LEADING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH COLLABORATION:
An Evidence-Based Model

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This paper reports on a study that explored educational reform in the secondary sector in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) by analysing the Ministry of Education's policy documents and examining perspectives on the impact of the current reform agenda from the point of view of practitioners: school supervisors, principals, and teachers. A qualitative interpretive research design was used, which employed a range of data collection methods including questionnaires, document analysis, and interviews. The paper argues that a different, more inclusive and participatory approach to leading context-specific school improvement is required for policy initiatives to be successful. An evidence-based model that takes this approach into consideration is proposed. The model, though premised on findings within the T&T context, can be applicable to other contexts.

Introduction

The study that this paper reports on captures the multifaceted nature of school improvement (SI) by exploring its most salient aspects, thus complementing the existing, though scant, knowledge base on SI in the Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) context. It presents insights into the country's SI initiatives from the perspective of a range of stakeholders, including teachers, school principals, and supervisors. Most SI research and models are rooted in larger education systems where devolution of power and authority and professionalization of teaching is already a reality (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Lauglo, 1995). The current study shows that the cultural and contextual realities implicated in policy borrowing can restrict or readjust the application of models or initiatives adopted without appropriate consideration for the specificities of the host system. Nevertheless, as Harris (2009) and Gronn and Ribbins (2003) propose, the main issue is the extent to which the host system can use the model or initiatives to its advantage and make useful modifications of practice.

This study provides an evidence-based beginning for construction of a model for leading SI grounded in the realities of Caribbean states. The

model suggests an approach to leading SI that is essentially school-based, with schools as the centre of change (Hopkins, 2001), supported collaboratively by the wider community, including the central education agency and other schools within communities. However, it is recognized that the model itself will not engender improvement in student outcomes; this is dependent on the will and commitment of stakeholders to change and effect change through negotiation among themselves and students (Levin, 2008). Nevertheless, in a non-prescriptive way, the model creates the conditions and environment for the process of such negotiations to take place, whereby common purposes and meanings can be established, which can lead to the affirmative action that brings about improvement in schools.

An Overview of the Literature

The Nature and Purpose of School Improvement

> At one level school improvement is a way of schools achieving organizational development and growth. At another level school improvement has a moral purpose and is intrinsically linked to the life chances and achievement of all students. (Harris, 2002, p. 18)

Harris's comment captures the main purpose of SI and provides the philosophical base that should underpin any successful SI effort. Beyond the rhetoric of policy, research, and learning, education has a moral and social justice purpose to make a positive difference in the lives of members of the society (Dale, 1997; Fullan, 2001; Thrupp, 1999; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). Improving schools and fulfilling the moral and social justice purposes is neither straightforward nor easy. On the contrary, it can be difficult and capricious, and this stems from the very contextualized, cultural, and subjective nature of this phenomenon.

SI is about changing culture (Fullan, 1991; Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2001; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008; Stoll, 1999), which makes the concept subjective and problematic to define. Nevertheless, SI proponents emphasize three main conditions. Firstly, SI is a process-oriented activity, not a one-off event (Fullan, 1999; Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 1999; Harris, 2002). Secondly, SI involves educational change directed at enhancing student outcomes and improving the conditions of the learning environment (Fullan, 1999; Hopkins, 2001; Van Velzen, Miles, Ekholm, Hameyer, & Robin, 1985). Van Velzen et al. (1985) describe SI as "a systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in the learning

conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively" (p. 48). In other words, SI involves changing people and relationships, and its success is dependent on the responses of people to the changes that it initiates (Ainscow & West, 2006; Dalin, 1994; Fullan, 2001; Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2001; Schmidt & White, 2004). Thirdly, SI is about building the capacity within schools to manage and sustain change and improvement over time (Barth, 1990; Datnow, 2005; Fullan, 2008; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Hopkins & Jackson, 2003).

Hopkins (2001) defines SI as "a distinct approach to educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change" (p. 2). Barth (1990) defines SI as "an effort to determine and provide, from within and without, conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among them" (p. 45). According to these definitions, the purpose of SI is to impact on the relationship between the teaching and learning process and the conditions that support it. Further, Hopkins (2001) suggests that the change which should take place as a result of the SI effort should not merely reflect an implementation of policies, but rather "innovations or adaptations of practice that intervene in, or modify the learning process to achieve the greatest impact on students, teachers and schools" (p. 37) (see also Hargreaves, 1994).

SI therefore involves some reform and educational change, which ultimately can come in various forms (Dalin, 1994; Fullan, 1999; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). Reform efforts can be large-scale; centralized; small-scale; decentralized; externally initiated (by a centralized education body or international initiatives); or internally initiated (by a single school, school district, or community). Most reform or SI efforts follow the agenda of some policy formulated either at the site of change (schools), or externally by the policy makers. Some ambivalence about the value and success of large-scale reform efforts and externally driven initiatives has been expressed (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Hopkins, 2001; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Dalin (1994), for example, states that:

> Both local and central initiatives work. An innovative idea that starts locally, nationally or with external donors can succeed, if programmes meet the criteria of national commitment, local capacity building and linkage, in a configuration that makes sense for the particular country. (p. 252)

Chapman (2005) concurs that large-scale and externally driven reform can work, provided that schools are not treated as a homogeneous group. According to Thrupp and Lupton (2006), an understanding of context can help policy makers make more adequate and effective educational provisions to increase student achievement. Thrupp (1999) pays attention to the weaknesses in the SI system, especially focusing on the realities of schools facing challenging circumstances, and the inadequate efforts of policy makers toward effectively addressing the issues impacting the performance of students of low socio-economic backgrounds.

Culture and school improvement

Although culture is a context-specific phenomenon, there are cross-cultural commonalities in how it should be treated and examined theoretically and practically (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001). In the T&T context, SI is wedded to significant political eras of the country's development (James, 2013). Hallinger and Kantamara (2001), reporting on the Thai context, emphasize an approach to leading change by fiat (orders or mandate), predicated on an assumption that change adoption and implementation are synonymous. They submit that within the current globalized context this approach is no longer culturally viable, and this view is supported elsewhere within the SI literature (Harris, 2009; James, 2008; Lee & Williams, 2006).

Differentiating between the school's culture and the national culture may be difficult, especially in Caribbean country contexts, which are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies, having emerged from colonialism (James, 2013). As Dimmock (2000) noted, cultural boundaries are not synonymous with national boundaries; differences can be commonly found within as well as across national boundaries. This is certainly true in the T&T context. Globalization has contributed to further blurring and diluting cultures, as information is transferred across cultures (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Lee & Williams, 2006). This makes it even more difficult to tailor SI to fit the particular cultural context in which the innovations are being implemented, when these contexts themselves are not easily defined.

Capacity building

Schools need to develop the capacity to improve. This involves staff and student development activities and building leadership capacity (Harris & Lambert, 2003; James, 2010). Harris (2002) states that "staff development activities should be task-specific and geared to teachers' concern and skill" (p. 9). Inherent in this notion of developing capacity is

the school's capacity to manage change, which is essential to SI. Building capacity to improve also involves giving all stakeholders the opportunity to have a voice (West, Ainscow, & Stanford, 2006). Further, capacity building involves reflection on practice and reflective enquiry (Halsall, 1998; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Stoll, 2009). Since schools are dynamic institutions that are constantly responding to internal and external changes, reflective and reflexive practices are critical to help schools adjust and respond effectively to changes and maintain their equilibrium. In this regard, the role of leadership is very important, and, particularly, distributive leadership (Harris 2008). The leadership function is critical in providing the impetus for change, interpreting the effect changes would have on the people in the organization, anticipating their responses, and devising a plan of action.

Top-down versus bottom-up approaches

Top-down approaches to SI tend not to work, largely because educational change involves changing people and cultures more than structures (Dalin, 1994; Elmore, 2004; Fullan 1991; Gray, Reynolds, Fitz-Gibbon, & Jesson, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1996). Fullan (1991) states that "real change, then, whether desired or not represents a serious personal and collective experience characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty" (p. 32). Still, some writers state that neither purely top-down nor purely bottom-up approaches to SI work, suggesting that a combination of the two approaches might be more effective (Fullan, 1999; Gray et al., 1996; Hopkins, 2001; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Nevertheless, a mixed approach does not guarantee improvement (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006).

Similarly, while research has shown that bottom-up approaches have greater chances of engendering successful SI (Fullan, 1999; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Hopkins, 2001), it is wrong to assume that by virtue of using this approach successful SI is automatic. Additionally, whether a top-down, bottom-up, or mixed approach is utilized depends on the degree of autonomy within schools. Where schools have greater freedom to act, they may adopt bottom-up or mixed approaches, but where their autonomy is limited, more top-down approaches may be evident. Even some of the features of these approaches may be quite cosmetic in nature, for example, teacher training, where it is sometimes expected that teachers can learn the mastery of instruction and delivery in a one-day workshop, whereas a more effective approach might be to build the capacity of leadership at the departmental level (Harris & Lambert, 2003). Nevertheless, as stated previously, no singular approach in itself

is a guarantee to success; contextual factors, the implementation process, and the people engaged in the reform play a huge part in making it successful.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this paper is based on the findings of a study that explored SI in the non-private secondary school sector in T&T. The research approach was qualitative and utilized the case study design in exploring the case of SI in T&T. The methods of data collection included document analysis, interviews, and questionnaires. Collecting data from a variety of sources and using different methods helped in triangulating the study. Fourteen school principals or acting principals across schools in seven educational divisions/districts and six school supervisors were interviewed for this study. One hundred teachers from 12 schools from seven of the eight educational divisions/districts responded to questionnaires. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the sample included varying school types representative of the secondary school sector in T&T. The interviews and questionnaires sought to elicit the views of participants on a number of themes related to improving schools, including: contextual and cultural issues, leadership, stakeholder participation, factors facilitating and inhibiting SI, capacity building, and teaching and learning.

Three main research questions guided the study:

1. *What school improvement initiatives have emerged in the secondary school sector in T&T?*

2. *What relations can be established between the school improvement initiatives being implemented in the secondary school sector in T&T and international perspectives on the theory and practice of SI?*

3. *What do these relations indicate for improvement in: (a) student outcomes and (b) organizational conditions of school?*

Findings and Interpretation

This section provides a critical analysis of the data across the four data sets (document analysis, teachers, school principals, and supervisors) comparing the documented data, which is the espoused policy, with the other data sets, which gives an interpretation of the policies in practice. The intention was to unify the data from the four sources to highlight what is significant across the data sets. The results of the empirical data analysis were synthesized with the literature review and discussed with

reference to the key issues investigated through the research questions and sub-questions. The results of this meta-analysis of the data and literature provide a synthesis of findings from which conclusions are made.

What School Improvement Initiatives Have Emerged in the Secondary School Sector in T&T?

Documentary data were sourced from policy documents and statements produced by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in T&T that relate to the period 1993–2008. Four main documents were reviewed, respectively: the *Education Policy Paper (1993–2003)* (T&T. National Task Force on Education, 1993); *Quality Education for All Young People: Challenges, Trends and Priorities* (Manning, n.d.); the *Strategic Plan (2002–2006)* (T&T. MOE, 2002); and the *Corporate Plan 2007–2010* (T&T. MOE, 2007).

The MOE's *Corporate Plan 2007–2010* (T&T. MOE, 2007) provided the most current SI initiatives being implemented. These initiatives and their main delivery mechanisms for the secondary school sector, as stated in the plan (pp. 11–12), are outlined below. The corporate plan listed six main initiatives:

1. To introduce school based management (SBM), including the establishment of local school boards.

2. Reconfiguration and streamlining of the Ministry's structure and services at the levels of school, local school boards, education districts/offices, and the ministry's head office.

3. Institutional strengthening of the ministry's head offices to improve capacity and human resources to enable delivery of an improved service.

4. Making the reform process more systemic by creating alliances with other public services.

5. Integrating information and communication technology.

6. Establishing a team to coordinate the school improvement implementation process.

According to the corporate plan, through streamlining its activities, the MOE hoped to facilitate improved student achievement and greater effectiveness at schools. Streamlining of the education district offices was expected to bring about improvement in supervision, monitoring, and evaluation of the implementation of the SI initiatives at the school level. The education district offices' mandate was also to provide support

to schools, which included provision of resources, site-based support, mentoring, and carrying out research.

The plan further indicated that a strong and comprehensive communication system and strategy had been put in place to ensure consistency in communication and promotion of the Ministry's initiatives through the use of various media, including talk shows, documentaries, and the Ministry's website. This implies that the Ministry is dedicated to informing the public about what it is doing. However, it is significant that there is no mention in this section of how the MOE intended to communicate the SI policies and initiatives to those people, like teachers, who are situated at the critical site of change, which is the schools, and who would in the final analysis have to implement the policies and initiatives.

In the interest of confidentiality and anonymity, principal participants were labelled G to T. Participants indicated a wide range of initiatives that were being implemented in secondary schools in T&T. The initiatives identified by principals were collated into five main categories, illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. School Improvement Initiatives Principals Felt Were Being Implemented in Schools

Category of Improvement	Initiatives	Participants
1. Leadership and management	• Decentralization • SBM • Appointment of Heads of departments and Deans • Greater administrative power to principals and vice-principals • Introduction of Performance Management Appraisal (PMAP)	G, I, H, L, K
2. Plant improvement	• Upgrading physical plant resources, building laboratories for CVQ and ICT libraries	J, K, G, H, R, N, M, S, P, Q
3. Professional development	• Staff training for teachers, principals, and vice-principals	O, K, G, I, H

Category of Improvement	Initiatives	Participants
4. Teaching and learning	• Remedial reading programmes for non-readers • Programmes to enhance discipline in schools, e.g., PEACE and Together We Light the Way (TWLTW)	G, L, J, I
5. Educational policy	• De-shifting, which is changing former 3-year schools to 5-year schools • The Secondary Education Modernization Programme • Transport system for students and the provision of school meals • Education for All	G, T, R, S

Plant improvement was the SI initiative that the majority of principals (10) identified, with leadership and management and professional development coming second, both having been identified by five participants respectively. The principals' comments indicated that there are a number of SI policies being implemented at the same time, and different initiatives are being implemented in different schools. Participants expressed concern that implementing the initiatives was problematic. They cited poor communication between the MOE and the schools, a lack of collaboration among the ministry's units, a lack of knowledge on the part of the planners, and the politicization of education in T&T as reasons.

Participant O stated that with regard to teacher training a lot of what was learnt from courses was not applied in classrooms. In his words: "*It is not getting down to students. This is because teaching is not taken as a profession, it is not respected.*" G stated that although the MOE said they had introduced SBM, if they had to get things done at the school, they still had to wait on permission and resources from the ministry, which stymied the change process. M said while the policies may be good, the "*problem is the different agencies who need to collaborate don't.*" S indicated that the problematic implementation of policies was because

"*the planners lack knowledge and this is why we are having all these problems. There is a lack of communication. Education too politicized.*"

School supervisors were ascribed the labels A to F to maintain anonymity and confidentiality in the study. The findings from the school supervisors are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. School Improvement Initiatives SSIIIs Felt Were Being Implemented in Schools

Category of Improvement	Initiatives	Participants
1. Leadership and management	• SBM, setting up safety and crisis teams, establishment of middle managers: appointment of HODs and Deans • Establishment of non-denominational school boards • Decentralization • Performance Management Appraisal Process (PMAP) • Having functioning PTAs and making PTAs autonomous • Establishment of management teams	F, D, A, C, E
2. Plant improvement	• Outfitting schools	B
3. Professional development		
4. Teaching and learning	• Curriculum reform: introduction of 'core' subjects and broadening the curriculum • ICT as a teaching tool • Values education • Increasing staff in terms of teacher/student ratio and broadening curriculum	E, D, C, F, B

Category of Improvement	Initiatives	Participants
	• Broadening student support • Student programmes, e.g., student council and abstinence club	
5. Educational policy	• Putting steelbands in schools	E, C, B

The information in Table 2 shows that, like the principals, the school supervisors presented a wide and varied range of SI initiatives currently being implemented in secondary schools in T&T. However, the focus of initiatives being implemented for both groups differed. The majority of SSIIIs (5) identified leadership and management and teaching and learning as the initiatives being implemented. There is congruence across principals and SSIIIs in the leadership and management category, but not necessarily in the other categories. This is significant, because school supervisors are expected to communicate the SI initiatives to schools and monitor and evaluate these initiatives.

Teachers mentioned 30 different initiatives that they felt were being implemented in schools. These responses were collated and are represented in Table 3. A sixth category labelled *none* was included on the table. Seventy-six teachers responded and 24 teachers did not respond to this question. The majority of teachers who responded (27) indicated that no SI policies were being implemented. Plant improvement was the initiative that most (22) teachers felt was being implemented. Twenty-one indicated that leadership and management matters were being implemented, and 20 indicated teaching and learning. Thirteen indicated initiatives related to educational policy.

Table 3. Teachers Views on School Improvement Initiatives Being Implemented

Category of Improvement	Initiatives	No of Participants
1. Leadership and management	• SBM • Introduction of school boards	21

Category of Improvement	Initiatives	No of Participants
	• Performance management appraisal programme for teachers • Appointment of Heads of departments and Deans • Strategic planning • Decentralization • Personnel safety	
2. Plant improvement	• Infrastructural development in schools: upgrading ICT equipment, equipping libraries, and building more classrooms	22
3. Professional development	• Teacher professional development	
4. Teaching and learning	• Curriculum re-design • Intervention strategies to deal with troubled students • Improved assessment methods • Introduction of remedial reading	20
5. Educational policy	• Secondary Education Modernization Programme • Education for All • Eradicating the shift system in schools • Implementation of school boards • Vision 2020 • White paper on education, No child left behind • Seamless and holistic education	25
6. None		27

These results from the teachers are more aligned to those of the principals. The majority of both groups indicated that plant improvements, leadership and management initiatives, and teaching and learning initiatives were being implemented in schools. This alignment can mean that both groups are focused on the same SI issues. Nevertheless, it is significant that only a few of the teachers indicated that professional development was an initiative being implemented. Additionally, the fact that more than a quarter of the sample did not believe that any SI policies were being implemented is significant, because their role is critical in enacting policies and engaging students in ways that bring about improvement.

This disparity between policy awareness among the various groups of stakeholders can be indicative of an ineffective communication system, which fails to adequately orient teachers, in particular about changes. However, while the Ministry may be partly responsible for the issues in communication, the problem does not seem to rest only with them. Both principals and schools supervisors have shown that they are aware of the initiatives. Further, it is their responsibility to mediate the curriculum and social contexts of the schools to ensure that initiatives are communicated to staff, parents, and students, in a manner that makes teaching and learning relevant and suitably differentiated (Ainscow & West, 2006; Busher, 2006).

What Relations Can Be Established Between the School Improvement Initiatives Being Implemented in the Secondary School Sector in T&T and International Perspectives on the Theory and Practice of SI?

The SI initiatives currently being implemented in T&T are modelled after "international best practices," and as such relate to international theories and practice. The SI changes relate to structural changes of the education system, curriculum changes, and delivery of its services. The introduction of school/site-based management and decentralization are strategies that have been used, for example, in the English system to engender improvement.

On the issue of centralization versus decentralization, the literature suggests that neither of these strategies work (Fullan, 1991) if the conditions to support either strategy is not in place (Datnow et al., 2002; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Hopkins, 2001; Hopkins & Lagerweij, 1996). Fullan (1991) states:

> Neither centralization nor decentralization really works. Mandates make people resist change. Leaving it to the school denies the

benefit of coordinated support and problem solving. Decentralization-such as school-or site-based management-is problematic either because individual schools lack the capacity to manage change or because assessment of attempted changes cannot be tracked. (pp. 200–201)

The main challenge is to find a balance between centralized policy initiatives and empowering schools to develop their own initiatives. The findings reveal that discovering this balance is proving to be problematic in the T&T context for various reasons. The principals commented as follows. J stated that "*the MOE initiatives are good, but they don't fulfil at the designated time, implementation of initiatives is the problem*." G stated that although the MOE said they had introduced SBM, if they had to get things done at the school, they still had to wait on permission and resources from the ministry, which stymied the change process. M said while the policies may be good, the "*problem is the different agencies who need to collaborate don't*."

The data from the school supervisors corroborated that of the principals. F's comments encapsulates the views of the majority of participants:

> *MOE manages from the top and therefore constrains people and success. However, some principals look at their situation and do what is necessary to get a programme going that is suited for the students, he may enlist the help of parents or members in the communities, but these are the risk takers and get people to buy into your plans and the authoritarian type of leadership will not lead to this. In the schools we have managers and not leaders. MOE talks about leadership but they really want managers, they don't leave schools and principals to operate. Principals need to think outside the box to get things done.*

Participant E stated that "*MOE orchestrates site-based management but they are still controlling. They want decentralization but at the same time they over centralizing*."

The findings of this research study suggest that decentralization has come in the form of delegation rather than devolution. Whereby the former means committing some powers but not giving full authority and autonomy, and the latter means transferring powers, authority, and autonomy, in this case to schools. Further, the centralized authority (the Ministry) seems to be initiating SI reform, and leaving the implementation of it to the schools.

In the T&T context, there is a danger of focusing the SI agenda on changing structures and systems, even processes, without recognizing that structures and systems cannot move and adjust themselves, they need people to do so. The SI initiatives being implemented in secondary schools in T&T, based on research and practice from developed countries, are premised on an assumption that teachers' interpretation of, and response to, the policy implementation process is the same regardless of their prior knowledge and experience. This is a false assumption. Policy implementers who apply a cognitive framework to researching the policy implementation process note that implementers' prior knowledge; the understandings they make between new ideas and their existing ones; and their social situation, past and current, influence how they interpret, process, and respond to policy (Ball, 1994; Cohen & Weiss, 1993; Lin, 2000; Spillane, 2000; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Yanow, 1996).

The majority of teachers who participated in this study indicated that they had no formal pedagogical training to teach, even though they had been teaching for more than five years in some instances. Of the 91 teachers who responded to the question on whether they were formally trained to teach, 54% indicated that they were not, and 37% indicated that they had been formally trained to teach. The current SI initiatives being implemented in secondary schools in T&T are premised on constructivist and student-centred approaches to learning, which may not be known to the implementers who are not formally trained teachers, or who may not have received an orientation to teaching as in-service training. Thus, the reality might be that teachers who have to implement policies may not understand the deeper purposes of the policy because of their limited pedagogical knowledge. This can negatively affect policy implementation.

SI theorists contend that "restructuring," as a systemic approach to improvement, will not by itself lead to changes in student outcomes (Datnow, 2005; Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996; Harris, 2003a). Reform efforts must connect directly with classroom teaching and learning and instruction (Elmore, 2000; McKinsey & Company, 2007). To realize improvement in student outcomes is as much a factor of the system and student input as it is the teacher input (Ainscow, 2007; Thrupp, 2005). Participants in this study indicated that the factor most inhibiting improvement in student outcomes in schools in T&T is the MOE's top-down approach. The top-down approach negates meaningful stakeholder input in the formulation of policies (see Table 4 for principals' and supervisors' views and Figure 1 for teachers' views).

Arguably, this input is crucial to creating the differentiated type of policies that contextually and culturally fit the varying school types.

Table 4. School Supervisors' and Principals' Opinions on Factors That Are Inhibiting School Improvement in Secondary Schools in T&T

	Inhibitors	**Participants**	**% of Participants**
1	The Ministry's top-down approach to SI	L, G, O, P, J, T, I, H, N, Q, M, S, E, A, B, D, F	85%
2	Problematic implementation process	L, J, O, I, Q, R, M, S, N, P, J, K, D, C, B, A, F	85%
3	MOE not providing resources in a timely fashion	L, P, J, T, Q, O, M, S, H, K, N, R, C, D, E, F	80%
4	SI policies not clearly communicated by MOE to implementers	P, H, S, G, L, J, O, K, M, I, N, Q, B, A, D, F	80%
5	Inadequate, unstructured, unclear, and untimely training programmes to implement SI policies	H, O, M, S, I, P, R, G, J, K, L, B, A, D, E, F	80%
6	Poor monitoring and supervision of implementation of SI policies	L, O, K, H, N, Q, M, S, I, A, C, D, E, F	75%
7	Individual schools' context not taken into consideration when designing SI policy	L, P, I, H, N, Q, M, S, G, O, R, A, B, D	70%
8	Culture of superficial stakeholder consultations	L, P, O, I, R, N, Q, S, M, H, K, B, D, E	70%
9	Limited capacity building support for implementing policies	L, N, H, Q, S, I, K, R, C, D, F	55%

	Inhibitors	Participants	% of Participants
10	Lack of stakeholder involvement: stakeholders' opinions not taken on board	L, O, G, H, N, Q, S, P, I, M, E	55%
11	Externally driven SI policies at variance with the national culture	I, R, Q, S, H, B, A, D, E, F	50%
12	Poor dissemination of information from MOE to schools	P, H, S, M, N, L, I, D, A, F	50%
13	Lack of teacher professionalism	O, Q, S, K, G, I, R, M, B	45%
14	Externally driven SI based on foreign models and theories	L, O, I, Q, M, S, A, B, D	45%
15	Ineffective school leadership	L, S, H, R, A, D, E, F	40%
16	Lack of collaboration and coordination among departments at the MOE	P, I, H, M, N, B, D, F	40%
17	MOE not implementing on a timely basis	L, P, J, K, O, S, E, D	40%
18	Lack of parental support	J, O, I, K, R, C, D, F	40%
19	Poor evaluation of implementation process	E, D, B, A, O, H, S	35%
20	MOE does not give principals enough autonomy	O, I, H, Q, S, E, F	35%
21	Unclear and ineffective SI implementation strategy	P, H, S, J, I, G, B	35%
22	Information from training courses not filtering down into the classrooms	O, H, S, T, A, D	30%
23	Difficulty in changing culture and mindset	O, Q, L, H, S, T	30%
24	Lack of proper evaluation strategy	O, H, D, E, B	25%
25	Education system too politicized	R, L, S, B, F	25%
26	Too many initiatives at one time without the capacity to implement them	L, O, S, I, F	25%
27	Teachers with no pre-service training	L, R, Q, B	20%
28	With T&T culture education is not valued by some	L, M, I, R	20%

	Inhibitors	Participants	% of Participants
29	Policy makers who are not education specialists	H, S, D, F	20%
30	Lack of student empowerment	H, M, S, D	20%
31	Lack of teacher accountability	L, Q, K, B	20%
32	No quality controls	L, M, E	15%
33	Lack of adequate time to prepare for implementing policies	P, J, F	15%
34	The schools' culture is at variance with the national culture	O, I, S	15%
35	Meritocratic system of education	S, R, F	15%
36	Lack of a systematic approach to SI	Q, C, D	15%
37	Schools not engaging in research, e.g., action research	F, D	10%
38	Poor relationships across the education fraternity, lack of trust, respect, and collegiality	N, E	10%
39	Lack of provision of support systems for disadvantaged homes	K, C	10%
40	Insufficient time for teachers to prepare for teaching and learning	K	5%
41	Large class sizes	T	5%
42	Limited stakeholder buy-in	D	5%
43	SSIIIs who are not doing their job	D	5%

The SI literature also stresses that orienting teachers toward change must be a part of the process of developing leadership capacity. This involves ensuring that they participate in decisions about how to change, motivating teachers to change, and ensuring that support for teachers is built into the process of change (Ainscow, 2007; Beresford, 2000; Harris, 2003b; Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1997).
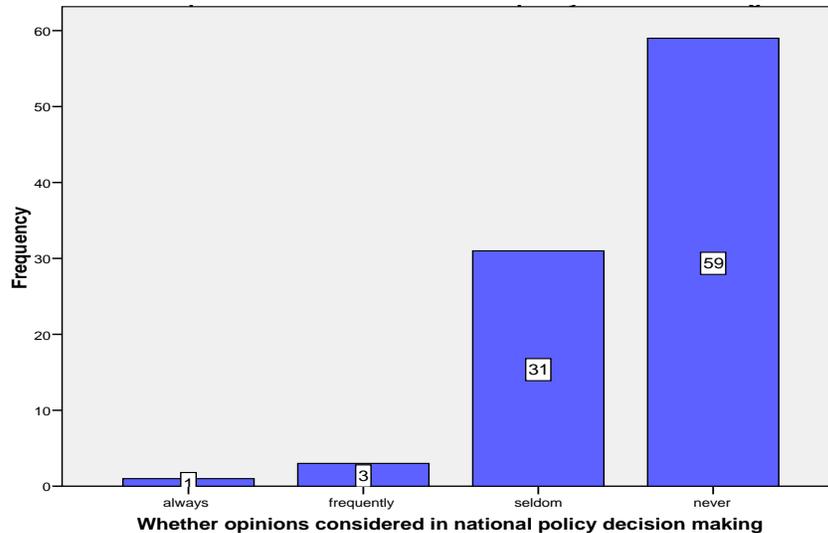
Figure 1. Whether teachers' opinions are considered in national policy decision making.

The McKinsey Report (2007) drew attention to the failure of many well-intentioned and well-funded interventions to impact positively on student learning outcomes because they did not pay enough attention to the teacher input. Nevertheless, there are examples within the literature (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006) of SI projects that have been successful, for example, the Manitoba School Improvement Program, and the High Reliability Schools Project. However, Harris and Chrispeels (2006) caution that success in SI tends to be non-transferable unless customization of practices and processes to suit particular contexts occurs. Further, when one examines the models of SI that have succeeded, they show that capacity building, and internal as well as external support, played critical roles in engendering the success of these programmes. Still further, it can also be noted that programmes were successful when the school and its practitioners took ownership of the change, and were strategically involved in the reform process. An example is the High Reliability Schools Project in England. This is not the case with the current reform in T&T, as participants in this study note that they do not have the capacity to enact policies for which they have had limited or no orientation.

Further, the MOE has devolved responsibilities to educational district offices and introduced school-based management to agencies that, according to the findings of this study, are limited in their capacity to

perform these duties effectively. There are manpower shortages and not all staff are trained, although training is ongoing. The Ministry's documents indicate that schools should come up with their own SI policies, but the participants state that the Ministry is still mandating the changes that they should make and excluding their opinions in policy decisions. The situation in T&T confirms the insights from the literature that neither decentralization nor centralization works when schools are not adequately supported nor have the capacity to manage and sustain change (Dalin, 2006; Datnow et al., 2002; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Hopkins, 2001).

What do These Relations Indicate for Improvement in: (a) Student Outcomes and (b) Organizational Conditions of Schools?

The concept of student outcomes can be context-specific and can vary from one school to another. For the purposes of this study, the concept of student outcomes has been defined in terms of attainment: academic attainment, citizenship, fulfilling human resource needs, and attainment of moral and social values. The MOE's stated goals in terms of student outcomes are to develop imagination, intellect, and spirit for creating committed, enterprising citizens and global leaders. Organizational conditions of schools refers to the educational processes and structures in schools, which span, but are not limited to, relationship building, vision building, strategic planning, leadership, and organization of departments.

Teachers were asked to rank a list of persons whose SI initiatives most led to school improvement. Table 5 shows how teachers ranked the initiatives.

Table 5. Teachers' Ranking of Persons Whose SI Initiatives Most Led to Improved Student Achievement

Initiatives	Ranked				
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Teacher-led	37	21	11	1	3
School-led	14	31	17	10	2
National initiatives	6	4	15	19	23
Parent-led	5	8	13	20	27
Student-led	14	9	19	21	9

The figures show that most teachers (37) ranked teacher led initiatives as most likely to improve student outcomes. School- and student-led initiatives were ranked by teachers as the second highest. Parent-led initiatives were ranked as the least likely to engender improvement in student outcomes. The teachers also ranked national SI initiatives low, with 23 ranking it as fifth. Only six teachers ranked it first.

The data from school supervisors and principals corroborate that of the teachers, in that the majority of them indicated that the factor that most facilitated SI was school-driven SI policies. According to these two groups of participants, national policies initiated by the MOE least facilitated SI (see Table 6).

Table 6. School Supervisors' and Principals' Opinions on Factors That Are Facilitating School Improvement in Secondary Schools in T&T

	Facilitators	Participants	% of Participants
1	Some school-driven SI policies	J, K, G, H, R, N, M, B	40%
2	Principals who are risk takers	L, S, Q, E, F	25%
3	Good SI initiatives	L, J, S, C, D	25%
4	Appointment of middle management teams of HODs and Deans to help with supervision in schools	L, K, A, B	20%
5	Willing and capable teaching staff	J, G, B, C	20%
6	MOE recognition of the need for specialized rather than "one size fits all"	G, A, E	15%
7	MOE beginning to take schools' contexts into consideration	G, A, E	15%
8	Interacting with the wider school community	J	5%
9	Some improvement has occurred because of MOE principals' training (M.Ed.)	O	5%

The following exposition notes school supervisors' comments on what they felt were the key SI issues in T&T affecting student outcomes and organizational conditions at schools. E stated:

> *We must decide if we will effectively decentralize and live out the mandate if we are going to empower the schools. Stop preaching one thing and practising another. Are we really giving the tools, in terms of finance, curriculum change, and so on, and autonomy for all the reforms to be engrained and working? You can't give directive from the top and expect it to work from the other end. It is too much control by MOE and they can't handle it.*

Participant F stated that "*for a school to improve the principal should be able to recruit and have more autonomy.*" F also commented that "*schools need to use research more. Schools don't use action research to develop programmes.*" Participant C stated that "*there must be a more systematic linkage between education, health and social services.*"

Participant B suggested that "*school improvement should be more bottom-up than top-down.*" Participant B additionally noted the results of a survey which indicated that teachers are ready to cooperate and collaborate with the MOE to engender change in secondary schools. B stated that "*a teacher survey that was done by Ministry of Education consultants indicates that teachers are positive about education and are ready to work with the Ministry of Education*"; however, B emphasized that "*this is a little known fact and that is not being utilized by the bureaucracy of the ministry to create more improvement*".

Participant D felt that the educational structure and subsequent relationships in T&T were inhibiting SI success. D commented that "*there are many great ideas like puzzle parts, but not connecting…if persons move away from power and status and deal with the rank and file it would be better.* Like other participants, D felt the "*need to involve all the stakeholders.*" Further, D commented on the issue of having non-educational technocrats running the education system and stated that "*you need persons who are educators and not public servants to run education.*"

There were a number of issues that principals felt were important to note about SI in secondary schools in T&T. Participant L commented:

> *I feel MOE has laudable initiatives but the implementation, monitoring, and accountability rate is very low. School support is very limited. Too many initiatives coming at one time. We should prioritize and do two things at a time. Don't do too many when you don't have the capacity to implement.*

Participant J highlighted the fact that the MOE was "*not providing resources in a timely fashion*," but also commented that "*a burning issue is parental support*." J suggested that "*schools do well because parents are supportive in values and assist the school, not only financially, but coming into the school and offering their skills and services*."

Participant O commented that SI in T&T required "*changing mindset*," which O stated is "*the greatest thing to bring about change in student outcomes and school conditions*," because "*getting teachers to change is difficult and takes time*." O also suggested that it was "*difficult to change mindset because principals in schools do not have authority*." Another issue that O pointed out as important to engender improvement was professional development. However, O was critical of the way in which professional development was being done in T&T, which involved taking teachers out of schools. O felt that "*it should happen in the schools,*" and suggested that there was a culture in T&T whereby "*teachers are suspicious about educational theory*." O further noted that "*the school's culture is sometimes at variance with the national culture which is being foisted on the school*."

Participant S also commented on teacher professionalism, but in a different way. S felt that teachers were not filtering the knowledge gained through professional development sessions into the classroom. S commented that there were "*teachers and educators who access professional development and it makes no difference in their practice*." S credited this to the fact that "*we are a certificate driven society, not practicing, we are into knowledge acquisition not practice*."

K made the following comments on issues related more specifically to teaching and learning, such as teacher preparedness and student outcomes: "*I think in education less emphasis needs to be placed on the financial cost, consider the outcome. Teachers need more time to prepare for teaching and learning*."

Participant G commented that the issue of stakeholder participation in SI was important, and stated that the "*MOE should involve the people who have to implement the changes from the initiation stage*." G also felt that there was need for "*more persons to supervise at the district level*," and that the "*MOE should fast track its decentralization process*."

A recurrent theme in the comments made by participants was the issue of culture. Participant I questioned whether the use of external SI models in T&T was creating problems in engendering improvement in schools. Participant I suggested that the external models may be at variance with the national culture in Trinidad and Tobago:

Is it that we are following too much of the US or UK and is this why we are experiencing problems. We need to revisit our values and ensure they are not eroded in this process of reform. Look for best practices from others but ensure it fits into our culture so we can gain the best from it.

Participant I also cited poor implementation, lack of support, and poor communication and professionalism as major inhibitors to SI in T&T. Participant I stated:

Our problem has always been implementation. I think major changes need to be made at the MOE and they are doing some of it. Sometimes departments don't know what is going on, documents are lost, and there is tardiness. I think the committed people need more support in terms of disciplining students.

K felt that leadership at every layer of the education system in T&T was a critical issue. K also linked leadership to wider cultural issues steeped in T&T's colonial past, and stated:

The leader has to have passion, vision, and be service oriented. You must have enthusiasm and passion, be reflective, go with instinct or gut feeling, and just go for it! The board also needs to work as a team. They sit up there like "massah' and give dictates and that is their failure. That is why schools like these still operate like plantation. The board sees their role as a "big stick": autocratic and authoritarian. The board is not participatory. The board needs to be aware of educational theory and so on. The board needs educational training.

Participant R felt that the Trinidad culture did not support the behaviours and practices that can usually lead to improvement in schools, and commented: "*I think we need to look at the Trinidad culture and how education fits into this and is the Trinidad culture one of planning and executing and maintaining?*" R also believed that education did not fit with the dominant culture in T&T, and that the cultural expressions of Trinidadians and Tobagonians were not fostering education and this also required reflection. R explained: "*We need to look at our cultural experiences and see how that shapes our education. It is a carnival, fete mentality, where anything goes, we need to develop a culture of excellence.*"

Q highlighted the important issue of schools' contexts and related it to recruitment and the need for greater autonomy for school principals. Q stated:

I think when teachers for a school are interviewed the principal or a delegate should be present because all schools have their peculiarities. Principals should have more autonomy in recruitment of teachers. There is a lot of 'drift wood' in the system [referring to teachers].

M commented on the need to ensure that the huge financial input into SI was engendering the desired outcomes, and noted that "*putting equipment will not get the outcome the human aspect is important*."

Summary

The findings of this study show that greater responsibility for SI has been entrusted to schools, but not necessarily the concomitant authority and power that can allow them to act independently, for example, having the authority to recruit and dismiss staff. Practitioners who were interviewed (school supervisors and principals) and surveyed (teachers) assert that policies are not contextually or culturally fitted to the educational environment in T&T. They make this assertion, firstly, on the basis that the Ministry disseminates a broad policy and school principals are meant to fit it to their schools' contexts via school-based management. Secondly, because their opinions are not taken into consideration in national policy decisions, even when they make specific suggestions for improving their schools.

Both school principals and supervisors state that SBM is not working properly. In essence, school supervisors and principals are saying that decentralization is rhetoric while centralization is the practice. Nevertheless, school supervisors indicated that regardless of the Ministry's shortcomings in instituting decentralization, some principals may not have the commitment to change and take risks, and this is inhibiting improvement in student outcomes and organizational conditions at schools.

In terms of improving organizational conditions at schools, the current structural reform, upgrading of schools, establishment of leadership teams, departmental heads, and year deans within schools, and ongoing training of personnel are positive indicators. However, whether these structural changes have any impact depends on how well stakeholders are oriented towards the change and their involvement in decisions about how to change. The majority of participants in the study noted that their opinions were not taken into consideration in the design of national SI policies, throwing doubt on the extent of the stakeholder buy-in to ensure that change in the organizational conditions at schools does indeed occur.

It will undoubtedly take some time for stakeholders' commitment to change to become manifest in school practices. Indeed, this is consistent with international SI theory and practice (Dalin, 1994; Fullan 1991; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Hopkins, 2001; Schmidt & White, 2004; Van Velzen et al., 1985). SI is not a one-off event, but a sustained effort to change and improve the conditions of the learning environment.

Towards a Model for School Improvement in Trinidad and Tobago

The proposed model is normative, underscored by a collaborative theoretical approach borne out from evidence within the study that suggests a desire on the part of stakeholders for greater participation in policy formulation, decision making, and implementation. In other words, there is a desire to make SI more school-based in practice and not just in policy statements. Recognizing that such a transformation can mainly be facilitated through collaboration and negotiation (Ainscow & West, 2006; Levin, 2008), the model proposes that change should be school-based, and dialogue on how to improve schools and raise student achievement should emanate from schools as a result of collaborations with members of the wider community (including other schools); educational districts; school staff; teachers' trade unions; and parents and students to arrive at shared values, mutual understandings, and agreements. Further, that similar collaboration on how to improve schools and raise student achievement takes place among the central MOE and other ministries, for example, health, that are symbiotically connected to education, to arrive at shared values, mutual understandings, and agreements.

Evidence from the study shows that stakeholders want to participate in decision making, but that what they get from the MOE at the moment is limited. Hence, to ensure that there is real and not superficial stakeholder participation, when these groups meet to negotiate, the model proposes that there should be a formal legitimized space at the national level, comprised of representatives across the two groups mentioned with responsibility for policy formulation and implementation. This model therefore suggests a hybrid mixed approach that includes elements of both centralization and decentralization, with schools developing strategies for improvement in conjunction with support from the educational district and central ministry.

The model seeks to unite all the agents of change that influence teaching and learning to devise policies that are suited to improving individual schools, rather than the "one size fits all" approach that

characterizes current SI initiatives. In this way, ambiguity of policies as they are incorporated into schools' development plans may be minimized, as implementers should have greater clarity of the plans they are enacting, because through representation at the policy-making level, in essence the policy makers and implementers are the same. Additionally, engendering shared purposes and understandings among stakeholders is more likely because all stakeholder groups are represented in policy decision making and implementation (see Figure 2).

The model identifies the roles of the singular stakeholder groups in engendering improvement in schools and the ways in which they should interact. The three coloured rectangular-shaped figures represent the different stakeholder groups. The curved arrows indicate continuous collective collaboration, dialogue, negotiation, engagement, and feedback among these stakeholders about teaching and learning, to fulfil shared goals to realize improvement for individual schools and students. The blue rectangle represents the policy-making space that unites representatives of various stakeholder groups to make decisions on SI policies and strategies for their implementation, while cognizant that customization may be necessary to fit individual school needs at the point of implementation. The model recognizes that there may also be singular roles for the National Parent Teachers Association (NPTA) and the teachers' trade union, the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA). There is overlap among the roles of some agencies, particularly in terms of leadership, monitoring, accountability, support, and capacity building. This is intentional, as the study highlighted that the performance of these roles, which are most necessary for improving schools, are most ineffective.
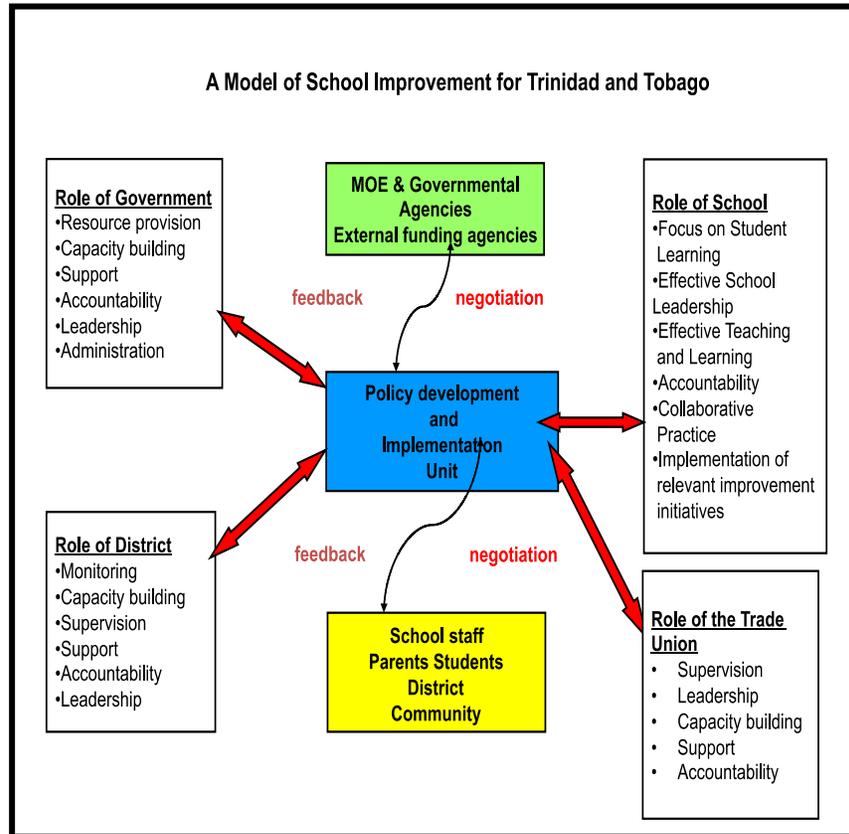
Figure 2. A model of school improvement for Trinidad and Tobago.

Conclusion

Educational reform in secondary schools in T&T is necessary, particularly as the country envisages acquiring developed status by 2020, and as such the Ministry's attempt to engender improvement is creditable. The current reforms are being undertaken with substantial resources and it is important to evaluate whether this financial investment is realizing good results, particularly in terms of raising student achievement and improving organizational conditions at schools. This was the primary aim of this research, and the evidence from the majority of practitioners who participated in the study reveals that the current reform is not sufficiently engendering improvement in student outcomes and organizational conditions at schools, mainly because:

1. school improvement practices derived from foreign contexts are not sufficiently customized to suit T&T school context and culture;

2. the Ministry's approach to the reform tends to be more prescriptive than facilitative, that is, top-down;

3. the Ministry is not engaging meaningfully with stakeholders, particularly policy implementers, to find out what school improvement looks like from their point of view, and using their opinions to formulate policies and initiatives;

4. monitoring and supervision of the implementation are insufficiently rigorous;

5. capacity building support in terms of resources and training are inadequate; and

6. some school leaders are not sufficiently empowered to lead improvement at their schools.

Notwithstanding the views of practitioners in the study, the Ministry's stated approach to educational reform is that it is bottom-up—school, student, and community focused—consultative, and supportive. This stated approach stands in contrast to the views of the majority of practitioners in this study. Hence the paper argues that for the current initiatives to effectively contribute to raising student achievement and improving organizational conditions of schools, the rhetoric of context-specific SI and stakeholder participation must be transformed into the reality of practice.

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