

Perception of Students towards School Principals' Effectiveness in Improving their Achievement: A Case Study of Secondary Schools in Zomba District, Malawi

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Abstract

The research aimed to find perception of students towards school principals' effectiveness in improving their achievement in secondary schools in Zomba District of Malawi. The target population consisted of the all the students in government and private schools in Zomba District. The researcher employed stratified sampling to sample 12 secondary schools. The respondents comprised of 168 students. The researcher used questionnaire for collecting data. Descriptive statistics were used in data analysis. The results indicated that highest proportion of the students viewed the school principals as ineffective since they don't struggle to provide adequate facilities to make leaning smooth. In addition, they rarely encourages maximum utilization of learning materials, rarely provide enough teaching and learning materials, rarely encourage teachers to provide remedial classes, rarely accepts opinion from students. The study recommends that, for the school principals to be effective, they should actively be involved in classroom observations; should meet with the teachers often and ensure that teachers are implementing the actual curriculum. Principals should also involve the students in the decision making processes in the school. This will give the students an avenue to air their views which are crucial in formulation of school policies.

Key Words: Students' Achievement, School Principals, School Leadership

INTRODUCTION

The roles of school principal has transformed considerably since its formal inception in the early 1900s, shifting according to political eras and societal changes (Goodwin *et al.*, 2003). The principal's role did not exist in the one-room schoolhouse, as teachers performed all functions. As schools grew in size and bureaucracy increased, the role was officially recognized in the early 1900s as one of manager and coordinator of activities (Smylie *et al.*, 2002). The nature of the role varied over time depending on social paradigm, politics, and the economy, but it was with the development of stronger, more vocal and active unions in the 1970s that the role of the principal shifted from —that of a colleague of teachers to a representative of the school board and the years followed with increased centralization and increased bureaucracy (Prytula *et al.*, 2013). It's indisputable that great teachers lead to successful students, but what about students' connection to their school principals? This study explores the principal's role in enhancing students' achievement. The study will gauge principles effectiveness based on students' point of view.

Background of the Study

Education in Malawi. Education is one of the most important investments a country can make in its people and its future and is critical to reducing poverty and inequality (Knight, 1997). If all students in low income countries left school with basic reading skills 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty (Goldenberg, 2001). It enables people to use and extend their capabilities, develop skills, improve their livelihoods and increase their earning potential. 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. 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, it is the responsibility of the government to provide 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 constantly declining with time (UNESCO, 2013). This is attributed to various factors but hugely it's due to school mismanagement by principals and the increased number of unqualified teachers (Kamwendo, 2013). In addition, Chimombo (2005) points out that the Government of Malawi acknowledges that one of the factors contributing to the poor quality of education is lack of Teacher Education Coordinating Body (TECB) that many link the Ministry of Education, Universities and Training Institutions in order to produce a qualified, dedicated and flexible teaching force hence these organs are weak.

Malawi Ministry of Education (MME, 2005) 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 and principals. 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. This has led to school principals to be ineffective in staff management because the teaching force is poor.

Table 1. Pupil/teacher ratio and pupil/classroom ratio from 2004 to 2010

	YEARS						
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Pupil/Qualified Teacher Ratio	80	83	84	88	90	95	100
Pupil/Teacher Ratio	72	71	76	78	80	86	89
Pupil/Classroom Ratio	107	106	107	104	100	94	90

Source: MOEST Statistics 2004 - 2010

The working environments for secondary schools in Malawi are generally not conducive, and this affects effective delivery of education as well as effectiveness of the school principals. 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 schools do not have adequate desks, teaching and learning materials (Chimombo, 2005).

Relationships between school leadership and student achievement. An intensifying body of research demonstrates relationships between school leadership and student achievement (Crum & Sherman, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Historical changes to the role of the principal, including recent decades, have expanded the principal's role and increased its complexity, demanding more time of the principal than ever before (Goodwin *et al.*, 2003). Principals play a great role in developing the child's potential to the full and, therefore, are central to all the activities of the school and the child's education by establishing a regular system of assessing each child's educational progress, develop means of monitoring and evaluating teaching methods and a code of discipline to establish a well-ordered school (Hallinger, 2003). Traditionally, the principal resembled the middle manager dealing with managerial roles of the school. In contrast, in a rapidly changing era of standards-based reform and accountability, a different conception has emerged. Today's principals are expected to be leaders of learning (Dinham, 2006). This shift has brought with it dramatic changes in what public education needs from principals. They can no longer function simply as building managers. They must, be stepped in curriculum and pedagogy and be able to assess and develop teacher skills. They must generate and analyse data for the purpose of guiding instructional and program decisions and establishing and monitoring specific performance targets. They must energise the entire school community around the goal of higher student achievement, and all of this must be done in an environment of shared decision making and less unilateral authority on the principal's part (Glatthorn & Jailall, 2009). In addition, according to Mendels (2012), principals are tasked with the roles of shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards, creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and fruitful interaction prevail, cultivating leadership in others so that assume their parts in realizing the school vision and finally improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn to their utmost.

The implications of these historical changes to the role of the 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 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. School principals in schools are expected to do whatever is necessary to achieve the outcomes (Khan & Khan, 2014).

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, discipline and student-teacher relationship (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2003). These create a hostile and non-supportive environment to the effectiveness of school principals' leadership with a consequent reduction in productivity and students' academic achievement (Chimombo, 2005). The theme of ineffective school principals' leadership and its effects on the students' academic achievement in the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) has not been adequately addressed by researchers.

Statement of the Problem

There is the problem of managing the schools at both macro and micro levels. The Malawi 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. 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 (Kunje & Lewin, 1999).

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, 1999). The above problems had great effects on the students' achievement in 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 (2005) 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 which is below average in Malawi National Examination, was selected fed on this background. 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.

In an attempt of knowing the exact point of weakness causing poor student performance, this study tried to find perception of students towards school principals' effectiveness in improving their achievement in Zomba urban secondary schools.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study was conducted in Zomba District, Malawi. Malawi is a landlocked country located South of East Africa. It borders Mozambique by 1589 km, Tanzania by 475 km, and Zambia by 837 km. Zomba District is one of twelve districts in the Southern Region of Malawi, surrounded by the Districts of Chiradzulu, Blantyre, Mulanje, Phalombe, Machinga, Balaka and the Republic of Mozambique to the east. The total land area is 2,580 km², representing three percent of the total land area of Malawi. The District has a total population of 670,533 (2008) resulting in a population density of 230 persons per km², more than half (52.6%) of whom are 18 years or younger. The annual population growth rate over the last decade was two percent. The main ethnic groups are Mang'anja/Nyanja, Yao and Lomwe. Chinyanja is the native language spoken by most of the inhabitants, although other languages like Chiyao and Chilomwe are also spoken. The two dominant religions are Christianity (78%) and Islam (20%). The District has experienced a sharp increase in school enrolment. Primary school net enrolment is currently at 87.2% against the country rate of 80.0%. However, the education sector in Zomba at all levels continues to face a number of challenges, including teacher qualification, shortages in the total number of teacher and student accommodations, lack of or dilapidated classrooms and lack of teaching materials.

Target Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population of the study consisted of the all the 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 168 students equally chosen from the sampled schools.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher used questionnaire for collecting the necessary information from the respondent. The chosen students were given the questionnaires and instructed appropriately. The filled questionnaires were collected and the raw data extracted in to MS-Excel sheets. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages were used to analyse the data. The hypotheses were tested using the one way ANOVA statistical methods. Qualitative methods were used especially with the data that was obtained through open-ended questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gender of the Respondent

The results indicated that out of the 168 students sampled 99 (58.9%) were male while 69 (41.1%) were female. This shows that majority of the students in the secondary schools in Zomba district are male. This finding is in line with the findings of UNESCO, 2013 that the largest gender gaps in school enrolment are observed in West and Central Africa, where 76 girls are enrolled in secondary school for every 100 boys.

Age Group of the Respondent

The results indicated that out of the 168 students sampled, 2 (1.2%) were aged between 16-17 years, 81 (48.2%) were aged between 18-19 years and 85 (50.6%) were aged between 20-21 years. Therefore, most of the students were aged between 20-21 years. The results reveal that a good number of students completed their secondary education early enough in the required age limit for secondary learning according to Malawian education standard to join higher institution of learning.

Number of Streams of the School

The results indicated that from the 168 students sampled 96 (57.1%) were from schools which are double streamed, 65 (38.7%) were from schools which had 3-4 streams of each class and 7 (4.2%) were from schools with 5-6 streams per class. This implies that majority of the schools in Zomba district are double streamed. This is rather worrying since the student population is so high in this district inferring that the pupil: teacher ratio is so high such that the teacher can't grant each student individual attention.

School Category

From the data in table 4.1 above 65 out of 168 (38.7%) students attended their schools in a mixed school, 45 out of 168 (34.5%) students attended their schools in private schools, while 58 out of 168 (26.8%) students attended their schools in single schools. The results show that many students attended their secondary education in mixed schools because there were more community day secondary schools than conventional secondary schools.

Students Perceptions on Principals' Leadership

Provision of Sufficient Physical Facilities. The researcher gauged that students perceptions towards the quality and quantity of physical facilities in sampled schools: having enough desks and chairs in the classrooms, having enough textbooks and referral books, having computers in the laboratory, having TV set for lessons and entertainment, having enough toilets, having enough classrooms and having biology and physical laboratories. The findings were summarized in table 2:

Table 2. Students' perception on quality and quantity of physical facilities

QUESTION	YES		NO	
	F	%	F	%
Have enough desks and chairs in the classrooms?	39	23.2	129	76.8
Have enough textbooks and referral books?	47	28.0	121	72.0
Have computers?	58	34.5	110	65.5
Have TV set?	49	29.2	119	70.8
Have laboratories?	50	29.8	118	70.2
Have enough toilets?	57	33.9	111	66.1
Have enough classrooms?	50	29.8	118	70.2

The findings were as follows: The data from the table above reveal that 129 out of 168 (76.8%) students responded that they did not have enough desks and chairs in their classes, while 39 out of 168 (32.2%) students responded that they had enough desks and chairs. The result shows that there was lack of desks and chairs in the classrooms. The data shows that 121 out of 168 (72.0%) students responded that they did not have enough libraries in their schools while 47 out of 168 (28.0%) students responded that they had enough libraries in their schools. Some schools create classrooms into a library and there was no enough space to occupy the whole classroom. This shows that there were no enough libraries in schools. The data shows that 110 out of 168 (65.5%) students responded that they did not had enough computers in their schools while 58 out of 168 (34.5%) students responded that they had enough computers. The results show that there were no enough computers. In the changing world there was a need all schools to have enough computers but same school lacks electricity to access the machines.

The same data shows that 119 out of 168 (70.8%) students responded that they did not have TV set while 49 out of 168 (29.2%) students responded that they had TV set in their schools. Lack of electricity contributed to some schools not to be considered when supplying school equipment like TV set. The data in the table 4.12 above reveal that 118 out of 168 (70.2%) students responded that they do not have enough laboratories while 50 out of 168 (29.8%) students responded that they have laboratories. Shortage of laboratories hinders gifted students who can do better in sciences. The data also shows that 111 out of 168 (66.1%) students responded that they did not have enough toilets in their schools while 57 out of 168 (33.9%) students responded that they had enough toilets. Shortage of school toilets prolonged students lined up for call of nature when break time is over as well as time management was difficult both teachers and the school principal. Finally, the data reveal that 118 out of 168 (70.2%) students responded that they did not have enough classrooms in their schools while 50 out of 168 (29.8%) students responded that they had enough classrooms. The findings show that shortage of classrooms hindered slow learners to be assisted at their maximum level. All in all, the findings show that, most of the schools in Zomba Urban, did not have enough desks and chairs, text books and liferral books, libraries, computers, laboratories, toilets, class rooms and TV Set, and this made the school principals to be ineffective in day-to-day running of the school.

Perception of Students' Attitudes towards their School Principals. The activities investigated to determine the perception of students attitudes towards effective school principals included: Visiting classrooms and supervising the process of teaching and learning, taking part in actual teaching of some lessons, providing relevant and enough teaching and learning materials, encouraging maximum and utilization of teaching and learning materials, assessing student notes and make remarks, rewarding students who perform well academically, encouraging teachers to provide remedial classes for slow learners, involving students in solving some administrative problems and accepting views and opinion from students. The summary of findings was shown in table 2 below:

Table 2. Perception of students' attitudes towards their school principals

Statement	Never		Rarely		Often		Very Often Performed	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
a) Visits classrooms and supervisors the process of teaching and learning	70	41.7	61	36.3	27	16.0	10	6.0
b) Takes part in actual teaching of some lessons	58	34.5	72	42.9	24	14.3	14	8.3
c) Provides relevant and enough teaching and learning materials	18	10.7	77	45.8	55	32.7	18	10.8
d) Encourages maximum and utilization of teaching and learning materials	9	5.4	84	50.0	44	26.1	31	18.5
e) Assesses student notes and make remarks	21	12.5	71	42.3	51	30.4	25	14.8
f) Rewards students who perform well academically	16	9.5	68	40.5	54	32.1	30	17.9
g) Encourages teachers to provide remedial classes for slow learners	17	10.1	76	45.2	53	31.6	22	13.1
h) Involve students in solving some administrative problems	24	14.3	71	42.3	53	31.5	20	11.9
i) Accepts views and opinion from students	17	10.1	74	44.0	59	35.1	18	10.8

The findings were as follows: The data in the table above reveal that 70 out of 168 (41.7%) students responded that school principals never, 61 out of 168 (36.3%) rarely performed, 27 out of 168 (16.0%) often performed and 10 out of 168 (6.0%) very often performed. The findings show that the school principal never visited classrooms and supervised the process of teaching and learning. This was so because of poor time management. The data in the same table reveal that 58 out 168 (34.5%) students responded never performed, 72 out of 168 (42.9%) rarely performed, 24 out 168 (14.3%) often performed and 14 out 168 (8.3 %) very often performed. The findings show that school principals rarely take part in actual teaching of some lessons. This was so because

of school principals' heavy workload they have on handling school administrative issues. It was observed that, 18 out of 168 (10.7%) students responded never being performed, 77 out of 168 (45.8%) rarely performed, 55 out of 168 (32.7%) often performed, and 18 out of 168 (10.8%) very often performed. The results show that school principals rarely provided relevant and enough teaching and learning materials. The research found out that this was so because the government did not supply enough materials. In the same table data reveal that 9 out of 168 (5.4%) students responded never being performed, 84 out of 168 (50.0%) students rarely performed, 44 out of 168 (26.1%) often performed, and 31 out of 168 (18.5%) very often performed. The results show that school principals rarely performing in encouraging and maximizing the utilization of teaching and learning materials. The researcher found out that this was so because some school principals did not utilize well the available teaching and learning.

It was observed that, the findings reveal that 21 out of 168 (12.5%) students responded never being performed, 71 out of 168 (42.3%) students rarely performed, 51 out of 168 (30.4%) often performed, and 25 out of 168 (14.8%) very often performed. The findings show that school principals rarely performed in assessing student's notes and make remarks. The researcher found out that this was so because some school principals involved themselves in activities outside the school. The findings also reveal that 16 out of 168 (9.5%) students responded never being performed, 68 out of 168 (40.5%) students rarely performed, 54 out of 168 (32.1%) often performed, 30 out of 168 (17.9%) very often performed. The results show that school principals rarely performed in rewarding students who perform well academically. This was so because school principals were limited on school finances. The data show that 17 out of 168 (10.1%) students responded never being performed, 76 out of 168 (45.2%) students rarely performed, 53 out of 168 (31.5%) often performed, and 22 out of 168 (13.1%) very often performed. The results show that school principals rarely performed in providing remedial classes for slow learners. The researcher found out that this was so because school principals did not create a good learning environment. The same data show that 24 out of 168 (14.3%) students responded never being performed, 71 out of 168 (42.3%) students responded rarely performed, 53 out of 168 (31.6%) often performed and 20 out of 168 (11.9%) very often performed. The findings show that school principals rarely performed in involving students in solving some administrative problems.

The data also show that 17 out of 168 (10.1%) students responded never being performed, 74 out of 168 (44.0%) rarely being performed, 59 out of 168 (35.1%) often performed and 18 out of 168 (10.8%) very often performed. Generally, the highest proportion of the students viewed the school principals rarely encourages maximum and utilization of teaching and learning materials, rarely provides relevant and enough teaching and learning materials, rarely encourages teachers to provide remedial classes for slow learners, accepts views and opinion from students. The findings also show that school principals rarely performed in accepting views and options from students because some school principals viewed themselves as there was no need of involving the students in decision making.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The highest proportion of the students viewed the school principals as ineffective. The principals don't struggle to provide adequate and quality facilities to make leaning smooth. In addition, they rarely encourages maximum and utilization of teaching and learning materials, rarely provides relevant and enough teaching and learning materials, rarely encourages teachers to provide remedial classes for slow learners, accepts views and opinion from students. To some extent, according to the students, the principals are solely responsible for the poor performance of their schools.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Principals. For the school principals to be effective they should actively be involved in classroom observations, they should meet with the teachers often and discuss the strengths and the weakness to ensure that teachers are actually implementing the actual curriculum instead of wasting student's time.

Principals should endeavour to provide sufficient physical facilities such as classrooms, books, lavatories etc. They shouldn't solely wait for the national government to provide these resources; on the contrary, they should employ resource mobilization tactics to come up with funds to finance the implementation/purchase of these resources.

Principals should also involve the students in the decision making processes in the school. This will give the students an avenue to air their views which are crucial in formulation and implementation of school policies.

Recommendation for further Research. Further studies should focus on the perceptions of the teachers on the principals' effectiveness. This will give supplementary data to totally elucidate the strategies which can be employed to enhance principals' effectiveness and thus students' achievement in national exams.

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