The Head Masters’ Instructional Leadership Role in Primary Schools in Mauritius: A Case Study

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Abstract
The headmaster’s primary role in the primary school is to act as an instructional leader. He/she has to ensure that the core mission of the school – effective teaching and learning - is achieved. With effective instruction, it is likely that pupils perform better academically. This paper examined the role of headmasters as instructional leaders and the relationship between instructional leadership and pupils’ achievement in primary schools in Mauritius. It also investigated into the strategies that the headmaster may adopt to promote effective teaching and learning for greater pupil achievement. This study used the qualitative research approach to gather information from headmasters in five primary schools in the Educational Zone 1. Individual interviews were carried out among headmasters respectively. It was also found that the headmaster should be a resource provider; he/she should empower teachers, lead on-the-job training, lead learning, do visioning, maintain healthy relationships with the teachers in the school, manage learner discipline, motivate teachers and share responsibilities with the stakeholders. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the headmaster should deeply be involved in curriculum development and monitoring, delegate administrative tasks, do time and priority management, and promote parent engagement in learner discipline management at schools.

Key words: instructional leadership, pupil achievement, discipline, headmasters, teachers.

Introduction
The different educational reforms in Mauritius- Master plan in Education (1991), Master Plan (2000) and the latest Nine Years’ Continuous Basic Education (NYCBE 2015) aim at reducing the number of learner drop-out and yield a high level of learner achievement (World Bank, 2017). However, the educational organisation in Mauritius is hierarchical. In this top-down system the State through the Ministry of Education and educational authorities like the SDEC (Le Service Diocésain de l’Education Catholique) are the governors and they command the school administration. According to Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson and Daly (2008), the traditional top-down approach has promoted student learning. But, this approach could impede organisational learning as it does not allow flexibility and educator discretion in attending the diverse needs of learners. This is a matter of concern when the scheme of duties of the head of the primary school is considered. The head master of primary schools in Mauritius has:

(a) To be responsible for management of a primary school;
(b) To verify the appropriateness and relevance of the scheme of work and daily notes of teachers, mentors and deputy headmasters;
(c) To supervise, guide all members of the staff posted to his/her school with the collaboration of Inspectorate cadre;
(d) To monitor the implementation of school curriculum;
(e) To give on job training to Deputy Headmasters on the administration and management of the school;
(f) To take part in refresher courses and other approved courses;
(g) To form part of educational committees and curriculum panels;
(h) To deal with parents and members of public and to ensure welfare of pupils while maintaining a good relationship with the public through the Parents Teachers Association;
(i) To organise with the help of school inspectors, school based staff development programmes for teachers who need to be upgraded;
(j) To ensure the smooth implementation of educational project and promote greater equity;
(k) To work with the community in management of primary school;
(l) To ensure that the distribution of foodstuff and other requisites is properly done;
(m) To help in the preparation and running of examination ad tests in primary schools;
(n) To conduct inventory of the school’s furniture, materials and equipment;
(o) To be responsible for the implementation of the performance management system;
(p) To monitor the implementation of numeracy and literacy programme;
(q) To use ICT in the performance of duties.

It is obvious from the above scheme of service as prescribed by the Public Service Commission of Mauritius that school heads perform mostly administrative duties. However, according to Belle (2009), school leadership should be looked at in a broader way where the leader is a facilitator, motivator and mobiliser of resources.

Instructional leadership is an approach by the school head to focus on educators’ behaviour in certain tasks that indirectly impact on the academic achievement of learners (Ismail, Don, Husin & Khalid, 2018). Among all the leadership styles that the leader may adopt, instructional leadership is the most important one as it related to the implementation of promoting and improving the learners’ learning and thus their academic performance (Drake & Roe, 2005). Instructional leadership involves many dimensions. The instructional leadership theory by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) mentions three dimensions, namely defining the school mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and promoting school learning climate. However, an overview of literature shows an array of instructional leadership tasks that the school head may perform in order to promote the learners’ academic achievement.

In a quest for quality education in primary schools in Mauritius, primary school administrators must be able to lead their schools to high achievement for all pupils. The reform in education 2015 puts emphasis on inclusion and equitable learning opportunities for students to attain high level of achievement ((National Curriculum Framework, 2015). In line with government policy to attain high level of achievements for all pupils in Mauritius, Headmasters must shift from their traditional role of administrators to that of instructional leaders. According to Calik et al (2012) there is a close relationship between self and collective efficacy of teachers depending on instructional leadership of school’s administrators. Therefore, it is important to investigate how instructional leadership impacts on pupils’ success.

**Literature Review**

Primary schools in Mauritius are expected to prepare the young generation academically so that they can take up secondary education with much confidence and achieve an academic success so that they are able to compete with globalisation. The reform in education 2008 laid emphasis on the fact that “no child should be left behind” (Ministry of Education, Culture & Human Resources, 2008). Whilst pupils’ academic success in required, teachers are held accountable for the success and failures of the former; however, very little emphasis is laid on the responsibility of Head Masters for pupils’ achievement. Most literature (Rautiola, 2009; Calik, Sezgin, Kavgaci and Kilinc, 2012; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008) revealed that teachers can perform to their best when they are given suitable working conditions like school climate, motivation, respect, support and opportunities. These conditions that affect pupils’ achievement are directly related to the instructional leadership approach of primary school’s Head Masters.
The key to success in any educational system is closely associated with the leadership style of the School headmaster. An effective leadership will foster long term sustainability and boost pupils’ academic performances. Research have shown that the instructional leadership of heads of schools can deeply influence the different elements in a learning environment, such as the climate, teachers and non-teaching staff attitude, and academic achievement (Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam and Brown, 2014). In comparison to the various leadership style in literature, instructional leadership has been qualified as the one having stronger effect on pupils’ achievement (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Willis and Vaner (2010) posit that teachers’ moral correlates with pupils’ achievement and the study quotes Miller (1981) who postulates that the main factor affecting teachers’ moral is the leadership behavior that school principals’ exhibit. This hypothesis of Miller (1981) can be linked to the findings of Calik, Sezgin, Kavgaci and Kilinc (2012), who agree that effective teaching depends on instructional leadership of headmasters.

This study defines the role of headmasters as instructional leaders. It is a focused study on instructional leadership in primary schools, as most research on school leadership has been carried out at secondary level and mostly outside Mauritius. According to Wallace foundation (2013), the leader should shape the vision for academic success of the school. Headmasters must have their own vision and they should make academic success the backbone of the school. As an instructional leader, headmasters have the responsibility to make the school climate propitious so that all stakeholders work in a cordial environment to promote academic success. Literature has shown that both transformational leadership and instructional leadership are recommended (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). However, previous studies have demonstrated that instructional leadership has brought more gains in terms of academic success (Robinson et al, 2008). Studies carried out in the Mauritian context demonstrated that school leadership is central in the education process. Dutta and Sahney (2015) aver that instructional leadership creates an environment where the head of school makes things happen through other people by establishing an effective social, affective and physical environment together with a positive school climate which has a positive effect on pupils’ achievement.

Instructional leadership has an indirect impact on pupils’ achievement. Although headmasters are not involved in teaching, they are responsible to provide teachers with the best possible conditions which will help them work towards higher pupils’ achievement. Motivation improves teachers’ performance and this variable influences pupils’ achievement (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008). School’s headmasters are key players in the teaching and learning process and their leadership influences the school climate, teachers’ motivation, school organization and pupil’s achievement.

(1) The impact of instructional leadership on school climate.

A school will progress and pupils will have high achievement only if there prevail a positive school climate (Osher & Berg, 2017). School climate has been defined as the physical, social and academic environment by Murtedjo and Suharningsih (2018) and Osher and Berg (2017). A positive school climate is a very important element in the improvement of school, as it encourages both pupils and teachers to carry out their task diligently. A school climate that is sound, builds confidence in teachers because they feel respected and perform their duties effectively and efficiently in order to reap high academic achievements (Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018). Promoting a positive school climate is an important role of headmasters. According to Murtedjo and Suharningsih (2018) headmasters can enhance school climate in the following ways:

(i) Provide teachers with appropriate coaching so that their teaching performances can be optimized. This implies that headmaster have to carry supervision and organize sharing sessions to curb teachers’ shortcomings.

(ii) Class visit is imperative in order to ascertain the proper implementation of teaching and learning.
Create a conducive school climate by adopting a more democratic and transformative leadership approach. This means that teachers should be given the opportunity to develop their potential and experiences and headmasters must trust them and respect their abilities and at the same time create an openness so that the views of teachers are respected.

(2) The impact of instructional leadership on teachers’ satisfaction and motivation.
Teacher’s satisfaction is influenced by teacher’s motivation and working condition which is one aspect that instructional leaders should not neglect (Horg & Loeb, 2010). Since teachers are directly responsible for teaching and learning business and they can create such opportunities that can develop the full potential of pupils, it is important that school leaders create such environment that can motivate teachers (Belle, 2009). Providing a positive school climate boosts teachers’ job satisfaction (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). The findings of Dutta and Sahney (2016), shows that there is substantial direct effect of teachers’ job satisfaction on pupils’ achievement. Seebaluck (2013) posits that motivation is one of the most important factor that empowers primary school teachers in Mauritius to execute their duties with full satisfaction and dedication. According to him, there is a relationship between teacher motivation and job satisfaction.

(3) The impact of instructional leadership on pupils’ achievement
In modern education system more precisely in Mauritius and with the Nine Year Continuous Basic Education which gives more consideration to inclusion (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2015), school leaders should have more consideration for the psychological aspect of teachers and learners. School head masters must adopt the most appropriate leadership approach and devote more of their time to the core mission of school which is teaching and learning. According to Horg and Loeb (2010), school leadership are responsible for school success because for past three decades most studies have associated school achievement to good leadership. Robinson et al., (2008) posit that instructional leadership has a greater impact on pupils’ achievement than transformational leadership. Dutta and Sahney (2016) are of the opinion that a supportive and affective environment and a friendly environment, impact positively on pupils’ achievement. Rautiola (2009) is of the view that instructional leadership impacts three to four times more than transformational leadership on pupils’ achievement and this result conforms to Robinson et al (2008) who are of the same view. However, a research carried out by Alam and Ahmad (2017) established that there was no direct impact of instructional leadership on pupils’ achievement in primary schools in Pakistan.

(4) The impact of instructional leadership on teaching and learning
The study of Nguyen, Hg and Yap (2017) cites Firestone and Herriot (1982) to the effect that primary school principals devote most of their time in managing daily works rather than instructional leadership task. On the other hand, the same study cites (Nguyen, Hg and Yap, (2014) showing that primary school principals in Singapore manage teaching and learning through class observation and discussing the curriculum with teachers. Bush et al (2010), cite Ofsted (2003) who views that there is a strong connection between good classroom monitoring and good teaching. Bush et al (2010) emphasise on the role of head of school in managing teaching and learning, they aver that the most important tool for managing teaching and learning are; monitoring, modelling and evaluation as explained below:

- Monitoring takes place through class observation and giving feedback to teachers.
- Modelling is done by sharing the best practices
monitoring learners’ achievement.

Blase and Blase (2000) are of the view that instructional leadership has strongly enhances teaching and learning.

The impact of Instructional leadership as organisational managers on pupils’ achievement.

The findings of Horng and Loeb (2010) demonstrate that schools having a strong organisational managers are more likely to improve academically. This adds to the new role of instructional leaders. They defined an organisational manager as a leader who develops organizational structures that would support teaching and learning rather that spending the time in the class room or coaching teacher. Thus, strong organisational managers are effective in supporting staff, mobilising the required resources, allocating budget and maintaining positive teaching and learning environment.

The purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate into the extent to which the heads of primary schools in the Educational Zone one Mauritius are using instructional leadership to impact on the teaching and learning process. The objectives of the study were:

(a) To determine the instructional leadership role of the headmaster in primary schools in Mauritius;
(b) To examine the impact of this role on the teaching and learning process in such schools.

Methodology

This study employed the qualitative research method in an attempt to gather in-depth information from the five selected head masters of five primary schools in the educational zone one, which consists of 72 primary schools. Convenience sampling was the strategy used to select participants in only one near locality. The participants are selected on the basis of accessibility and experience. Five primary school headmasters were selected for the individual interviews. The purpose of the interview was to collect relevant data on the instructional leadership dimensions that they adopt in their schools in an attempt to motivate their teachers and improve teaching and learning. It should be noted that the findings of this study cannot be generalised as it used a small sample, yet they may give insights into the instructional leadership role of the headmasters of primary schools in Mauritius and how they are impacting on the core mission of the school – effective teaching and learning.

The collected information were analysed using the six steps suggested by Lodico, Spaulding and Voegle (2010), namely preparing and organizing data; reviewing and exploring data; coding and categorizing data; constructing thick description of people, places and activities; building theme; and reporting and interpreting data. The data were transcribed and the content analysis approach was used to obtain the findings of the study.

All ethical issues in terms of data privacy and protection, confidentiality and anonymity of participants, minimising risk of harm, integrity, independence and informed consent (BERA, 2014) were taken into consideration to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings

From the individual interviews with the participants, it became obvious that the headmasters are trying to do their best to adopt instructional leadership in their school management, though they are accountable to the Ministry of Education in terms of overwhelmed administrative tasks in their day-to-day school responsibilities. The following themes or dimensions of instructional leadership practices by primary school head masters, in the context of Mauritius, were identified and analysed from the content analysis, based on the two objectives of this study. The findings of the study are discussed as follows:
(1) Resource provider

From interviews it was obvious that providing teachers with the required material is important as it impacts on pupil’s achievement. Headmaster C emphasised on the importance of resources: “I have created a resource centre in my school, and where all my teachers have access to all the resources and material that they need. I have also appointed one person to make sure that all resources needed by all teachers are available”.

If resources available at schools are deployed in a convenient way it will have a positive impact on pupils’ achievement (Caldwell, 1998). Horng and Loeb (2010), further are of the view that an instructional leader has resource provider.

(2) Teacher’s empowerment

All the five headmasters’ interviewed laid much emphasis on the fact that they give opportunity to their teachers to lead certain activities like sports, music day and to be instructional leaders by sharing their best practices. To a question on delegation of powers headmaster C said “yes, yes I do it. I delegate to my DHM and teachers also, as if I make them in charge. For example, our school is an eco-registered school, so there is a group of teachers who are responsible for eco project. They organize meeting on their own and each teacher in the group assumes a certain responsibility.”

Furthermore, headmaster B pointed out, “I ask them to organise music day and sports day. I give them the whole responsibility to take decisions related to such activities”.

Headmaster A praised his teachers said “Last year my school celebrated its centenary and you won’t believe one teacher chaired the organising committee which comprised of advisors from three ministries as the prime minister was the chief guest, he also acted as master of ceremony and the event was a real success. So we must have trust in our teachers and give them opportunities to show their potentials. Headmasters must delegate powers to teachers because they have certain skills that headmasters may not poses.”

Interviews also confirmed the element of shared leadership which gives teachers the opportunity to explore their potentials and give them job satisfaction.

Empowering teachers and giving them the opportunity to lead is to explore the best of teacher’s (Frost, 2012). Berry et al (2010) stated that teacher leadership can improve pupils’ achievement. From literature it is clear that headmasters can explore the potentials of teachers by sharing responsibilities.

(3) On job training

Interviews have revealed that professional development of teachers which is an important aspect of instructional leadership as cited by Congo-Poottaren and Sohawon (2014) is not given due consideration by headmasters except that they promote sharing of best practices among teachers. Headmaster D avers that he encourages sharing of ideas among his teachers and shared the opinions that, “the headmaster is not ‘Mr Knowledge’, we share good practices, if I know something I share it, if teachers know something, they share it”.

However, on this issue headmaster C emphasised on shared leadership in two instances and said “I have set up a pedagogical committee at school level. I have my teachers who meet on a monthly basis, there they discuss their problems related to how to improve their teaching and learning situations of the children/pupils in class. They talk about the pedagogical tool etc." This is a new phenomenon that has emerged in primary school and need to be reflected on.

Other headmasters did not lay much emphasis on the issue of on job training but as mentioned by headmaster E “teachers attend sankoré workshops, grade 2 and 1 teachers have been on workshop for tablets at the M.I.E.” The workshops referred to are simply a training on the use of technological tools and not professional development in terms of pedagogy.

Literature shows that professional development of teachers is very important as it impacts directly on the quality of teaching and learning and impact on pupils’ achievement (Rautiola, 2009).

(4) Managing teaching and learning
Interviews concluded that all headmasters do not monitor teaching and learning. Headmasters B, D and E aver that they visit class teachers regularly and also observe teachers during lessons and advise them at times. To a question on her direct involvement in teaching and learning headmaster D convincingly stated: “Oh, [serious and very confident] I perform class visit very often, I go and do, then I delegate few class visit to my DHM , we take our observation sheet we go in class, then we make positive critics and help teachers where we can to improve their teaching.”

Headmaster C was of a different view: “I have total trust in my teachers and I need not go in their class to observe them. They are professional doing their job and I trust them.” But the fact remain that no headmaster has talked about their direct involvement in teaching and learning.

Headmaster B monitored teaching and learning and acted as a mentor to teachers and replied “I follow classes and encourage my teachers to adapt their teaching based on the capability of pupils, for example I tell them to give easier task to slow learners in order to motivate them to work.”

From literature, it is clear that teaching and learning is the core business of the school. Monitoring teaching and learning is one of the most important instructional leadership task as it has considerable impact on pupil’s achievement. However, the research of Belle (2009) and Manaseh (2016) show that this is not the actual situation in all schools. They asserted that head of schools do not monitor instruction by observing classes, as they are overloaded with administrative task and rather depend on teachers’ notes and plan of work to monitor teaching.

(5) Sharing the goal, vision and mission of the school

Interviews have revealed that headmasters organise staff meeting at the beginning of the year and at regular intervals and share their vision, goals and mission of the school. Headmasters during the interview stressed on the fact that sharing their vision and goals for the school with teachers is very important for school to progress as stated by headmaster A: “You see the headmaster and teachers are all a link of the same chain, so we have to work as a team and share the same goal and vision.”

From the analysis of data collected from interview it is clear that instructional leadership of headmasters affect pupil’s achievement. Qualitative data confirms the analysis of quantitative data to the effect that there is a relationship between instructional leadership of headmasters and pupil’s achievement.

(6) Discipline management

An interesting phenomenon that emerged from interview concerning discipline management was that headmasters have recourse to parent’s intervention in certain cases. Headmaster D emphasises on the creation of a “club de parent” in her school and said, “I have a ‘club de parents’ which regroup some 15 parents and theses parents work in collaboration with me to combat the problem of discipline. Very often members of the club go door to door to visit parents of those pupils who misbehave at school or parents of pupils who are regularly absent from school.”

The collaboration of parents was also mentioned by other participants but in the other cases it was mostly through the Parent Teachers’ Association. All five participants agree on the fact that without discipline pupils cannot progress.

Headmaster at school E succinctly viewed that, “teaching and learning cannot take place without discipline”.

It has been observed from interviews that some common discipline problems in primary schools in Zone one in Mauritius are; absenteeism, disruptive behaviours in classroom, fights and use of abusive language in certain schools.

Literature shows that pupils’ academic success is closely related to a good discipline management on part of headmasters. It is also mentioned that indiscipline reduces teachers’ self-esteem and the fact that teachers are demotivated this have a negative impact of pupils’ achievement (Belle, 2009).

Therefore, we conclude that as part of instructional leadership task managing school discipline is important if a high level of pupils’ achievement is expected.
Teacher motivation

Interviews have shown that all headmasters make their best to motivate their teachers. This is the belief of headmasters that a motivated teacher will perform better. Headmaster D ascertained that she is a democratic leader who adopt a friendly attitude to create a good climate. This is illustrated by her statement: “I would say that I am a democratic leader. It is a ‘win- win’ situation. I create a friendly attitude with my staff, then for the smooth running of the school a friendly attitude makes teachers work better. Teachers do not have any difficulty to approach me. They come and tell me their problems and I solve it.”

Headmaster C added, “I invited one NGO during the holidays to hold one-day workshop with my staff, where we play and have fun together in order to maintain a good relationship and to motivate my teachers. My teachers are so motivated that they rarely absent from school and if ever they are absent they arrange with their colleagues so that their pupils carry on with their work”.

The above findings are in line of literature where the research of Dutta and Sahney, (2016) confirms that there is a direct relationship between pupil’s achievement and teachers’ motivation.

Maintaining positive relationship with the teachers

All five headmasters aver that they maintain good relationship between headmaster and teachers. The fact that they have to work in team so there is a good line of communication. Headmasters are always ready to support their teachers. One headmaster even stated the following: “We work as one family and to maintain this good relationship in my school we organize get together, we go on and very often organize lunch together.” (Headmaster A). Headmaster C avers that he organises workshop with the collaboration of NGO during school holidays just to have teachers and administration to play together and share ideas so that there is a better understanding of each other.

Head master C suggested that, “the first thing is that there should be a team, right, a team spirit, if there is no team, no team spirit nothing will happen….. Ones an NGO came to perform team building exercise during school holidays, at that time we did painting together, teachers and headmaster together, you see a team building.”

This finding is in relation with the findings of Dutta and Sahney (2016) who are of the opinion that a supportive and affective environment and a friendly environment, impact positively on pupils’ achievement.

Discussion

This study revealed the various dimensions of the instructional leadership role of the school heads of primary schools in Mauritius. These dimensions that the school heads attempt to implement are: provision of resources, empowerment of teachers, provision for professional development for teachers in the form of on-the-job-training, managing instruction, visioning, learner discipline management, teacher motivation, and maintaining positive relationships with the teachers in their school.

It is obvious from the study that instructional leadership helps improve academic achievement of pupils. The main emphasis was laid on tasks of headmasters in the Mauritian primary schools. Headmasters in primary schools do their level best to make available to teachers the necessary teaching aids so that they can perform better and give the best possible result. So headmasters monitor instruction by visiting class but it is also noted that some headmasters are hesitant and do not perform class visits but rely on the trust they have in teachers. It also shows the determination of headmasters as instructional leaders to curb the problem of learner indiscipline with the help of parents. However, it is important to note that professional development of teachers which is one of the most important element of instructional leadership is not taken into consideration by headmasters. An important phenomenon which was highlighted was the active participation of parents by initiating a parent’s club. This showed that there is a very sound school-parent partnership in these schools. These dimensions of instructional leadership of the headmasters indeed impacts positive on the effectiveness of the primary schools in Mauritius.
Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Since headmasters devote less time to monitoring of instruction and they are also hesitant to perform regular class visit, it is recommended that they carry out working sessions with teachers to inform them about the importance and purpose of monitoring instructions. Headmasters should build the trust and confidence in teachers to the effect that monitoring is not about finding faults, but the aim is to share experience, give constructive feedback, advise them and to be an all-time support in line with the school mission and vision. Headmasters should be always visible and be at the service of teachers for any support and suggestions which are related to the school business.

Headmasters claim that they have too many administrative task to perform their tasks, so it recommended that they delegate the administrative tasks to the administrative staff (school clerk and deputy headmasters). However, headmasters should properly train the administrative staff during the school holidays as per scheme of service. Delegation will spare time for monitoring of instruction.

Time and priority management is an important skill that all headmasters should develop. It is highly recommended that headmasters prioritise tasks as a good time management from school heads is associated with a productive work behaviour and has a positive impact on output.

Besides, it is recommended that headmasters work in close collaboration with parents in order to curb the problem of indiscipline in primary schools. The example of parents’ club (club de parents) as mentioned in this study can be adopted.

Furthermore, the only institution mandated by the Ministry of Education to carry out teacher’s training in Mauritius is the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE). Since headmasters are not able to conduct professional development course for teachers, it is recommended that the MIE holds workshops where teachers and headmasters can work together under the supervision of lecturers and professionals from the education sector to develop new strategies to carry out instructions.

It is also important that the MIE runs refresher courses for all headmasters on instructional leadership so that all schools adopt the same leadership skills.

The Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research should come out with a new primary school management manual (the current one dated 2008), with more emphasis laid on instructional leadership. The new manual should lay emphasis on delegation of administrative task to deputy headmasters and administrative staff. The role of headmasters should be redefined in the context of instructional leadership, instead of school administration.

References


