

Impact of Principal Instructional Leadership Practices on Students' Academic Performance in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

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Notwithstanding the growing scholarly interest in the effects of principal instructional leadership on student achievement, empirical evidence in developing countries from the African context, especially Zambia, concerning the role of principal instructional leadership behavior effect on students' academic outcomes has been limited. Hence, this study examined the impact of principals' instructional leadership practices on students' educational outcomes and determined which specific instructional leadership dimensions have the most important role. A survey research design was carried out under quantitative research methodology. The sample consisted of 39 principals, 190 teachers, and 345 students from low and high-performing secondary schools in Lusaka Province, Zambia. The results show that all the four instructional leadership practices are strongly associated with academic performance (defining the school mission ($r(30) = 0.606, P < 0.01$), managing of the school instructional program ($r(30) = 0.603, P < 0.01$), promoting a positive school learning climate ($r(30) = 0.715, P < 0.01$) advancing teachers' interests ($r(30) = 0.580, P < 0.01$). Furthermore, this study recommends that a balanced instructional leadership by principals enhances proper utilization of all resources to realize good performance in examinations for their schools.

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INTRODUCTION

The success of academic programs in learning institutions depends on their instructional leadership (Hallinger 2011). Hallinger defines instructional leadership as all action education leaders take to improve teaching and learning in educational organizations. According to Leithwood et al. (1999), principals' instructional leadership may be conceptualized into two categories narrow and broad. According to Musungu and Nasongo, (2008), the narrow definition focuses on instructional leadership as a separate entity from administration and only includes those actions that are directly related to teaching and learning, such as teaching methodology and lesson observation, while the broad view of instructional leadership includes development and implementation of goals, school culture and instructional management aimed at enhancing student learning outcomes. Instructional leadership practice means creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning to pursue academic and social school goals (Leithwood, 2019). Further, the school climate and student achievement are linked, and without a school climate that would create a harmonious and well-functioning school, then a high degree of academic achievement is difficult.

Goal-oriented instructional leaders should focus on improving student academic attainment (Hallinger et.al, 2016). Principals, according to Hallinger (2014), must create direction as instructional leaders by articulating a clear vision for the school and communicating with all stakeholders. Further, a school is a social system where the organization desire to achieve set goals, individuals interact with each other to carry out institutional objectives and goals, and emphasize a hierarchy of relationships; thus, the study will adopt the broad view of instructional leadership. Principals are regarded as crucial players in both the creation and maintenance of well-run schools, as well as the development of schools with high student accomplishment (Hopkin, 2001). According to Al-Mahdy et al., (2018), the major job of the principal is to provide the focus and support system that allows teachers to improve their classrooms for higher instructional effectiveness.

A great instructional leader, according to Ghavifeekr et al., (2019), is someone who prioritizes curriculum and instructions, rallies and mobilizes resources to achieve goals, and fosters an atmosphere of high standards for academic achievement and respect for all students. Besides being accountable for managerial tasks, principals today are ultimately responsible for providing top-quality instructional leadership that reflects best practices for the chief purpose of ensuring student achievement (Kaster, 2011). However, principals' instructional leadership practices have not been prioritized in many countries, including Zambia. School leaders are being pushed to adopt a more instructional-focused role in their classrooms. As the demand to improve students' performance in the present standards-based accountability system rises, school administrators are being asked to concentrate their efforts on the core business of education – teaching and learning.

Hallinger and Heck (2011), in their study on principals' instructional leadership, revealed that principals' instructional leadership practices are linked to school improvement in examinations and that some schools thrive under instructional practices whilst others struggle. Hallinger et.al (2016) agree that instructional leadership can contribute to school improvement by enhancing supervision of instructional programs, appropriate principals' support and coordination of staff development, and a conducive work environment.

The Zambian government recognizes the importance of instructional leadership practices in enhancing quality education. Since 2021, the government has made a concerted effort to improve school supervision (one indicator of instructional supervision) to mitigate the falling standards of education, due to the introduction of free primary and secondary education (FEA). The government revamped Quality Assurance and Standards to a directorate and increased its mandate in supervision. There was intensified professional development of

QASO and principals through seminars and workshops (MOE, 2021). Through the MOE, the Zambian Education Management Institute (ZEMI) sponsored all principals for a Diploma in Education Management to address the issue of principals' instructional leadership practice despite these efforts by the government, there is still public clamor for effective instructional leadership practices by the principals in public secondary schools in Zambia. There are reports of poor pupil learning outcomes as observed by the Ministry of Education while releasing 2021 GCE results. The ministry noted that there was the need for effective supervision in schools, aimed at assessing the general school management, including instructional leadership practices noting that creativity and innovativeness in the management would be a critical motivating factor that would guarantee high performance.

Overall, the purpose of this study examined the impact of principals' instructional leadership practices on students' academic outcomes and determine which specific instructional leadership dimensions have the most important role. This was achieved using the following research sub-questions;

1. What is the influence of managing the school instructional program on the academic performance in secondary schools in Lusaka Province?
2. How does defining the school mission influence academic performance in secondary schools in Lusaka Province?
3. To what extent does promoting a positive school learning climate influence academic performance in secondary schools in Lusaka Province?

How does the advancement of teachers' interests influence the academic performance in secondary schools in Lusaka Province?

Theoretical framework

The multi-dimensional leadership theory formulated by Bolman and Deal (2003) was used as a theoretical framework.

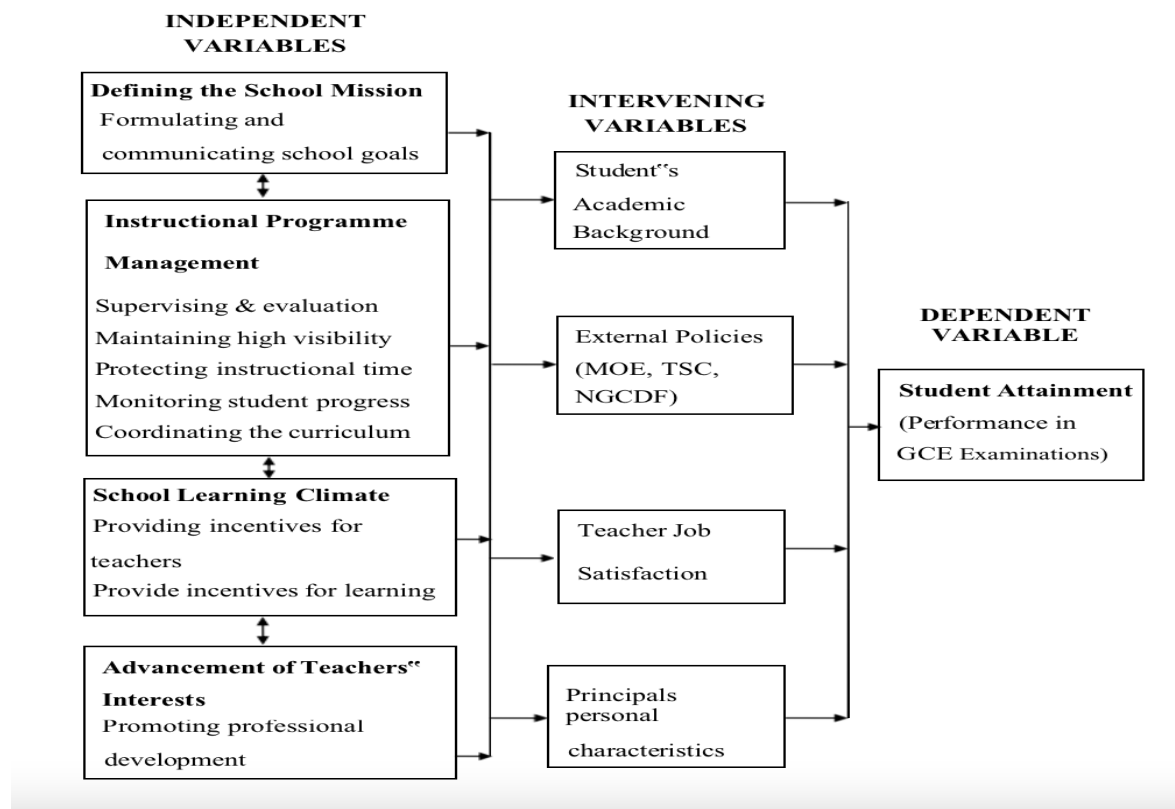


Figure 1: The Bolman and Deal Multi-Dimensional Leadership Theory Source: Bolman and Deal (2003)

Based on Bolman and Deal's Multi-Dimensional Leadership theory (2003), the researcher conceptualized instructional leadership shown in Figure 1 overleaf. In the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 above, the structural frame is represented by defining the school mission, which entails planning and communicating the school policies. The symbolic frame is represented by coordination of the curriculum, supervision, and evaluation of instruction, monitoring students' progress, maintaining high visibility, and protection of the instructional time. The motivation of teachers and students represents the human resource frame of instructional leadership, in which the principals provide a favorable work environment which is essential in stimulating both individual and school effectiveness. Lastly, the political frame of leadership is represented by the effective development of people (in this case teachers) to match the varied tasks assigned to them.

The four frameworks theory by Bowman and Deal (2003) helped the researcher to formulate the objectives for this study, by utilizing the practices indicated as important towards effective leadership. The current study observed that all the four leadership frames are useful for effective instructional leadership in public secondary schools in Lusaka Province, and therefore the four frames leadership theory applies to Zambian secondary schools. The findings of this study hence support Bowman and Deal's (2003).

METHODOLOGY

The present research utilized a descriptive survey design (Creswell,2014) to obtain the desired information about the incidence, distribution, and interrelationships of educational variables among a given population at a given time. This study examined the effect of principals' instructional leadership practices on students' academic outcomes and determine specific instructional leadership dimensions which have the most important role. A descriptive survey, therefore, was considered useful to study the impact of principal instructional leadership practices on student academic achievement and determine which specific instructional leadership dimensions have the most important role. Data collected were used to address the following four questions.

1. What is the influence of managing the school instructional program on the academic performance in secondary schools in Lusaka Province?
2. How does defining the school mission influence academic performance in secondary schools in Lusaka Province?
3. To what extent does promoting a positive school learning climate influence academic performance in secondary schools in Lusaka Province?
4. How does the advancement of teachers' interest influence the academic performance in secondary schools in Lusaka Province?

Population, sample, and sampling strategy

To collect data, 38 (42%) of target schools from high performing and low performing "South Zone", "district" and lastly "North Zone" categories, to give a total of 38 secondary schools were targeted. Schools from moderate performing clusters were not selected for the study due to their inability to provide the conclusive positive or negative influence of the instructional leadership practices on student academic outcomes. The main "Technical" secondary schools were omitted from this study since, in the researcher's view; they do not possess the common features in most secondary schools of the target population. The main "Technical" secondary schools, by virtue of national focus by the Zambian government, have superior physical and material resources over the other secondary schools, and their admission of students with

relatively higher marks was likely to produce skewed and unreliable correlations. Hence, this study targeted secondary school principals from general schools and an average of five teachers from each school. This number of teachers represented a possible 42% of teachers who handle candidates in a secondary school, given that most schools offer 10 subjects for examination in GCE. a teacher were selected from Mathematics, Chemistry, Geography, Biology, English and History through simple random sampling from each selected secondary school, on the basis that they had handled GCS candidates in the school for at least three years. This sampling procedure gave a total of 190 teachers for the sample. The sample of students was determined using Cochran 's (1977) formula:

$$ss = \frac{(Z)^2 \times (p)(1-p)}{(d)^2}$$

Where ss= sample size

Z=1.96 (Z value at 95% confidence level)

P= percentage picking choice expressed as decimal

d= 0.05 (confidence interval)

Corrected formula final sample =

$$\frac{ss}{1 + \frac{ss-1}{population}}$$

Where the Form 3 and Form 4 student population size = 3,420. Thus, Simple random sampling was used to select the 380 forms four and three students on the basis that they have stayed in the school for at least three years.

Research instrument and data collection procedure

To collect data close-ended questionnaires were employed. The content of this questionnaire was adapted from the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale Questionnaire (PMRSQ) developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) and some aspects of instructional leadership skills identified by Weber (1971). The questionnaire, however, was subject to some modifications to adapt it to the Zambian context. It was important to conduct a pilot study to test the instrument validity and make adjustments following the recommendations suggested by the respondents. The instrument's validity was also strengthened by running a principal component analysis (PCA) to assess the instrument's length, intelligibility, redundancy, and content specificity.

Table 1.

Likert Rating Scale

Rating Points	5	4	3	2	1
Very High	√				
High		√			
Moderate			√		
Low				√	
Very Low					√

Source: McLeod, S. A. (2008). *Likert Scale*.

Data analysis

Once data were collected, the researcher processed the data for analysis. Cohen et al. (2000) explain that data processing involves coding and editing. The researcher identified and eliminated any errors in the returned questionnaires during editing to complete any incomplete or eligible answers and rectify any inaccuracies. In coding, the researcher assigned numerals to replace text so as to establish relationships between variables. Data were analyzed in two phases. The first phase used descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to present the respondents' biodata in order to determine whether the data obtained were still reliable in seeking to establish the desired relationships. The second phase of data analysis used inferential statistics, where Pearson correlation was used to test for relationships between instructional leadership practices and academic performance. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the differences in the rating of the leadership practices by the three respondent groups.

FINDINGS

The data results were presented and discussed around four instructional leadership dimensions that emerged from principals' and teachers' responses. These are as follows: (a) defining the school mission; (b) managing the school instruction program; (c) promoting positive school learning climate, and (d) advancing teachers' interest. Means and standard deviations indicating the level of the principals' involvement in each behavior are presented in the following.

Impact of Defining School Mission on Academic Performance

With regard to dimension 1, which is *defining the school mission*, the results in the study indicated in Table 2 below show that school principals enact all instructional leadership behaviors that comprise defining the school mission. However, some mean differences are observed which indicate that some behaviors in this dimension are more performed than others. For instance, when the ratings were tested on a five-point Likert scale of 1-5; where 1 represented "very low", 2 represented "low", 3 represented "moderate", 4 represented "high" and 5 represented "very high". The Mean scores for all the respondents were calculated, where a score ranging from 4.6 to 5.0 was taken Mean that principals were rated as "excellent" in that aspect of leadership defining the school mission, mean score ranging from 4.0 to 4.5 was rated as "good", mean score ranging from 3.0 to 3.9 was rated as "average", mean score ranging from 2.0 to 2.9 was rated as "poor" and the range from 1.0 to 1.9 was rated as "very poor". All respondent groups rated the principals as "good" at defining the school mission (for teachers: $M=4.05$, $SD=1.00$, principals $M=4.38$, $SD=0.96$) and students $M=4.10$, $SD=1.26$).

Table 2

Teachers Rating on Indicators of Defining the School Mission

Indicators	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Framing a focused set of annual school-wide goals	164	4.19	.848
Using student performance data in developing the school's academic goals	164	4.01	1.036
Effectively communicating the school's mission to members	164	3.93	1.083
Ensuring the effective display of school's academic goals	164	4.05	1.046
Total		4.05	1.003

Table 3*Relationship Between Defining the School Mission and GCE Performance*

	Defining the School Mission	GCE
Pearson Correlation		
Defining the School mission	1	.606**
Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
N	32	32
Pearson Correlation		
GCE	.606**	1
Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
N	32	32

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Furthermore, Table 3 above shows that principals are rated “good” by their teachers at three of the four indicators used thus: framing a focused set of annual school-wide goals, using student performance data in developing the school's academic goals, and ensuring the effective display of school's academic goals, but average at the indicator of effectively communicating the school's mission to members. These results concur with the assertion by Hallinger (2011) that school goals should be comprehensive, specific, and time-bound, say for a year, clear as to which particular staff members will address certain areas, geared towards fulfilling specific objectives based on a needs assessment involving the staff, academic goals should be based on student performance data, clear to be understood and executed by the concerned target groups.

In addition, the results in table 3 below show that there is a strong and highly significant association between defining the school mission and GCE examination performance ($r(30) = 0.606$, $P < 0.01$) among secondary schools in Lusaka Province. These results imply that the clearer the principal makes the school goals to the concerned persons, the better the performance of students in GCE examinations. The findings of this study confirm the observations by Isaiah and Isaiah (2014) who identified defining school mission as one best instructional leadership practices of school leaders. The findings of the current study differ from those by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) who found moderate effects on student achievement for the instructional leadership dimension concerned with goal setting and planning. Sanchez, Paul, and Thornton (2020) however noted minimal or even adverse effects by leadership on students' learning.

Impact of Managing the School Instructional Programme on Academic Performance

The study identified instructional leadership behaviors that secondary school principals prioritize in their everyday leadership activities in the Lusaka Province. To do so, average means and standard deviations were computed for all subscales of instructional leadership.

As indicated in Table 4, principals managing their instructional program is strongly performed by the secondary school principals as perceived by the respondents “good” on making clear who is responsible for coordinating the curriculum ($M=4.45$, $SD=0.737$) and drawing upon the results of school-wide testing when making decisions ($M=4.23$, $SD=1.100$) but average on the other indicators of managing the school instructional program studied, which include monitoring curriculum to see that it covers the school's objectives ($M=3.82$, $SD=0.438$), ensuring tardy and truant students suffer specific consequences ($M=3.59$, $SD=1.073$). Ensuring

mechanism for compensating for the lost instructional time in place ($M=3.19$, $SD=1.236$). The bold attempt by principals to delegate so that goal assignment is clear is justified by Hallinger (2011), argued that in many instances, principals in secondary schools are not the educational experts in most subjects and therefore rely on the teachers, who are subject specialists for effective curriculum implementation.

Table 4.

Teachers Rating on Indicators of Managing the school Instructional Program

Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Making clear who is responsible for coordinating the curriculum	164	4.45	.737
Drawing upon the results of school-wide testing when making decisions	164	4.23	1.100
Monitoring curriculum to see that it covers the school's objectives	164	3.82	.438
Ensuring tardy and truant students suffer specific consequences	164	3.59	1.073
Ensuring mechanism for compensating for lost instructional time in place	164	3.19	1.236
Total		3.82	0.964

Table 5

Influence of Management of the School Instructional Program on Academic Performance

	Managing Programme	Instructional GCE
Managing	Pearson Correlation 1	.603 **
Instructional Program		.000 32
GCE	Pearson Correlation .603 ** Sig. (1-tailed) .000 N 32	1
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).		32

The statistics in Table 5 above indicate that there is a moderate but highly significant association between managing the school instructional program and GCE examination performance ($r(30) = 0.603$, $P < 0.01$) among public secondary schools in Lusaka Province. These results imply that a greater effort in managing the instructional program contributes to better GCE examination results. This means that for good performance in examinations, there must be proper coordination of the curriculum through proper delegation (Hafsat et al., 2020), adequate supervision, and effective monitoring of student progress.

Impact of Promoting Positive School Learning Climate on Academic performance

The dimension of promoting a positive school learning climate on academic performance as perceived by the teachers indicated in Table 6 as "average" on all indicators of promoting a positive school learning climate. The teachers' Mean rating for promoting a positive school

learning climate was “average” ($M=3.55$, $SD=1.311$) while that of principals was “good” ($M=4.10$, $SD=1.144$) and that of students was “average” ($M=3.89$, $SD=1.348$).

Such “average” Mean rating indicate that principals have ignored their instructional leadership role of creating a favorable learning climate. While the importance of this instructional leadership practice has been underscored by Omemu, (2017) the “average” rating for the principal's rewarding special efforts by teachers with opportunities for professional may be due to limited “financial muscle” of the schools, which rely mainly on government subsidy, with no “vote head” for staff development (MoE, 2020).

Table 6

Teachers rating for head teachers on Promoting a positive school learning climate

Indicators	N	M	SD
Recognizing students who do superior work with formal rewards.	164	3.87	1.330
Contacting parents to communicate exemplary student performance.	164	3.63	1.288
Supporting teachers actively in their reward of students' accomplishments.	164	3.40	1.266
Reinforcing superior performance by teachers in staff meetings, newsletters, and/or memos.	164	3.85	1.386
Acknowledging teachers' exceptional writing memos for their personal files.	164	3.18	1.315
Rewarding special efforts by teachers with opportunities for professional recognition.	164	3.34	1.280
Total		3.55	1.311

Table 7

Correlation between Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate and Academic Performance

Instructional climate			GCE
Instructional	Pearson Correlation	1	.715**
			.000
			32
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
N			
	Pearson Correlation	.715**	1
GCE	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	32
	N		

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

As indicated in Table 7 below, there is a strong and highly significant association between promoting a positive school learning climate and GCE examination performance ($r(1, 32) = 0.715$, $P < 0.01$) among secondary schools in Lusaka Province. These results imply that a more positive school learning climate results in better performance of students in GCE examinations. The findings of this study affirm the argument by Omemu (2017), that most successful school leaders stress a lot of time on human resource activities than promoting a positive learning climate.

Impact of Advancing Teachers' Interests on Academic Performance

The dimension of seeking to establish the impact of advancing teachers' interest on academic performance in Lusaka Province as indicated in Table 8 below was "good" (principals $M=4.48$, $SD=1.114$, teachers $M=4.11$, $SD=1.023$).

Table 8.

Impact of Advancing Teachers' Interests on Academic Performance

Indicators.	N	M	S.D
Ensuring that in-service activities attended by staff are consistent with the school's goals.	164	4.29	.912
Actively supporting the use of classroom of skills acquired during in-service training.	164	4.05	.955
Obtaining the participation of the whole important in-service activities	164	3.99	1.138
Total		4.11	1.023

As can be seen in Table 8 above, head teachers were rated "good" by their teachers at promoting the teachers' interests ($M=4.11$, $SD=1.023$). Such a high rating points to the importance that Principals in Lusaka Province place in supporting and facilitating teachers for staff development endeavors. Omemu (2017) explains the important role that staff development plays in empowering staff to develop the requisite skills to cope with the ever-changing demands of delivery of curriculum and instruction. Sanchez, Paul, and Thornton (2020) also argue that continuous professional development is the most crucial practice to enhance student performance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results reveal that, from the perceptions of the teachers, students, principals in secondary schools of the Lusaka Province, to a certain extent, performed instructional leadership behaviors and have an impact on student academic outcomes. It was found that principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and the functions of instructional leadership that their teachers are expecting them to perform. Teachers perceived that school principals to a large extent do engage in defining the school mission, promoting teacher professional development, providing teaching and learning resources, and reviewing curricula, were also enacted but at a moderate level.

Although defining school mission is not excellently done, the results show that the school principals understand the role of having shared goals in the teaching and learning process. Principal-teacher collaboration was shown to be at the heart of the school development process, where the principals tapped into teachers' expertise and experience to ensure that schools had clear and collective goals that focused on student learning and achievement. This partnership is in line with the new conception of instructional leadership where, according to Hallinger and Wang (2016), effective principals seek out the ideas and insights of teachers around instructional matters. Sanchez, Paul, and Thornton (2020) in their research revealed that schools perform well when principals put more emphasis on setting and sharing the school mission and goals with teachers as compared to low-performing schools. The effort that the school principals invest in having a shared school purpose is an indicator that teaching

and learning in the Lusaka Province is not the sole responsibility of teachers but rather a collective activity that binds all school members, including the principals. The fact that the principals accept teachers being part of the school goal development process confirms Omemu's (2017) findings that teachers who understand school goals make better sense of their work and commit to it for the sake of positive change in the classroom.

Overall principals' instructional leadership behaviors enactment. IL subscales Mean SD Mx MN; Defining school mission (M=4.05, SD=1.00). This Mean rating did not differ significantly ($F=1.31$, $p<.270$) from those of Principals (M=4.38, SD=0.96). On Correlating defining the school mission and students' academic performance, the study found a strong and highly significant association between defining the school mission and GCE examination performance ($r(30) = 0.606$, $P<0.01$) among secondary schools in Lusaka Province. The study established that the association between defining the school mission and GCE performance is higher in high performing schools ($r(5) = 0.813$, $p<0.05$) than in low performing schools ($r(23) = 0.397$, $p<0.05$). Managing the school instructional program as seen in Table 4.12 (M=3.62, SD=0.964). This Mean rating did not differ significantly from those of head teachers ($F(1, 30) = 32.344$, $p<0.01$) but was not significantly different from those of students ($F(1, 834) = 2.865$, $P<0.091$). On Correlating managing the school instructional program to students' academic performance, the study found a strong and highly significant association between managing the school instructional program and GCE examination performance ($r(30) = 0.603$, $P<0.01$) among public secondary schools in Lusaka Province. The study established that the association between managing the school instructional program and GCE performance is higher in high-performing schools ($r(5) = 0.347$) than in low-performing schools ($r(23) = 0.112$). This study established that teachers rated their principals "average" at promoting a positive working climate (M=3.55, SD=1.31). This Mean rating did differ significantly from those of principals ($F(1, 358) = 11.312$, $p<0.01$); ($F(1, 834) = 1.220$, $P<0.27$). On Correlating promoting a positive working climate to students' academic performance, the study found a strong and highly significant association between promoting a positive working climate and GCE examination performance ($r(30) = 0.715$, $P<0.01$) among public secondary schools in Lusaka Province. The study established that promoting a positive working climate makes a more significant contribution to students' academic performance in low-performing schools ($r(23) = 0.441$, $p<0.05$) than in high-performing schools ($r(5) = 0.596$, $p<0.158$). Advancement of teachers' interests as (M=4.11, SD=1.023). This Mean rating did differ significantly from those of principals ($F(1, 358) = 59.08$, $p<0.01$). Students were not used for this leadership practice due to their inability to determine and report on it. On Correlating the advancement of teachers' interests to students' academic performance, the study found a strong and highly significant association between the advancement of teachers' interests and GCE examination performance ($r(30) = 0.580$, $P<0.01$) among secondary schools in Lusaka Province.

The results reveal that the principals provided teachers with opportunities to share information on what was observed during instruction supervision. The principals believed that observing instruction and providing feedback was not enough to improve content delivery and student learning. In addition, having time to discuss the feedback with teachers and allow them to express their ideas in an honest and non-threatening way was another strategy to help teachers to reflect on their practices and analyze their teaching more deeply for instruction improvement. This is what Blas'e and Blas'e (1999) and Hafsati et al., (2020) support by saying that improvement in teachers is likely to occur when there is a mutual, open, and critical dialogue between teachers and their supervisors. Thus, the principals providing teachers with time to openly and mutually discuss the observed behaviors in the classroom

showed an intent to guide and support these teachers in improving instruction by bringing positive changes in their teaching and in their students' learning.

Support and Agreement

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Conflict Statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare

Publication Ethical Statement

Before beginning data collecting, ethical considerations in human subject research were addressed. First and foremost, participation was optional, and participants were told that the information submitted during data collection would be used solely for the purpose of the research and that their identities would be kept anonymous throughout the writing and publication of the results. Prior to the data collection process, participants were also assured that they could withdraw from the study at any moment with no repercussions. They signed a consent form prior to completing the questionnaire, confirming their desire to participate voluntarily.

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