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School improvement: theory vs. practice

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The demand for better schools has been increasing in Sri Lanka. Therefore successive governments have made an effort to fulfill this demand by introducing new programmes. The main areas addressed in these programmes are school administration, curriculum management, student development, teacher development, financial management and school community relations, even though the specific names of the programmes were different and changed from time to time. The present paper attempts to discuss the reality of the "school improvement programmes (PSI)" introduced in 2006 at the school level. The main objective of PSI was for schools to become increasingly empowered through strong community involvement in school management. The expected outcomes of PSI show that this programme also addressed the same 06 areas mentioned above. The study was conducted in three phases (2006-2009) (baseline survey, case studies in seven selected schools, impact study) using a sample of 35 schools selected from seven of the eight zones in which PSI was initially introduced. Three types of instruments were used to collect data: a questionnaire, interviews and survey of school documents. Data gathered for the impact evaluation was compared with the baseline information to identify the change in the selected management areas after introducing PSI.

Findings show that by the end of 3 years of implementation of PSI, principals were of the view that they were aware of PSI objectives, but that they ask for support and supervision from other external sources for the sustainability of the programme. The ideas of students on school vision differed from those of the principals and were more related to the current needs of the society. The principals have admitted that they need to focus more on the curriculum implementation process and on teacher development. The main focus of the principals, teachers and parents was to make the students secure a pass at public examinations. Inadequate emphasis is given to co-curricular activities which could help development of skills and attitudes. PSI has helped in identifying different avenues for generating funds for school related activities rather than depending on parents alone. School community relationships have been strengthened but the involvement of the community in curricular activities is not so prominent. Their participation is evident in improving the physical infrastructure of the school. There is no evidence of schools addressing and understanding community needs. Lack of awareness of the programme's objectives has been the main limitation in achieving the desired outcomes of the programme.