Human Resource Practices and Teacher Engagement in the Rural setting of Ugandan Schools

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The study sought to examine the relationship between human resource practices and teacher engagement in secondary schools in the far north district of Arua. The study was premised on the counter- productive work behaviors of some secondary school teachers working in the rural setting of Uganda. There was however, lack of local empirical studies on the factors driving this trend. Cross sectional research design was adopted for the purpose of the study using a sample of 226 respondents out of the total population size of 514 teachers in the selected local government. Pearson Correlation and regression analysis were used to find out the extent to which HR practices predict teacher engagement. The research findings showed a positive Correlation between the study variables. The study concludes that there is need for the policy makers and school administrators to introduce and effectively apply HR practices namely recruitment and selection, reward, performance management, staff development programmes and employee involvement aimed at inducing teachers' engagement despite the upcountry setting in which they work. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 19th Annual international management conference of Makerere University Business School, September 2 -5, 2014.

Key words: Human resource practices, teacher engagement, secondary schools, Uganda.

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Background

The teaching profession is constantly undergoing scrutiny and is the focus of continuous change (Kilgallon, Meloney & Lock, 2008). According to Demerouti & Cropanzano, (in press), engagement is important for organizations since it contributes to the bottom-line. As societies alter so do the demands made upon educational bodies and those working within those systems; teachers are challenged to cope up with the new human resource issues like workload, reduced administrative support, poor employment conditions; all which influence their engagement level.

In Uganda, this trend is taking a heavy toll on teachers both in the urban and rural settings. There has been a wide focus on performance discrepancy between these two settings and the public has begun to wonder whether teacher engagement contributes to the dichotomy. Even the government has realized that performance differences are affecting the leveling of education as a national service. With the introduction of Universal Primary and Secondary Education, the role of teachers is continuously changing and this has affected teachers' engagement levels across the social-economic setting in which the schools are located.

According to Davar (2009), Human Resource (HR) practices such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management, result oriented performance appraisal and reward systems bring high performance as long as HR practices match up the external and internal environment. The assumption underpinning the practice of HRM is that people are the organization's key resource and the organizational performance largely depends on them (Guest, 2002). Armstrong (2009) contends that HRM is essentially concerned with achieving results through full and effective utilization of human resources. A similar study by Rogg, Schmidt, Shull and Schmitt, (2001) suggest that HR affects performance by first influencing climate which then affects performance. If an appropriate range of Human Resource policies and practices are developed and implemented effectively, HR will make a substantial impact on employee's engagement and subsequently organizational performance (Armstrong, 2006).

Despite the importance of HR practices, many schools in Uganda, especially those in upcountry towns and rural dwellings have not created HR systems to handle pertinent issues affecting teachers. HR issues are a premise of head teachers and their deputies who continue to perform the traditional human resource functions without putting much emphasis on how these roles affect performance. This could explain the differences in teacher engagement levels across the country. However, many critics have attributed the performance failures to the impact of ever changing school environment like demographic profile of academic staff, increases in staff numbers and widespread competition among the schools for top level slots in national examination results. This, of course is achieved at a high cost; many urban schools are able to levy high tuition than do rural schools. The latter can therefore search for

high talent and pay the price as it will in turn attract enrollment when the school is top ranking. This leaves a gap for rural schools that will not be able to engage in strategic practices that attract high teacher engagement. The results is weak teacher and overall school performance levels (Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock, 2008).

Lating (2009) reported that the performance of secondary school teachers in Arua District is very poor. Some teachers in secondary schools like Muni girls' SS have a very poor attendance record while others openly abuse alcohol; all which translates into a poor teacher performance, poor student performance, hence affecting the performance of schools. For example a comparison in the performance of Muni girls SS, Ediofe girls' SS with their counterparts Makerere College and St. Mary's College Namagunga which have better HR practices indicates a disparity in performance. Whereas the former had below 15% of the students scoring in first grade in 2010, 2011 and 2012 Uganda Certificate of Education results, the latter had over 80% of the students in the division one. Ssenkabirwa (2010) also noted that the crisis in the academic sector today is about management.

Without proper HR practices, effective teacher engagement cannot be realised in schools. Even if the schools have all the instructional materials and financial resource, it will not be able to use them properly if a mix of HR practices is not effectively employed. The role played by HR functions in schools is very important (Boyne, 2002; Boyne, 2004; Boyne and Walker, 2004). There is need for schools to introduce, develop and effectively carry out HR functions so as to enhance teacher engagement. This study was motivated to examine this study in the far north west region to obtain an empirical underpinning of the national outcry.

Theoretical foundation

There are various theories that provide anchorage to the debate on teacher engagement especially those in the realm of employee motivation. Cardwell (2011) cites various scholars who have explored this concept and attempted to ground it in motivation theories. The self-determination theory and flow theory were found to point at causal links between teacher engagement and student engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004). On the other hand the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that learning occurs when students are cognitively and emotionally engaged. Ryan and Deci's (2000) motivational theory affords educators a greater understanding of student needs. These authors identify three types of factors influencing achievement. They are competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Competence involves understanding and self-efficacy, relatedness involves making connections, and autonomy involves taking an active role in one's own learning.

A high level of teacher engagement, which is defined as having commitment and enthusiasm (Rutter and Jacobson, 1986), is essential for the success of schools. It is a a contributing factor to academic achievement (Basikin, 2007). Engagement at work has

been described by Kirkpatrick (2007) as an employee's interest in, enthusiasm for and investment in the job. Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) defined engagement as having energy, involvement, and efficacy. However, this definition differs from that of Schaufeli et al. (2002), who defined engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption." Engaged teachers are concerned about the quality of education they deliver (McLaughlin, Pfeifer, & Stanford University Policy Institute, 1986). They will search for new ideas, implement best teaching practices (Marzano, 2003), modify instruction (Cotton, Dollard, & de Jonge 2002), to have best output. However, in these studies there is a conceptual and empirical gap to underpin how human resource practices lend teacher engagement. This is s behavioural aspect and scholars contend that theories that define engagement based primarily on behavior are very likely inadequate (Rutter & Jacobson, 1986).

The achievement goal theory, expectancy-value theory, and self-determination theory can all be used to explain teacher motivation and subsequent engagement although have been applied in different frameworks. For example the expectancy-value theory provides a framework for understanding teachers' motivation for choosing teaching as a career, although we do not find elements of routine work related positive behavior. Wozney, Venkatesh, & Abrami (2006) have examined how the expectancy-value model can explain teacher beliefs and practices related to professional development. The literature makes clear how incorporating resources that address possible theoretical approaches to teacher motivation and professional development can be useful as guides to the design programs and interventions as a means of attaining improved educational quality (Schieb & Karabenick, 2011).

Human Resource practices
In the modern Human Resource Management (HRM) literature, the studies of Milkovich, George, & Boudreau (1991) argue that human capital management is a dynamic process that involves being aware of and managing ever changing conditions in the internal and external environment like the demographic changes, increase in diversity, widespread competition and dual careers all which influence the needs of employees differently. The literature adds that the responsibilities of Human Resource function has gradually shifted from the more traditional roles such as pay role design, recruitment and selection to the strategic roles.

Similarly, extant literature observes that people are the organizations' most important asset and their effective development and deployment offers distinctive and non-imitable competitive advantage. This has spurred interest in the effective management of human resources (Guest, 2001). He also emphasizes that HRM is specifically charged with programs concerned with people who facilitate the most effective use of employees to achieve organizational goals in the most effective manner. This dimension examines how people should be handled to make them more satisfied and

productive. The literature further argues that HRM is a broad generic term used to describe range of possible perspectives through which HR practices might enhance corporate performance.

Bach (2002, 2005); Pichault (2007) suggest that the various strategic roles performed by HR managers include among others fostering HR decentralization by giving first-line managers greater responsibilities, achieving a new balance between quality and performance within the public sphere via skills development, replacing life-long careers based on unilateral appointment with contractual relations, promotion based on competence but not seniority as the basic criterion, management by objectives and a general move towards the individualization of social relations. Ayeni (2005) indicates that policies on recruitment and selection, training and development and performance management are not properly implemented by those in charge which has led to teacher disengagement as many teachers report late to work, leave early, attend irregularly, get alternative work elsewhere and even engage in regular strike actions as a way of resenting poor treatment from the school management. Therefore, Ssenkabirwa (2010) found that the Human Resource Practice in Schools is still wanting as evidenced by the crisis in the academic sector today.

Teacher engagement

Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004) report that employee engagement is a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values;

engaged teachers are aware of business context, work with colleagues to improve performance for the benefit of the organization. Bakker, Scheufeli, Leiter and Tarsis (2008) in their study, literally argue that work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, and work-related state of mind that was characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. The literature states that Vigor was the high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties; dedication was being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge; and absorption was being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly. Engaged teachers were those who could dedicate their time and energy towards effective achievement of organizational work (Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock, 2008).

Robinson, Perryman and Hayday, (2004) agree that teacher engagement was not one way movement of knowledge from teacher to student but rather an interactive process that was influenced by the type of support received from management, the nature of students, the work colleagues, the curriculum and the milieu in which the interactions among these parties took place. Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock (2008) also identified personal factors i.e. attitudes, beliefs and personal health and wellbeing of the individual teachers to influence engagement levels, which eventually impacted on the overall output level. The term engagement has gained increased

currency as a positive descriptor of active involvement in learning on the part of teachers and students. Employee engagement should therefore be seen as a barometer that determines the association of a person with the organization (Vazirani, 2007). Gallup the consulting organization (e.g. see, Vasirani, 2007) posits that people within the organization can be looked under three perspectives i.e. "the engaged, not engaged and actively disengaged". *Engaged employees* were builders i.e. they used their talents and strength to work with passion to push the organization forward, were naturally curious about the company and their position in it; *not engaged employees* tended to focus on tasks rather than goals, wanted to be told what to do, did not have productive relationship with their managers and generally felt that their contribution was overlooked. The *actively disengaged* employees were consistently against everything, undermined what their engaged Co-workers accomplished every day, were unhappy at work every time and generally, could cause great damage to an organization's functioning.

In the recent studies, teacher engagement was a source of a sustainable competitive advantage for every school (Syed, Daniel, & Gloria, 2008). In China, for example, colleges and universities were increasingly concerned about engagement by strengthening the HR practices in order to enhance teaching, scientific research and thus improve the overall level of employee engagement. In Uganda, however, teacher engagement had remained low because secondary schools had not shifted away from the more traditional practice of HR to

the adoption of some innovative HR practices. In summary, Sendegeya (2010) recommends that there was an urgent need to widen participation in higher education and corresponding investment in the HR practices in order to influence teacher engagement in schools.

Variable Relationships
Earlier studies had shown that HR practices influence teacher engagement. Macey and Schneider (2008) found that engagement was relatively stable because of continued presence of specific job and organizational characteristics. In line with the above, Bakker and Demerouti (2008) assert that job resources such as autonomy, supervisory coaching and opportunity for growth and development had a motivational potential which in the long run drove people's attitudes and behaviors towards performance of tasks. Kahn (1990) also described job resources as characteristics of work situations that shape the degree to which people employed and expressed themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performance (see also Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Meijman & Mulder (1998) report that HR practices manifested in job resources play both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivational role. For instance, extrinsic role i.e. work environment that offer many resources to foster the willingness to dedicate one's efforts and abilities to the work task successfully and goals attained.

Bakker and Bal (2010) agree that HR practices such as team work, opportunity for development, reward and performance feedback increased the likelihood of being

successful in achieving one's work goals. Similarly, the achievement of work goals and outcome was positively related to engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). The study agreed with Schaufeli & Bakker (2004) who articulated evidence between a positive relationship between some HR practices like performance feedback, team work, individual development and worker engagement (see also; Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006; Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2007).

Recent studies also showed that HR practices within the confines of job characteristics varied from day to day (Buttler, Grzywacz, Bass & Linney, 2005); every working day employees use their job resources to reach their work related goals (Clegg & Spencer, 2007; Daniels, 2006; Totterdell, Wood & Wall, 2006) which determined their daily mood differently depending on the practices available and such resources helped in coping with the emotional demands of teaching and eventually impacted upon teachers day to day level of engagement (see also; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2008; Zohar, Tzischinski & Epstein, 2003).

Methods
The research used a cross sectional survey design, quantitative and qualitative data (Cresswell, 2009). The population was 514 secondary school teachers in Arua District, the west nile region of Uganda. The sample size of 226 was determined by Krecjie and Morgan (1970). While random sampling was used to reach the respondents, on a little extent, supported by Johnson and

Onwuegbuzie (2004), some senior teachers were purposively included to befit this study from their rich experience. Primary data was collected through self administered questionnaires and a response rate of 77% was obtained. The instrument had reviewed by the experts, pretested and the Cronbach Alpha values were above 0.7 for all the variables under study. The study variables were rated using a five point Likert scale. Data analysis was done using SPSS. HR practices were measured basing on the instruments used by De Beer (1987) and Teacher Engagement by Schaufeli & Bakker (2003). These measures were also adopted from the studies of Towers Perrin, Gallup and Blessing white (Nelly, 2008).

Findings and Discussion

The descriptive statistics
The demographic characteristics of the respondents were considered and the findings showed that majority 68.9% of the respondents were male, 65.6% were diploma holders and 31.6% were holding degrees. Majority (33%) had served in the schools for a period of two to four years and only 22.1% had served in the schools for duration of one year and below. The results also revealed that 56% of the respondents were married and 49.9% were youth and adult youth ranging in the age bracket of 26-35, this constituted the biggest percentage. This distribution was good to provide insights of perceptions from different levels of the organization. The results reflected non biased responses which were not skewed to any level of age, gender, marital status and length of service among the respondents.

We contend that these demographic characteristics partly influenced the issues of teacher engagement.

Inferential statistics

We set out to establish the relationship between HR practices and teacher engagement. This was revealed by coefficients as can be seen in table 2. They are positive and significant. This implied that HR practices are positively associated with teacher engagement even in the upcountry secondary schools in our study. The reverse will be true. We however, note the lowest coefficient of reward and compensation. While the public concern has been on pay differences between the urban and the rural teachers, our empirical finding shows a low association. Instead, the rural teachers emphasized more performance evaluation and training and development as associated with their engagement.

Correlation analysis
Table 1: Correlation analysis between HR practices and Teacher engagement

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	B
HR practices						
Recruitment, selection and deployment (A1)	1					
Training and development (A2)	.561**	1				
Reward and compensation system (A3)	.449**	.651**	1			
Performance evaluation (A4))	.590**	.618**	.564**	1		
Involvement in decision making (A5)	.584**	.677**	.611**	.687**	1	
Teacher engagement (B)	.502**	.503**	.288**	.516**	.436**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Regression analysis
Regression analysis was performed to predict teacher engagement using HR practices.

Table 2: Regression model

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	20.014	2.996		6.680	0.000
Recruitment, selection and deployment	0.380	0.133	0.257	2.850	0.005
Training and development	0.497	0.173	0.366	2.869	0.005
Reward and compensation system	-0.312	0.136	-0.235	-2.292	0.024
performance evaluation	0.436	0.195	0.257	2.239	0.027
Involvement in decision making	-0.004	0.197	-0.003	-0.022	0.982
a. Dependent Variable: Teacher engagement					
R Square		.413	F Statistic		15.494

Adjusted R Square	.387	Sig	.000

In table2 we conducted a regression analysis with the HR practices against teacher engagement so as to examine the predictive power of the variables. The overall model had a moderate fit. Results showed that HR practices accounts for 38.7% variation in engagement (r^2= .387, p<0.00). Of the HR practices in our model the highest role is from training and development (beta 0.366, p=0.005); followed by recruitment, selection and deployment (beta 0.275, p=0.005), performance evaluation closely follows (beta 0.257, p=0.027). It is observed that reward and compensation had very low beta value. This is a key finding that should guide practitioners on where to lay emphasis. Interestingly we also found out that involvement in decision making was not statistically significant in predicting teacher engagement.

The model did not account for nearly 62% of the variance in teacher engagement. While we empirically attributed this to factors other than HR practices, we are concerned that the human resource function is not yet highly regarded in upcountry schools hence the moderately weak model fit we obtained. This therefore calls for further analytical studies on HR and other variables to determine factors that predict a high fit for teacher engagement. Comparative studies in the urban- rural dichotomy will also resolve the dilemma.

Our results at least confirmed that there is a positive relationship between HR practices and teacher engagement. This finding has support in extant literature. The presumption is that HR practices are an integral management activity that needs to be handled within the structures of schools. This also draws that the more Human resource practices are introduced and implemented in secondary schools, the

more engaged teachers will become. This supported by by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) who cited the implementation of HR practices as a way of obtaining superior teacher engagement. Conversely, Hakanen, Bakker and Schaufeli (2006) found a positive evidence between HR practices and teacher engagement as did our study. Teachers who perceive fair HR practices in the schools they are serving, are willing to engage in extra role behaviors. Such employees feel that there is an open giving between them and their employers and develop a work related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Tarsis, 2008). This finding means that the more a school introduces and implements effective training and development, formal recruitment and supervision, the more teachers will be engaged resulting into better overall school performance.

Conclusions and Implications

We conclude that human resource management practices should be identified as strategic points in the long run view of schools. Our results have confirmed the positive relationship and revealed the practices that are significant; our results have support of extant literature. The presumption that that HR practices are an integral management activity that can be handled by head teachers, needs to be revisited. They should be handled within the structures of the schools but with specialty attention.

We contend that schools proprietors, head teachers and teachers will find strong basis in our study to review their current practices. Schools should introduce and implement effective HR recruitment and selection, and design training and development programs. The ultimate focus on how much teachers are paid as the basis of their engagement has found not support

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from our results. It is therefore important that managers in schools continuously emphasize strategic human capital development. We do not however, completely relegate remuneration and other practices; they had low but statistically significant coefficients save for involvement in decision making.

Policy makers in government and school management committees have an empirical basis to introduce guidelines on hiring and development of teachers. These priority practices must be put among key budget centers of the school. For researchers this study has highlighted the significant HR practices that lead to teacher engagement. They accounted for 38.7%, meaning that other factors not covered in this study account for 61.3%. We recommend further studies to identify the other variables in upcountry schools. We particularly recommend further comparative research between the urban and rural levels of engagement and the power of influencers. We are concerned teacher involvement in decision making, reward and compensation had a negative contribution to teacher engagement. We implore further examination of these variables.

The results in the study may have been limited by our operationalisation of the study variables especially the HR practices that we chose to study. We also suspect some biases among the respondents on the items in our instrument. We provided an upcountry analysis and results from urban schools could enrich the conclusions. We however, contend that despite the limitations we have contributed towards the debate with empirical findings.

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