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**INVESTIGATION OF MANAGEMENT ROLE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF SECTIONAL HEADS OF THE SELECTED SCHOOLS IN THE COLOMBO DISTRICT IN SRI LANKA**

Chandana Kasturi Arachchi and Damayanthi Edrisinghe, S.

**ABSTRACT**

*Sectional heads perform an important role in teaching, and managing teaching- learning process in the government schools in Sri Lanka. However there is no clear definition for the sectional head's role and responsibilities in school. In some occasions, sectional heads, their principal and deputy principals do not have better understanding of role expectations and professional development needs of sectional heads. Therefore the aim of this study was to explore the sectional head's role and professional development needs of sectional heads, and in order to accomplish the objectives of this study the perceptions and insights of the principals and deputy principals were explored. Five schools were selected randomly in this study, and random sampling method was employed to select ten senior sectional heads and five deputy principals. Five principals selected purposely from five government schools (National Schools) located in the Colombo district. Semi structured interviews were used to collect information from participants and the thematic analytical approach was employed to analyze the data gathered. The sectional head's role was broad and varied from school to school and section to section. Time was a key problem that the sectional heads faced in performing their roles. Sectional heads required support in induction into the management role in the school. With regard to professional development needs, there was a lack of agreement between the perceptions of sectional heads, principals and deputy principals. Orientation programmes for sectional heads in government schools should be developed at both zonal and school levels to fulfill their lack of knowledge and experiences of school management. Such orientation programmes are recommended to evaluate the existing role, and identify the development needs of sectional heads in schools.*

**Key words:** Professional Development, Sectional Head's Role, Management Development Programmes, Professional Leadership

**INTRODUCTION**

Sectional heads perform an important role in teaching, and managing the teaching-learning process and are seen as the driving force behind any school and the key to improving the quality of the teaching-learning process. It stands to reason that the way to make stronger their role would be to have a clear definition of this significant role. Research findings indicate that sectional heads are not being received relevant support and training they require to fulfil their roles (Adey, 2000; Creese, 1991; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Glover, Gleeson, Gough & Johnson, 1998). Furthermore, many researchers and educators emphasise the importance of team management in school towards a common purpose with a shared vision. Hence the alignment of expectations held by sectionals heads themselves and the principals and deputy principals (top managers) to whom they report is a significant issue. This study is focused on investigating the role activities, role expectations and professional development needs of sectionals heads in the government schools. This study investigated the expectations of principals and deputy principals in relation to sectional head's role. The findings of this research may be of practical benefit to government schools and relevant policy makers in planning their professional development programmes. Most significantly, this research created knowledge about the role expectations of sectionals heads who are key players in providing helpful educational experiences to students.

**BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

There were about 10,205 schools in Sri Lanka, and a majority of them were government schools. Teacher population in the government schools was about 225,978 (Central Bank Report in Sri Lanka, 2010). Government schools are categorized as type 1AB, type 1C, type 2 and type 3. There are maximum of six sections in a 1AB

school, 5 sections in a 1C school, 2 sections in a type 2 school and 1 section in a type 3 school. There are evidences that assistant principals take over sectional head's role in some schools.

Table 01: Number of schools and average number of sectional heads

School Type	No. of schools	Sections	No. of sectional heads
1AB	692	5	3460
1C	1951	4	7804
2	4046	2	8092
3	2721	-	-
Total	9410	-	19356

Source- Central Bank of Sri Lanka- 2010

In general 1AB schools have six sections: primary, junior secondary, senior secondary, collegiate level (science, commerce and arts). Thus at least six sectional heads are working in a 1AB School. Type 1C school has junior secondary, senior secondary, collegiate level (commerce and arts). Type 2 school has at least three sections as primary, junior secondary and senior secondary. If type 3 school has one section sectional heads are not appointed, and the principal looks after all the management tasks. According to the statistics given in the table-1 there are at least 19,356 sectional heads in the government schools of Sri Lanka.

Professional development programmes and induction programmes are conducted by different institutions for the principals, deputy principals and education officers in Sri Lanka. The National Institute of Education conducts training programmes for principals, deputy principals in government schools and education officers in Sri Lanka.

But there are no any specific professional development programmes or induction programmes for sectional heads of the government schools in Sri Lanka.

However, even without appropriate training, majority of sectional heads play a vital role in teaching, and managing the teaching- learning process in schools. It seemed that nobody has identified professional development needs and role expectations of sectional heads. No qualitative research has been undertaken to understand the perspectives and experiences of sectional heads, principals and deputy principals in the government schools about the expectations of sectional heads' role and their professional development needs. The qualitative research framework of this study was therefore to support a better understanding of the role expectations and professional development needs of sectional heads in Sri Lanka overall, complementing and enriching the quantitative research findings. The findings of this qualitative study may provide useful insights to guide future decision-making at various levels of both policy and implementation in relation to the development of sectional heads.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Over the recent years, national schools have become larger and the task of sectional heads, their role responsibilities have been increased. There has been an expansion in the sectional head's role and some schools have included a number of new sections. Furthermore, the culture of school management is changing from a top-down hierarchical model to a participatory management style with the introduction of the programme of school improvement (PSI) in Sri Lanka.

There is no clear definition of the sectional head's role and responsibilities. In addition, the professional development programmes at school level and other levels do not address the management development of sectional heads. Sectional heads mentioned that the lack of support they received from the staff and officers to perform their role as well as their lack of professional development had affected in the performance of their duties. This seems inconsistency and variable among schools with regard to role clarity and professional development for sectional heads.

It is revealed that the sectional heads of schools face various kinds of difficulties when performing their duties. Investigation of their experiences, ideas and perceptions may be useful to understand the real situation of sectional heads role in the school. Therefore this study investigated the experiences of sectional heads in relation to their role and the extent to which current provision of professional development meets their needs. Further, this study also explored the expectations of top managers in relation to the sectional heads role. The research focused on the following research questions:

1. How do the sectional heads perceive their role?
2. What do the sectional heads believe with regard to the extent to which their professional development needs are met?
3. What is the expectation of top managers in relation to the sectional head's role?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to international literature a sectional head's role in the school can be identified as a middle management position. In short, middle managers are in the middle of a hierarchy in the bureaucratic structure in the school. In schools they function as Faculty leaders, Key stage managers, Heads of Sections or Departments, Teachers in Charge of Subjects, and Team Leaders (Piggot- Irvine & Locke, 1999). These sectional heads work as the interface between teaching and managing the resources for teaching which implies that they are involved in teaching and managing (Cardno, 1995).

It can be seen that the roles and functions of middle managers in schools are varied and may not be consistent. The definition of the sectional head's role itself is not unproblematic. All teachers, in effect, are managers as they manage students, resources and the teaching learning process. However, according to Earley and Weindling (2004), only some of these teachers have the responsibility of managing other staff. On the other hand, Bush and West-Burnham (1994) pointed out that management at top or middle management level involve working with and through other people and consists of a number of activities such as planning, organising, controlling and evaluating as well as leading. Hence, the term sectional head often assumes both leadership and management occur in a sectional head's role.

One way of clarifying the role of the sectional head is to consider that the role can be defined as what an individual: the role holder; understands their job to be (Wise & Bennett, 2003) and is determined by one's job description. The two key aspects of the role of sectional heads relate to school improvement and the improvement of teaching and learning. These roles are now conceptualised as leadership roles rather than management roles (Earley & Weindling, 2004). This is not to say that leadership was previously unimportant, rather it is more a matter of emphasis. In England, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has made a shift using the term 'leader' to replace the term 'sectional head'. This shift in terminology reflects the dominant discourse which is now about leadership, not management, and distributed or shared leadership where anyone in an organisation can function as a leader outside their formal position (Earley & Weindling, 2004). This notion has considerable significance at the middle management level where the focus of influence should be directed specifically to the improvement of learning and teaching. Starratt (2003) argued that attention ought to shift from leadership of the organisation and its structures, roles, responsibilities and tasks to the leadership of learning. Leading teaching and learning activity means that the teaching and learning process is the focal point of attention for sectional heads. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2006) carried this argument further by stating that there ought to be a shift from managerialism and management practices to matters of pedagogy and pedagogic practices. However, as Field and Holden 2004, cited in (Earley & Weindling, 2004) commented that while the term 'leader' carries with it connotations of vision, direction and inspiration and the term 'manager' suggests concepts of maintenance and implementation of policies devised by others; in this separation of functions it is not clear in an education system whose curriculum is controlled from the centre. These researchers further state that it is not clear whether

subject leaders are concerned with curriculum management or implementing someone else's agenda. Therefore, they suggest that perhaps the challenge for sectional heads as curriculum managers, is to establish a balance between leadership and management roles in order to provide vision and direction, and also to ensure the implementation and monitoring of pre-determined policies and procedures.

The school management reforms called Programme of School Improvement (PSI) in Sri Lanka saw change in school management: the principal, deputy principals, sectional heads and other school managers' roles expanded (Ministry of Education, 2008). This resulted in principals exerting their leadership indirectly by sharing the role and responsibilities for it with appropriate others (deputy principals and sectional heads) through delegation and distribution. Furthermore, as a consequence of these reforms, the workload of sectional heads increased (Ministry of Education, 2008). But their role was not clearly defined and described.

## METHOD

The most appropriate approach for this research study was the adoption of a qualitative methodology and case study approach was employed to study this research problem. Qualitative research uses a variety of interpretive research methodologies that seek to investigate the quality of relationships and experiences (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001). The qualitative research approach seemed to be the most appropriate for this study, because this research also explored human experiences and perspectives of participants. The case study research approach has been used by qualitative and interpretive researchers for a long time to investigate actual contemporary life settings and life cycles of people, and it allows researchers to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events of people (Yin, 2009). In particular, this study explored perceptions of sectional heads, principals, deputy principals in relation to the role expectations and professional development needs of sectional heads.

This study used semi structured interviews for collecting data from ten sectional heads, five principals and five deputy principals. Various types of interviews are used in qualitative research. These are: semi structured, informal, and retrospective (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001). The semi-structured interview seemed to be the most appropriate method in qualitative research to get the respondents ideas through better conversation. Therefore, this study used semi structured interviews because semi structured interviews are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between the interviewer and participants. Semi structured interviews allow interviewee to answer comfortably for the questions. Therefore semi structured interviews help researcher to gather rich data.

In this study five principals were selected using a purposive sampling method, five deputy principals and ten sectional heads were randomly selected in to the research sample. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) suggested that "qualitative researchers analyze and make meaning from the data, starting with specific data and ending with categories and patterns" (p. 367). Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analyzing strategy that starts

with the data, and pursues identifiable themes and patterns (Aronson, 1994).

The thematic analysis was the most appropriate method to analyze data in this study in order to identify the meanings and the patterns of the interview data because it was an analytical approach dealing with data that involves human perceptions.

In conclusion, the participants of this study: sectional heads, principals, deputy principals of national schools expressed their experiences and perceptions, and those were the research data in this study. This study had qualitative written data in the interview transcriptions. In the process of analyzing data from the transcriptions, it was identified themes, and then coding and identifying patterns were completed in order to find out the similarities between the cases in this study.

## Analysis and Discussion

Findings revealed that the responses of sectional heads and principals and deputy principals with regard to the responsibilities/tasks related to the sectional heads' role are almost the same. There is general consensus of participants regarding the tasks relate to the sectional head's role, and they indicated six key tasks that sectional heads perform as: teaching; resource management; staff management; professional leadership; administration and communication.

## Challenges

There was a unanimous indication that time was a huge issue for sectional heads. The following aspects are also tied in with the time issue: workload and unrealistic expectations. Followings are some of the comments that sectional heads made in this regard: "*need additional time to complete the tasks expected of me, need more time to develop resources to meet student needs, too many tasks to do in short time frames*". Other sectional heads commented that a huge barrier to them performing their role effectively was a lack of clear communication and appropriate feedback from principals and deputy principals.

Some principals and deputy principals also acknowledged that time as well as workload issues are a huge challenge to sectional heads performing their role effectively. Principals and deputy principals had these comments to make: "*Sectional heads need more time to do the job, student discipline issues/compliance and administrative tasks consume time, lack of sufficient time to complete tasks, time is not enough, quality uninterrupted time to do a good job*".

Principals and deputy principals acknowledged that the sectional head's role is not easy. Time and workload issues impact on to perform sectional heads' roles. Sectional heads expressed that there is not enough time to complete the tasks required of them. Administration tasks and student discipline issues consume most of the time and leave the sectional heads with very little time to spend on development within their sections. Furthermore, sectional heads do not feel supported (by principals and deputy principals) to fulfil their role effectively. There is a lack of communication, and sectional heads feel that issues that are brought up are not followed through with principals and deputy principals. There is also a lack of

recognition of the sectional head's roles and their welfare seems unimportant. Principals and deputy principals also acknowledge that time is a huge issue for sectional heads. They also agree that administrative tasks and student discipline issues do impinge on sectional heads' time.

### **Professional Development**

Sectional heads are unwilling to engage in professional development in their own time, not undergoing professional development to meet the changing learning needs of students, needing professional development to use their time effectively.

Principals and deputy principals, on the other hand, also state that sectional heads lack the necessary skills to perform their role effectively and therefore require professional development in staff management and time management.

There is evidence from the comments made above that sectional heads are requiring support and direction in developing in the area of management development. Principals and deputy principals also acknowledge that sectional heads require professional development, but cite that time constraints and workload issues have made a huge impact and result in this area is being neglected. There is acknowledgement from both sectional heads and principals, deputy principals that the sectional head's role has grown considerably and this has increased their workload and impinged on their time. Sectional heads, principals and deputy principals indicated that there is a lack of recognition for the sectional heads' role. Some suggestions were that sectional heads ought to be financially rewarded as well as be allocated more time to complete the assigned tasks. Furthermore, there is a lack of support for sectional heads. Sectional heads acknowledged that appropriate professional development is required to fulfil their role effectively. This sentiment is further endorsed by principals and deputy principals who state that sectional heads should embark on educational management training, as it is this lack of academic background that hinders them in their role. The majority of participants pointed out the areas should be covered in a programme for training sectional heads as: human and physical resources management, curriculum, welfare, discipline and time management, supervision, communication, planning and leadership.

### **Findings and Recommendation**

In this study, sectional heads raised several issues regarding their role and professional development needs. The following issues have made a huge impact on sectional heads: time constraints and workload issues; the diverse and changing nature of the sectional head's role (increasing demands; no recognition for the sectional head's role; lack of clear role definition); and insufficient support for sectional heads (no proper induction into the role; no specific professional development for the role; lack of mentoring from another sectional heads; and poor appraisal). As a result of these issues, sectional heads have indicated that they do not feel supported and are not prepared for the role.

Principals and deputy principals on the other hand raised the following issues: sectional head's lack in the necessary skills; time constraints that impact their role; lack of recognition of sectional head's role and work load

issues. The study also identified the ideas of principals and deputy principals with regard to the time that sectional heads allocate on tasks that is not sufficient. A key finding was the principals' and deputy principals' point out that sectional heads are receiving professional development for their role. Sectional heads on the other hand felt that professional development in management is needed for them.

The three key issues arising from the discussion are summarised here, these key issues are: time constraints and work-load issues; the diverse and changing nature of the sectional heads' roles; and the lack of support for sectional heads. The findings revealed that principals, deputy principals and sectional heads agreed that time constraints and work-load issues impact hugely on sectional heads to perform their role expectations. This is further complicated by the fact that the sectional heads' roles have become increasingly diverse as well as be in a continual state of flux. Furthermore, sectional heads identified that there is a lack of support for their role in the areas of induction into the role, mentoring, appraisal and management development.

Principals and deputy principals are lacking in the knowledge of the critical role that the sectional heads play. Responsibilities once held by principals and deputy principals have been devolved to sectional heads, but no support is being given to fulfil these tasks effectively. In this study there was a lack of agreement between the perceptions of sectional heads and principals, deputy principal with regard to professional development needs. Principals' and deputy principals' perceptions are that the sectional heads are receiving professional development in management development through the training given to them by the higher education authorities. This, however, was not the view of sectional heads. There is a clear conflict between principals' and deputy principals' and sectional heads' perceptions of professional development in management development. It is a conflict in urgent need of resolution so that the sectional heads are given the necessary professional development to fulfil their role effectively. This study showed that while some schools have been proactive in providing in-school management development training, other schools have adopted a complacent attitude to management development. It is also the perception of principals and deputy principals that sectional heads are not keen to take on professional development in the area of management development as an own initiative.

There is a lack of policy and planning for sectional heads' management development at national level. Hence there is a need for a national induction programme specifically for sectional heads. In Sri Lanka, there is a specific centre under the National Institute of Education for training principals of government schools. Perhaps a move towards establishing a similar centre or a specific professional development programme will augur well for developing training sectional heads in schools. In this study sectional heads clearly voiced their concerns about the lack of an induction programme and the ongoing mentoring to fulfil their role.

A national induction programme for sectional heads will ensure uniformity across the schools. Furthermore, an induction programme for sectional heads will address the areas that the sectional heads indicated as the areas they required support and training in to fulfil their role effectively. These areas are: induction into the sectional heads role; ongoing mentoring and support in the role; and an appraisal that focuses on the sectional heads' role. It is recommended that a framework for professional leadership for sectional heads that focuses on team development and leadership be formulated.

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**Chandana Kasturi Arachchi**  
Senior Lecturer  
University of Colombo  
Sri Lanka  
[Chaou05@yahoo.com](mailto:Chaou05@yahoo.com)



**Damayanthi Edrisinghe, S.**  
Senior Lecturer  
University of Kelaniya  
Sri Lanka  
[swarnadammi@gmail.com](mailto:swarnadammi@gmail.com)