by schooling and knowledge [2].

#### **Traditional culture and authoritarian schooling in developing countries**

Harber and Davies [2] postulate that a major contributing factor to the continuation of authoritarian relationships is the nature of traditional political cultures and patterns of child-rearing. In a sense, these traditional cultures more often than not reinforce the educational values imported with colonialism.

In a study of the Hausa child's experience in the patriarchal family and in the traditional Koramicschool in Northern Nigeria, Harber [2] concludes that the child's experience in both instances is hierarchical and authoritarian with emphasis on strict obedience based on fear and physical punishment. In this regard as Harber and Davies [2] aptly observe, rather than clashing with imported Western schooling the authority relationships at the home and the school have been mutually supportive.

According to Alverson [4] formal education is a perfect reflection of Tswana patterns of child-rearing involving role learning and punishment for mistakes and errors in Botswana. He adds that as in the surrounding culture, creativity, self-reliance and autonomy are discouraged and duality, obedience and submissiveness encouraged. One study conducted by Harber and Igbal [5] in Pakistan showed that the interplay between traditional system of patronage and intricate networks of power creates a culture of fear where teachers and learners are afraid to express their views before higher authorities [2].

#### **Primary school in developing countries as pseudo – bureaucracies**

The actual operation of schools as bureaucratic organisations in developing countries is different from the Weberian model of bureaucracy. Indeed, as Riggs [1] states, one of the most widely noted characteristics of public administration in transitional states is a high degree in "over centralisation". Put differently, the organisation model most commonly replicated by schools in developing countries is bureaucracy or rule by officials. Generally, the development of a bureaucratic mode of organisation in schools has been criticised as it is seen to diminish the dignity of the individual.

However, bureaucracy has been defended on the grounds that it promotes rationality, orderliness and consistency. For example, a Nigerian writer, Eden [6], argues that:

*Weber is often criticised for ignoring the human aspects of administration and attempting to reduce workers to organisation rules and regulations. A close look at this model, however, reveals that it is used in education and that in our schools, which are very human institutions. Weber's bureaucracy promotes efficiency.*

It is, however, the premise of this paper that primary schools in developing countries do not actually operate as bureaucracies according to the Weberian model. Weber [7] was clear that bureaucracy is a form of domination and that, in terms of the way that power is used in policy and decision making, it is distinct from democracy. It is important to note, as Ball [8] aptly observes, that in most primary schools in developing countries the policy deliberations of the principals are usually secretive because this is seen as a specialist function carried out by the supervisor.

In developing countries, the existence of what Fuller [3] calls "fragile states" means that governments must attempt to enhance their shallow authority by appearing modern [2]. One way of doing this is by constantly preaching to the populace about the existence of meritocracy as mass opportunity. In the majority of cases, schools are used for the extension of the propaganda. To this end, primary schools in developing countries in reality do not operate in terms of the classic Weberian bureaucracies in terms of such principles as merit, the fair and equal application of rules consistency and honesty and integrity.

Because of vices such as nepotism and corruption, teachers are not only subjected to authoritarianism which is inefficient as an organisational model for schools, but also to the inefficient practice of authoritarianism. According to Harber and Davies [2] this results in the bureaucratic facade which results in messy and incoherent authoritarianism. The argument here is that

authoritarianism, messy or not, is unlikely to promote effective instructional supervision. In a sense, the bureaucratised schools in developing countries are at odds with the emerging consensus on the need for democracy. Indeed, multi-constituency democracy in primary school supervision is the central theme of this study.

### The principal as a despot

It has been argued that power relations in primary schools in developing countries are largely authoritarian and bureaucratic and that this is both an ineffective way of educating for peace and democracy. The argument is that if primary schools operate this way then principals must play a part in maintaining them as such.

In this regard Holmes and Wyne [9] describe the most frequently found type of principal in developing countries as the benevolent despot. In a sense this means that the role of the principal is significantly concerned with domination. In Zimbabwe, for example, primary school principals occupy the top of the school hierarchical chain of command. The role of teachers in this authoritarian model is, to all intents and purposes, to support the principal's decisions. In Balls [8] paraphrased words, rights of participation are a political ritual which lends support to what in reality is a system of autocracy. What is true of most principals' relations with teachers is also true of their relationship with learners.

It is the premise of this paper that given the nature of primary school organisation in the majority of developing countries it would be unlikely for the majority of the principals to be anything other than despots or benevolent despots. This is clearly reinforced by gendered masculinist supervision models with both men and women subscribing to these models. According to Alverson [4], in Nigeria, for example:

*[i]n theory, it is expected that most heads [principals] will fail in categories like autocratic, democratic or laissez if not altogether autocratic. To a certain extent, this tendency can be attributed to the traditional ways of life, in which the elder or the man authority...has the final say in all matters and must be obeyed.*

In support, Tsang and Wheeler [10], in discussing the role of the principal in Thailand note that "[t] his role derives in part from the cultural traditions that emphasise hierarchical decision making and defensiveness towards leaders". And yet, Levin and Lockheed [11] caution against overemphasizing, the role of the principal in school effectiveness and school improvement. They argue that learning occurs in classrooms through a complex relationship between teachers and learners. Levin and Lockheed [11] correctly comment, the principal operates at the hub of a number of different responsibilities. Such

responsibilities include guiding teachers as they implement curriculum, organising staff development sessions, managing and developing school resources, and the development of a school-wide climate and school community among others.

### The actual job of the principal in developing countries

School leadership is often seen as a key variable in school effectiveness studies. And yet, as Harber and Davies [2] correctly observe, despite the importance attached to the principal as being central to the success or failure of a school we still know very little about what primary school principals in developing countries actually do. Books on the subject usually provide a list of functions.

Balls [8] argues that the reason for this tendency to ignore what principals actually do, is that theoretical writing on school organisation has been overwhelmingly influenced by the systems theory and has not been grounded in empirical reality. Fuller [3], writing about principals in the industrialised nations of the West, makes a telling point about the need to look at what primary school principals actually do:

*Nearly all district role descriptions stress the instructional leadership responsibilities of the principal – facilitating change, helping teachers work together, assessing and furthering school improvement and so on. However, how principals actually spend their time is obviously a better indication of their impact on the school.*

Fuller's review [3] of the studies of what principals actually do in Western schools found a series of consistent trends:

- Most of the principal's time is taken up by face to face meetings and telephone calls.
- Principals' work days are sporadic and characterised by variety and fragmentation.
- Most of their activities are brief.
- Principals demonstrate a tendency to engage themselves in the most current and pressing situation. They spend very little time on reflective planning.
- Most of their time is spent on administrative house-keeping matters, maintaining order and crisis management.

Eden [6] summarises this debate rather poignantly when they say:

*The global response to any and all concerns means that he/she never has the time, energy or inclination to develop or carry out a set of premeditated plans of his/her own. Containment of all problems in his/her theme. The principal cannot be an effective supervisor, or leader under these conditions.*

In developing countries, we know even less about what principals actually do given the contexts and the nature of school organisation even if we had to assume that the job of a principal in developing countries is just as messy, untidy, fragmented and event driven as in schools in developed countries, this study argues that the actual, tasks and problems faced by principals in developing countries are substantially different.

In 1993, a commonwealth Africa workshop hosted in Botswana published the familiar list of principal tasks [12]:

- Manage and deploy school resources efficiently;
- Allocate school accommodation appropriately;
- Ensure satisfactory standards of maintenance and cleanliness of school facilities;
- Guide curriculum implementation and change;
- Organise staff development in school; and
- Create a professional ethos within the school by involving promoted staff in decision making.

The list could have come from any beginning of a text on educational supervision used in the United Kingdom, Australia or the United States. What is conspicuously missing is a description of what these phrases mean in the day to day operations of a school in a developing country. To be sure, in the entire series of modules, there is absolutely nothing that describes the average day, week or year in the life of a principals within a developing country. The list includes distribution of resources which are not available in the first instance [8].

### **The complexity of being a primary school principal in developing countries**

It is likely that, given the contexts of developing countries, the task and problems faced by principals are likely to be unique. For example, the study of activities of four primary school principals in Barbados by Riggs [1] found that in one week the total number of activities performed ranged from 113 to 194, with a daily average of 30 activities compared with Mintzberg's 22 activities a day for the business executive. The activity with the largest amount of time was curiously personal having lunch, managing a family concern by remote control or reading for example. This was closely followed by unscheduled meetings, paper work and correspondence. The next section attempts to capture some data on the actual job done by principals in developing countries.

In most developing countries, principals face a number of problems relating to the supervision of staff. For a start, principals do not recruit the teachers and this usually results in some schools being used as dumping grounds for poor teachers. As Harber and Davies [2] point out, it is essentially these poor teachers who give principals problems in regard to instructional

supervision. Harber and Davies [2] assert that teachers' misbehaviour such as lateness, absenteeism, alcoholism and sexual harassment of female learners stem from a weak code of professional ethics and culture of power and gender. As already discussed (see section 1.1) many teachers are untrained or poorly trained. Morale and motivation are often low because of poor pay, lack of promotion and inadequate resources [2].

Principals in developing countries have to deal with a diverse range of auxiliary staff: kitchen staff, general maintenance staff, bursars, grounds people, cleaners, messengers, typists and librarians. In Zimbabwe, many principals of government and boarding schools complain of a serious shortage of support staff such as typists, ground persons, cooks and clerks. The problem has been worsened by a government directive (in the light of the structural adjustment programme) to reduce the number of employees [6]. Lack of support staff, arguably, causes many administration problems which have bad consequences for the principal's program of instructional supervision.

Harber [13] notes that another problem faced by principals in developing countries, especially in Africa, is the frequent and compulsory transfer of staff, including principals themselves. In this regard Harber and Davies [2] cite an example of a principal who has been transferred to his present school on this basis of compulsory transfer. Harber and Davis [2] adds that the transfer of teachers could happen at very awkward times, thereby creating extra work for principals.

### **External relations and community involvement**

Parents of learners in most schools in developing countries are often expected to contribute towards the construction of buildings and provision of basic facilities through the School Development Associations / Committees (as they are known in Zimbabwe) or Parents Teachers Associations (as they are called in many other countries) [4]. Receiving donations not only symbolises good relations between the school and the community but also triggers parental expectations of favours from the school. For example, a principal may be expected to open the school for people to sleep in when they have important gatherings such as weddings [1].

Parental expectations, according to Harber and Davies [2], can go beyond a resource *quid pro quo*. They cite the principal of a community Junior Secondary School in Botswana who noted that parents come to see him about out of school matters, for example: "My son didn't come on Sunday night, what can you do about it?" This is a vivid example of Riggs [1] prismatic society at work: the traditional way of life is not congruent with a geographically fixed "modern" institution such as a school.

One particular group with which a principal has to maintain good relations is local dignitaries. Arguably in rural areas, the most significant dignitary that principals have regular contact with is the local chief or the local representative of the ruling party. Eden [6] explains that in Ghana, for example, the chiefs are the kings of the principals. Any time they call on them, principals must put aside everything. As one principals in Ghana put it:

*On one occasion, the message from the paramount chief was simple. There was going to be a meeting in the region and he wanted the school truck to carry his drums and royal paraphernalia to the meeting. On another occasion the side-de-camp of one of the most influential chiefs in the area arrived to tell the principals that the chief was coming to see him in half an hour's time. The principal suspended what he was doing and told the rest of the school administration to gather to receive the chief in the traditional way....*

Another problem for principals in developing countries is that of maintaining external relations at all costs in the context of very poor communications and transport difficulties. In this regard many principals in rural schools have turned into messengers as they have no telephones to contact the district offices of the Ministry of Education. In Zimbabwe, for example, some schools are more than two hundred kilometres from their district offices [6].

## CONCLUSION

This paper would therefore like to contend that current supervisory practices in developing countries are impacted upon by the political, social and cultural context within which they exist. It is likely that, given the contexts of developing countries, the task and problems faced by principals are likely to be unique from those faced by principals in developed countries.

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