Maldivian Perspectives: Principals' Leadership, Teachers' Self-efficacy and Obligations to Students

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Abstract: *The Maldives has achieved the first-generation objective of providing widespread access to primary education through rapid enrolment expansion. However, various sources show that education eminence in the Maldives modest and fabulous transformation of schools at all levels to address the industrial revolutions are needed. School principals and teachers are the immediate groups capable of refining the education system backed by the government. The high-performance support of teachers as the spearhead of educational activities in the schools is essential. Indeed positive professional self-efficacy is critical for teachers in approaching complex tasks and activities to improve students' performances. Hence, there is a need to concentrate and bring forward the prominent role of principals' leadership and teachers' self-efficacy that led to the most commitment to students in public schools of Maldives. This paper aims to point out the pressing need for educational uplift and propose research issues in this area to enrich the present body of knowledge focusing on the Maldivian context. Practical and theoretical implications within the education sector are discernible in this paper.*

Keywords: Public school, principal leadership, student performance, teacher self-efficacy, Maldives
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1. Introduction

The Republic of Maldives is a group of islands scattered in the Indian Ocean, consisting of 1192 coral islands situated across the equator. The Maldives lies southwest of Sri Lanka and India. The length of the archipelago is 750km, with the widest point measuring 120km. The islands are low-lying and small, with an average size of the islands being 1 square kilometre. There are 187 inhabited islands, 853 uninhabited islands and 164 resorts (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The Maldives is a developing country, and the economy focuses on tourism and the fishing industry. The school system of Maldives consists of government, private, partnership and community-based schools. Maldivian government schools cater for students from foundation to higher secondary education. The schools' enrolment ranges from 22 to 2000 plus students, depending on the island's population. Schools in the Greater Male' area, including the capital Male' City, are highly populated. Remarkably, the Republic of the Maldives ranked high for literacy rates in South Asia, reaching ninety per cent in 2017. The medium of instruction of all the schools except one Arabic medium school is English. In the 1960s, English medium schools began to establish in the Maldives. Apart from the subjects of

Islamic Studies, Dhivehi (the study of national language) and the Quran, all the other school subjects are taught in English. (UNESCO-IBE, 2011).

The Constitution of Maldives (2008) positions that every person has the right to get an education, and discrimination is prohibited. The state shall freely offer primary and secondary education. Besides, higher education opportunities shall be generally accessible to all citizens (Article 36, Maldives Constitution). Today, the government of Maldives afford 12 years of compulsory education and 14 years of free education for all. Based on the records, only 12% of the students cannot complete the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level and Higher Secondary Certificate examinations (Ministry of Education, 2014, 2019). The Maldivian population under the age of 18 years enjoys free education that includes preschool on all inhabited islands. The government provides all the necessary teaching and learning resources with a considerable proportion of the national annual budget for education. The GCE O' and GCE A'levels examination fees are also taken care of by the government to ensure no one is destitute for equal education (Quality Assurance Department, 2018).

Some of the remarkable successes of the education sector of the Maldives in establishing a modern public education system across the country are visible in the Situation Assessment Report of the Most Disadvantaged Schools in the Maldives. One success mentioned is providing access to pre-primary, primary and secondary education across the Maldives. Introducing the first national curriculum in 1984, revising it from 2009 to 2014 and introducing a new curriculum is also a tremendous success, as stated in this report. Developing textbooks, training teachers, building new schools, and upgrading and refurbishing several existing schools are remarkable successes. The Maldives achieving a literacy rate of 89% in 2000 was another notable success compared to other countries in South East Asia (QAD and UNICEF, 2019).

Principals and other school leaders play a significant role in student performance, education and social well-being. The principal leadership affects the teachers' performance and, ultimately, the students are proper connectivity commonly viewed in the field of education. Bartoletti & Connelly (2013) stated that great schools exist with great leaders, which is true in many circumstances. Principals should be educational visionaries. They should be instructional leaders who are very familiar with the curriculum and acts as curriculum leaders. They need to be assessment experts and disciplinarians who help build the community. To Zepeda (2014), instructional leadership necessitates "projecting, promoting, and holding steadfast to the vision; garnering and allocating resources; communicating progress; and supporting the people, programs, services, and activities implemented to achieve the school's vision" (p. 4). In simple words, instructional leadership involves forming dynamic school learning systems while tailoring them toward a national education mission. Fascinatingly, the Maldivian Ministry of Education realises school principals' importance in becoming instructional leaders. It provides a broader space for the principals to be actively involved in the instructional development of the schools. The aspiration toward raising students' creditability has pushed the need for instructional leadership practices at the Maldivian schools is undeniable. Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms (2011) believe that teachers and principals should work together for school improvement, and it is not merely the complete responsibility of the appointed principals and administrators. Principals are to lead their schools, work collaboratively with other staff, and share their mission with the entire school workforce. It is vital, thus, to explore and understand the indenture between the principals' leadership role, teachers' self-efficacy, and commitment to student performance.

2. Issues in the Maldivian Schools

The Maldivian islands disperse over 3,500 square miles and are known as one of the highly geographically spread countries in the biosphere (Bonofer, 2017). It makes the provision of all levels of school education a more considerable challenge besides being costly. However, education plays a crucial role in human capital development, and there is an urgency to develop the human capital of the Maldives. Education is of high priority for the government of the Maldives and the community. As a result, the government's budget for the education sector in 2019 and 2020 arises (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Parents and communities spend a vast sum of money on education-related activities, apart from the government. Despite all these heavy investments in education, it is noticeable that students' achievements are average, perhaps not to the stakeholders' expectations. Students' academic grades, skills, and social values seem not to parallel the stakeholders' hopes (Ali, 2017). Most of the students who complete the ordinary level (Grade 10) quit their education because they could not join the advanced group due to poor academic grades. According to the Ministry of Education of Maldives (2019), enrolment statistics are highest at the Primary levels (Grades 1-7) each year. High access to pre-primary education is one of the significant achievements in the education sector. The participation rate at the primary level increased since schools implemented the attendance policy, which the Ministry of Education introduced in the year 2015. As a result, 'children at risk' are identified, and taken actions to reduce the dropouts from the school system (MOE, 2019). But, student enrolments decrease as it moves to higher levels of education in the Maldives. Decrease in secondary classes and thus affecting the intake of students at the higher education levels are happening rampantly and worrying the nation. Less than 50% of the students who complete grade 10 are eligible to study in secondary higher education. The gender disparity is significant at this level, and there was a sharp drop in male student enrollment, as mentioned in the Education Sector Analysis of Maldives (2019). Fluctuations in the students' intake are common, but sharp decreases in fresh intake and enrollments need deep thinking and remedial action to curb the future dropping of human talents.

The Maldives' national curriculum emphasises holistic education to equip the young nations to face reality and contests of their future livings. They need to be fitted with the advances in knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and competencies to engage with the evolving world. However, most of the schools in the Maldives are focusing on improving the students' academic results with moderate attention to instilling advances in holistic education. As the leaders of schools, tremendous, transformational decisions have to be made by principals as they have to strategically plan to strive for a balance between improving the examination results and developing students' character (Shiuna & Sadiq, 2013). Students were not prepared for any specific field at the secondary level of education due to a lack of competency development. The authors also mentioned that the Maldives' teaching skewed toward scoring examinations and obtaining better ratings, whereby parents and teachers trade off examination grades over skill-based learning. Decades ago, McComas and Abraham (2012) asserted that simplicity, sequencing, questioning strategies and mental well-being influence student perceptions, motivation, and the achievement of educational outcomes. Therefore, teachers need professional support from the principals to improve the lacking area. Reports found that some principals generally lacked dynamics as instructional leaders and effective school managers. The importance of school leadership and the principals' role in school perfection is visible in many external review reports. Recommendations for continuous professional development are one of the key agendas for principals, widely spoken about (QAD, 2018).

Aturupane and Shojo (2012) also stressed that the quality in every sphere of education is a significant policy challenge that the Maldivians face. The country has successfully achieved the first-generation objectives of providing widespread access to primary education through the rapid expansion of student enrollments. These authors clearly stated that evidence from various sources shows that education eminence in the Maldives needs continuous attention. A situation assessment based on the 55 schools identified as the most disadvantaged school in the Maldives in QAD and UNICEF reports. The purpose was to develop a strategy and an action plan to support these schools—two significant issues that require immediate intervention. One of the highlighted issues is the lack of attention to accountability and regular monitoring by school leaders. The second issue is the inadequate skills of school heads in critical aspects of school leadership. These two issues are within leadership and management (QAD & UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, it is evident that the principals and other leaders are not fulfilling their roles and responsibilities to the utmost. These would affect the students' academic and social achievements.

Yusoff (2021) states that the principals lack futuristic leadership practices, poor communication skills, and a lack of knowledge on prioritising activities. Norhaini (2006) has supported this idea and stated that in some situations, principals appear to be less proactive, less innovative, often lose focus, and often lose focus on management goals. Also mentioned, principals are not open and welcoming to changes and behave passively in dealing with problems even through routine management. Yusoff (2021) noted that the findings of his study showed that principals failed to provide an appropriate model and influence teachers' innovative work behaviour. The principals must be teachers' source of new ideas for professional learning. This study also revealed principals stimulate the teachers' intellectuals by making them re-evaluate their assumptions about the tasks performed at school. They inspire them with new ideas, encourage them to reflect on current practices towards students, and relook their practices and teachers to learn with each other. Issues found in the Maldivian context might match with other countries. Thus, the research agendas proposed in this paper may induce the interest of the academic fraternity.

3. Principals' leadership, teachers' self-efficacy and students' performance

Principals' effective, shared leadership is vital to school evolvement, engagements, and students' holistic performance. Principals are responsible for ensuring the quality of education provided to the students. Principals need to empower the teachers as teachers are the leading key players in educating the young minds of students. As stated in Education Dive (2021), principals can be influential leaders by empowering teachers to do their best. Providing feedback on the teachers' work is a vital role of the principals. Observing the teachers' work and giving feedback after looking at the asssement is helpful for the teachers grow and engage in the world of reality developing day by day. Miller (2021) states that providing feedback to the teachers is one of the critical roles of the principals and assistant principals. He mentioned that this was not successful as they usually do this through classroom observations and conducting individual conferences. The concerns raised included that principals are out of touch and do not visit the classrooms enough to provide accurate feedback. Therefore, the school leaders need to be instructional leaders to support the teachers and enable them to learn and grow. Literature redundantly states that the school principals are instructional leaders in leading curricular instruction in modern school environments (Abdulla et al., 2013; Chair et al., 2019).

The principals of schools at any level are the most responsible change agent for the students, teachers, parents and the community by large. Teachers' involvement is enhanced when a supportive, knowledgeable leader motivates the teachers and students to higher standards. The principal must be a role model who has a variety of leadership styles (Brolund, 2016). Instructional leadership is one of the highly prefered models, a pathway for setting and communicating a clear vision and mission for the school stakeholders. It supports the teachers through multilevel coaching, mentoring and related professional competency enrichments. Chair et al. (2019) stated that principals should always remain the lead learner in the community they serve. He highlighted how principals' leadership-learning implications and expectations occur. One way is to continue and expand instructional leadership knowledge, especially in Professional Learning Communities. Consider creative uses of staffing, innovative professional learning for staff, and strategic hiring. The third way he has discussed is building and believing in a culture of school pride and high expectations. By remaining a leader and learners in the community, principals can be role models for the teachers to grow in the field and reach the aspiration of argumentative student dynamics required for industrial resolutions.

Principals as instructional leaders need to provide real-time professional development for the teachers. Coaching and mentoring are very helpful for the teachers to grow professionally. Carraway & Young (2014) believes that teachers who undergo superior coaching are more likely to practice new advanced skills and embed them in their classroom. Noted in the School-Based Professional Development (SBPD) Policy of Maldives, the principals must plan and execute the SBPD programs in the school and monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the programs. The principals require to participate in all these activities. Each professional staff is responsible for participating in 15 hours of professional development courses within a year.

Furthermore, principals must support teachers and continuously encourage them to improve their teaching practices continually. The principal's instructional leadership roles would ultimately bring a positive change to the teachers and affect the students' school performance. Brolund (2016) stated that principals acclaimed as instructional leaders care for their teachers in their professional practices by facilitating career development opportunities. They also help teachers by providing never-ending mentoring to ensure best practices are in their school shrine in reality. When principals are instructional leaders, they positively affect the students' learning outcomes in their schools and the best values spread across the nation.

As school leaders, principals need to build trusting relationships with the staff as this would help the principals to nurture the changes he wants to see from the school. Waller (2021) has discussed six key ways to build relationships. Being authentic with the staff and sharing their interests, hobbies, and passions will allow relating to the team as it humanises the leader. Sharing the leader's goal, having open conversations with the staff, smiling and bringing joy to them would help the leader build trust and good relationships. Being present for the staff and the leader's visibility is another crucial part that would allow the leader to be there for the team when they need it. Also, responding to the concerns of the staff and finding ways to acknowledge and then act on those requests would help build trust with the team. Listening and taking action is another meaningful way as this would impact the work of the staff. Showing the staff that the leader is attending by taking action is essential. School leaders must know their team very well. Learning their skills, their interests, about their family and knowing many other things would help to develop the relationship. Sharing the decision-making process with the staff is also helpful in establishing a good relationship with the team. Many decisions are taken daily in schools, including large and small decisions. Hence, it's essential to involve the staff in the decision making whether the findings are small or large. These would help the

leaders to empower the team. Accepting and apologising for the mistakes is another way the principals can build a good relationship with the staff. As the principals are also human beings and make mistakes, admitting the mistakes, apologising and correcting the errors would help forge a relationship built on trust.

Teachers working with instructional leaders enroots committed teachers to students' achievement. These teachers are tuned to be concerned with their students' accomplishments and struggle for their betterment. They find ways and means to keep their students growing holistically. According to Mart (2013), passionate teachers are committed to their student's achievement. To Mart, teacher commitment evolves as it is multidimensional. Some external factors may influence the commitment degree to the school, students, professional knowledge base and career continuance. Effective teachers are exceptionally favourable toward teaching. They enjoy teaching and engage the students genuinely.

Thien et al. (2014) conducted a study in Malaysia with a sample of 600 teachers from primary schools. The survey outcomes supported teacher commitment as a multidimensional concept found in the literature. The four significant dimensions highlighted in the study are commitments to students, teaching, school, and profession. The authors conclude that teachers need to be committed to these four dimensions to improve the students' performance. Teachers' commitment affects the students in all ways. The success or failure depends on the teacher as the teacher is the critical player in the school who is responsible for the teaching/learning process. Students are committed and perform much better if the teacher is committed to championing students' agendas. Elementary school teachers had significantly higher levels of commitment to school (Thien et al., 2014). Undoubtedly, committed teachers engage in school strategic plans, work progressively in activities and help the school achieve the critical performance indicators. These teachers remain working within the school and dedicate to going beyond the projected expectations (Yildiz & Celik (2017).

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation. Cherry (2020) described these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave and feel. According to the author, self-efficacy is part of the self-system that comprises a person's attitudes, abilities and cognitive skills. Career-oriented individuals' self-efficacy evolves throughout work-life as professional people acquire innovative skills, experiences, and knowledge and competencies directly linked to job performances. Bandura believes that self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, social modelling, social persuasion and psychological responses (Cherry, 2020). Our belief in our ability helps us achieve what we want. It affects the way we think, the way we act and how we feel about the world. Self-efficacy influences our determination and helps us to achieve our goals. Therefore, the teachers' self-efficacy or their beliefs in their ability to fulfil their role as a teacher influences their performance, affecting the students' performance. To Winn (2018), teacher self-efficacy is a critical factor in a teacher's success in the classroom. In current conceptualisations, a teacher's sense of self-efficacy relates mainly to teaching tasks, particularly within the classroom context (Friedman & Kass, 2002). Friedman (2003) states that self-efficacy is defined operationally based on three-dimensional conceptualisation. Task, relations, and organisation. Besides, Fairuz et al. (2013) believe that teacher self-efficacy affects the innovative work behaviour of the teachers.

As stated in the vision of the national curriculum of Maldives, schools are responsible for preparing the students for life by providing holistic education. Helping the students be on the right track and do the righteous things would lead them to develop good behaviour. Schools must help the students develop the required values ethically and morally. If the students do not

develop holistically, their future and dependents will be affected. They will be unemployed if they do not have the required knowledge and skills to compete in the industrial evolutions. These will lead them to dissatisfaction and engage in unwanted activities, such as drugs, social violence, corruption, etc. Therefore, the principal role in ensuring the quality of education provided by the schools is significant. Besides, a constant reminder that students who persistently show up with discipline hitches often drop out of school and become involved in unpreferable social crimes. Hence there is a need to find out the underlined causes of the poor performance of students while addressing the associations between the poor performance, principals' leadership, teachers' self-efficacy and commitment to students to be reached. The following research questions are helpful for future research: 1) does principals' leadership influence teachers' commitment to students in secondary schools of Maldives? 2) does teachers' self-efficacy influence teachers' commitment to students? And 3) does teachers' self-efficacy mediate the relationship between principals' leadership and teachers' commitment to students' academic and social developments? This research would be helpful for the present and future principals, school leaders, policymakers and the Ministry of Education. Therefore, the need is to reform the schools to educate the children, build their confidence, shape their personalities and prepare them for life, as mentioned in the vision of the national curriculum of Maldives. Hence, schools need principals and other stakeholders to educate, train and mould the younger nation to fit into different economic sectors as the country shines following the national developmental plans.

4. Conclusion

Education is essential for human capital augmentation and socio-economic well-being in the Republic of Maldives. The literacy rate of Maldives is very high, and the nation has equal access to primary and secondary education. But the participation rate slips down toward higher secondary and tertiary education. A significant amount of the government's budget goes to the education sector. Besides, parents and communities are ready and willing to spend a massive amount to reach superior results in their children's education. Despite all huge investments and achievements, the student's academic grades, technical skills, and social values are not meeting the stakeholders' expectations. Poor academic performance discourages them from continuing the educational journey after completing the ordinary level (Grade 10). The numbers of students who join higher secondary grades are less when compared to the number of students who complete their secondary stages. The school leavers are not skilled and equipped to perform in different jobs or get placement in higher education. Due to this, many school leavers are unemployed and social problems such as involvement in drug abuse have been a significant issue in the Maldives.

Education policymakers in the Maldives and across the globe are searching for the leadership practices that matter most. As the principals are responsible for implementing the national curriculum and achieving the curriculum's vision, the principals' leadership is vital for the schools to gain a competitive edge. The leadership roles of the principals directly affect the teachers' performance which finally affects the young students and the nation's aspirations. Effective school principals help to ensure that innovations with teachers have a path guided by a mutual purpose. Principals are responsible for providing necessary training to the teachers under the School-Based Professional Development Program (SBPD) of Maldives. Widely accepted that quality teaching is best when teachers' professional development is in the school system. Continuing professional development would allow the schools to empower the teachers and build a learning culture in the school that gives mutual growth.

Teachers are the key players in successfully implementing the curriculum in the classroom. Hence, the teacher's self-efficacy and commitment to the students are the most critical aspects that require sustainability. Dedicated teachers have a sense of being encouraged to experiment and explore. Teachers' self-efficacy escalated by providing proper coaching, mentoring, and needs specific training. There is no visible research conducted in the Maldives to investigate the principals' leadership, teachers' self-efficacy and commitments to students. Thus, future research would support the recommendations in this paper. Empirical shreds of evidence enrich the trusts and help the Ministry of Education of Maldives plan and provide a supporting milieu to school leaders to make schools the ideal place for preparing the younger nations to guarantee job placements with the socially responsible souls.

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