Instructional Leadership

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Abstract

Instructional leadership is one of the transformational leadership theories which focus on the task-person tension and dominates the world of organizations into the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The notion of instructional leadership emerged in the early 1980's. This was due to the fact that the public wanted change in education and to close the gap in the achievement between students who traditionally do well in schools and those who do not. Instructional leadership is also one of the most useful tools in creating a forward-looking environment. Various research studies show that instructional leadership has been criticized because it focused on curriculum and instructions from principals; as a result a principal is a center of power and authority. Instructional leadership model also focuses on the direction of influence which is increasingly concerned with teaching and learning.

Keywords

Instructional leadership; teaching and learning; students' achievement

Introduction

Instructional leadership is one of the most useful tools in creating a forward-look centred school environment and has a long and rich history, yet is a concept that is complex, with multiple interpretations as what an instructional leader does.

This paper is presented in a number of sections. The first section deals with the school origin of instructional leadership. Since the main interest point of the study is the instructional leadership, an understanding of the concept of instructional leadership is important to this paper, and is therefore explored. Furthermore, benefits and the implications of

instructional leadership are also covered in this paper. Lastly I explored the challenges of the implementations of instructional leadership model in the Namibian schools. As an educator, all presentations and examples given in this paper are based on the school situation. In the next section, I present the origin of instructional leadership in the school context.

The origin of instructional leadership in the school

The concept of instructional leadership has a long history as I stated earlier, its origins can be traced back to the 19 [th] century. Starting around the late -1980s and early 1990s the public (policy makers, parents and educational leaders) became increasingly more demanding on the school system to improve students' academic performance (Leithwood, 2007; Stewart, 2006). They also demanded "educational accountability through management practices, professional standards, teacher commitment, democratic processes and parent choice" (Stewart, 2006). This was due to the fact that the public wanted change in education and this required schools' reform. Leithwood (2007) further argues schools were being asked to do much better in terms of academic achievement and close the gap in achievement between students who traditionally do well in school and those who do not do well. In addition to that, these movements insisted the leadership of school to focus on the commitment of the leaders and subordinators (teachers).

Stewart (2006, p. 2) indicates that the "new focus for school has created a cohort of 'old school' principals who must now embrace a conceptually new form of leadership". This resulted in the increasing number of the research studies attempting to measure the impacts of school leadership and "new terms began to emerge in literatures such as shared leadership, teacher leadership, distributed leadership and instructional leadership" (Stewart, 2006).These new forms of leadership drew the focus away from traits and rather focused on individuals being a 'person' in an organization.

Since this paper focuses on the instructional leadership, it is therefore imperative to give a brief explanation of the concept instructional leadership, which is addressed in the next topic.

The concept of instructional leadership

The concept of instructional leadership has been the subject of academic enquiry for over ten decades; however academics and researchers have failed to construct the same definition. According to Bush (2007, p. 401) "instructional leadership is the leadership which focuses on teaching and learning and on the behaviour of teachers in working with students". Given the above definition, it seems that leaders' influence is targeted at student learning via teachers. In the same vein York-Barr and Duke, (2004), have almost

the same definition as Bush (2007) when they say "Instructional leadership...typically focuses on the behaviour of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students". In short, the instructional leadership can be defined as the actions taken by a principal to promote growth in students' learning. This means that the principal encourages educational achievement by making instructional quality the top priority of the school. Furthermore, Bush (2007) asserts that "the role of an instructional leader differs from that of traditional school administrator in a number of meaningful ways" (p. 401). In practice, a principal who is an instructional leader is charged with redefining his/her role to become the primary learner in a community striving for excellence in education.

According to Cawood and Gibon (as cited in Sinvula, 2009):"Instructional leadership is a process of guiding and encouraging the teacher along a path towards greater professional effectiveness". Such guidance demands very careful, far sighted and effective planning, based on professional insight and constructive and accurate analysis of teaching-learning (p.11).This implies that the leaders and the teacher are the partners in guiding teachers towards advanced professional development. Sinvula (2009, p. 11) further asserts that "instructional leadership is not the role of the principal only, but also that of teachers, as it is they [teachers] who are actively involved in the learning process and therefore have a better understanding of students' needs". As such, it become the principal's responsibility to work with teachers to define educational objectives and set school goals, provides the necessary resources for learning, and creates new learning opportunities for students and staff.

Murphy (1990) proposed a frame work of viewing instructional leadership which included four major dimensions:

- **Developing mission and goals** which include framing and communicating school goals. Effective principals were described as having vision and the ability to develop shared purpose through the way they communicated their vision for their school.

- **Managing the educational production function** which includes promoting quality instruction, informal supervision instruction, evaluating instruction, allocating and protecting instructional time, active involvement in coordinating the curriculum, extending content coverage by developing and enforcing homework policies.

- **Promoting an academic learning climate** which includes establishing positive expectations and standards, maintaining high visibility in the classroom and around the school, providing incentives for teachers (e.g. public and private praise and encouragement) and students.

- **Developing a supportive work environment** which includes creating a safe and orderly learning environment through emphasising effective discipline programs, providing opportunities for meaningful students involvement(e.g. use of schools

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symbols to bond students to schools), developing staff collaboration and cohesion through having clear goals and opportunities for teachers to be involved in professional interchanges and decision making (pp. 170-171)

In this description of instructional leadership there is a strong theme of supporting the school instructional program, with emphasis on quality teaching and academic learning. The issues like developing mission and goals, and developing a supportive work environment are seen as necessary for core activities of teaching and learning.

Graczewski, Knudson & Holtzman (2009, p.72) gave an inspiring definition of instructional leadership when they say "the concept of instructional leadership is a departure from the traditional view of the principal as administrative leader, but the imposition of instructional responsibilities does not remove the administrative demand at a school site". The principal's role is to focus on the teachers as the teacher focuses on helping students to learn (Ibid). This is in line with the South Africa Standard for School Leadership which says "the principal is able to ensure that teaching and learning in the school are at the heart of the school's strategic planning and management of all resources to achieve high academic performance" (South Africa. Department of Education, 2006, p.11).

Bush (2007, p. 400) echoes this sentiment when he "says instructional leadership is differerent from the other models of leadership because it focuses on the direction of influence, rather than its nature and source. Instructional leaders are concerned to promote and develop their school as learning organisation or professional learning communities in order to bring about the school learning goals for its pupils."Therefore the key role of the principal as a change agent in the model of instructional leadership is to provide resources, curricula and teaching as the highest priority and support to improve instruction and students achievement.

Similarly, Southworth as cited by Bush (2007, p. 401) says that "instructional leadership ... is strongly concerned with teaching and learning, and include the professional learning of teachers as well as student growth". To him, leaders' influence is targeted at student learning via teachers.

Despite all of these different viewpoints of instructional leadership regarding the definition and concept of instructional leadership, the definitions agreed in the two areas namely: firstly leaders (principals) instruct the teachers to teach the curriculum and teachers instruct students to learn the curriculum. Given the above definitions, it demonstrated that there is no single accepted definition of instructional leadership; however all the researchers focus their attention on teaching and learning as core areas of education and central activities of the school.

In many ways the research on instructional leadership is still in its infancy, but noteworthy benefits and limitations have emerged from the few studies that have been undertaken after three decades. In the next section, I look at the benefits of instructional leadership.

Benefits of instructional leadership

Many studies of effective schools emphasized instructional leadership as one of the features of effective schools. It is the driving force behind the principal to ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place in the school. According to Stewart (2006, p. 2.) "Instructional leadership helps school and communities address the challenge of promoting leadership for quality and teaching". This is in the line with the South African Standard for School Leadership which says "the principal is able to ensure that teaching and learning in the school are linked to the school's wider community" (South Africa. DoE, 2006, p. 21). In addition to that, instructional leadership deals with the enhancement of the effectiveness of teachers' classroom practice and students' academic achievement. It also challenges the traditional top-down leadership which is task-orientation rather the person-orientation. Furthermore, Steward (2009, p. 2) argues that "those who learn to be instructional leaders acquire many characteristics that are beneficial to their schools and communities". Instructional leaders exhibit a clear sense of direction for their schools and prioritize and focus attention on the things that really matter in terms of the work of students (Ibid).

Bush (2007, p. 1) has similar views with Steward (2007) when he says "instructional leadership improves schools' goals and objectives, because they [schools' and objectives] are set together with the staff members". This is also due to the fact that the curriculum is managed and coordinated in such way that teaching time can be used optimally and that the principal support teaching programmes and provide the resources that teachers need to carry out their task.

Instructional leadership is a very important dimension because it targets the school's central activities, teaching and learning. In addition to that, the result of instructional leadership is a collaborative learning environment where learning is not confined to the classroom and is the objective of all educators. Furthermore, instructional leaders know what is happening in their classrooms and develop the capacities of staff by building on their strengths.

Similarly, Leithwood (2007, p.186) asserts that "instructional leaders also attempt to sustain improvement and change in their schools by anticipating and overcoming the obstacles that inevitably will emerge along the way". Furthermore, principals who possess instructional leadership skills show concern for students and what teachers do by being

visible, they walk around the school to observe how teaching and learning takes place in the school.

In spite of the many benefits derived from instructional leadership model, there are also many limitations of instructional leadership. This is discussed in the next topic.

Limitations of instructional ieadership

Though, leaders (school principals) are expected to be instructional leaders, they are also cautioned about implications for the practice of instructional leadership. According to Liontos, Lynn Balster(1992, p. 2) "Instructional leadership encompasses hierarchies and top-down leadership, where the leader is supposed to know the best form of instructions and closely monitors teachers' and students' work". The main argument is that, instructional leadership does not begin and end with the principal; it must come from teachers if schools are to improve and teaching is to achieve high professional status.

Bush (2007, p. 401) argues that "this paradigm [instructional leadership] underestimates other aspects of school life, such as sport, socialization, students' welfare and self esteem". This is not in the line with the National Standards and Performance Indicators for Schools in Namibia which says "learners are given opportunities and encouraged to participate in wide range of extra-curricular activities such as sport, cultural and environmental programmes" (Namibia. Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 15).

Balster (1992, p. 2) echoes this sentiment when, he says "this form of leadership concentrates on the growth of students but rarely looks at the growth of teachers". He further suggested that instructional leadership influences what happens in core business of the school –teaching and learning (Ibid). In practice, instructional leadership influence students' perception of how teachers organise and conduct their instructions and their educational interactions with, and expectation for their students.

Bush (2007, p. 401) argues that "giving place to leadership for learning within principals' training and development programmes would make a valuable contribution to the restoration of an appropriate culture of teaching and learning and to the development of schools as learning organisations". This is recognized by the National Standards and Performance Indicators for Schools in Namibia, which stresses the importance of teaching and learning which require strategies focused on change at the school and classroom levels (MoE, 2004).

By ensuring that teachers have opportunities to increase their knowledge, principal are not only empowering teachers as individual, but the institution and the whole system is likely to benefits, as they will be tapping into the skills and knowledge acquired.

In spite of benefits and limitations of instructional leadership, there are numerous challenges facing instructional leadership. This is discussed in the next topic.

Challenges facing the implementation instructional leadership in Namibian schools

Stewart (2006) indicates that one of the challenges with instructional leadership is that in "many schools the principals are not the educational expert" (p.6). Often it is very difficult to find leaders who are good managers and also instructional leader, though there are exceptional cases. Moreover, there are some principals who perceive their work to be only administrative and, at times distance themselves from the classroom and the core business of teaching and learning. In this way, school leaders have lost touch and meaning with the real business of the school which is teaching and learning, and they need to assume their roles of being the master teacher/learner.

The above mentioned views are similar to Stewart (2006, p. 6) when he says "some principals perceive their role to be administrative and, as such they purposely distance themselves from the classroom environment". One the Namibia policies of education clearly states that a principal be qualified to teach the highest grade offered at the school. This resulted in the principal to be blamed for poor planning or incompetency to balance management and leadership responsibilities, including instructional leadership. Furthermore, (2006, p. 6) Steward argues that "the reality of the current school system is that principal are politically wedged between the expectations of the classroom, the teachers, the senior management team, and members of the community". It is always a challenge to most principals to strike a balance between the competing and often conflicting demands of various interests groups as they are occupied with managerial and administrative tasks of daily school life and as such, they rarely have time to lead others in the areas of teaching and learning (Stewart, 2006).

The issues of decentralisation in Namibia have also diverted the principals' attention from playing their role as instructional leaders. The issue of principals heading cluster centres has created more responsibilities for some principals, as they are subject teachers, principals (instructional leader) as well as heads of clusters, whilst also serving as members of the circuit management teams of their respective circuits. This has loaded principals to the extent that teachers are left without instructional leaders and have to find ways to get out of difficult situations they might find themselves in. In this regards, the principals as instructional leaders need to be multi-talented to be able to cope with the responsibilities of school leadership and management today.

Despite the challenges of instructional leadership facing principals as leaders of school, teachers also have difficulties assuming roles of instructional leadership because of their many responsibilities. For instance, after normal classes they have to plan lessons, provide

remedial classes to learners with learning difficulties or talk to parents on issues affecting their children.

Finally, lack of adequate teaching and learning resource, competent and qualified teachers and other physical facilities, are also some of the challenges hindering effective instructional leadership and the provision of quality education delivery in Namibia.

Conclusion

Instructional leadership can be understood as a process of influencing teachers to teach the curriculum and students to learn, based on clear values and beliefs and leading to a vision for the school. It can also be viewed as the strong directive leadership focused on curriculum and instruction from the principal. This leadership model has benefits and limitations .To implements this leadership theory, there are numerous challenges emanating from the education system itself, teachers etc. Improving learning outcomes requires an approach to leadership development, which focuses on instructional leadership. This means attempting to change the mind-set of leaders to regard the processes of teaching and learning as central to their role rather than simply leaving such matters to educators.

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