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Instructional leaders' strategies for maintaining high performance in high schools: A case of high performing high schools in the Kingdom of Eswatini

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Abstract

Instructional leaders have an obligation to ensure that learners attain high academic performance in schools. This study sought to establish the strategies instructional leaders employ to ensure that learners achieve high academic performance in Eswatini high schools. The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm and followed a qualitative research approach which applied a case study design. Face-to-face interviews on 5 head teachers from high performing schools in Mbabane were used to collect data. Data were analysed for content and conclusions were drawn. The findings of the study reveal that it is important to provide the essential resources needed for education in the 21st century classrooms. It was also revealed that involving learners and teachers in decision making was very essential. The study also found that learner and teacher constant supervision yielded good results. It was revealed from the study that involving parents in school activities as well as decision making was essential for learners' high academic performance. The main conclusions of the study were that high academic performance in schools may be attained when teachers and learners have resources enough for them to achieve their goals. The other conclusion of the study was that collective decision making involving all stakeholders contributing to learners' education was essential. The study also concluded that instructional leaders in schools have a task to supervise all activities that learners and teachers partake in.

Keywords: instructional leaders, teachers, learners, academic performance, schools

1. Introduction

Principals continue to strive for balance and proficiency in their roles as instructional leaders in schools. Instructional leaders in schools have an impact on student learning (Robinson, 2011, Leithwood and Seashore-Louis, 2011) [22]. The instructional leader in a school who in most cases in the school principal has multiple roles, an educator, administrator, coach and mentor (Friesen *et al*, 2015) [6, 7]. There's no doubt that instructional leadership requires the school principal to wear many hats. At various times, principals must be administrators, managers, diplomats, teachers and curriculum leaders, sometimes all within one school day. It is definitely a balancing act, and principals must be proficient in all of these areas, as well as able to fluidly move from one role to another (Concordia University Portland, 2018) [3]. An instructional leadership mindset includes an intense moral purpose focused on promoting deep student learning, professional inquiry, trusting relationships and seeking evidence in action (Timperley, 2011).

Shin (2006) noted that there are instructional principles teachers need to employ if good results are to be produced so that the teacher may be labelled an excellent teacher. Some of the instructional principles given by Shinn (1997) include meaningfulness, open communication, learning aids, novelty, modelling, active appropriate practice, pleasant conditions and consistency, among others. Shin (2006:2) concludes that "...the teaching strategy must base learning on inquiry, investigation, and critical study in situations in which genuine purposes, needs and wants are experienced". This means that teaching goals need to be properly planned, managed and holistically implemented.

Hoerr (2015:1) [20] reveals that principals in schools must view themselves as "lead learners." Meaning that they do not know the most, but, they believe their job is to ensure that good teaching routinely takes place in every classroom. Principals need to be engaged in curriculum

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development, assessment, and in developing pedagogy in ways that are obvious to everyone. The instructional leader in a school is primary to initiating, encouraging, and sometimes directing student academic growth in the school.

Quality Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership involves setting clear goals, managing curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, allocating resources and evaluating teachers regularly to promote student learning and growth. Quality of instruction is the top priority for the instructional principal. Instructional leadership is committed to the core business of teaching, learning, and knowledge. Staff members should meet on a regular basis to discuss how to do their jobs better and ultimately help students learn more effectively.

Hoerr (2015) ^[20] points out that an instructional leader needs to appreciate learner diversity in the school to achieve quality results. There is need to ensure that differentiation is valued throughout the school culture. School needs to be a safe place where all students feel accepted and respected as well as comfortable enough to learn. To attain quality, principals in schools may also be able to lead the effort to recognise all students' strengths. Instructional leaders also need to be curious about what's happening in classrooms and ensure that whatever happens is also important for quality academic performance. Principals' engagement in instruction is essential. Instead of waiting for reports, instructional leaders need to be active members of the school and look at how teaching and learning is being done.

Skills essential for effective instructional leadership

Fullan (2014) ^[8, 9] posits that being an instructional leader is the most important part of our job, and it is also the most fun. Concordia University Portland (2018) ^[3] reveals four skills that have been identified as essential for effective instructional leadership for principals.

Effective use of resources

It isn't sufficient for principals to just know their faculty's strengths and weaknesses. If specific resources can benefit the staff, the principal should be ready and prepared to provide them. They should also clearly recognize that teachers thrive on being appreciated and acknowledged for good performance.

Communication skills

Communication skills are vital in running an institute. Instructional leaders should be excellent communicators. Relational skills are crucial to the success of an instructional leader in schools. Instructional leaders in a school must be able to communicate their beliefs pertaining to education, including the conviction that every student is capable of learning. Communication skills that the instructional leaders possesses should be in a position to inspire trust, spark motivation and empower teachers and students in a school.

Serving as an instructional resource

In schools teachers rely on principals as instructional leaders and other administration officials to be sources of information related to effective instructional practices and current trends in education. It is apparent that instructional leaders be tuned in to all of the pertinent issues and current events related to curriculum development, effective assessment, and pedagogical strategies.

Being visible and accessible

Good instructional leaders should be positive, vibrant and visible in the school. Their presence should be visible at all times. The instructional leader should be in a position to model good behaviors of learning, focus on learning objectives, and lead by example for the success of the school organisation.

Excellent planning and observation skills

In addition to these four qualities, a successful instructional principal should also have excellent planning and observation skills as well as proficiency in research and evaluation of both staff and student performance.

Instructional leadership roles: always evolving

The role of the instructional leader should also be expanded to incorporate a shift away from just "management," or working in terms of administrative tasks, and move toward an emphasis on leadership. In order to achieve this objective, a strong principal with solid ideas is not enough; success will require a redefinition of the role of the principal. Barriers to leadership must be removed by reducing emphasis on bureaucratic structures and procedures. Relationships must be reinvented.

The dramatically different role of the school principal as instructional leader has been described as one that must focus on building a vital community of learners. It also requires shared decision-making and, in a sense, getting back to basics. It will require the leveraging of time, the support of ongoing professional development for staff members, creating a climate of integrity, using resources to support a diverse educational game plan and, lastly, plenty of room for inquiry and improvement.

For principals to truly thrive in the role of instructional leader, they will have to work to liberate themselves from being mired in the bureaucratic aspects of teaching. They'll have to redouble their efforts in improving learning and teaching methods. Needless to say, improvement in instructional methods is a goal worth seeking.

The conceptualisation of the instructional leadership model

Researches done on effective schools in the 1980s pointed to instructional models (Hallinger, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 2010) ^[12, 15]. Graczewski, Knudson and Holtzman (2009) ^[20] describe the traditional role of the principal as being that of focusing on administrative management activities, such as enforcing discipline and having good relations with the communities. The role of the principal according to Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008) is no longer accountable mainly for inputs but is accountable for the performance outcomes of teachers and students in a school.

Hallinger (2003) ^[12] points out that the focus of instructional leadership is on the role of the school principal who should coordinate, control, supervise, and develop curriculum and instruction in the school. Some of the other features of instructional leadership include creating conducive environment for teaching and learning to take place in pursuit of the academic and social school goals, ensuring that the goals of the school are attained as well as the improvement of student academic achievement. Instructional leaders are also perceived as culture builders who create an 'academic press' which instils high academic expectations and standards among students and teachers.

Hallinger (2005) ^[13] describes an effective principal as one who can find the correct balance among political, managerial and instructional roles. School leaders should be accountable to improve their schools and are expected to function as instructional leaders. Principals as instructional leaders should focus on coordinating and developing the curriculum and pay more attention to creating a favourable teaching environment (Ruebling, Stow, Kayona & Clarke, 2004). Hallinger and Heck (2010) ^[14] concur that school leadership should mainly direct its energy to improving student outcomes and the pursuit of other goals should be secondary.

The theoretical framework of the study

This study was guided by the Path-Goal Theory of Leadership and Behavior by House, Mitchell, 1974. The Path-Goal theory specifies a leader's style or behavior that best suites the employee and work environment in order to achieve a goal. The goal in using the path-goal theory is to increase employees' motivation, empowerment, and satisfaction so they become productive members of the organization. Instructional leaders in organisations have strategies that they employ to ensure that the goal of high academic achievement is met in their schools. Thus, this study was set to unveil how employees in high schools are motivated towards attaining set goals. According to Davis (2014) ^[4],

The path-goal theory as it pertains to leadership is based on the way that a leader motivates subordinates to accomplish their designated task and how they are motivated to reach their prescribed goal. This theory states that a leader's behavior is important for good performance as a function of its impact on subordinates' perceptions of paths to goals and the attractiveness of the goals

Davis (1014) reveals that in an institute that uses the path-goal theory on leadership, *the leader has a task encourage subordinates to reach their designed assignment and ensure they are motivated to work. Similarly, Pennstate (2018) states that,*

The path-goal theory of leadership is more of a follower motivational theory to leadership than it is a theory of true leader-follower development. At its core, the path-goal theory is based on the situational approaches leadership styles, mixed with the expectancy theory to motivation, where a leader's objective is to increase a follower's motivation through improving one's job satisfaction and performance while in pursuit of a goal.

Pennstate (2018) ^[26] reveals that employees should be motivated into performing their work, thus, in high performing schools subordinates have a hand ensuring the goals set for the organisation are met. The leader's job is to help subordinates reach their goals by directing, guiding, and coaching them along the way.

Problem statement

Schools in Eswatini have a challenge of maintaining a high performance status quo. Performance in most cases fluctuates year by year.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

- Establish what schools are doing to maintain a high performing status quo in the country.
- Determine the monitoring systems that schools have to engage to ensure they maintain the high performing school status quo.

Research methodology

The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm and followed a qualitative research approach which applied a case study design.

Research paradigm

The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm. Lincoln (2000) points out that a research paradigm is human constructions, which deal with first principles or ultimate indicating where the researcher is coming from so as to construct meaning embedded in data. Kivunja (2017) reveals that paradigms are important because they provide beliefs and dictates to scholars how a phenomenon should be studied, as well as, how the results of the study should be interpreted. The paradigm defines a researcher's philosophical orientation and, tells us how meaning will be constructed from the data collected. In this study the perceptions of instructional leaders on how they maintain high performance in their schools will be sought.

Research approach

This study followed a qualitative research approach. Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, Varpio, (2015) point out that, qualitative research is the systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings. These phenomena can include, but are not limited to, how people experience aspects of their lives, how individuals and/or groups behave, how organizations function, and how interactions shape relationships. In qualitative research, the researcher is the main data collection instrument. The researcher examines why events occur, what happens, and what those events mean to the participants studied (Hammarberg, & Kirkman, 2016). This study was set to establish those events that take place in schools as a way of maintaining high academic performances in their schools.

Research Design

A case study design was employed in this study. According to Harrison, Birks, Franklin, and Mills, (2017) case study designs have been used across a number of disciplines, particularly the social sciences, education, business, law, and health, to address a wide range of research questions. In this study a range of questions were used to determine how instructional leaders in the Eswatini high schools maintain high academic performance in their schools.

Research instruments

Face-to-face interviews were used to gather information in this study. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) state that interviews are a discussion between the researcher and the participant. Interviews can either be structured, unstructured or semi-structured. In a structured interview, the researcher utilises an interview plan which is an arrangement of inquiries in a prearranged order, while in an unstructured interview the researcher simply introduces the topic or main research questions, and allows the participant to answer in the way they like (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). In this study, we used semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in order to allow the participant to remain focused, as well as directly address

research notions. This approach allowed the researchers and participants not to wander, and discuss irrelevant issues.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in this study five head teachers were used to collect data. In order to identify what Patton (1999) named information-rich cases and optimise selection of the best people for informing an understanding strategies employed to maintain high performance in high schools, I used the purposive sampling approach. This sampling method is used where the researcher handpicks the participants based on specific attributes being looked for (Cohen *et al.*, 2011) [11]. The sample composed of people who had been with the school for more than ten years and were experienced in teaching. Purposive sampling allowed concentration on lived experiences of participants who had been in the environment for a while. The study focused on those head-teachers who are instructional leaders in high performing high schools in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

Data were analysis

Data analysis is the classifying, taking stock of, and clarification of data; it is noting data patterns, themes and categories (Cohen *et al.*, 2013). In this research, data analysis occurred in three phases:

Phase 1: Data was analysed daily after data generation – a requirement in qualitative research (Cohen *et al.*, 2013). The reason for analysing data immediately after generation was to enable us to make summaries of what transpired, create a report and map the way forward for the next day. The process was tedious but it allowed us to remain focused and note the trends of the data.

Phase 2: This stage involved further data analysis, grouping information according to the emerging themes. In coming up with the themes, we were guided by the critical questions of the study. we analysed data to establish linkages and relationships among themes and categories. Thematic analysis is amongst the most widely recognised types of information analysis in qualitative research and it includes indicating, analysing, and noting examples or subjects within data. Themes are crosscutting issues that are imperative to the depiction of a phenomenon and are related to a particular research question. These themes turn into the classifications for scrutiny.

Thematic analysis is executed through coding, and has six stages. These codes assist to build the structure of the research (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). This process was done by colour coding keywords according to the meanings emanating from the participants' responses (Cohen *et al.*, 2013). Data was read through many times to ensure consistency, and refine and modify the data; all this was done to infer meaning from those associations (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

Phase 3: The final stage was to identify and categorise data as per the research questions. Data was allocated according to each specific research question of the study. Quotations which came directly from the responses from interview questions were used in data presentation.

Results of the study

Instructional leaders were asked to narrate on the teaching strategies used in the schools under study. As we discussed

with the instructional leaders, we noticed that in everything they did, the objective was to maintain the highest level of academic performance in their schools.

Resource provision

Instructional leaders revealed that it was important to ensure that the resources for teaching and learning were available in every classroom. This was one goal that they achieved and it steps up teachers' performance in the classrooms. One instructional leader explained that:

One thing that we do here is to make sure teachers are happy because they are the ones who teach. In that I make sure they have all the required resources they need to execute their duties in the classroom. We even provide for the learners' extra-curricular activities.

On the same note, one instructional leader revealed that, "Our classes have enough current textbooks, both hard and soft copies, computer labs with state of the art computers and enough classrooms."

Another instructional leader added that one very important thing that had helped them to execute their duties was the continuous availability of internet in the school and explained that:

We have internet connection here and it works well, this is another thing that has made our work easier. We are able to research anytime and deliver good and productive lessons because of availability of resources.

Instructional leaders' visibility in the school

Instructional leaders also added that, for goals to be attained, one needed to be seen in the school and have their presence felt in a positive way by being involved in what happens in the school. The principal stated that:

Look some of these things need hands-on, I personally monitor what happens in classes when I am around. When the bell rings to start classes I always stand out there where all teachers see me as they start teaching.

On the same note, one instructional leader revealed that, "Another thing is that my HoDs are efficient, they follow-up in their departments and make sure teaching happens."

Appropriate environment for teaching and learning

One other instructional leader revealed that it is important for principals to ensure that the environment in the school is conducive for teaching and learning and explained that:

I have also created an environment which makes it easier for teachers to teach. There is discipline in the school, our learners are responsible and they know our mission here.

Similarly, another instructional leader revealed that the environment in their school does compel learners to study. The instructional leader expressed that:

You don't find learners loitering around, in fact our system is such that if a teacher misses a class learners report immediately to the HoDs or Deputy Head teacher and an action is taken unless a prior arrangement was made.

The instructional leaders agreed that it was not only teaching that made the school perform well. It started from the creation of a conducive environment for both learners and teachers. One of them revealed that:

Here we have managed to maintain discipline and respect; our policies instil a sense of hard work in our learners as well as members of staff. We also encourage team teaching, where teachers work and plan together sharing methods and ideas.

Preparation for lessons and mentoring novice teachers

Lesson preparation was one other strategy used in these schools. The researchers asked the instructional leaders to explain how lessons were prepared. One instructional leader responded by stating that, “*Over and above the scheming and planning which is the standard practice. I assess the actual teaching, pupils’ exercise books and work teachers administer comparing with what the syllabus says.*”

On the same note another respondent stated that:

These routine classroom visits are not fault finding or intimidating our teachers but meant to help encourage them to work. We also make sure they have enough resources before we supervise their work.

One instructional leader mentioned that in their school they practice mentoring, where the novice teachers are given an opportunity to learn from the experienced. The respondent stated that:

In terms teaching we encourage old and young teachers to work together so that the new ones bring in new knowledge while the old ones bring in experience. This has worked well for us here.

In response to the question on strategies employed to enhance teaching, the instructional leaders added that there were four major elements that needed to be taken seriously to enhance high performance. One of them explained that:

The major thing to be taken care of in the teaching and learning are: content learnt, teaching methods, learner discipline and learner continuous assessment. If we manage these well, we will have created a good learning and teaching environment.

All the interviewed instructional leaders indicated that the school encouraged academic competition among learners through publicly acknowledging and displaying good work done by individual learners. One of them expressed that:

I personally create and encourage competition among my learners by publicly announcing the best achiever and challenging other learners to beat the record in the next exercise. This motivates the best pupil and gives others a challenge.

Managing learner discipline through parental involvement

I noticed that the two schools used similar strategies in their teaching and learning. In order to understand more, I asked

for the strategies they have in place to enhance high performance and the response was:

The success of the learners in their academic work is a collective responsibility which requires all stakeholders involved in the learning of learners to be actively involved, I mean teachers, learners, parents and the school management team.

Similarly, one other instructional leader responded by expressing that:

Here we make sure everyone is involved, especially parents because they supervise our learners at home we want them to be kept abreast with their children’s performance.

On the same note, one other instructional leader mentioned that:

A good example here is that parents sign homework books and are constantly in touch with teachers for feedback.

The instructional leaders also added that, discipline plays a major role in ensuring that learners attain high academic achievement. One mentioned that:

Managing learner discipline and learner assessments are some of the strategies that we use to assist teachers improve learners’ performance.

The preceding sentiments were also echoed by another instructional leader who agreed that involving parents in learner academic activities made learners work hard. One of them explained that:

Involving parents makes our life easy as educators because these learners have nowhere to hide, they are monitored at home and at school to ensure that they are disciplined and they can do school work. We also encourage teachers to give prompt feedback to learners so that parents are kept in the loop regarding their children’s performance.

Creating a reading culture in the school

Another instructional leader added that creating a reading culture in the school is a wise strategy for high academic achievement. The instructional leader alluded to that, “*We also practice examination questions with learners always to make sure they are familiar with the type of questions asked.*”

On a similar note, one instructional leader stated that:

We have also encouraged a culture of reading here. From Form one our learners are subjected to intense reading which helps them in learning and understanding the instructional language.

There was consensus in the information that was given by the instructional leaders. They alluded to the fact that major things that needed to be done to enhance learning were capacity building to enhance teaching skills, reading culture and examination practice with learners, knowing what to teach, and discipline from both teachers and learners.

Discussion of findings

The results of the study reveal that instructional leaders take time to visit classrooms while teachers are teaching so as to monitor and advise where possible. This finding is in line with the views from Hoerr (2015:1) ^[20] who points out that one of the roles of the instructional leader is to ensure that good teaching consistently takes place in every classroom. The results of the study do not reveal those instructional leaders' skills they have that make them manage to direct the activities in their school towards attaining the desired goals. This finding is contrary to the view by Concordia University Portland (2018) ^[3] which reveals that there are four skills that have been identified as essential for effective instructional leadership in principals.

The study reveals that instructional leaders are involved in the day-to-day activities in the schools, to ensure their visibility is realised. This idea is contrary to the view by Holtzman (2009) ^[10] who describes the traditional role of the principal as being that of focusing on administrative management activities, such as enforcing discipline and having good relations with the communities. Instead this finding is in line with Hallinger (2003) ^[13] who points out that the focus of instructional leadership is to coordinate, control, supervise, and develop curriculum and instruction in the school.

Conclusions

The study concluded that, instructional leaders from high performing high schools in Eswatini have a number of strategies that they employ to ensure that the goal of high academic achievement is met in their schools. The study concludes that the high academic achieving schools work together with other stakeholders to ensure that learners are geared towards learning. The study also concluded that instructional leaders in schools have a task to supervise all activities that learners and teachers partake in so as to attend to their needs and give constructive advices.

Recommendations

The study recommends that there be in-service workshops where instructional leaders from high academic achieving schools share their experiences with instructional leaders from other schools with challenges. It is also a recommendation of this study that in addition to resource provision in the classroom, teachers from high academic performing schools be given incentives, that may come in the form of an allowance or vouchers to encourage them to keep the standards high.

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