



RESEARCH ARTICLE

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES OF PRINCIPALS IN HIGH AND LOW PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Instructional leadership practices refer to the activities that the principal engages in or delegates to others that promote growth in student learning. It is envisioned as the most ideal leadership model for principals in secondary schools and one that can lead to an improvement students' academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore the differences between the instructional leadership practices by principals in high performing and low performing schools with a focus on Chemistry, Physics and Biology in Makueni County, Kenya. The target population was the principals in County secondary schools and the respondents were obtained through both stratified and simple random sampling. The study established that there are distinct differences between the instructional leadership practices by principals in the high performing and low performing schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Principals in secondary schools are the people entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that educational strategies are put in place to support effective teaching and learning for all students in their schools. Therefore one of the principals' key responsibility is to promote the learning and success of all students by ensuring that effective instruction is done thus offering instructional leadership (Alig-Mielcarek 2003; Hanna, 2010). The role of the instructional leader helps the school to maintain a focus on why the school exists, and that is to help all students to learn (Blasé, Blasé & Philips, 2010; Sushila, 2004). Instructional leadership therefore is a broad construct that encompasses a variety of roles and tasks that range from the technical to the interpersonal (Weller & Weber, 2002). Broadly, instructional leadership includes such work as the communication of shared goals (Northouse, 2010), supervision of teaching and learning (Wanzare, 2012), evaluation of the teaching/ learning process (Green, 2010) and motivation of both teachers and learners (Glanz, 2006; Lyons, 2010). In their study investigating the links between leadership and learning, Louis, et al (2010), argued that for improved instruction, principals need to adopt certain practices which should ensure that their schools are focused on goals and expectations of student achievement (Cayetano, 2011).

Principals therefore should keep track of the professional development of the teachers, including prescribing as well as managing the attendance of the teachers to their duties. They should also create structures and opportunities for collaboration among teachers, to the extent of scheduling meeting times (Alig-Mielcarek, 2003; Hallinger, 2008). Other practices perceived to be important are monitoring the work of teachers in the classroom, providing mentors to new teachers, being easily accessible, providing backup with discipline and parents and supporting parental involvement in the learning of students (Green, 2010). There exists a perception among teachers and principals that instructional leaders are responsible for establishing an instructional climate and actions in their schools (Cayetano, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Many policy makers, researchers and practitioners have defined the role of the principal in terms of instructional leadership. Principals in secondary schools are therefore looked to as providers of strong and directive instructional leadership in such a way that their students perform well in examinations. Consequently, they are expected to ensure high academic achievement of their students in all the subjects taught in their schools. A research question that guides this study is whether instructional leadership behaviours are directly or indirectly related to students' academic achievement. Principals do not normally work directly with

students, hence the question: how does the instructional leadership of the principal affect student achievement. In some schools in Makeni County, students generally perform well in the Science subjects while in others they perform poorly in these subjects in KCSE. Those students who perform well qualify for most of the Science related courses in institutions of higher learning while those who do not perform well are locked out of these courses. This achievement gap needs to be closed for students to have equal opportunities to succeed and it is envisioned that school leadership can facilitate the process. This study therefore sought to investigate if there is any relationship between selected principals' instructional leadership practices and students' academic achievement particularly in the Science subjects in Makeni County secondary schools, Kenya.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in Makeni County Kenya and involved interview sessions with principals of County secondary schools. Respondents were selected through both stratified and simple random sampling. The schools were placed into two groups based on the students' average mean scores in the three Science subjects, either below or above six on a scale of 1-12. The interview was conducted on ten principals five of them with students scoring mean scores of above six, in this study referred to as principals of higher performing schools. The other five had students with average mean scores below six in the Science subjects, in this study referred to as principals of lower performing schools. The principals were required to give narrations of their instructional leadership activities based on an interview schedule. The responses were recorded, coded, transcribed and were grouped into four themes namely principals' communication to teachers and learners, principals' supervision of the teaching/learning of the Science subjects, principals' evaluation of the teaching/learning of the Science subjects and motivation and teachers' professional development. Analyses of the interview data revealed specific decisions, behaviours, and actions on the part of the principals that affect their learners' academic achievement.

Results from the Principals' Interview

Table 1 below gives a summary of the respondents and an average of the mean scores of their students in the three Science subjects, Chemistry, Physics and Biology. The names of the principals and their schools have been withheld for their privacy.

Table 1. Principals and their students' Mean scores in the Science Subjects

S.No.	Principals name	Average mean score of the Science subjects
1.	PRINCIPAL 1	9.20
2.	PRINCIPAL 2	9.45
3.	PRINCIPAL 3	6.98
4.	PRINCIPAL 4	6.56
5.	PRINCIPAL 5	6.18
6.	PRINCIPAL 6	3.00
7.	PRINCIPAL 7	3.99
8.	PRINCIPAL 8	4.00
9.	PRINCIPAL 9	3.48
10.	PRINCIPAL 10	3.45

As much as principals in all the sampled schools acknowledged the importance of students' mastery in the Science subjects, those in the higher performing schools demonstrated a higher personal commitment to their students' academic achievement. They reported that they dedicated more personal time and effort to ensuring high academic achievement in the Science subjects for their students than their counterparts in the lower performing schools. The study revealed clear distinctions between the attitudes and behaviours of principals in lower and higher performing schools regarding their instructional leadership practices. The results are outlined below:

Communication with teachers and students

Most principals in the higher performing schools reported a personal commitment and involvement in the classroom or engaging directly with students out of the classroom to encourage achievement in the Science subjects. This was particularly evident from responses by Principal 1 and Principal 2 who cited that they are directly involved in all activities of the Science Department and they take a lot of time to encourage the students. Dedicating personal time and energy to improve the students' Science skills and the persistent emphasis on the importance of achievement in the Science subjects was consistently reported by the principals in the higher performing schools as quoted below:

I have created an open atmosphere in the school where teachers give me ideas on anything they think we can put on board to run the school (Principal 2)

As a member of the Science department I have to teach and seek to be a role model for both the teachers and students. I like listening to the teachers to hear the kind of language they use and then correct them where they are using negative language lest they transfer a negative attitude to the students. (Principal 1)

We have regular meetings with our students scheduled fortnightly where we all as staff meet and talk to them regarding their academic achievement in the Science subjects and any other topical issue at hand. That way the students feel that we all have their interest at heart. They are therefore able to communicate with any of the teachers without fear. (Principal 3)

On the other hand, few principals in the lower performing schools divulged similar levels of personal commitment or similar intensity and regularity of emphasis on the Science subjects' performance. They did not report comparable allocation of time and energy to support and encourage teacher effectiveness and students achievement.

School principals in the higher performing schools reported higher awareness of and concern about failure in the Science subjects' mastery in their schools and encouraged institutional discussions about it. Some of the principals reported self involvement in it, while others sought opportunities to communicate and work with students outside the classroom. They seemed to be part of all the programmes put in place to improve the performance of the Science subjects. This intensity of personal involvement and commitment was less evident among principals in the less performing schools, who acknowledged the problem but were more apt to discuss

routine activities like maintenance of records, reliance on syllabi coverage and emphasis on examinations than deviations to the routine. They seemed to delegate most of these responsibilities to the Heads of Departments. Narrations by Principal number 10, 8 and 6 are given below which attest to this as quoted below:

We started a programme for supplementary examinations for the weak students in the Science subjects but I don't think it has taken off yet (Principal 10)

We do not have a school Science project specifically for improving students' achievement in these subjects, not yet introduced (Principal 8)

We are encouraging teachers to go on and finish the syllabus and do the kind of revision that will be needed. The teacher has to record the work he has taught. (Principal 6)

These reports show that schools that perform better in the Science subjects have principals with a more caring attitude which is not just a quality for leaders but an organizational characteristic facilitated by mindful leaders. To promote this behaviour, findings of the study showed that principals got personally involved in activities aimed at the improvement of performance of the Science subjects not just as leaders but at times as followers, implementing the decisions of their juniors, for example overseeing students' group discussions when the teachers had gone home. This was specifically reported by Principal 3 who takes time to follow students to ensure they do the work left behind by their teachers as quoted below:

We introduced evening discussions after evening preps for the Science subjects, the subject teachers leave students with work to be done and I personally supervise the students to ensure the work is done. (Principal 3)

Commitment to the day to day activities of the school contributes greatly to the students' sense of responsibility and change of attitude. Principals need to create close relationships between the teachers and students and to share closely with both of them to get any challenges that the students could be facing. These findings are in agreement with past research. Lyons (2010) in his study on principals' instructional behaviour as perceived by teachers and principals also identified communication as one of the instructional leadership practices that affect students' academic achievement. Both formal communication (like goal statements, staff bulletins, articles in the principal or school newsletter, curricular and staff meetings, parent and teacher conferences, school hand books, assemblies) and informal interaction (like conversations with staff) can be used to communicate the schools' mission by all principals and hence improve on students' academic achievement. Green, (2010) in his study of the four dimensions of principal leadership indicated that the success of a school is determined by the ability of the principal to develop a vision for the school and communicate it to the entire school community. Findings by Webb & Norton, (2003) and Young & Castetter, (2004) showed that communication helps promote teaching and learning and consequently students' academic performance. Similarly Westerberg (2013) in his study on behaviours that separate successful leaders from the irrelevant, he found out that school principals should be willing to communicate the school vision with their teachers. DuFour & Marzano (2011) also asserted that for success in an institution,

the leader needs to address the issues within the individuals' control and then hold them accountable for students' academic growth and improvement.

Supervision of the teaching/learning of the Science subjects

Principals of the higher performing schools reported a higher commitment and sensitivity to students' needs and problems than did principals in the lower performing schools. Principals in the higher performing schools paid attention to all students and particularly the weak ones and took personal initiatives to ensure that these students improve their performance in the Science subjects. Individual attention was given to each student and this helped the students to perform well in these subjects. An example of this is quoted by principal 3 given below:

I follow the weak students to ensure they have personal timetables and that they are effectively using them during their private study. I organize for questions in those areas and also experiments from the subject teachers and supervise the students to do them. (Principal 1)

We have encouraged students to come and see us after classes and also when they are free for consultation and assistance. We encourage them to consult the laboratory assistants for guidance in carrying out experiments during their free time. (Principal 3)

I move around as the students do their private studies to ensure that they have personal timetables and that they are using them effectively. I also ask them to account for the time they spent studying by looking at their summary notes and any assignments and tests done. (Principal 2)

In the lower performing schools the study found out that general measures are taken like ensuring that students settle for their private study without being concerned with how they are doing their reading and revision.

This is the case cited by principal 7 and 9 as quoted below:

I ensure that students are settled for their morning and evening preps and that they are busy doing their private studies without any interruptions. (Principal 7)

I have a lot of office work in the day and so I leave the supervision of teaching to the heads of departments which they do and give me updates (Principal 9)

The study found out that the principals in the higher performing schools encouraged teachers to develop a positive attitude towards all students especially the weak ones and therefore put measures in place to help them improve, which was not practiced in the lower performing schools. Principals in the higher performing schools encouraged team work among the teachers as opposed to their counterparts in the lower performing schools who did not seem to develop close relationships with the teachers.

This difference was seen in the narrations by Principal number two, number eight and nine as outlined below:

I ensure that each of the teachers takes an active part in the teaching/ learning process including testing. If teacher A is in

charge of CAT 1, then teacher B will be in charge of CAT 2 or end of term examination and that way everybody feels part of the process. (Principal 2)

When there is any information to be passed to the students, this is done in the various departments and through the student leaders. Other issues are addressed during school assembly days (Principal 8)

We have a good delegation system whereby those responsible for various duties know it and are expected to do them and meet the set deadlines. (Principal 9)

These findings agree with earlier research by Knezek (2001) in his study of supervision as selected instructional leadership behaviour of elementary principals and student achievement in reading. His study found that principals' supervision helps improve students' academic achievement. Similarly Kwinda (2002) in his study titled Instructional leadership role of the school principal in Thohoyandou found out that supervision by the school principal led to improved students' academic achievement. They found that in high performing schools collaborative supervisory systems were in place that fostered teacher reflection on instruction as well as collaboration among teachers and with the principal. Green (2010) in his study on the four dimensions of principals' leadership identified supervision as one of the cornerstones of instructional leadership which leads to improved student academic achievement.

Evaluation of the Teaching/Learning Process

The narrations from principals in the higher performing schools revealed flexibility in the classroom and emphasized their personal commitment and investment of both time and effort. This was clearly seen from reports given by Principal 1 and Principal 4 as quoted below:

I encourage teachers to use interactive methods of teaching advocated in SMASSE and I monitor to ensure that teachers have the necessary materials by visiting the science laboratory as frequently as possible. I also encourage team teaching for diversity of ideas. (Principal 1)

I ask teachers to discuss closely with students to identify their areas of strength and those of weakness so that they can help the students perfect their skills on each area based on their individual abilities. This ensures that even the weak students have something to write in the examinations. (Principal 4)

Their counterparts in the lower performing schools confessed that they do only routine practices and did not divulge their willingness to spend their extra time on their students which was seen in the practices by Principal 7 and 9.

The students make notes, solve some problems in their exercise books and if time allows teachers solve some problems on the chalkboard. (Principal 7)

If need be I take the students' exercise books and check them physically against the teachers' schemes of work to see if they correlate (Principal 9)

Principals in the higher performing schools reported getting involved in the teaching of the Science subjects ensuring that

teaching methods used are interactive and learner centered for instance those advocated by SMASSE while those in the lower performing schools did not seem to be concerned with the classroom practices. These results of this practice agree with those by Lyons, (2010), Green, (2010) and Louis *et al.*, (2010) who found that evaluation and progress monitoring was an important activity in the continuous improvement of students in academics. Alig Mielcarek (2003) similarly found out that monitoring of students' progress helped in maintaining an enabling school climate which led to improved student academic achievement. According to findings by Wambui (2005) and Hanna (2010), evaluation is an integral part of the teaching/ learning process which helps to track the learners' academic progress. Effective evaluation according to them leads to improved academic achievement and should be incorporated in the teaching/ learning process.

Motivation and Teachers' Professional Development

Data collected revealed clear differences in the interpersonal relations in the higher performing schools and the lower performing schools. Most principals in the higher performing schools talked of their association as a family, feeling accepted, the importance of having everyone on board and being unreserved with one another both socially and professionally. Principal 3 and 5 stated that:

There is a lot of unity among the teachers which makes them work as a team seeking the good of the students. Team teaching is practiced and therefore no class goes untaught. Teachers are also able to share other responsibilities like preparation and administration of examinations which makes everyone feel part of the team. Mine is to oversee what they do. (Principal 3)

I encourage and promote a lot of unity and warmth where we live as a family and want success to be owned by everyone. (Principal 5)

On the other hand principals in the lower performing schools made little reference to cohesiveness in their schools. There was emphasis of delegation of duties in the lower performing schools as opposed to collaboration as quoted below:

We have a briefing session at the start of the week where I give my expectations for the week and thereafter each teacher is expected to attend to their lessons and record the work taught. (Principal 9)

Our students are very weak in the science subjects and so it is not easy to uplift them, considering that teachers have high workloads and the students are not cooperative. (Principal 8)

Principals in the higher performing schools reported that they always seek the welfare of their teachers professionally and they look out for opportunities for professional development. On the other hand principals in the lower performing category did not report any commitment on the professional development of their teachers. Some of their narrations are outlined below:

I look out for opportunities of training and workshops for the teachers that could help in teaching and other professional areas. All the Science subjects' teachers are passionate about SMASSE for instance and look forward to it annually to get new teaching techniques. The heads of departments have also been trained on management through KEMI (Principal 1)

Any teacher wishing to attend any workshop or seminar should do so only during school holidays. We only employ trained teachers so we emphasize that they should be able to teach their students well. (Principal 10)

These findings agree with those by Green (2010) in his study of the four dimensions of principals' leadership, who found that motivation of both teachers and learners contribute to better performance by both. Similarly, Kwindu (2002) carried out a study on the instructional role of the principal and found that when principals take time to motivate teachers and learners improved academic performance is observed. Studies by Glickman *et al* (2001), Cayetano (2011), Alig- Mielcarek (2003) and Muchiri (2010) found out that promoting professional development motivates teachers and this imparts positively on students' academic performance. Professional development exercises that are well planned, relevant and provide direct links to instruction help teachers become better in their practice (Glickman *et al*, 2001; Cayetano, 2011).

DISCUSSION

These narrations indicate marked differences in the leadership behaviours of principals in the different schools of different academic achievement. Principals in the higher performing schools stay very close to the teaching/ learning of the Science subjects through providing an environment that brings both teachers and students on board and focused on academic achievement. Marked differences were observed in the principals' instructional behaviour between the principals in the higher and those in lower performing schools with the principals in the higher performing schools being personally involved in the teaching and learning of the Science subjects. Their main focus was the continuous improvement of their students through sharing their vision and goals with their teachers and students. These principals created open channels of communication and took time to listen to teachers and students and get their contributions to improved performance of the students. Their counterparts in the lower performing schools were not directly committed to the close supervision of students teaching and learning. They had formed a negative attitude towards their students that they are weak in the Science subjects and tended only to concentrate on routine activities.

Principals in higher performing schools reported that they took time to monitor the classroom practices to ensure that proper teaching methods were implemented and gave feedback to their teachers and students through their frequent meetings. They had put specific measures for the weak students and followed to ensure that these measures were put in place. They ensured that interactive teaching methods were used in the classrooms. On the other hand their counterparts in the lower performing schools did not show such commitment. They at times put measures in place but did not follow to ensure that these measures were put into practice. They seemed to promote more of competition rather than collaboration and did not have time to monitor teaching and learning but only delegated this to the heads of departments. Principals in the higher performing schools promoted a lot of team work and unity among teachers which then permeated to the students. They sought the professional growth of their teachers through workshops organized in and out of school which was a great motivation to the teachers. The principals in the lower performing schools on the other hand did not allow

professional development of their teachers as a continuous process but expected their teachers to organize for their professional development outside the school schedule. They seemed very mechanical with no time left for the teacher to get new teaching ideas and to sharpen their teaching skills in the school programmes.

Conclusion

The study found that there is a big disparity in the instructional leadership practices of principals in high performing and those of low performing schools in Chemistry, Physics and Biology. Principals must embrace all elements of instructional leadership as outlined earlier. They need to ensure that teachers are prepared to teach, and the school climate is conducive for teaching and learning. They need to ensure that professional learning institutions are maintained and ensuring that supervision of teachers is a priority. They need to clearly establish and articulate the vision and goals of their institutions ensuring that the teachers adhere to the curriculum. The school principals also need to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their teachers and plan professional development workshops based on the needs of their teachers.

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