

# Mauritius: Portrait of a Visionary School Leader. The Principal in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Abdool Rashid Jogee

**Abstract:** *This research is about what constitutes a visionary school leader. We go back to the traditional principal, his characteristic and what prevent him from becoming a visionary leader. We find that there has been a traditional way of organising leadership which is hierarchical, top - to - bottom and has rendered principals generally autocratic. This is the case in Mauritius. But, since the beginning of this century, there has been a shift in paradigm. It has been found that a shared, distributed leadership is able to change the atmosphere of a school and impact positively on the performance of students. A principal as effective as he tries to be, cannot turn himself into a visionary leader if the structure of the school does not allow him to do so. We have drawn up the portrait of a visionary leader in Mauritius and shown that others cannot reach that level only because they are denied the possibility, because of the organisation of the school.*

**Keywords:** Educational Leadership, School Leadership, Educational Leadership and Management, Educational Leadership Styles, School Heads and Principals Leadership Styles

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of this century, there has been a transformation in the management of the school. The principal is no more seen as an administrator. He has become a leader. His role has become quite complex. There is now greater focus on accountability. His performance is judged, among other factors, on student achievement. So many responsibilities rest on his shoulders that he has no more time to perform successfully his work alone. He has to rely on the help of all his staff.

Until recently, that has not been the case. The principal was seen as the sole leader. His leadership could not be contested. He decided and communicated his decisions to the staff. They had to put into practice his instructions without being able to challenge him. Many principals, nowadays, realise that the teaching staff possess quite a number of qualities which are lying dormant. Since the start of this century, there has been a paradigm shift from the traditional way of considering leadership. A new concept has emerged and is making its way in school leadership. It is called Distributed Leadership. The pioneers of this concept are Peter Gronn, James Spillane, Alma Harris.

Peter Gronn (2000), says that distributed leadership is a collective process, a group activity dormant. If principals are able to use these qualities, the climate of the school could be changed favourably. Greater collaborations will have an impact on student achievement.

For James Spillane (2006), distributed leadership is the ability to delegate to other staff. It is impossible to an effective leader without the assistance of others.

Alma Harris (2005), says:  
“Distributed leadership builds the capacity of change and improvement. Through distributed leadership, expertise at all levels can be mobilised. School Leadership has a greater influence on schools and pupils when it is widely distributed”.

## 1) The Principal in the Schools of Mauritius

### 1 (a) The Setting

Mauritius is a small island in the Indian Ocean at the cross roads of Africa and Asia. It has an area of 720 sq kms and a population of some 1.2 million people. It does not possess any natural resources, but, through sheer hard work, it has lifted itself to the top of African countries concerning economic development. It has a population made up of people coming from Europe, Africa and Asia. They live in harmony and peace. The language is Creole but the official language is English although the majority of the population speaks French. People in the countryside speak Bhojpuri, one of the several dialects of India.

The educational system is quite developed. Education is compulsory up to sixteen. The Government has made pre - primary, primary, secondary, tertiary education free. Transport to and from school is free, and a meal is given everyday to needy students. So also, books and copy books.

The Government has made education its priority. 13% of the budget is devoted to education. Schools are found at walking distance in towns and villages. The buildings are modern and of high standard, well - equipped with modern laboratory, library, workshop, playground. All the teachers are graduated and trained pedagogically. Modern methods of teaching are implemented. Ministers come up regularly with reforms to increase the quality of teaching. Without natural resources, the authorities rely heavily on the country's manpower for the economic development of the country. Education in Mauritius is considered to be of high quality. It has successfully been used to increase the standard of living of the population. So much so, that before COVID 19, the World Bank classified Mauritius as a Highly Developed Economy with a Per Capita Income of \$12, 800.

The tradition of the Headmaster has been inherited from the British System. The British, for one a half centuries, possessed Mauritius as a colony. Up to now, the principal in Mauritian Schools is a copy of the British Headmaster. He is in charge without contest. He is an austere person, feared and respected at school. He communicates decisions of the

Ministry and Teachers are bound to put them into practice. He acts as an autocratic leader.

If we go into the Constitution of the Country, we would be able to understand why it is so. The system is totally centralised. There is no autonomy given to schools. The Constitution gives all powers to the Minister of Education to design and develop education, to mobilise resources and is the sole one accountable to Parliament. So, he directs and gives principals the ability to put into practice his decisions but does not give the possibility of contesting. The Ministry has become a fortress, a silo which all reformers butt against.

Many reforms have been applied. Schools have been modernised, new textbooks have been written, pedagogy has changed, teachers are being trained on an on - going basis, and principals are having the possibility to study modern practice of management. And yet, since quite a long time, there is wastage of 30% in the results of students at the end of secondary schooling. Why is it so? Most probably it is the archaic way in which schools are run. There is no sharing of leadership with teachers

According to the Wallace Foundation (2004), "*Leadership is second only to teaching among school influence on students' success*". This Leadership cannot be exercised alone. Innovation and growth will come when principals prepare other teachers to become leaders and influence them (Spillan, 2010). The principal needs to put up structures that favour leadership of teachers (Sherer, 2008). Unless he is able to do this, it will be impossible for him to manage the workload. Management of schools has become too complex. He is expected to carry out day - to - day management which is quite complicated, go into classroom to watch teachers at work, give feedback, build teachers' capacity, be accountable for results, and establish relationships with all stake - holders. The principal's work has become an impossible one. It is, therefore, normal that teachers participate in the leadership of schools.

But, in Mauritius, the tradition has established that principals are the sole leaders of schools. Teachers put into practice the instructions that principals have received from the ministry. No one at school is free to take the initiative. Is there a possibility to change the situation? A culture of autocratic leadership which has been established since two centuries cannot be changed overnight. Culture is a difficult element to change.

And yet, if we want to bring innovation, change in Mauritian schools, leadership has to keep pace with the changes successfully brought in many countries. Since the start of this century, there have been many empirical researches that have shown that Distributed Leadership improve teaching and learning, and so, has positive impact on students' performance. (Harris, 2005; Spillan, 2005; Lovett, 2018; Sebastien et al, 2017; Tian et al, 2016; Ingersoll et al, 2017; Karadag, 2020.).

The principal has to build a network of leaders (Scribner et al, 2007) to face the daily challenges. And so, he has to create opportunities for teachers to participate in decision -

making. He has to make use of the expertise of all his staff. When leadership is shared, it favours decentralisation. And decentralisation has the power to impact positively on teaching and learning. It prevents schools from remaining static. Many empirical researches have shown that communities reject strong centralisation (Tan, 2007). Decentralisation brings the community closer to the school and enables stake - holders to participate in decision - making. This collaboration will definitely create changes for the improvement of schools.

## 2) Distributed Leadership.

It is now agreed that leadership should be spread across all the actors of an Institution. The leader needs to give opportunities to participate to everyone. He is the one who is going to distribute leadership (Gronn, 2002) and ensure that everyone works together, collaborates, builds favourable relationships, solves problems together, takes risks together.

It is important that the principal builds teams. Watson and Scribner (2007) assert that it is important to create a network of leaders to initiate successful change. The staff will have formal and informal roles. They will share their expertise to bring success to the organisation. A vision for the school will be built collaboratively. Teachers will participate in redesigning the organisation for its success. All this can be brought about if the principal is prepared to develop the leadership of the staff.

(Elmore, 2002; Ellison & Hayes (2009) assert:

*"Successful administrators develop teachers' innate leadership talents as they move beyond a hierarchical and authoritarian structure leadership"*.

### 2 (a) Good Relationships

Good relationships and trust are important when leadership is shared with all. Good relationship is the root of successful education. It is an important element to achieve aim and objectives. Good relationships will affect positive educational outcomes. Teachers, who have empathy for their students, easily solve bad behaviours. The teacher needs to establish good relationship with his colleagues.

### 2 (b) Trust

The success of an organisation is built on trust. Trust unleashes talents, initiatives, creativity, energy, passion. It enhances teamwork, collaboration. It improves efficiency, engagement, productivity, loyalty. It is important to have honest and open communication at all levels in a school. It is the duty of the principal to see to it that all these conditions flourish in order to create an efficient school. He plays a key role to establish distributed leadership in his school.

### 3) Portrait of A Visionary Principal In Mauritius.

According to Le Sourd, and Grady (1991), visionary principals are outstanding leaders. They are dedicated to the realisations of their goals; they have strong beliefs, convictions, and values. They are innovative. They know that staff assistance is necessary to realise the vision. They are always positive. They have an image of a better school in the future.

A visionary leader is able to influence others so that they achieve the objectives set (Shaleh, 2006). He should be able

to motivate, inspire (Wahyudi, 2009). His style should be loved and appreciated.

According to Nanus (1992), a visionary leader should have the following characteristics:

Ability to communicate effectively, guide, encourage, motivate, relate with people, react to opportunities, influence people, be able to develop every challenge, to anticipate the future. He needs to have intuitiveness and imagination.

For Kahans (2002), a visionary leader must show capability, ability, outstanding skills to bring about success and victory in the future. He should be able to anticipate challenges and opportunities.

For Komaria (2006), a visionary leader should be able to create formulate, communicate and implement ideal thoughts. He should always aim future targets (Marno, 2007).

For Nasir (2012), a visionary leader has the following characteristics:

He has a clear view of a vision and develops his organisation based on that vision. He shows confidence and is ready to take risks. He is able to motivate people to work hard, to formulate a clear, motivating vision, commitment to the organisation. He shows ability to change vision into action, shows professionalism, builds relationship with others, is innovative, creative.

For Mc Laughlin (2001), a visionary leader shows integrity, energy, vitality, has positive inspirations for the future and a clear direction, shows good relationship to create sympathy.

For Brown (2014), the visionary leader has the following competencies:

A clear vision, futuristic thinking, foresight, is proactive, has creative thinking, takes risks, builds coalition, encourages continuous learning, and embraces change.

According to Mulyasa (2007), a visionary leader should be honest, confident, responsible, emotionally stable, takes risks and be a model for others.

Ghiselli (2006) says that the visionary leader must have supervisory ability, is achievement - oriented, smart, creative, explicit, be able to solve problems, self - confident and innovative.

For Wahyosumidjo (2007) a visionary leader should create warmth and togetherness, provide security in the school, provide advice and suggestion to improve performance, motivation, provide support, inspires others, is caring and supporting.

What we have seen of the characteristics of a visionary principal, leads us to look at visionary leaders in Mauritius. I am in a very good position to consider this because I myself have had a long experience in education - 35 years as a teacher and 22 years as a principal in various secondary schools.

Mauritian principals are good but very few can be called visionary. Not that they lack capacity, but the organisation of schools prevents them from jumping the last step which would project them into the field of visionary leadership. Most schools are controlled by the Ministry of Education. The administration is centralised. A scheme of work has been established which describes what is allowed and what is prohibited. The Minister is given the power to have total control of state schools. The principal is put into a mould from which he cannot escape. He receives directives which he has to put into practice. He is not allowed to take initiatives. In these circumstances, his development is limited. He can become very efficient up to a certain extent. Within the field of his power, Mauritian principals are quite efficient.

And yet, there are a few principals who have been able to escape from this situation. They have simply refused to be the principal of a State Secondary School. They have refused to be locked in the straightjacket of the Ministry of Education. They have opened their own schools, private and fee paying. But they are very few. Education is free in Mauritius. Not many people are rich enough to afford sending their wards to private schools.

#### **4) An Institution Which Is Moving Towards A New Professionalism.**

I have had the opportunity of visiting a private school which has made great strides to become an ideal school practising the philosophy of new professionalism.

It is led by a principal who has had quite a long experience in education having taught and led schools for 55 years, who knows how to lead and manage a school. He can be categorised as a visionary leader. I was able to have a long conversation with him. What he told me is confirmed by conversations I have had with members of the staff.

This person, who has wished to remain anonymous and whom I shall call Dr. M, has refused to be limited by the administrative constraints of the Ministry and has opened his own school and put into practice his vision. This principal has a presence which commands respect. He is a tall man, well - built and quite well dressed. He holds two doctorates from a prestigious American University. He elaborated to me on his vision of education. His motto is “**Excellence Above All**”. And he strives to reach excellence continually, strives to succeed. It can be said that he ticks most of the boxes of the characteristics of a visionary leader.

The School that I had the opportunity to visit is quite tidy. An environment conducive to teaching and learning has been created. The staff and students seem happy. The students are quite disciplined and very polite.

The principal explained to me that he continually communicates his vision to the staff, students and parents. He prods students and staff to do their best to accomplish the goals that have been set up. He makes everyone understand that we are living in a period of continuous change, and, therefore, it is quite important to adapt. It is the only way to survive.

Dr M possesses strong convictions, beliefs and values. As we said, he communicates effectively, guides, encourages, and motivates staff and students. He has the capacity, ability and skills to bring success. He can anticipate challenges and opportunities. His vision is quite clear, and he develops his institutions based on that vision. He shows integrity, energy, vitality. He develops positive relationships. He has foresight, and is always ready to take risks. He is achievement - oriented, self - confident, innovative.

Although Dr M seems to be a tough person, yet he is quite open. He shares his vision of education to the members of the staff and encourages them to air their views. If he finds that any proposition is valuable, he is prepared to implement it. And so, the staff participate in the running of the school.

The curriculum in Mauritius is centralised. But this has not prevented this principal to give to the students a different kind of education. Teaching is not merely academic. Subjects like Law, Psychology, Sociology, Design and Technology, Thinking Skills, Drama, Music, Media Studies have been introduced. The curriculum is open. Combinations are not restricted. Students do not have to follow a strict combination. Various combinations are offered and students are even allowed to offer their own combinations. Each session lasts 75 minutes. This gives ample time to the teacher to elaborate on his subjects and invite the participation of students and give, where necessary, individual attention.

Teaching is a preparation for life. The whole aim is to turn students into good citizens of the country. A philosophy which will allow them to succeed in life permeates teaching in this institution. The aim is to render the child autonomous, independent. He is taught to think, to find solutions by himself. It aims to reach “*Learning for sustained ability, a whole school commitment that helps the school and the community to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and practices needed to take decisions which are compatible with sustainable future in a just equitable world*”. (The Standard for Leadership and Management: Supporting Leadership and Management Development, Dec.2012, General Teaching Council for Scotland).

The teaching in this Institution aims at developing intellectual, social, ethical growth, a culture of trust, respect, enquiry, moving towards excellence. Trust is a very important element to achieve effective leadership. One of the aims of Dr M has been to build a climate of trust through good interpersonal relationships, listening, communication, collaboration (Tunji, 2022). The principal wants to motivate students and teachers to set high expectations, to target 100% pass for all students. The school goal is to prepare young people for the future.

The teachers, as we said, are young, dedicated, dynamic, and, although inexperienced want to learn and improve. They are continually coached by the principal who dialogues with them and pushes them higher and higher (Davies and Davies, 2009). They are eager to collaborate.

Dr M has been successful in aligning the staff to his strategy; seeking their commitment and capacities, and

encouraging higher levels of personal commitments to organisational goals (Leithwood et al, 1999).

## 2. Conclusion

It can be said that the institution created by Dr M, has moved and still moving towards a New Professionalism which will change completely the image of schools in Mauritius. He has, as Leithwood et al, asserted in “Successful Leadership; What It Is and How It Influences People’s Learning”.

- a) Built a shared vision and sense of purpose.
- b) Developed Teachers.
- c) Believed in putting children ahead of personal and political interests.
- d) Is resilient and persistent in goals but adaptable to context and people.

He has clear “*priorities and well - developed management structures and systems*”. (NCSL 2007).

Dr M has understood that it is important to accept change and to participate in the change process. Technological Developments compel the whole society, and especially education, to adapt and implement change (Church et al, 2002). Everyone expects better quality. With global information, it becomes important to adapt rapidly.

It can be said that Dr M is a visionary leader with a new type of leadership. This is absolutely necessary for teaching to innovate and progress.

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