

Effectiveness of Principals' Leadership Role in Enhancing Students' Achievement in Urban Secondary Schools in Zomba District, Malawi

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Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of principals' leadership role in enhancing students' achievement in some selected secondary schools in Zomba district, Malawi. The study was conducted using both survey and naturalistic designs especially phenomenology design. The sample size was three hundred (300) respondents, which consisted of 12 principals, 120 teachers and 168 students from both public and private secondary schools in Zomba Urban. Questionnaires and direct observation were used to collect data on school facilities and teaching and learning resources among others. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics and one way ANOVA for testing the hypotheses. The researcher concluded that there was no significance difference in mean secondary school principals' perception about their role effectiveness scores when schools were classified by those headed by highly experienced secondary school principals or less experienced secondary school principals and when secondary schools are classified as those headed by male secondary school principals or female secondary school principals. Through observation on the quality and quantity of physical facilities, the findings show that, most of the schools in Zomba Urban, did not have enough desks and chairs, text books and reference books, libraries, computers, laboratories, toilets, class rooms and TV Set, among others. Further, School principals rarely allowed students to participate in decision making and this led to ineffectiveness in maintaining school discipline as a result the school did not do well in academics. Accordingly, the researcher concluded that shortage of facilities, rare involvement of the students and teachers in decision-making, and ineffective class supervision, and principals' commitment, among the factors led to ineffectiveness of principals in carrying out their responsibilities. Among the recommendations made were: Principals should lobby for provision of adequate facilities, improve communication, involve teachers and students in decision-making, and provide effective supervision of teaching in secondary schools.

Key Words: Principal, Leadership, Effectiveness, Academic Achievement, School Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

Education is at the heart of any national development. It enables people to use and extend their capabilities, develop skills, improve their livelihoods and increase their earning potential (Maluwa-Banda, 2003). It also empowers them to participate in decision-making and in the transformation of their lives and societies. Education is central to the achievement of greater equality in society (Hallinger, 2003). Education also allows individuals and societies to unlock their potentials, expand their horizons and adapt to a changing world. Investment in children's learning is the most important contribution a community can make for a better future. It improves the productive capacity of the society, their political, economic, and scientific institutions. Societies need systems that are capable of passing on the accumulated knowledge, which provides an essential basis for creativity and progress (Stiggins & Duke, 2008).

In every country, the government is responsible for the provision of classic education and academic systems to its citizens (UNESCO, 2009). In Malawi where this study was conducted, The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) is responsible for the provision of quality primary and secondary schooling, as well as primary school teacher training and continuing professional development. Malawi's Teacher Training and Professional Development (MTTPD) activities are coordinated through the Department of Teacher Education and Development (DTED) within the Ministry of Education Science and Technology. Evidence from research is increasingly showing that the quality of educational services in Malawi is declining with time (NIPDEP, 2004)

According to Kunje (2002) the quality of education in Malawi is poor. This is attributed to various factors such as school mismanagement by principals and the increased number of unqualified teachers. Not all qualified teachers are given orientation for the changes of curriculum, yet in some of the subjects such as languages, the approach has changed from structural to communicative approach. Some community day secondary schools have been heavily staffed by many experienced primary school teachers who were not trained to teach in secondary schools. This happens when the government introduced Community Day Secondary Schools without training secondary school teachers, hence the government appointed experienced primary school teachers to fill the gap.

The National Implementation Program for District Education Plans (NIPDEP, 2004) indicates that while the Malawi Government has made efforts to respond to the growing demand for quality secondary school education, by increasing access, the quality of education being offered has greatly been compromised. The number of secondary school teachers has drastically increased by 83% from 5,905 in 2000 to 10,805 in 2004; only 23% of these are qualified teachers. We need to emphasize the fact that in many aspects there still exists a wide gap in terms of quality of education between the community Day Secondary Schools and other types of secondary schools. Schools continue to suffer from lack of resources and the majorities are still staffed by under-qualified teachers who are only qualified to teach at Primary School level. As a result, achievement levels are extremely low. These lead secondary school principals to be ineffective in staff management because some of the teaching staffs were trained to teach primary schools and not secondary schools.

The mismanagement of government allocation funds leads to low student achievement. Even though education sector gets the biggest share of the national budget, about 90% is spent on personal emolument. The remaining 10% is spent on teaching and learning materials. As a result, the infrastructure at secondary level has been generally insufficient. Many secondary schools do not have adequate desks, teaching and learning materials (Chumachawo *et al.*, 2004).

The understanding of the secondary principals' roles and responsibilities has changed over time. Historical changes to the role of the secondary school principal, including recent decades, have expanded the principal's role and increased its complexity, demanding more time of the principal than ever before (Crum & Sherman, 2008). In the modern world, effective secondary school principals are responsible for planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, leading, reporting, budgeting and controlling. Duties such as these are continuously being revised. In recent years, more schools have opted to what students should achieve. Secondary school principals are expected to do whatever is necessary to achieve the outcomes (Sergiovanni, 2001).

The students achievement in Malawi School Certificate Examinations is affected by a variety of factors at both micro and macro levels. For example, imbalances in the distribution of educational facilities between urban and rural schools, indiscipline in secondary schools, and wanting student-teacher relationship. These create a hostile and non-supportive environment to the effectiveness of secondary school principals' leadership with a consequent reduction in productivity and students' academic achievement (Chimombo *et al.*, 2005).

The Ministry of Education Science and Technology and the Divisional Educational Managers (DEM) which are endowed with supervisory roles in schools have not done enough. Secondary schools have operated without constantly following up professional inspection for decades. These organs are therefore weak. Moreover these things are happening in the world that is rapidly changing technologically (Kunje, 2002). This poses an increasing challenge to students' achievement. There is a growing demand to do things in a particular way, if we are to cope with the changes. The many deliberate attempts being made to cope with the technological changes have not yielded much fruit because of the weak educational and economic muscles of the nation and or the schools. Many schools are improvised and majority supported by Parent Teacher Association (PTA) who are again unpredictable in the management of schools. It is not rare that parents have portrayed passive attitude towards management of schools (Kunje, 2002).

The above problems had great effects on the students' achievement in secondary schools and institutions in Zomba District. One of the means of judging students' achievement is through examination results. The Ministry of Education Science and Technology observes that students' scores in national examinations are accepted as a proxy of achievement in education internationally. Chimombo *et al.*

(2004) points out that the certificate awarded to successful candidates must not only certify that such a certificate has fulfilled the requirements of the examination board but also that their grades compare favourably with those of a similar cohort elsewhere.

Zomba district, being one of the districts in Southern Region, is a region which is below average in Malawi National Examinations. Apart from national secondary schools, the rest have generally recorded poor achievement during the period in question. The situation described above if left to go on unchecked may continue to influence students' achievement.

Provision of quality education emanates from sound educational management and administration. Leithwood (2000) asserts that effective management goes a long way to determine the success of an institution. The secondary school principal occupies a vital and well established position in educational administration. His actions influence the effectiveness of the educational programmes offered by the school. His/her educational training experience and personality influence his behaviour. He/she brings to his/her job skills, abilities, understandings and values which influence his/her effectiveness as well as academic achievement.

There is little research done in relation to the effectiveness of the principals' leadership role in decision-making, provision of physical facilities, school communication, involvement of the parents, community members and other stakeholders, supervising the instructional materials and students attitudes towards effective school principals in Zomba urban secondary schools. This study therefore sought to assess the effectiveness of the principals' leadership role in enhancing student's achievement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Zomba, which is one of the twelve administrative districts in the Southern Region of Malawi. It is surrounded by the following districts; Chiradzulu, Blantyre, Mulanje, Phalombe, Machinga, Balaka, and Republic of Mozambique to the east.

The target population of the study consisted of the all the school principals, teachers and students in government and private schools in Zomba District. The researcher employed stratified sampling procedures to sample 12 secondary schools from the population (eight government schools and four private schools). The respondents comprised of 12 secondary schools principals, 120 teachers and 168 students making a total of 300 respondents. The researcher used questionnaire, interview schedule and observation technique for collecting the necessary information from the respondent. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages were used to analyze the data. The hypotheses were tested using the one way ANOVA statistical methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher assessed the effectiveness of the school principals' leadership role in involving teachers in decision – making. The secondary school principal has a very important role to play in decision-making and has the ultimate responsibility in the school for every decision made. However, the more the staff is involved and the more their advice is sought and taken, the more effectively are decisions likely to be implemented. Good leadership consists of staff consultation and participation in decision-making. The researcher determine the effectiveness of secondary school principals in the following activities: participating in the school decision-making, presenting decisions and inviting questions from teachers, proposing what to be done, involving students in disciplinary committees, conducting assemblies and meetings without the principal and empowering students to work effectively. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage distribution on teachers role in decision making (n=120)

STATEMENT	VI		I		FE		E		VE	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Participates in the school decision-making	37	30.8	56	46.7	1	.8	17	14.2	9	7.5
Presents decisions and invite questions from teachers	40	33.3	58	48.3	0	.0	19	15.9	3	2.5
Proposes what to be done	33	27.5	52	43.3	4	4.2	17	14.2	14	10.8
The school have students disciplinary committees	40	33.3	56	46.7	4	3.3	14	11.7	6	5.0
Conducts assemblies and meetings without the principal	31	25.9	65	54.2	1	.8	19	15.8	4	3.3
Students had power to work effectively	33	27.5	64	53.3	4	3.3	16	13.4	3	2.5

Key: VI= Very Ineffective, I= Ineffective, FE= Fairly Effective E= Effective, VE= Very Effective

Generally, the findings indicate that the school principals were ineffective in allowing teachers participate in making school decisions, proposing what to be done, in having students' disciplinary committees and in giving powers to the students' to work effectively even without the principals and members of staff.

The researcher investigated secondary school principals' role in monitoring and evaluating school resources. Preparing a budget is important because a budget is a pivot instrument for proper financial management of an institution. Sometimes school principals may fail to be very effective in maintaining a healthy school financial responsibility due to poor fees payment resulting in ineptness of the school. A leader who abdicates accountability also abdicates leadership. The school principals should ensure that there is transparency and accountability in managing school finances. The following activities undertaken by the school principals and the teachers in this task were investigated to establish the effectiveness of the school principals. Amongst these activities were preparing budget, monitoring expenditure of the school against the budget, evaluating expenditure through auditing, procurement through tendering, supervising and controlling expenditure of school funds. The findings were summarized in the Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage distribution of school principals and teachers in monitoring and evaluating resources

STATEMENT	PRINCIPALS (N=12)					TEACHERS (N=120)				
	VI	I	FE	E	VE	VI	I	FE	E	VE
Maintains a healthy financial position of the school	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Obtains financial support from the sponsors	8.3	16.7	8.3	25.0	41.7	7.5	10.8	25.0	30.0	26.8
Sources funds from the government in form of grants in-aid and bursaries	16.7	16.7	8.3	41.7	16.6	16.7	13.3	30.0	23.3	16.7
Monitors the expenditure to see that the school budget is followed	25.0	8.3	16.7	41.7	8.3	55.0	10.0	8.3	18.4	8.3
Evaluates the expenditure of the school through internal auditing	0	8.3	25.0	33.3	33.4	11.7	10.0	17.5	31.7	29.1
Ensures that educational policies and guidelines are implemented	0	8.3	25.0	25.0	41.7	51.7	18.3	4.2	16.7	9.1
Ensures that procurement is done through tendering	0	0	25.0	33.3	41.7	10.8	6.7	20.8	35.0	26.7
	8.3	8.3	16.7	41.7	25.0	10.8	10.0	21.7	33.3	24.2

From these results, it can be concluded that the secondary school principals were very effective in maintaining a healthy financial position of the school, fundraising, sourcing funds from the government

and in monitoring the expenditure. This is an indication that the effectiveness of the school principals in monitoring resources improves students' academics.

The study also investigated the effectiveness of the secondary school principals' leadership role in motivation. Under this task, the researcher wished to determine the effectiveness of the school principals in the following activities. Involvement in school budgeting, having knowledge about the school finances, having enough salaries, receiving allowances from the government, good teachers welfare, and having a committee that caters for teachers with financial help and materials. The summary of the findings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage distribution of teachers and school principals in motivation (teachers, n=120) & (principals, n=12)

STATEMENT	TEACHERS(N=120)			PRINCIPALS (N=12)		
	True	False	Not Sure	True	False	Not Sure
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Involvement in school budgeting	40.0	44.2	15.8	91.7	8.3	0
Have knowledge about the school finances	30.8	46.7	22.5	66.7	25.0	8.3
Salaries are good enough	20.0	63.3	16.7	66.7	33.3	0
Receive allowances	30.0	55.8	14.2	50.0	41.7	8.3
Welfare is good enough	31.7	55.0	13.3	91.7	8.3	0
Have a committee that caters for teachers with financial help and materials	30.0	51.7	18.3	66.7	33.3	0

The findings above show that most of the school principals motivate teachers while teachers disagree with the idea and indicate that they were not motivated. Motivation is a force behind all success. It is always important to make teachers enjoy their work by motivating them.

The study also investigated to what extent do secondary school principals supervise instructional activities. Secondary school Principals are the curriculum implementation supervisors in their schools and this is a responsibility they cannot avoid to execute. The evaluation of instructional programmes gives the school the feedback required on the strengths and weaknesses of school instructions programmes. Evaluation affords the evaluators an opportunity to address areas of weakness so as to improve on school achievement and also gives an opportunity to the evaluator to know the strengths of certain programmes which can build on or refer to in the event of recurrence of a similar programmes or a different one. School achievement standards form an important basis as one of the major activities a school principal. The activities investigated to determine the effectiveness of the school principals in instructional activities included requesting stationary and other teaching materials in the school, requesting teachers from Teachers Service Commission to avoid inadequate of teachers in schools, reviewing academic achievement of the school, evaluating the instructional programmes and overseeing modifications, delivering instructional resources, helping in coordinating staff training and development and selecting materials and allocate resources equally. The summary of findings is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage distribution of school principals in supervising instructional activities (n=12)

STATEMENT	VI		I		FE		E		VE	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Requests stationary and other teaching materials in the school	0	0	1	8.3	2	16.7	4	33.3	5	41.7
Requests teachers from Teachers Service Commission to avoid inadequate of teachers in schools	1	8.3	0	0	1	8.3	7	58.4	3	25.0
Reviews academic achievement of the school	1	8.3	1	8.3	2	16.7	7	58.4	1	8.3

Evaluates the instructional programmes and overseeing modifications	0	0	1	8.3	3	25.0	6	50.0	2	16.7
Delivers instructional resources	0	0	1	8.3	2	16.7	5	41.7	4	33.3
Helps in coordinating staff training and development	0	0	1	8.3	3	25.0	6	50.0	2	16.7
Selects materials and allocate resources equally	1	8.3	0	0	3	25.0	4	33.4	4	33.3

From the above results, the researcher found out that secondary school principals were effective in selecting materials and allocate resources equally. Generally, the findings indicate that secondary school principals were effective in requests stationary and other teaching materials in the school, sourcing teachers from Teachers Service Commission and reviewing academic achievement of the school, evaluating the instructional programmes and overseeing modifications, delivering instructional resources, helping coordinating staff training and in selecting and locating resources.

The study showed that none of the secondary school principals had Master Degree, this show that school principals were not supported by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology to go back to school to upgrade and improve their education of qualification so as to be in a better position to help students towards good achievement, to acquire knowledge on administration and planning skills.

In the area of administrative task, the effectiveness of secondary school principals is motivating teachers in schools to enhance students' achievement. The findings showed that the school principals were ineffective in involving teachers in school budget as they had no knowledge about the school finances and were rarely motivated as part of appreciation for the effort done for the students to do better.

In this area, the secondary school principals were ineffective in inspecting the school facilities and in putting up development projects in schools according to priorities. Teachers reported that secondary school principals were not effective in providing funds for the school development and for monitoring and evaluating the ongoing projects of the school.

In the area of the effectiveness of the secondary school principals in school communication in enhancing students' achievement, the secondary school principals were ineffective in gaining access to community resources and meeting both government officials and private visitors on school matters.

In the area of the perception of students' attitudes towards the effectiveness of the secondary school principals leadership, the students viewed that the secondary school principals were effective in taking part in actual teaching of some lessons, assessing student notes and make remarks, involving students and teachers supervising some school activities and visiting classrooms and supervisors the process of teaching and learning.

From the study it is evident that there was no significant difference in the mean school principals' perception about their role effectiveness scores when schools are classified as those headed by highly experienced secondary school principals or less experienced secondary school principals but also when schools are headed by male secondary school principals or female secondary school principals.

CONCLUSION

The school principals of a public secondary school play a pivotal role in education management in Malawi. It is he/she who is entrusted by the government of Malawi to help interpret the national goals of education and oversee the implementation of the national curriculum that focuses on attainment of these goals. Effective leadership by the person of the secondary school principal becomes imperative if the curriculum is to be implemented effectively and good performance of the school achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the issue of curriculum implementation, the researcher recommends that for the secondary school principals to be effective they should support curriculum implementation so as to improve school achievement. This should include setting targets for each year, having the syllabus completed in time so as to give time for students to revise for examinations.

The ministry of education science and technology should support the secondary school principals in supplying enough teaching and learning materials to schools equally so as to improve school achievement. This should include teaching aids for specific subjects, text books, referral materials and laboratory equipment. The secondary school principal should ensure that the school environment is conducive for learning. These should be continuous motivational schemes for both students and teachers.

The secondary school principals should also involve the parents, the community members, board of governors and the educational officials in school management by putting in place mechanisms to ensure that the Board of Governors, Parent Teachers Association, secondary school principals and teachers should focus on the school mission and vision as all these stakeholders attempt to interpret the national goals of education of school level.

The secondary school principals should actively be involved in classroom observations. After class, they should meet and discuss the strengths and the weakness to ensure that teachers are actually implementing the actual curriculum instead of wasting student's time.

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BIO-DATA

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