

Total Quality Management for Continual School Improvement: Guiding principles of success that can be derived from Mauritius

By: David Hung and Jean Claude Ah-Teck

Abstract

As a small island country, Mauritius is relying on its human capital and innovative hi-tech industry to ensure future economic viability in the global market. As such, Mauritian education authorities are seeking ways to raise educational standards. One government's reform idea being canvassed is that Total Quality Management (TQM) could provide the framework for Mauritian school leaders to deliver imperatives for change and improvement so as to achieve 'world-class quality education.' However, whilst there is a burgeoning literature on TQM and a quality culture in education, little research attention has been paid to the practical processes of implementing TQM concepts in realizing and sustaining quality in schools, and when this has been done it has tended to be limited to higher education institutions. Moreover, no research has covered this topic in the Mauritian context.

This research focuses on investigating Mauritian principals' perceptions, from an under-researched ethical leadership perspective, about school and systemic improvement and the usefulness of TQM tenets in raising educational standards in schools. Significantly, what emerged from the research is a conceptual framework including a complementary set of guiding principles of success, informed by a thorough literature review of the field and capturing school principals' pertinent ideas, that might inform future research and possible collective action for continual quality improvement. The research present signposts for challenges and opportunities that would be worthy of debate, from an ethical school leadership perspective, in re-imagining public education in Ontario in the quest for increased student achievement and well-being.

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Introduction

As a small island country, Mauritius is relying on its human capital and innovative hi-tech industry to ensure future economic viability in the global market. Therefore, education authorities are striving to improve Mauritian schools and raise educational standards. One government's reform idea is that *Total Quality Management* (TQM) could provide the framework for school leaders to deliver imperatives for change and improvement so as to achieve 'world-class quality education.' However, whilst there is a burgeoning literature on a 'quality' culture in education, little research attention has been paid to the practical processes of implementing TQM in realizing quality in schools, let alone in the Mauritian school context.

This research investigates Mauritian principals' perceptions about school improvement and the usefulness or otherwise of TQM tenets in raising educational quality standards. The research findings and implications from the Mauritian educational jurisdiction present many lessons that can be learned from an ethical leadership perspective, and guiding principles of success that may be usefully adapted in public education in Ontario as a platform for systemic change in the quest for increased student achievement and well-being.

Total Quality Management in education

TQM endorses *distributed leadership* (Gronn, 2008), including an emphasis on 'teacher leadership' (Starr & Oakley, 2008), thus recognizing the importance of *collaboration and teamwork* to enable stakeholders to engage in participative decision-making (West-Burnham, 2004). Implementing TQM in schools calls for a high degree of delegation and decentralization, requiring all teachers to pursue relevant *professional learning* opportunities (Fullan, 2007). Another key TQM principle in education is a *focus on stakeholders* through meeting and exceeding their needs and expectations, based on the principle that the stakeholder is the supreme judge of the quality of educational products and services (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Schools that are quality orientated are committed to *change and continuous improvement* that best meet their stakeholders' expectations (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). In the TQM

philosophy, *decision-making based on data* is emphasized, requiring rational and transparent leadership (Wayman, Jimerson & Cho, 2011). TQM is ultimately based on *systems thinking*, meaning that institution building is a holistic consideration (Watterson & Caldwell, 2011).

Moreover, current educational leadership thinking is greatly driven by morality and ethics. Principals should be centrally concerned with leadership practices that are ethical and moral by the very nature of the work they do (Sergiovanni, 2006). This research therefore investigates the issues involved in implementing TQM as a basis for school improvement from an under-researched ethical leadership perspective.

Methodology

The research was based on a mixed methods study comprising two phases. The quantitative phase was a nationwide questionnaire survey of school principals exploring whether they were actively using quality tenets based on the *Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award* (MBNQA) Education Criteria, which are regarded as key characteristics of TQM (Karathanos, 1999). Correlation and regression analyses were conducted on the quantitative data.

The subsequent qualitative phase involved the conduct of in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of six principals, representing diversity of sector, level of schooling, the gender of leaders, location and socio-economic status of the enrolling families. The analysis of the qualitative data was an exercise in grounded theory building (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The research questions formulated were:

- Do principals' perceptions of their current leadership practices for school improvement corroborate with the TQM philosophy?
- Could TQM tenets not currently used be beneficially adapted for school improvement?
- Based on principals' responses, what leadership strategies could be applied for continual school improvement?

Summary of findings

The findings from the quantitative phase of the study gave credence to the general MBNQA theory that leadership drives the system which creates results (Foster *et al.*, 2007); that is, Mauritian school leaders

played a critical role in influencing school outcomes directly and indirectly through the inner workings of the schooling system (Ah-Teck & Starr, 2013). However, this was not confirmed in the subsequent qualitative phase of the study.

The qualitative phase indicated that while Mauritian principals overwhelmingly accepted TQM tenets and claimed that they actually used them, in reality their interpretations of their own leadership practices revealed many contradictions, with practices diverging markedly from the TQM philosophy. In particular, the research found that leadership was not distributed but was rather concentrated at 'the top', indicating principals' underlying autocratic leadership style which served their own interests. Another noteworthy finding is that principals' main focus was to secure stakeholders' attention through marketing and public relation strategies, not through collaboration in the schools' operations or involvement in decision-making. Furthermore, principals were found not to assume their leadership role as a systemic issue, but were rather focused on their own schools as stand-alone systems (Ah-Teck & Starr, 2012a, 2012b).

Notwithstanding their actual leadership practices, principals' positive reactions to TQM suggested that TQM tenets could be usefully applied for more structured quality improvement of educational processes and outcomes.

Implications for school improvement

What emerged from the research is a conceptual framework for continual school improvement, shown in Figure 1, capturing principals' key ideas and from the perspective of what constitutes exemplary, research-based school leadership practices coupled with an ethical leadership stance. The framework's prime emphasis is on *Authentic School Leadership* which is fundamentally concerned with professionally effective and consciously reflective practices, informed by values and ethics (Begley, 2007). It captures a vision of *Improved Student Outcomes*, attained through a series of behaviors in the authentic teaching and learning elements which are themselves value-based and ethical (Duignan, 2007). It also indicates the direct relationship between *Authentic School Leadership* and *Improved Student Outcomes* (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). All six elements are connected in a cyclical loop which accommodates the spirit of continuity. The 'Caring and inclusive school community' ('roof' of figure) sets the context for school operations. This conceptual framework might be described as encapsulating the moral purpose of schooling by elaborating and making explicit the values and ethics dimensions

which might facilitate the work of school leaders and teachers in enhancing authentic (transformed) learning for students.

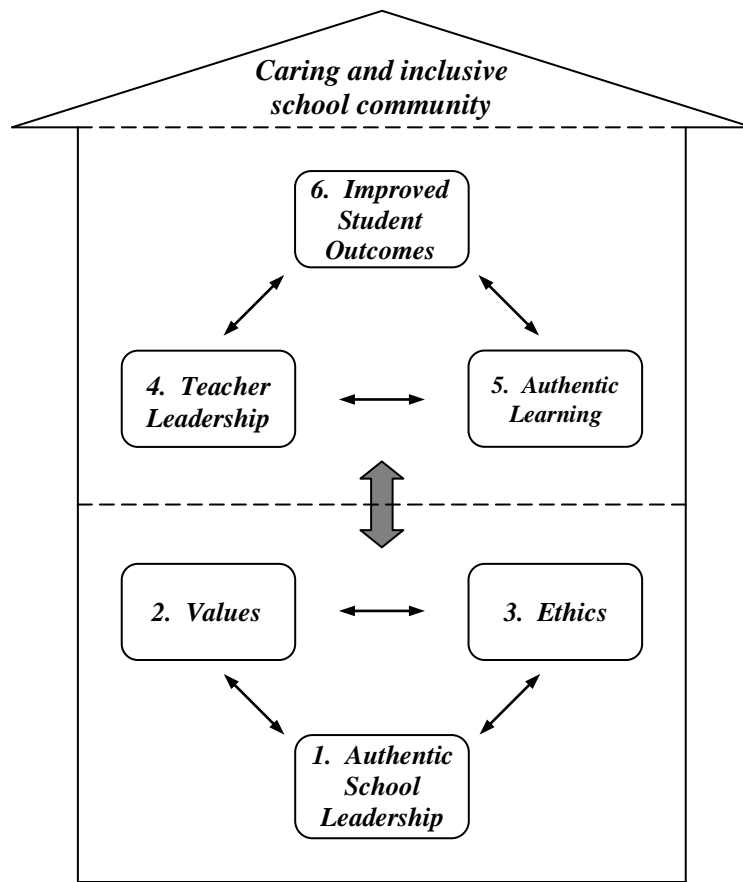


Figure 1 A conceptual framework for continual quality improvement in schools

Guiding principles of success for continual quality improvement in schools

The simplicity of the framework is intended as an overview and visual model of the school improvement process in the pursuit of the vision of transformed learners. It is complemented by a set of guiding principles of success, which provide additional insights into practical processes as a basis for reflective practice. These are both theoretically and empirically sound since they are informed by the literature review of the field and capture school leaders' responses and insights to TQM concepts in education uncovered in the empirical study. We shall henceforth refer to schools which replicate these principles by what Bonstingl (2001) evocatively calls *Schools of Quality*.

Element 1: Authentic school leadership

Principle 1.1: Leadership is distributed throughout the school community, empowering those people best positioned to make decisions about quality improvement in teaching and learning within a culture of collegiality.

In Schools of Quality, leadership promotes a culture that empowers those staff closest to the students, especially teachers, about how best to improve teaching and learning. Teacher empowerment entails a simplification of the school's organisational structure, shifting the focus of responsibility and decision-making away from school leaders towards the teachers themselves. In Schools of Quality, more emphasis is placed on people and shared values and ethics than on roles and rules. It is important that the school is seen as one that listens and acts on the advice of 'front-line' staff instead of one that is formally organised and bureaucratised. Principals should be the agents charged with developing leadership capacity through distributed/shared practices in schools.

Principle 1.2: Leadership is based on data and evidence, as well as professional discourses, intuition, judgment and lived experiences.

A School of Quality builds staff capacity by collecting and analyzing relevant data to inform decision-making. School leaders and teachers take a research stance and engage in evidence-based practice to reflect on their effectiveness and take action for improvement. A School of Quality implements routine procedures for collecting relevant data in ethical ways and for interpreting the collected data. A School of Quality is also committed to developing and enhancing staff skills in evidence-based practice. To be more ethical, feedback incorporating a qualitative view based on professional discourses, intuition, judgment and lived experiences that would enable informed decisions should be equally valorized (Ah-Teck & Starr, in press).

Principle 1.3: Leadership supports on-going professional learning of teachers, embedded in teacher practice and focused on student outcomes.

Teacher's professional development should be ongoing in order to keep up to date with new educational thinking and enhance their teaching practice, while focusing on student outcomes. Teaching is a dynamic profession and, as new knowledge about teaching and learning emerges, new pedagogical skills are required by teachers. Professional learning should serve to create and promote a

working environment in which collaboration and involvement of teachers from different subject disciplines and departments prevail (Berry, 1997). Moreover, professional learning should be embedded into the everyday practice of teachers, within the context of daily routines and tasks in which they are already engaged (Fullan, 2007), such as lesson planning, assessment and evaluation. This enables new learning to be tried out *in situ* and in a time-efficient manner (Wayman, Jimerson & Cho, 2011).

Principle 1.4: Leadership is made sustainable by distributing leadership, taking responsibility for leading learning, and planning for leadership succession.

Leadership should be distributed and developed across the whole school organization with participative and teamwork approaches, providing a basis for sustainability of change and organizational self-renewal (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). Principals in Schools of Quality also ensure that they can sustain their work by taking responsibility in *leading learning* by making learning a priority in all school activities. He/she sustains student's learning first and then everyone else's learning in support of it (Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003), thereby making lasting and inclusive improvements for students in their care. School leaders have a prime responsibility for planning leadership succession so that leadership succession events do not pose a threat to sustainable improvement.

Principle 1.5: Leadership builds a school culture as a framework to lead authentic behaviors and actions towards continuous improvement, stakeholder satisfaction, and collaborative approaches.

In Schools of Quality, the school culture focuses on establishing an environment where people develop collaboratively an explicit and owned sense of group purpose, grounded on values and ethics. Creating a school culture requires leaders and staff to develop a shared vision that is devised by, and clearly communicated to, all stakeholders. Principals in Schools of Quality foster an atmosphere of trust that helps teachers, students, and parents work as a community to support authentic teaching and learning, albeit within their various capacities (see, for example, Miller Marsh & Turner-Vorbeck, 2010). They create a climate that encourages shared authority and responsibility. Importantly, Schools of Quality celebrate key events and achievements as a community to promote the core values that are accepted and lived out.

Principle 1.6: Leadership focuses on external networking, with an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition.

Schools of Quality work in close partnership with parents and encourage their involvement to support their children's learning. They also build lateral capacity through interaction with other schools, universities, future employers and the community, and seek to enhance their satisfaction and loyalty. In this way, an effective chain of stakeholders is built and they can participate actively in decisions regarding improvements in the design and delivery of educational programmes. Schools of Quality therefore build a climate of trust, mutual support and development among all stakeholders.

Element 2: Values

Principle 2.1: Schools promote and model relational values such as 'trust', 'respect' and 'fairness', enabling adults to operate relationally and providing opportunities for students and staff to create a healthy relational partnership in the classroom.

Schools of Quality place great value on relationships and recognize their responsibilities to uphold the dignity and rights of others. School leaders who are able to show a human side are held in high esteem by staff and help to build trust and encourage staff to take risks and become involved. The promotion of relational values, including mutual trust, respect for the dignity and worth of others, and fairness, is a significant factor not only in the well-being of staff and students alike, but also in their willingness to support a shared school vision. The leader's influence is largely anchored on his/her moral values or virtues, over and above the mere use of formal power.

Principle 2.2: Schools promote and model the values of 'love' and 'care', either as religious faith in action or as secular concepts within pastoral care, fostering the full human development of students.

A focus on the values of love and care means the promotion among students of social behaviors, confidence building, communication skills, sharing and caring, love and appreciation for nature, love for learning, community spirit and mindedness. Schools of Quality engage in activities to enhance the general awareness of, and respect for, all religions. Pastoral care is the endeavor of all people within the school community to care for each other and foster the building of meaningful personal relationships. Pastoral care is an expression of the ethos of the school, especially endorsing the values of love and care, to respect the dignity of each person within a faith or non-faith community.

Principle 2.3: Schools promote and model the value of ‘social justice’, building an inclusive and caring community as they embrace the diversity of people and cultures and place themselves at the service of society.

Schools of Quality build an inclusive and caring school community, based on the value of social justice. They are inviting and inclusive as they endeavour to reach out particularly to the socially disadvantaged and the needy. They ensure that their policies and teaching practices reflect the principles of social justice – equity, access, participation, equal opportunities – thus modeling a more just and democratic society (Duignan, 2005). This involves a perspective that stretches beyond the school gate to encapsulate an active care and collective responsibility for the education system as a whole and all the students within it (Lumby & Morrison, 2006).

Principle 2.4: Schools promote and model the value of ‘excellence’, ensuring the highest quality of teaching and learning and aiming at the very best outcomes for all students.

In Schools of Quality, school leaders strive to achieve the very best outcomes for students by ensuring the highest quality of ongoing professional learning for teachers and authentic learning for students in an ethos of high expectations and strong support. At the same time, teachers recognize the need to respond to students’ ability differences and to provide educational approaches tailored to their individual needs. Discipline and hard work on the part of both students and teachers are seen as prerequisite conditions to achieve expectations at all times. Although the academic development of the child is valued as a priority, ‘creativity’ is nurtured within the curriculum, and the mental, physical and spiritual developments are concurrently catered for.

Element 3: Ethics

Principle 3.1: School leaders and teachers are challenged by the ethic of ‘authenticity’ to bring their deepest principles, beliefs, values and convictions to their work, and to act in truth and integrity in all their interactions as humans with the good of others in view.

In Schools of Quality, school leaders have an obligation to promote a reciprocal relationship with teachers in which they express their own authentic selves while respecting and affirming how teachers construct authenticity in their lives and professional work (Bredeson, 2005). The ethic of authenticity places an obligation on school leaders to appreciate and affirm teachers’ uniqueness and needs while

focused on building individual and collective capacity through professional development. Leaders in Schools of Quality require truth and integrity in its entire staff, promote authentic learning, and develop school work systems that challenge teachers and students to engage with society in ways that promote authenticity.

Principle 3.2: School leaders and teachers are challenged by the ethic of ‘responsibility’ to act in ways that acknowledge their personal accountability for their actions, and to create and promote conditions for authentic learning experiences for students.

In Schools of Quality, principals feel a primary responsibility, as leaders and educators, for their own actions and for the authenticity of the learning of students in their schools. Principals are therefore seen to be responsible or accountable to themselves and to the people making the decisions related to that learning, as well as to one-another. To this end, they take responsibility to create environments conducive for transforming learning and the persons making the decisions related to that learning.

Principle 3.3: School leaders and teachers are empowered by the ethic of ‘presence’ to act with genuine authenticity and responsibility, linking them strongly to the school’s stakeholders in the pursuit of quality.

In Schools of Quality, schools leaders manifest their ethic of presence in ways that are ‘affirming’, ‘critical’ and ‘enabling’ (Starratt, 2004). Principals indicate an affirming presence to teachers in the form of clear messages to them that they are valued, encouraged, and would not be judged or sanctioned as they make themselves vulnerable to new learning and take risks to experience novel teaching practices. Principals’ critical presence means that they are leading at the forefront by example in the sense of enabling and supporting shared decision-making, responsibility and accountability, while showing their human side in interpersonal relationships with staff. Principals’ enabling presence is more proactive in the sense that they are directly involved with teachers in ways that are truly open and engaging to build specific capacities (knowledge and skills), aimed at authentic teaching and learning of students.

Element 4: Teacher leadership

Principle 4: Teachers transform the learning of students by putting into practice their values and ethics as instructional and curriculum leaders, and by creating conditions for authentic learning of students.

Teachers as ‘leaders’ play a central role in influencing student performance and outcomes. Improvements in student outcomes are more likely when teachers are empowered in decisions related to teaching, learning and assessment (Silins & Mulford, 2002). In Schools of Quality, teachers are instructional and curriculum leaders committed to the values and ethics underpinning the development of transformed students. They contribute actively in the creation of authentic learning experiences for students, whereby teaching and learning processes are continually constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed (Starratt, 2004) to satisfy the particular needs and expectations of the students, and “with a view to elevating and enhancing their life chances and choices” (Duignan, 2007, p. 4).

Element 5: Authentic learning

Principle 5: Authentic learning takes place in schools, engaging students in deep, meaningful and purposeful learning experiences, whereby teaching and learning processes are constantly transformed so as to realize the vision of transformed students.

In Schools of Quality, authentic learning typically focuses on real-world, complex problems and their solutions, using role-playing exercises, problem-solving activities, case studies, and participation in virtual communities of practice. Going beyond academic learning and outcomes and the need to meet the requirements and expectations of parents and other stakeholders, authentic learning intentionally engages students in enriching learning processes and experiences within current frameworks for teaching and learning to enable them to better assimilate, retain and transfer knowledge. Learning becomes as much social as cognitive, and as much concrete as abstract. Authentic learning provides the opportunity for students to examine the task from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives, to think in interdisciplinary terms, to make choices and to reflect on their learning. There is no place for superficial performance based merely on formulaic understanding of the subject/object of study (Starratt, 2004).

Element 6: Transformed students

Principle 6: Students are transformed into fuller, richer and deeper human beings as a result of their authentic learning experiences supporting their full human development.

In Schools of Quality, transformed students are intellectually curious, excited by learning, and motivated to persevere despite initial disorientation or frustration. They have the flexibility to work across disciplinary and cultural boundaries to generate innovative solutions. Although foundational skills (reading, writing, mathematics, etc.) remain essential, students immersed in authentic learning activities cultivate transferable skills that modern society and the world of work nowadays demand. Transformed learners go beyond being technically competent to being able to get things done, demonstrate ethics and integrity, and work well individually and with others in teams. They are ‘creative’ thinkers and problem solvers, independent, proficient, optimistic and resilient. They take responsibility for their own learning. They are committed to their ongoing mental, physical, intellectual and spiritual development and to lifelong learning.

Closing comments

Principals’ responses in this study indicate that TQM discourses are accepted and even applauded, but their fulfillment in practice will require considerable adjustments to current implicit leadership practices. However, education authorities reaffirm the government’s vision of Mauritius as a competitive player in the global economic arena. Appropriately, this research presents opportunities for school leaders, teachers, Ministry of Education authorities and policy-makers to drive school improvement initiatives continually so as to contribute to an efficient and dynamic workforce. Significantly, it is an original attempt to relate TQM, morality and ethics in educational leadership, thus addressing a perceived literature gap.

While many of the guiding principles of success for continual school improvement embedded in the proposed framework are already being embraced and practised across schools in Ontario, it is hoped that they may provide a further basis for future discussion and reflection. They would be worthy of debate in re-imagining public education in Ontario in the quest for increased student achievement and well-being. Importantly, the research broadens our understanding of the direct and indirect impact of school leadership on improved student outcomes from a burgeoning ethical perspective in education.

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