

A Case Study of Instructional Leadership in Malawian Secondary Schools

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Abstract:

Currently, there is a huge demand for secondary school education worldwide especially in the developing countries such as Malawi. In order to meet this for the secondary school education, the Malawian government tries to develop effective school leadership in its education policy agenda. We conducted a qualitative study involving two religious-run secondary schools that have been achieving excellent results in order to examine the instructional leadership roles of the principals.. The study consist two principals, ten students, six parents and fourteen teachers. The study revealed that the principals established the positive partnership with the parents, students as well as the teachers. It is also discovered that the principals' responsibilities in both schools were often distributed to the teachers as well as their students. Furthermore, we also discovered that the principals in those schools played much emphasis on the academic results by prioritizing the allocation of enough resources in the teaching and learning as well as the effective use of time and other resources. Therefore, the Malawian government should make sure to have many principals that may have effective instructional leadership capacity in order to improve the culture of teaching and learning in Malawian secondary schools.

Keywords: *Instructional leadership, secondary school, roles of principals, Malawi*



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INTRODUCTION

Recently, instructional leadership has made a comeback with increasing importance placed on academic standards and the need for schools to be accountable. Although there are different views on the precise nature of the instructional leadership task of the principal, many authors identify specific management functions or elements of the principal's management task that have a significant effect on teaching and learning results. Several efforts have been directed to identify commonalities within a vast array of research data on the instructional role of the principal. The following five functions typify instructional leadership: defining and communicating a clear mission, goals and objectives; managing curriculum and instruction; supervising teaching; monitoring learner progress; promoting instructional climate (Krug, 1992). It is generally accepted that the different functions of instructional leadership can be carried out within the following two aspects or domains of school management like bureaucratic and structural and informal aspects (Fidler, 1997). A dominant belief in educational and government circles is that the principals can and should make a difference in the academic standards of schools (Christie, 1998). Effective school leadership has become one of the top priorities in education policy agendas to meet the demand for the secondary school education in many countries including Malawi. Malawi has been one of the countries that have engaged in the massive reform of its school management in order to restore the culture of teaching and learning in its schools. The vehicle of this reform is school-based management which implies an increase of the responsibilities of school management teams and school governing bodies (Chimombo, 2014). The school leadership is also becoming more critical as the international trend towards devolution of school management to the school level is gaining momentum in the 21st century (Barber et al, 2010). Different competencies such as capacity building, vision building and/or a team building required of principals to cope with the changing demands of the education sector have been suggested by researchers. Botha (2004) argues that theoretical knowledge is as important as tacit and experiential knowledge. The knowledge of practice and educational theories puts principals in a better position to know the challenges teachers face when they are implementing the curriculum. The principal as the instructional leaders must be well-informed about current developments in the education sector since the instructional context is forever changing. Furthermore, knowledge of technological integration in teaching and learning is also imperative for the principals who want to be relevant in the 21st century. These competencies require a principal who is dynamic, versatile and flexible. An attempt to meet the demand of the secondary education; as well as to mitigate the poor national examination results of many schools and to address several problems the schools in Malawi are facing have led to a general drive to improve the culture of teaching and learning and the overall quality of schools in the country (Chimombo, 2006).

METHOD

The study employs a qualitative approach to produce descriptions and explanations of principals' leadership practices as instructional leaders. A qualitative method was used for the research and data were collected through interviews. Two religious secondary schools were purposively chosen to participate in the study.

Sample

The Malawi secondary school education under the new unified system, has the following types of secondary schools: i) day and boarding schools, or conventional secondary schools (CSS): they are operated and funded directly by the government via Education Division Offices; ii) grant-aided schools: these are operated by religious organizations with a government contribution consisting of monthly grants to their day-to-day running costs and teachers' salaries; tuition and boarding fees are much higher than in government schools; iii) Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS): these are mostly initiated and financed by the school committees but receive some government funding to cater for day-to-day running costs and teacher and support staff salaries; iv) private schools: these are schools owned by private individuals or non-governmental organizations which receive no grant at all from the government and charge tuition fees; v) designated schools: these are mostly for expatriates and are given nominal government grants; vi) night secondary schools and distance education. In this study, purposeful sampling was used based on the schools' national examination results. The two religious secondary schools displaying excellent academic results were selected. The study comprised of two principals (who had been working as the principals for more than six years) from each two schools; ten students of which five were from each school; six parents

(three from each school that had their students in those schools) and fourteen teachers (seven from each school). All the teachers selected had been teaching in those schools for more than four years.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was voluntary and participants were given the option to withdraw at any time if they no longer wanted to participate. The researcher assured the participants that they would remain anonymous. According to Hakim (2000), written informed consent for participation in interviews has become a necessity rather than a luxury or an impediment. All the participants signed a consent form containing detailed information of the study and its intended purpose.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the following strategies to minimize researcher bias were followed (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997): As a triangulation of methods, the interviews conducted with principals and educators, observations during normal school days, analysis of relevant school documents and a literature control were the methods utilized in the research. The field research was done at the schools in the natural location of the participants. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim as a mechanically recorded data.

Data collection and analysis

Data have been collected by means of the following methods: Semi-structured interviews have been applied with the principal of each religious secondary school. The focus group has been interviewed with the teachers, students as well as the parents. Observations have been made during a normal school day according to a pre-developed schedule. Finally, relevant school documents have been reviewed. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions. The questions focused on the two aspects or dimensions of the principal's instructional leadership role, namely, the formal and structured aspects of instructional leadership and the informal influence of the principal on the instructional program of the school.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes emerged during the data analysis process:

Parental support and cooperation

Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's learning and in the successful implementation of the curriculum. This is illustrated by the following three extracts from the narratives:

The parent X had this to say:

We are invited to school to check our learners' books and to understand what is going on in the school. Sometimes we have the opportunity to examine the teaching area in order to understand thoroughly about the learning environment of our children.

Parent F had this to say:

The school principal phones us frequently in order to inform us the progress of our children. He sometimes invites us to school when our children misbehave. In this way, we help the school in building the better future of our children.

There is an increasingly important view among educators and other professionals that schools and parents need to work together in order to ensure that their children's ability to succeed can be enhanced (Kruger, 2003). Mestry et al. (2007) argue that progress of the students' educational development in the school context depends largely on effective contact with, and cooperation between, the parents and the school personnel. This sentiment is shared by Kurian (2008) who maintains that active participation of parents in the education of their children is essential to improve the discipline at school and the academic performance of the students.

Training on effective curriculum implementation

All the principals of two schools indicated that they were on the forefront about curriculum issues and are involved in ensuring that teachers are supported in their implementation of the curriculum.

The principal Z from the school A had this to say:

I make sure to organise a seminar with fellow principals of our cluster in order to familiarize our teachers with better methods to effectively cover the curriculum.

The teacher Y from School B had this to say:

Every term our principal sends us to participate in the curriculum workshops where we are trained in the number of things concerning the effective delivery of our classes.

The principal X from School B had this to say:

I usually do model lessons for teachers so teachers could come and observe so that they could see how the principal is conducting the lesson. Teachers can then critically evaluate the lesson and how learners are responding and how the information is presented to learners.

As Mathibe (2007) points out, principals should create a climate for and culture of success in schools by ensuring that there is room for self-expression, creativity, communication and motivation in all structures of the school. Participants indicate that they even do model lessons to assist teachers in ensuring that the anticipated curriculum is implemented. Jacobs et al. (2011) argue that teachers obviously need support to implement the curriculum. Without the necessary support, curriculum implementation will be an elusive concept that will never be realized.

Sufficient delivery of learner and teacher support material

Teaching material plays a major role in ensuring that curriculum implementation is successful.

The principal Z in School A had this to say:

I make sure that all the members of teaching staff have adequate materials for covering their work effectively. I keep on reminding all teachers about the availability of the materials. I also emphasize the teachers to always write the requisition of the teaching and learning materials in advance in order for those materials to be available when they need them.

The principal X in School B had this to say:

I make sure that all the departments have necessary teaching and learning materials in large amount. I also remind the fellow teachers to take care of the available resources.

The student M from School B had this to say:

Our library was equipped with different kinds of relevant books to our curriculum. This facilitated us to read the materials that met our examination expectation. I believe thus why almost all of us passed.

This agrees with Akinyi & Onyango (2014), who found that many schools in Kenya that were provided with adequate instructional materials by their principals had high performance than the schools that had lower provision of the school materials. Smit (2001) indicates that the lack of appropriate resources and lack of material worsen the possibilities of sound curriculum implementation in the classrooms. Textbook and learners' books are essential in facilitating successful implementation of the curriculum in the classroom. Moreover, Lunenburg (2010) emphasizes that teachers need to have access to curriculum guides, textbooks or training related to the school curriculum. The importance of teaching materials cannot be overemphasized Jacobs et al. (2011) maintain that a prerequisite for the successful implementation of any curriculum is the availability of specific and effective means to implement the curriculum. Therefore, resources need to be provided to schools before the curriculum is actually implemented in the classrooms.

Curriculum coverage and managing time for learning

Both schools pay much attention in the completion of the curriculum for each academic year.

The principal Z of School A had this to say:

We make sure to prepare thoroughly before the term begins. Every member is provided with the materials in time in order to meet the expectations of the curriculum.

The principal X in School B had this to say:

Our school pays much emphasis on time. Every member of staff is reminded to complete the syllabus in time so that the students should have much time for preparation of the national examinations.

The teacher Y from School B had this to say:

I arrange extra-classes especially during the weekend or in the evenings. I do so to compensate my time lost when I have a busy schedule.

According to Porter (2002), addressing the curriculum content of the specific topics being assessed is essential in researching factors that affect student achievement. That is, there should be alignment across the curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Boscardin et al., (2005) also emphasize the need for the teachers to give the students the opportunity to learn the content targeted by assessments. The most important function of the school is to ensure that the curriculum is covered. Without this coverage, students' chances of learning and achievement are greatly diminished (Squires, 2008).

Learner assessment

Each school presses much emphasis on academic excellence. In this area of instructional leadership both the principals play a major role.

The principal Z of School A had this to say:

I put all much emphasis on the national examination results. I monitor the performance of my students. I work hand in hand with my colleague to ensure the academic excellence for our students.

The principal X of School B had this to say:

Every year our school has the comprehensive analysis of our students" performance of the national examinations. We change the strategy whenever there is a need for improvement. I make sure all the teachers to critically analyze our performance and I request them for their constructive contribution on what should be done to meet our expectation.

According to Licata and Harper (1999), academic emphasis is a significant characteristic of effective schools. The emphasis on academic achievements provides a shared meaning about purposes and the vehicle for integrating the behavior of teachers and learners. Academic emphasis is the extent to which the school is driven by a quest for academic excellence—a press for academic achievement. High, but achievable academic goals are set for students; the learning environment is orderly and serious; students are motivated to work hard; and students respect academic achievement (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Productive work takes place when the goals of the school are understood by all stakeholders (Karpicke & Murphy, 1996).

Dispersal of leadership

Both principals indicated that the responsibility of curriculum management and leadership is shared with heads of department and subject heads and that they are minimally involved in these aspects.

The principal Z of School A had this to say:

I give the responsibility to the heads of the departments to set subject policies with members of their department. I also advise them democratically allocate the subjects to various teachers in their departments. Adding to that, I also empower them to take full control of the teaching and learning resources in their departments.

The principal X of School B had this to say:

I make sure that the implementation of the curriculum is being monitored in order to maintain our record of Excellency. The heads of the department and the deputy head principal have the responsibility to conduct clinical supervision as well as to advise fellow teachers when it is necessary to do so

The teacher M from School B had this to say:

Our principal organizes staff meetings frequently. Every teacher is requested to feel free and deliberate. He is ready to accept criticisms and pieces of advice from all teachers. With this attitude, I really feel honored to work with him.

According to Reitzug (1997:342), providing teachers with greater autonomy and creating opportunities for teachers to engage in professional dialogue develop a supportive environment and create a culture of commitment.

Students' recognition

Both schools reported to involve students in one way or another principal from the School A said:

Every day, I visit different classes to check the students" exercise books. I encourage them to work extra-harder when I see that they are performing below average. I also advise those who are performing well to maintain the record. Every week we announce on the assembly for the excellent work they show us.

The principal X from School B had this to say:

Our school makes sure to share vision with our students. The students promise us to work extra-harder in order to achieve our shared vision. We clarify to them the school rules and regulation. We also give them some responsibilities such as helping in the maintenance of the discipline in the classes as well as in their hostels. We ask them to democratically choose their leaders. We also ask them to feel open in sharing their problems that may hinder their learning processes.

The student L who graduated from school B had this to say:

I enjoyed my studies at my school. Every term I was working hard because our principal as well as our teachers used to inspire us about the importance of hardworking. They would tell us the

stories about various universities they had studied. They could reward you with something when you outclassed your fellow students. In that way I felt motivated.

The student N from School A had this to say:

We used to call our principal a no nonsense man. He did not like laziness. Every time he could come to our study hall to check whatever we were doing. He made sure that everybody should be busy with books. I liked this spirit because he motivated many students to work very hard.

According to Machoya, et al, (2014) they found that there was high correlation between high student performance and motivation. They also found that in the schools where students performed well, the school management had the shared vision with their students; the principals could visit the classroom and check the students' notes as well as observing the students' performance. This motivated the students to have the positive spirit toward their studies. Another research conducted by Mwangi (2009) found that in the schools that performed well in Kenya, the principals sacrificed their time to monitor the students' progress and teachers also portrayed high sensitivity to the students need.

Social relations within the school

Both schools emphasize the need for social relationship between the teachers.

The Principal Z from school A had this to say:

Most of the activities here we do together. I emphasize the spirit of working as the family. We conduct classroom supervision together; we offer one another the professional guidance. We also offer spiritual and moral support to our colleague.

The teacher S from school B had this to say:

Our principal encourages us to capitalize every opportunity that comes to our way. For example, many teachers here have had the chances for professional growth. This really makes every member to feel involved.

And the teacher D from school A had this to say:

When I need help to improve my instruction, people extend themselves to help me with both time and resources.

The principal X of school B had this to say:

We recognize that every individual member of staff has different feelings and aspiration. We encourage them to feel open and tell us their concern. Where there is a possibility to help we do so. I also encourage my fellow members to share to their colleagues various teaching strategies.

According to Reitzug (1997), providing teachers with greater autonomy and creating opportunities for teachers to engage in professional dialogue develop a supportive environment and create a culture of commitment.

Staff performance incentives within the schools

The recognition of the staff achievements is one of the cornerstones of both schools.

The principal Z of school A had this to say:

We recognize the performance of our teachers. When teachers have done well, we offer them certificate for performance. We also offer gifts such as household utensils, money and many more to the high achievers.

The teacher S from school B had this to say:

At our school, when you have excellent performance, the whole school does wonders to you. They give you a trophy for best performance educator. Your fellow staff organize a party for you. The principal always make the public praise for your achievement. I really feel overwhelmed working here.

The principal X of school B had this to say:

When our teachers have performed well, I make sure that his or her achievement should be known to our school community. We recognize for work well done during briefing meetings. We also award them with many gifts since it is our custom here. It is our mandate to motivate our teachers by recognizing their achievements.

Appreciation is a fundamental human need. Employees respond to appreciation expressed through recognition of their good work because it confirms their work is valued. When employees and their work are valued, their satisfaction and productivity rises, and they are motivated to maintain or improve their good work (Harrison, 2013). Odden & Kelley (2002) argue that school-based rewards are a means of providing motivation by introducing clear goals to the whole school, and facilitating student achievement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

School leadership is occupying a central position in educational reform in Malawi. Owing to the emphasis on the need for the instructional leadership as a requisite to meet the educational demand in the secondary school level, it is therefore, necessary for the Malawian school principals to be equipped with the desired characteristics that may influence the effective teaching and learning culture.

The followings are some of the important findings regarding to the practice of instructional leadership in the two schools that were investigated: The schools value collaboration in the work as well as positive human relation in the work place. The students are recognized as the very important element for the effective teaching and learning culture. The schools press much emphasis on the sufficient delivery of Learner and Teacher Support Materials in order to effectively deliver the curriculum. Teachers are given opportunities for professional development in order to gain effective skills for curriculum coverage. The schools make sure that the curriculum is covered so that the students have the opportunity to meet the contents of the national examinations. The schools ensures the existence of the strong cordial relationships with the parents in order to complete each other on the addressing the expectations of the students. Teachers as well as the students are recognized for their achievements in order to motivate them.

In order for these initiatives to be effective, principals need to empower teachers as well as establishing the effective rapport with other stakeholders of their schools in order to effectively fulfil these roles. Since almost all the schools in Malawi have the supporting staff, it is necessary to have a further enquiry on how the principals work with them as they provide instructional leadership in order to maintain effective teaching and learning culture.

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