

The Innovative Role of the Principal as Instructional Leader: A Prerequisite for High Student Achievement?

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Abstract. Principals today face more demands, more complex decisions, and more responsibilities than principals of the past. The principal's day is filled with activities of management such as handling relations with parents and community, dealing with multiple teacher and student crisis that are inevitable. However principals should facilitate best practices and keep the school focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment to meet students' learning needs and improve achievement. The principal should take on an innovative role as an instructional leader who possesses the requisite skills, capacity and commitment to lead an effective school. This study investigates how principals perceive their roles as instructional leaders. Using an open ended questionnaire and personal interviews with eight principals in the Gauteng Province of South Africa, it found that principals who placed importance to instructional matters were managing and leading schools effectively and attaining high student achievement.

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Principal, Professional Development, Assessment, Curriculum Delivery, Student Achievement.

1. Introduction

The role of the principal has become more complex, overloaded and unclear in the past decade. Fullan (1991: 144) asserts that the role of the principal has been in a state of transition, progressing from the principal as an instructional leader or master teacher, to the principal as a transactional leader and, most recently, to the role of transformational leader. The duties of principals extend beyond that of instructional leaders to one that is administrative and managerial. The principal's day is filled with activities of management – scheduling, reporting, and handling relations with parents and community, dealing with multiple crisis and special situations that are inevitable in schools (Fink & Resnick, 2001). Most principals spend relatively little time in classrooms and even less analyzing instruction with teachers. They may arrange time for teachers' meetings and professional development, but they rarely provide intellectual leadership for growth in teaching skills. Research conducted by Bush and Heystek (2006: 68) revealed that South African principals are mainly concerned with financial and human resource management, and policy issues. The management of teaching and learning was ranked seventh of ten leadership activities in a survey taken with more than 500 Gauteng principals. Chisholm (2005) agrees that principals' time is largely consumed by managerial and administrative activities.

The expectations of principals have moved from demands of management and control to the demands of an educational leader who can foster staff development, parental involvement, community support and student growth (Mestry, 1999:4). Blasé, Blasé and Phillips (2010: xxi) concur with Mestry and argue that new responsibilities and activities have been added on to the principal's role but the old responsibilities and activities have remained. This, they add, has resulted in the role of the principal being composed of a multitude of conflicting demands (Blasé *et al.*, 2010:xxii). According to Kruger (2003:206), many school principals lack the time for and an understanding of their instructional leadership function. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) noted that a major challenge for principals was balancing their administrative role with their instructional functions. They thus queried whether one person could do all the job of a principal, and suggested the need for empowering others to exercise leadership. There is a belief in educational circles that principals can make a difference to the teaching and learning environment by creating conducive conditions for improved instruction (Alig-Mielcaric, 2003:7; Copeland, 2003:2; Yu, 2009: 715; McKewan, 1998:2). Thus,

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principals play a key role in the development and maintenance of academic standards in schools (Sergiovanni, 1984: 6-8).

According to Shoho, Barnett and Tooms (2012: 1), the professional lives of school principals have increasingly impinged on their personal well-being, and resources have continued to shrink, it is crucial to understand how principals share and divide their energy, ideas, and time within the school day. It is therefore worthy to explore the rarely examined experiences of principals and how they are to become effective instructional leaders. By understanding their experiences, one would be able to determine what aspects of leadership preparation are useful and what aspects need to be reconceptualised and changed. The problem statement is thus:

How do principals understand their role as instructional leaders?

The following section examines what is understood by instructional leadership and the role principal play as instructional leader.

2. The Instructional Leadership Role of the Principal Defined

Instructional leadership can be defined as those actions that principals take, or delegate to others, to promote growth in students' learning (the concepts 'learner' and 'student' will be used interchangeably). In practice, this means that the principal ensures educational achievement by making instructional quality the top priority of the school. Fullan (1991:161) explains that instructional leadership is an active, collaborative form of leadership where the principal works with teachers to shape the school as a workplace in relation to shared goals, teacher collaboration, teacher learning opportunities, teacher certainty, teacher commitment, and student learning. Instructional leaders spend most of their time dealing strictly with curricula matters rather than administrative functions. The principals as instructional leaders should at all times strive for excellence in teaching and learning with the sole purpose of improving student achievement. Principals should serve foremost as instructional leaders in schools, and that their commitment to instructional improvement should not only be strongly articulated but should be reinforced with experience in the classroom (Glanz, 2006: xv; MacNeill, Cavanagh & Silcox, 2003:40). In order to secure legitimacy in the eyes of the teachers, principals should have sufficient teaching experience and should understand with first-hand experience the instructional challenges faced by teachers. Instructional leadership demands high standards of academic excellence: setting high expectations for learner success; having knowledge and experience with effective teaching or instructional strategies. Glanz (2006:xv), Instructional leadership is thus about encouraging best practices in teaching. Principals should become familiar with innovative theories and practices and motivate teachers to model them in classrooms.

3. Methodology

This investigation was directed at determining the perceptions of principals of their role as instructional leaders facilitating effective teaching and learning in schools. To gain a better insight into the participants' realities and experiences of instructional leadership, this study was located within the interpretivist paradigm (Hatch & Cunliff, 2006:41-44). Using a generic qualitative approach which seeks to discover the perspective and worldviews of the people involved, eight principals were asked to complete an open ended questionnaire and this was followed by semi-structured individual interviews.

Purposive sampling was used to collect rich data to provide the researcher an insight and an understanding of the problem researched (Marshall, 1996: 523). Principals from eight primary and high schools situated in the Gauteng Province were interviewed. To ensure trustworthiness, highly structured interviews for each participant were conducted using the same format and sequence of words and questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011:204). To achieve greater validity for this study, the researcher was mindful of the fact that he could not be biased or prejudicial by the way questions were framed and asked during the interviews.

4. Findings

The themes that have been identified will be discussed and supported with appropriate literature where applicable.

4.1. The Functions of Principals Ranked in Order of Importance

Some participants expressed concern about managing their time effectively and efficiently. Even though many schools apply the distributive leadership model, these principals are frequently drawn into dealing with learner discipline and budgetary issues, rarely being able to take on their instructional leadership responsibilities.

Only three of the eight principals interviewed considered instructional leadership (managing teaching and learning) very important and this function consumed most of their time than any other functions. Although one principal rated teaching and learning important, he only devoted about 10 percent of his time to this function, whereas 40 percent of the time was spent on administration. Two other participants indicated that some emphasis should be placed on instructional leadership. However, two principals felt that it was least important for them to manage teaching and learning, and therefore spent most of their time managing learner discipline and attending to administrative matters. One principal claimed that managing people (human resource management) was much more important than managing teaching and learning, while another principal expended 40 percent of his time on administrative matters. However, four of these principals rated human resource management as an important function for school principals.

4.2. Role Of Principal in Managing Teaching and Learning

All participants interviewed provided varied explanations of their role as manager/leader. Two principals were of the opinion that their primary task was to manage the Heads of Departments (HoDs) and the deputy principal (curriculum) whom were responsible for curricula delivery. Although one principal alluded to various managerial functions (planning, organizing, leading and controlling) that he performed, there was no specific reference made to his role as instructional leader. This principal alluded to the fact that he only applied the different management functions to teaching and learning, such as controlling the work of HoD; conducting weekly meetings where HoDs and deputy principals provided him with feedback to problems they encountered; and merely commenting on the analysis of assessment results for all grades. He frequently attended departmental meetings or studied the minutes of meetings. Another principal claimed that he was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school, and that curriculum matters were the responsibility of the school management team. The school had appointed additional HoDs than those allocated by the Department's post provisioning norms.

4.3. Principals Understanding of "Instructional Leadership"

From the responses of the principals interviewed it would appear that very few had a conceptual understanding of what instructional leadership means. One principal emphasized that he did not see his role as instructional leader but explained that instructional leadership is the ability to give guidance to less experienced teachers. He is of the opinion that the principal must take the lead in developing new teaching strategies and ensure effective classroom management. Another principal explains that instructional leadership is about providing guidance to the school management team and teachers with regard to teaching and learning. An instructional leader "*should monitor the delivery using the Curriculum Management Model and ensure that resources are provided to teachers.*" was one of the principal's response. He elaborates that the leader should organize workshops where pertinent issues regarding teaching and learning should be discussed: topics such as assessments, reporting and subject policies. The leader should monitor content coverage, compare with results and implement improvement plans.

One principal understands instructional leadership to mean that "*as a leader you should communicate clear instructions. This cannot be done always because you cannot be forever giving instructions. At times you need to listen and involve more people/stakeholders in decision-making.*" This principal felt that one fulfills the role of instructional leader if "*I have to communicate or implement departmental regulations and/or policies*". From further probing it was established that his school management team is responsible for arranging workshops and dealing with all curriculum matters.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Although principals are still accountable for managerial tasks such as ensuring safe school buildings, maintaining order and discipline by enforcing departmental and school policies, and ordering books and supplies, they should become responsible for providing good quality instructional leadership that aims to promote best practices in teaching and related instructional areas for the aim of improving learner achievement. Balancing administrative and managerial duties with their role as instructional leaders is undoubtedly a necessity for high student achievement.

Student achievement is the cornerstone of the success of principals who should play an active, ongoing role as instructional leaders. If the principals' success depends on teacher and student performance, the principals' approach as instructional leaders is crucial to promote student achievement. To do so requires principals to become conversant with innovative teaching theories and practices, and to encourage teachers to model them in the classroom. The principal has the power to influence student-learning outcomes by setting the school's goals and by promoting effective instructional practices.

The job description of principals in current legislation should be reviewed to include a detailed description of what is expected from the principal in terms of instructional leadership.

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