

The Principals' Leadership Roles in a Performing and a Non-Performing Combined School in the Zambezi Region, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

One of the reasons attributed to the continuous decline in learner performance and low educational outcomes in schools is the poor leadership displayed by many principals (Naidoo, 2019). This article is a comparative account of a study that aimed to elicit the roles that principals play in performing and non-performing schools in the Zambezi region, Namibia. The study was qualitative in nature and used a case study design to generate data. This study used interviews and observations to collect data. Two principals and seven teachers teaching Grade 10 were interviewed using unstructured interviews. The following are the key findings that emerged from the analysis: Firstly, that teachers and principals identified indirect factors such as principal approachability, interactive classroom observation and/or visitation, and collective teacher collegiality and efficacy as the main instructional leadership behaviors that may have strong effects on learner achievements. Secondly, the study showed that schools where students do well tend to have strong administrative leadership.

Keywords: leadership style; learner achievement; teacher capacity; transactional; transformational; influence;

INTRODUCTION

High academic performance is the ultimate goal for all established institutions of education, and hence the purpose of the study was to investigate the role that principals' leadership styles play in influencing learner performance in the school environment. As the Wallace Foundation states, "There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader" (Leithwood, et al. 2004). The Wallace Foundation, 2012, which has been examining principal effectiveness over the past decade, has declared that principals are second only to teachers as the most influential in-school factors in learner achievement. Although schools serve a variety of purposes, the most commonly mentioned aim of schooling in Namibia is to empower learners with knowledge and skills that will enable them to function well in a knowledge-based society (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 12). Thousands of Grade 10 and 12 learners nationwide annually sit for the end-of-year exit examinations to test if they have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge in various school subjects. Despite their limitations, grades are always used as proxy measures to evaluate the effectiveness of public policies and to determine learner performance and success (Borghans, Golsteyn, Heckman & Humphries, 2016). Unfortunately, for the Zambezi region, low learner academic performance on the end-of-year examinations is always the norm (Zambezi Education Conference, 2011). One study found that an average school led by a highly effective principal performed 10 percentage points higher than if that school was led by an average principal (Waters, Marzano, and McNulty 2003). The purpose of the study was to investigate the role that principals' leadership styles play in influencing learner performance in the school environment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was guided by the following research questions

1. What are the roles of principals in influencing learners' performance in selected combined schools in the Zambezi Region?
2. What challenges do principals face in executing their duties in the two selected combined schools?
3. What strategies can be developed to address the identified challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

International literature on leadership roles of principals was reviewed to create some theoretical frameworks that guided the study. Two theoretical frameworks, namely the leadership continuum and transformative leadership theories, guided the study. The two theories are associated with motivation of team-work or value and respect for subordinates. In the leadership continuum theory, motivation is achieved through the level of freedom that a manager as a leader chooses to give to a team, while the transformative leadership theory provides motivation through allowing subordinates to identify the needed change for performance (Nikezi, Puri, & Puri, 2012).

Effective leadership begins with the development of a school-wide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all learners. The principal helps to spell out the vision and get all others on board with it (Mendels, 2012).

Leadership

Leadership in education is a process of influencing teachers and other stakeholders and is not necessarily limited to a single person. The process of influence ideally leads to an effective learning climate which all stakeholders (such as pupils, teachers, parents, society) experience as an added value, and keeps all the organisational processes in the school (among others, monitoring the instructional process, managing personnel and allocating resources) running smoothly (Daniëls et al., 2019). Leading as a function of management involves directing, motivating, communicating, guiding, and encouraging employees (Smit et al., 2007). In the case of school principals, they are school managers who lead the school by directing activities; motivating teachers and learners; communicating with teachers, learners, and parents; guiding teachers and learners; and encouraging learners and teachers as employees. The leading function of management means that school principals play a leadership role in schools. In Pakistan, Branson, Baig, and Begum (2015) found that the instructional leadership style of school principals is the most important factor on how well students do in school.

Leadership roles of the principal

According to Tonich (2021), the principal presents one medium through which to advance a school, because his or her role is very important in various activities, such as managing organizational aspects of the school, and he or she needs to consider various aspects related to management so that organizational goals can be set accordingly. The primary responsibility of the principal is to promote the learning and success of all learners, and school principals can accomplish this goal by focusing on learning, encouraging collaboration, using data to improve learning, providing support, and aligning curriculum, assessment, and instruction (Lunenburg, 2010). A school principal's actions or inactions have a direct connection with the ultimate goal of schooling, which is learning on the part of the learners. What they learn, however, also depends on the teachers' performance, which is a product of many factors, such as their commitment, professional growth, school environment, prevailing culture, teachers' innovativeness, etc. As a leader, he or she should lead the school in a manner that ensures that a conducive environment prevails so that teachers perform as expected. The principal has to provide the appropriate leadership aimed at assisting each staff member make a maximum contribution to the school's effort to provide quality and up-to-date education.

The second type of leadership role for principals is transformational. Transformational leadership is one of the most widely discussed and utilized notions that has risen to the forefront of educational administration. Transformational leadership was initially conceived of as a process whereby leaders strategically transform the system or organization to a higher level by increasing the achievement and motivation of their followers. Early theorists would argue that transformational leadership and change are inexorably intertwined, which in turn underscored the importance of a leader's ability to positively transform the attitudes, norms, institutions, behaviors, and actions that structure our daily lives (Litz et al., 2020). Balyer (2012) states that transformational leadership helps school principals frame their attitudes to move their schools forward. In the context of a school, transformational leadership replaces the leader as the only one who manages school processes and procedures related to instruction and supervision and demands subordinates to act as change agents. Principals are expected to lead schools through reform. A transformational leader as an agent of change stresses the ingredients of change, for example, ideas, innovation, influence, and consideration for the individual in the process (Botha 2014; Marks and Printy 2003). Transformational leadership focuses on the vision and goals of the organization, whereas shared instructional leadership is about how members of the organization work as partners on a daily basis in order to achieve the vision and goals. Leadership no longer depends on the position or role of a single individual but on interactions that are synchronized through the establishment of structures or committees to maintain order in the organization. Studies have revealed that the use of transformational leadership coupled with high-quality pedagogy helps learners perform

academically at a high level (Lumadi 2014; Marks and Printy 2003). The principal, as the leader, has a critical role to play in meeting the challenges the schools face. Because of the massive changes that have taken place in the education system in the country and the Zambezi region in particular, the role of the principal as the transformational leader is vital. Transformational leadership on the part of principals is important to make sure that teachers and other key players accept these changes without pushing back.

A study conducted by Ibrahim and Al-Taneiji (2013) in Dubai established that the most used leadership style by school principals was transformational, followed by the transactional leadership style, which is characterized by contract-based conditions of work with rewards for successful completion of tasks. The only correlation established in most studies was between leadership style and leadership effectiveness, but there was no correlation between leadership style and learner performance (Adeyemi and Bolarinwa 2013; Bush 2009; 2012; Hallinger 2011; Suraya and Yunus 2012; Yusuf 2008; 2012).

The third type of leadership role for principals is "transactional". According to Selesho and Ntisa (2014, p. 212), transactional leadership is an exchange relationship that involves the reward of effort, productivity, and loyalty. Transactional leaders are more successful in cultures that need to be maintained (Martin, 2009). Transactional leadership aims at maintaining or preserving the way a school functions and does not easily accept deviation from the operating systems and procedures that already exist. This is because transactional leaders are less able to adapt to change and meet changes in demands from their internal or external environment.

Lekamge's (2010) study on leadership roles played by school principals found planning and organization of school activities; management of the school curriculum, resources, students and staff; promoting achievement of the school's mission, objectives, and instructional goals; initiating and managing change necessary for the development of the school; preparing a budget for the school and presenting it to the school board and parents; and protecting school staff and learners from external pressures as the main roles. The role of the school principal covers many different areas, including leadership, teacher evaluation, and learner discipline (Meador, 2015). The principal, as the head of the school, should make sure that teachers are evaluated based on their lesson preparation and teaching, and learners who are not disciplined are dealt with according to the laid down rules and regulations of the school.

It is evident that neither a democratic nor a transformational leadership style that focuses more on the relationship between the leaders and the followers could yield good student performance without the coexistence of transactional leadership, which focuses on the instructional supervision of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Challenges principals and teachers face in managing schools

The challenges experienced by principals in managing schools is related to the complex nature of the job (the management challenge, the complexity challenge and the learning challenge), and interactions with different stakeholders (problems with educational authorities and educational policy; the staff and teaching process; the students; the families and the school community; and the society) (Tintore et al., 2022). These challenges are briefly discussed below.

Learner absenteeism

Some learners have negative behaviours and attitudes towards school, resulting in irregular class attendance. Research shows that learner absenteeism is a matter of concern in most rural schools, likely caused by either socio-economic and/or school factors (Preetika & Priti, 2013).

Learner retention

Studies by Bush and Oduro (2006) in Africa and Preetika and Priti (2013) in India reported that learner retention during school hours is one of the key challenges that schools face and hinders learners' academic performance. Teaching methods adopted by teachers and the fact that most learners still travel long distance to and from school may be some of the key factors that diminish learners' attention span, who as a result may lose interest and skip classes. Additionally, Bush and Oduro (2006) reported that most rural schools in Africa, educators still work in poorly equipped schools with inadequate trained staff.

Lack of parental and family support

High illiteracy and poverty rates among parents in most rural schools across Africa including Namibia are commonplace. This raises the question of whether illiterate or semi-illiterate parents or other family members are capable of contributing to the academic success of their children. However, there is little convincing evidence that illiterate parents can effectively supervise their children's studies and completion of their homework (Bush & Oduro, 2006).

Ineffective teachers

One of the major tasks of principals is to ensure that teachers carry out their daily duties and responsibilities. To ensure that teachers effectively perform their duties, principals exercise control through constant supervision and monitoring of all teachers. Among others, principals conduct class visits to ensure that teachers carry out their work as expected (Preetika & Priti, 2013). However, anecdotal evidence shows that in Namibia, principals have little control on ineffective and habitually absent teachers. Though principals keep records of misconduct for teachers' misdemeanors, disciplinary and corrective actions reside only with the human resources department, making it difficult for principals to exercise absolute control over staff members. Thus, schools may be forced to keep an ineffective teacher for the entire duration of the investigation of the nature of the teacher's misconduct.

Overall, Preetika and Priti (2013) concluded that the challenges school principals and teachers encounter in their daily work may result from the legacy, practice and style of the previous principal and the ineffectiveness of staff members. Preetika and Priti's (2013) findings may not be different from those experienced in Namibia's public-school system.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to generate data. In case studies, the researcher explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system over time through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, e.g., observations, interviews, audio materials, and documents (Creswell, 2013). The researchers used the case study method as a pertinent method of inquiry in this research. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2013) state that a case study is concerned with conditions or relationships that exist, practices that prevail, beliefs, points of view, or attitudes that are held, processes that are going on, effects that are being felt, or trends that are developing.

In order to explore principals' roles in the selected schools, one main instrument was used to collect data: interviews. Two principals and seven teachers teaching Grade 10 were interviewed using unstructured interviews. The study employed a "one-on-one" type of interview. The study consisted of the two principals selected from two combined schools. Also, seven teachers, four from School A and three from School B participated in this study. Extreme case sampling was used to select the two principals and the seven teachers from the two combined schools. Patton (2006) proposed that when a study intends to highlight notable outcomes, failures, or successes of a phenomenon, an extreme or deviant case sampling technique, a type of purposive sampling, is always appropriate for the researcher to focus on special cases and explain the unusual and typical issues of the units of analysis.

The analysis of data in this study was done by transcribing data from speech into written form. The interview was first transcribed, coded, and the themes were developed and noted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will start with a discussion of each of the emerging themes and some other research-based insights.

Table 1: Teachers' and Principals' background information

Participant	Years of experience in current school	Site	Qualification
Principal A	12 years	School A	Degree in educational leadership
Principal B	3 years	School B	Degree in leadership & courses in instructional leadership
Teacher A	8 years	School A	Teachers' Diploma
Teacher B	4 years	School A	Teachers' Diploma
Teacher C	1 month, 2 weeks	School A	Teachers' Diploma
Teacher D	3 years	School A	Teachers' Diploma
Teacher E	1 year, 7 months	School B	Teachers' Diploma
Teacher F	2 years	School B	Teachers' Diploma
Teacher G	5 years	School B	Teachers' Diploma
Teacher H	22 years	School B	Teachers' Diploma

Principals' roles and responsibilities

The principals in this study mobilized and managed school resources, allocated job responsibilities to their teachers, and ensured that their respective schools performed well. Additionally, it was also evident that Principal B was responsible for ensuring that a conducive learning environment prevailed in his school; inducted newly appointed teachers; and motivated all teachers in his school. This finding is consistent with the literature reviewed in this study. For instance, Fullan (2002) indicates that school principals play three types of roles, namely the instructional, transformational, and transactional roles. In the context of research participants' narratives, principals in this study appeared to regard themselves as not only instructional but also transformational and transactional leaders. For example, principals indicated that they do not only promote learners' learning and support their staff (instructional leaders); they also attempt to create innovative school climates in which teachers are motivated towards the achievement of school goals (transformational leaders) (Moolenaar, Daly & Slegers, 2010). There is further evidence showing that principals in this study regard themselves as transactional leaders. Martin (2009) argued that transactional leaders try to maintain the existing culture of their organizations. Martin's conclusion appears to suggest that by inducting his newly appointed teachers, Principal B in this study has attempted to ensure that all teachers preserve the existing culture, functions, and procedures of the school. Lastly, the finding that Principal B coordinates local communities through the school board also corroborates with the literature reviewed in this study. The Education Act (Act No. 16 of 2001) mandates school principals in Namibia to use school boards as democratic institutions to set and achieve the main goals of schooling (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport & Culture, 2001). This finding may strengthen the argument that by fostering strong relationships between schools and community members, such connections might benefit learners and the whole school (Habegger, 2008; Meador, 2015).

Principals' consultative strategies

Principals in this study involved their teachers in the decision-making process through various team mechanisms (staff meetings, morning briefings, and subject and phase meetings). Thus, this finding seems to suggest that principals in this study understand the problems in their schools to which they continue to offer firm leadership so as to minimize the potential adverse effects of identified challenges. However, though both principals appear to exercise firm leadership in how decisions are taken, it is Principal A who seems to use a "we" or collaborative culture that demonstrates genuine consideration for teachers to participate in the school's problems. While Principal B describes himself as a democratic leader, it appears that decision-making rests with the principal, as demonstrated in his persistent use of the personal pronoun "I". Also, there is evidence that Principal B acts like a transactional leader who "sells" decisions to his teachers (Selesho & Ntisa, 2014; see 2.5).

There is another possible explanation for principals' responses to the question of how they involve teachers in daily decisions. Based on the definitions adopted in this study, it is Principal B who appears to take personal responsibility for influencing learners' academic achievements in the school. Compared to this counterpart, Principal B is convinced that as a leader, he alone directly inspires emotions, opinions, or behaviours of teachers and learners to attain academic performance (Boundless, 2015; Nel et al., 2003).

On the contrary, by focusing on collaboration and identification of school problems across subjects and phases, Principal A appears to exhibit the attributes of both an instructional and transformational leader (Lunenburg, 2010).

CONCLUSION

When it comes to delivering effective school leadership, principals who get the desired results make use of the thoughts, observations, and skills of teachers who aid in doing so as partners. Any activity taken by a leader that is directly relevant to teaching and learning is referred to as instructional leadership. Some examples of beneficial instructional leadership are curriculum management, assessment monitoring, and the supervision of teaching and learning. It is expected of the principal, in their role as instructional leader, to provide the vision and objectives for the school, as well as monitor and evaluate the curriculum, instruction, and assessment, to provide a pleasant working environment, and to create an environment that is conducive to learning. According to the findings of this study, in order for principals to be successful in their efforts to raise student achievement, they need to possess certain qualities, such as the ability to be approached, be prepared for interactive classroom observation and/or visitations, and cultivate collective teacher collegiality and efficacy.

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