

Principals' perspectives and experiences of their instructional leadership functions to enhance learner achievement in public schools

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Abstract

School principals are faced with new demands, more complex decisions and additional responsibilities than ever before. Their day is usually filled with diverse administrative and management functions such as procuring resources, managing learner discipline, resolving conflicts with parents and dealing with unexpected teacher and learner crises. However, it is imperative for school principals to accentuate their role as instructional leaders by emphasising best teaching practices and keeping their schools focused on curriculum, teaching, and assessment to meet learner needs and enhance learner achievement. Using open-ended questionnaires and personal interviews with eight school principals, this study investigated how the principals perceived and experienced their functions as instructional leaders to improve learner performance. Findings revealed that many school principals repudiated claims that their primary function was to manage teaching and learning. However, those school principals that place high priority on curricular matters undoubtedly influence teacher and learner performance positively.

Introduction

Kellerman (2015) asserts that school leadership has become a high wire act that only the most skilled are able to perform successfully. The school principal's day is usually filled with diverse activities of administration and management – scheduling, reporting, handling relations with parents and the broader community, dealing with unexpected multiple learner and teacher crises, and extraordinary situations (Early, 2013; Bottery, 2016; Tucker & Coddling, 2002; Oumer, 2014). One of the primary tasks of principals is increasing learner achievement and maintaining teacher satisfaction (Rigby, 2014).

There is a strong belief among educationists that principals can improve the teaching and learning environment by creating conditions conducive to improved curriculum management (Kiat, Tan, Heng, & Lim-Ratnam, 2017; Early, 2013; Yu, 2009). They are responsible for creating positive school climates, motivating teachers and learners; and effectively managing resources to enhance best instructional practices. Thus, principals play a key role in the development and maintenance of academic standards which include the knowledge and skills that learners are expected to learn in a subject and in each grade (Shelton, 2011). They cannot achieve this without a clear and deep understanding of teaching, learning and assessment. They should also actively promote positive behaviours and interactions among teachers and learners (Hoy & Hoy, 2009). According to Bush and Glover (2009), principals are required to undertake the following activities: oversee the curriculum across the school, evaluate learner performance through analysing internal continuous assessments and examination results, monitor the work of heads of departments (HoDs) through scrutiny of their work schedules and portfolios, ensure that HoDs monitor the work of teachers employed in their subjects/learning areas; and arrange a programme of class visits followed by meaningful feedback to teachers; and ensure the availability of appropriate learning and teaching support materials (LTSM).

Principals are faced with new demands, more complex decisions and additional responsibilities than ever before. Their day is usually filled with diverse administrative and management functions such as procuring resources, managing learner discipline, resolving conflicts with parents and dealing with unexpected teacher and learner crises. Hallinger (2005) and Hoy and Hoy (2009) assert that many school principals experience great difficulty in balancing their diverse administrative duties with their curriculum leadership functions. They question whether one person has the capacity to do all the tasks of a principal, and suggested distributive leadership and the need to empower subordinates to exercise leadership as a possible solution. This would undoubtedly alleviate the burden of principals and enable them to focus on instructional matters (Bush, 2011; Hallinger, 2005; Van Deventer, 2016; Van Deventer & Kruger, 2008). According to Kruger (2003), many school principals lack the time for and an understanding of their instructional leadership functions. Most of them spend relatively little time in classrooms and even less time analysing curriculum delivery with teachers. While they may arrange time for teachers' meetings and professional development programmes, they rarely provide intellectual leadership for growth on

instructional issues. Instructional leadership should emerge freely from the combined efforts of the principal; the school management team (SMT) and teachers (Hoy & Hoy, 2009). Kallaway (2009) found that instructional leadership of school principals has been completely disregarded. Goslin (2009) argues that many school principals overlook their main responsibility of instructional leadership because they are far too busy attending to day-to-day critical issues, including learner discipline and parent complaints. Both, Hallinger (2005) and Bush (2011) concur that principal effectiveness can be attained when they find the correct balance among their various functions for a given school context.

In South Africa, scholars (see Fleisch, 2008) agree that the instructional leadership function of school principals has to be intensified. Prospective or aspiring leaders are considered for principalship positions if they merely complete a teacher's qualification and have at least seven years of teaching experience. There is no overarching principal preparation or certification programme (Bush & Odura, 2006) and there is rarely any formal leadership training. School principals are appointed on the basis of their teaching record rather than their leadership potential (Mestry & Singh, 2007). Induction, mentoring and other tangible support are usually limited and principals have to adopt a pragmatic approach to managing the day-to-day operations of schools. The lack of stringent criteria and the absence of explicit leadership and management qualifications for the appointment of principals have resulted in many of them under-performing and making schools dysfunctional (Fleisch, 2008; Kallaway, 2009; Mestry & Singh, 2007).

Evidence suggests that there is a positive link between high-quality leadership and successful schools (Bush & Jackson, 2002; Huber, 2004; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). It can thus be inferred that the lack of effective leadership in curricular issues results in poor academic standards of learners. This is clearly reflected in the annual National Senior Certificate examinations (Grade 12), and the more recent Annual National Assessments (ANA) for Grades 3, 6 and 9 learners (Joseph, 2011). South African learners perform poorly in international tests such as the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Southern and East Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). Spaul (2013, p.3) claims that South Africa has the "worst education system of all middle-income countries that participate in cross national assessments" and the country performs "worse than many low-income African countries. Among the reasons cited for these

dismal performances is the ineffective leadership of school principals (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). There is growing evidence in South African literature that supports the view that effective leadership is crucial if schools are to significantly improve learner performances (Bush, Joubert, Kiggundu & Van Rooyen, 2010; Christie, 2010).

Most principals leading South African public schools lack a comprehensive understanding of their instructional leadership role, and this impacts negatively on learner performance and consequently, the institution's academic standards (Hoadley cited in Bush & Glover, 2009). Several studies on instructional leadership emphasise the importance of principals being effective instructional leaders. They should have confidence and the necessary skills to engage in productive and respectful conversations with teachers about the quality of teaching and learning (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015; Robinson, 2010). Sinnema, Robinson, Le Fevre & Pope. (2013) aver that effective instructional leaders address important concerns related to teacher and learner performances such as teaching approaches, learner assessments, and remedial programmes for weak learners, enrichment programmes for gifted learners, and effective use of available resources. This continues to remain unaddressed and unresolved. Challenges facing instructional leaders about ineffective teacher performance concerns behavioural issues, attitudes, relationships, effectiveness, and capability. South African principals should be made to understand that instructional leadership is one of their pivotal functions, and that their administrative or managerial functions are subordinate (Zepeda, 2004). According to Shoho, Barnett and Tooms (2012), school principals should share and divide their energy, ideas, and time within the school day.

Aim and objectives

The general aim of the study was to determine the perceptions and experiences of principals of their instructional leadership functions to improve learner performance.

The following were the objectives:

1. To understand the nature and essence of instructional leadership;
2. To provide recommendations on how principals can strengthen their instructional functions with the view of improving learner academic achievements.

Instructional leadership defined

Instructional leadership is described as those actions that school principals take, or delegate to others, to promote growth in learners' learning. Alig-Mielcarek (2003) defines instructional leadership in terms of the school principal's behaviour that leads a school to educate all learners to a level of high achievement. This behaviour defines and communicates shared goals, monitor and provide feedback on the teaching and learning process, and promotes schoolwide professional development. Yu (2009) explains that instructional leadership consists of direct and indirect behaviours that significantly affect teacher instruction and, as a result, learner learning. Spillane, Hallett and Diamond (2003) asserts that instructional leadership is an influence relationship that motivates, enables, and supports teachers' efforts to learn and change their instructional practices. Likewise, Fullan (1991) considers instructional leadership to be an active, collaborative form of leadership where the principal works with teachers to shape the school as a workplace in relation to shared goals, teacher collaboration, teacher learning opportunities, teacher commitment, and learner learning. It can be argued that instructional leadership helps principals identify a school vision, empower and inspire teachers, and innovate school classroom-based strategies in order to improve teaching and learning for teachers and learners (Mestry, Koopasammy-Moonsammy & Schmidt, 2013). In each of the definitions provided, the consequences of learner learning is irrefutable (Hoy & Hoy, 2009).

According to Speck (cited in Glanz, 2006), school principals must consider curricular matters, instruction and assessment central to their work if they expect to make a difference in learner learning. It cannot be overemphasised that principals play a significant role in the teaching and learning environment. Their role should be evolved from manager to instructional leader to facilitator-leader of the school learning community. Due to curriculum development, instructional and assessment practices are continually changing to conform to the needs of all learners, and collaboration among principals and teachers is encouraged. The central role of the principal is to take charge of issues focusing on curriculum, instruction and assessment so that learner performance and learner achievement is improved. It thus becomes imperative for principals to possess the requisite instructional skills, capacities, and commitment to lead effective schools and promote learner achievement (Rigby, 2014). However, principals face serious challenges to

focus on learning and instruction, establish relationships with teachers, and guide teachers to improve instruction resulting in enhanced learner achievement.

Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam & Brown (2013) advocated four leadership dimensions that had an impact on learner achievement: Monitoring learner progress, protecting instructional time, providing incentives for learning, and providing incentives for teachers, and make rewards contingent on good performance. These dimensions address the following principal capabilities: meeting with teachers to discuss learners needs; discussing performance results with teachers and learners limiting possible interruptions of classroom instruction; encouraging teachers to use classroom time effectively; recognising learners who exhibit academic excellence or improvement; provide clear expectations and appropriate rewards for teachers; and provide recognition at assemblies, office visits, and in communications to parents. Research conducted by Waters *et al.* (cited in Glanz, 2006) found that effective instructional leadership comprises many key areas of principal behaviour, which include good and open communication; trusting relationships, motivating teachers and learners, creative, entrepreneurial and resilient. These leadership practices seem to align effectively with teachers and learners ability to perform intellectually. It was therefore deemed essential to examine several instructional leadership models espoused by various scholars.

Hallinger and Murphy's Model (1985) examined the instructional leadership behaviours of school principals and developed a framework of instructional management with three dimensions: defining the mission; managing instructional program; and promoting the school climate. Murphy's Model (1990) augmented Hallinger and Murphy's Model. He noted that principals in effective schools (schools where the quality of teaching and learning were strong) demonstrated instructional leadership, both directly and indirectly. Using this review, he built an instructional leadership framework which emphasised four sets of activities with implications for instruction: developing the school mission and goals; co-ordinating, monitoring and evaluating curriculum, instruction and assessment; promoting a climate for learning; and creating a supportive working environment. Weber's Model (1996) of instructional leadership incorporated research about shared leadership and empowerment of informal leaders. He identified five essential domains of instructional leadership: defining the school's mission; managing curriculum and instruction; promoting a positive learning climate; observing and improving instruction, and assessing the instructional programme. In this

regard Weber (1996) avers that effective instructional leadership would depend to a large extent on two important factors, that is, 'the flexibility a school principal exhibits in sharing leadership duties' and 'the clarity with which a principal matches leadership duties with individuals who can perform them collaboratively'. Alig-Mielcarek's Instructional Leadership Model (2003) found three distinct similarities that emerged from a study of the three models discussed (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 1990; Weber, 1996). All three indicated the importance of instructional leaders defining and communicating goals, monitoring and providing feedback on the teaching and learning process, and promoting and emphasising the importance of professional development. Leithwood and Louis (2011) emphasise that learner achievement is influenced by core leadership practices such as setting direction; developing staff; developing the organisational culture; and managing the instructional programme.

The model proposed by Hallinger (2009) was selected as an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. He suggests the following dimensions (very similar to the above models) as prerequisites for effective instructional leadership:

- *Defining the School's Mission:* This dimension concerns the principal's role in determining the central purposes of the school. The dimension focuses on the principal's role in working with staff to ensure that the school has clear, measurable, time-based goals focused on the academic progress of learners. It is also the principal's responsibility to communicate these goals so that these are widely known and supported throughout the school community.
- *Managing the Instructional Programme* focuses on the coordination and control of instruction and curriculum. The school principal has to be deeply engaged in stimulating, supervising and monitoring teaching and learning. These functions demand that the principal have expertise in teaching and learning, as well as a commitment to school's improvement and school effectiveness. It is this dimension that requires the principal to be involved 'hip-deep' in the school's instructional programme.
- *Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate:* This dimension conforms to the notion that effective schools create an 'academic press' through the development of high standards and expectations for learners and teachers. Instructionally, effective schools develop a culture of continuous improvement in which rewards for learner and staff are aligned with purposes and practices. The principal is highly visible on the school

premises and even in classrooms. The principal models values and practices that create a climate to support the continuous improvement of teaching and learning.

In closing, it can be inferred that principals as instructional leaders are goal-oriented. They take the lead in defining a clear direction for their schools and personally coordinate efforts to increase learner achievement. They are required to manage the curriculum, and monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning (Bush, 2007; Copeland, 2003; Yu, 2009; Hallinger, 2009). Principals should at all times strive for an excellent teaching and learning environment that emphasises high learner achievement. They are required to provide the necessary resources for learning, and create new learning opportunities for learners and teachers. Instructional leaders should forge partnerships with teachers as colleagues by spending more time in classrooms and engaging teachers in conversations about learning and teaching. Professional conversations and professional development should revolve around the improvement of instruction, how learners learn, and appropriate teaching strategies for different contexts (Hoy & Hoy, 2009). It is not expected that principals have proficiency in each subject content but that they become knowledgeable about the latest trends in education, innovative teaching methods, state-of-the-art resources, and cutting-edge assessment methods. They should be familiar with innovative theories and practices and motivate teachers to model these classrooms.

Research methodology

The empirical investigation used a generic qualitative research methodology to determine the perceptions and experiences of school principals of their functions as instructional leaders to enhance learner achievement. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding rather than explaining; experiencing naturalistic observations rather than controlled measurement; and undertaking a subjective exploration of reality from an insiders' perspective as opposed to the predominant outside perspective in a quantitative paradigm (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Caelli, Ray & Mill, 2003). To gain better insight into the participants' realities and experiences of instructional leadership, this study was located within the interpretivist paradigm (Hatch & Cunliff, 2006).

Principals of eight public schools situated in the Ekurhuleni District of Gauteng were purposefully selected (Marshall, 1996). The selected principals were well-qualified, most holding post-graduate qualifications. The selected schools had an average enrolment exceeding 1 000 learners and medium of instruction was English. The sample included four primary schools and four secondary schools selected from a range of affluent schools (quintile 4 and 5), so-called middle schools (quintile 3), and poor schools located in previously disadvantaged communities (quintile 1 and 2) for comparative purposes. Although there are more females employed in the teaching profession, senior posts in schools are usually held by their male counterparts, and this accounts for the all-male participants. They have numerous years of experience as principals and long standing service in education. Their age group ranged from 45 years to 56 years and their years of experience as principals varied from 9 to 19 years.

The principals were initially asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire, and this was followed by semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews with each of them. The researcher studied each participant's questionnaire and then interviewed them to probe further and supplement responses reflected on the completed questionnaires. The interviews for each participant were conducted using the same format and sequence of words and questions to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The researcher safeguarded being biased or prejudiced by the way questions were framed and asked during the interviews. The interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed time in the participants' offices (Lichtman, 2009). Due to technical challenges the researcher was unable to audio-tape the interviews and thus elected to take copious notes during the interviews. After the interviews, participants were required to validate whether the notes taken had in fact represented a true account of their views and experiences expressed.

Using Tesch's (1990) method of coding (Creswell, 2009), the data generated from interviews and open-ended questionnaires were reviewed to establish value, depth and richness and then analysed. Attention was given to patterns and commonalities in search for themes and categories that uncovered the meaning of particular perceptions and experiences focusing on the aim of the study. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality to conduct the study were observed. Reassurances were given to the participants that the aim of the research was not to judge or evaluate their leadership and management skills but rather to determine their perceptions and experiences in respect of instructional leadership. Consent was obtained from both, the Gauteng

Department of Education and the principals of selected schools. Principals were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To preserve anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms (where applicable) for participants and symbols (e.g. A, B, etc.) for schools were used.

The following section examines the nature and essence of instructional leadership and define the principal's role as instructional leader.

Findings

The themes that were identified from the data are discussed below and supported with relevant quotations from the interviews.

Theme 1: Principals' understanding of the concept 'instructional leadership'

It was discouraging to note that although many participants provided partial explanations to what they understood to be instructional leadership, very few provided a comprehensive interpretation of the concept. Principal A was uncertain as to what instructional leadership meant and responded as follows:

Not sure what it is but as a guess, it would be one that is a role model for other people. Someone that takes the educators and/or learners to be as successful as they can be, each in his own field of expertise. If the track record of the school is anything to go by, probably many of the learners have done very well in tertiary studies and in commerce. We accept learners from all walks of life – 80 percent from previously disadvantaged sector.

Principal C felt that instructional leadership allows one to be supportive of teachers and to be a role model to them, especially during a lesson delivery in class. Principal B emphasised that he did not see his role as instructional leader but explained that instructional leadership is *"the ability to give guidance to less experienced teachers"*. He was of the opinion that he *"must take the lead in developing new teaching strategies and ensure effective classroom management."*

Principal D had a much clearer understanding:

Instructional leadership is about providing guidance to the SMT members and teachers with regard to teaching and learning". An instructional leader "should monitor the lesson delivery using the Curriculum Management Model and ensure that resources are provided to teachers. Also, the leader should organise workshops where pertinent issues regarding teaching and learning should be discussed: topics such as assessments, reporting and subject policies. The leader should monitor content coverage, compare with results and implement improvement plans.

Principal F provided a more meaningful understanding than Principal A of what the functions of instructional leaders are:

Principals should take the lead in teaching and learning; provide solutions to demanding challenges encountered in teaching and learning; ensure that the necessary human resources are available, and that LTSM and facilities for each subject is provided; guide teachers on assessment policies and drafting subject policies; monitor the delivery of teaching and analysis of learner performance; teacher at least one subject; make time to do class visits; and become familiar with different teaching methods and strategies.

From the above responses, it is evident that some participants have not assimilated instructional leadership role in their functions. They were unable to provide a succinct definition of the concept. Participants that considered instructional leadership as one of their main functions provided a better understanding of the concept 'instructional leadership'. What I found interesting was that the results in the Senior Certificate Examinations in Principal D and F's schools were way above the national average (Principal H)

Theme 2: The instructional leadership role of principals

It was evident from views expressed by most participants that instructional leadership did not fall within their ambit. They emphasised that this was the responsibility of HoDs and deputy principals. Principal B claimed:

I am responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school, and that curriculum matters were the responsibility of the school management team (deputy principal and HoDs). The school had appointed additional HoDs than those allocated by the Department's post provisioning norms.

Although most principals refuted that instructional leadership or curriculum management was their main responsibility, they inadvertently undertook some aspects of instructional matters. All the participants emphasised that monitoring and control of academic standards was their primary concern. For example, Principal D remarked:

I monitor the teachers as well as HoDs and ensure that procedures are in place for effective teaching and learning. I improve on available resources, and construct and implement intervention programmes for learners. On a regular basis, I monitor the progress of learners and report to the parents the progress of specific learners. I analyse the results of the continuous assessment programmes for each grade and every subject and devise plans and ensure its implementation for school and learner improvement.

Principal E also saw his role as one of monitoring and control of teachers' activities: "*I monitor teaching and learning activities ensuring that teachers go to class and learners attend school. I control educators' work programme, pace and assessment techniques.*" Principal F explained how remediation programmes were designed and implemented.

The HoDs and the deputy principal (curriculum) will identify learners that require additional tuition and I will facilitate the remediation programme. I also provide extra classes based on the SSIP (Secondary School Improvement Plan). I ensure that the LTSM is available and used effectively

Principal H had a different perspective of his role as leader in teaching and learning and provided a more comprehensive response:

I share new and creative ideas of teaching and encouraging teachers to try these ideas out. I am an experienced foundation phase (Grade 1 to Grade 3) teacher and therefore able to impart my knowledge to both

learners and teachers in all aspects such as lesson preparation and presentation. I give demonstration lessons and encourage teamwork. We allow for teachers to visit other teachers' classes to observe lessons. I ensure that educational resources are purchased and shared equally amongst teachers. I request that the LTSM Committee explain how teachers should use the educational aids effectively. I also undertake a needs analysis of teachers and develop programmes. Whenever teachers attend workshops, I ensure that these teachers provide feedback to other teachers at a staff meeting.

Principal G talked about his role as mentor and leader and made very little reference to his role as instructional leader. He emphasised that *"I spend much time mentoring the HoDs and teachers by sharing good practices in teaching. I have an invitational approach and encourage my staff to discuss problems experienced in the classroom. I share with them good practices of teaching and I make time to address their concerns"*.

Mentoring and coaching are also often used as a means of sharing good practices with initiates (Middlewood, 2003). According to Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi (2011), mentoring is designed to facilitate the transfer of learning to principals' and school practice. Effective mentoring provides strong potential for deep learning. There is substantial international evidence supporting the efficacy of mentoring and coaching for leadership development

Theme 3: Professional development programmes for principals

According to Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi. (2011), there are two main options available for the preparation of school principals. These are to identify and prepare potential principals before they are appointed or to provide development for practising principals after their appointment.

The responses from the participants concerning their own professional development were alarming. It is evident that most of them had not attended any structured professional development programmes on curricular matters arranged by the provincial department of education or the Ekurhuleni District. They were critical that the chief education specialists (CESs) in education districts had very little knowledge of curricular matters, and had very limited

skills or the necessary experience to manage instruction. This was a barrier to principals being provided effective professional development programmes. They argued that there were far too many changes in curricular over a short period of time and in-depth training and proper guidance was not proffered to principals and SMTs.

When asked how they would improve professional development opportunities for principals, Principal A suggested “*communal meetings where principals could get together to discuss problems affecting them*”. The principals should take the initiative of arranging professional development for themselves by, for example, rotating the presentations or inviting external specialists to address them on pertinent issues regarding curriculum delivery and other key functions. The principal added that “*a successful school needs a good principal and deputies to provide the necessary leadership*”. Principal B felt that the Department should allow them to “*study courses that were relevant to them*” while principal E suggested a “*well organized and well-planned programmes catering for their needs should be scheduled with aim of improving teaching and learning in schools*”. Principal F was of the opinion that though he has not attended “*well-structured development programmes, principals should be resourceful in arranging professional development programmes for all principals located in a particular area*”. He was critical of the workshop arranged by the Department. He indicated that the programme was not rolled out properly, the district officials “*were not specialists and the district does not have any capacity*”.

Two principals, D and F attended one professional development training event on the new curriculum referred to as CAPS (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement) arranged by the District but were disillusioned by the workshop presented: “*District officials were unprepared and did not have the necessary knowledge and skills of CAPS and also their presentations ranged from weak to mediocrity*”. Principal F suggested that “*there should be compulsory training for incumbent principals, for example, the ACE course offered by Higher Education Institutions*”.

Mathibe (2007), Blasé and Blasé (2000), and Bush *et al.* (2011) explain that the model for development may incorporate a selection of programmes such as training and networking. Training embraces workshops or direct instruction provided by education specialists and experts from district offices who have thorough understanding of curricula issues. Training can take the form of one-day conferences; single-session activities; short courses over a

period of time, formal meetings by subject specialists; and membership of working groups. The creation of local or district networks, to promote mutual learning, is also a distinctive feature of a professional development programme. Bush, Glover and Harris (2007) review of the leadership development literature concludes that networking is the most favoured mode of leadership learning. Its main advantage is that it is 'live learning' and provides strong potential for ideas transfer. Visiting other schools, particularly those in similar contexts, appears to enhance leadership learning. Brundrett (2006) adds that inter-school networks are powerful tools for school development.

Discussion

Three interrelated themes emanating from the study formed the principals' overarching perceptions and experiences of their role as instructional leaders. Since very few principals had a comprehensive understanding of the concept 'instructional leadership' and more specifically their role as instructional leaders, they acknowledged that their core functions included teaching and learning. Using Hallinger's Model on Instructional Leadership, many of the selected principals set direction for their staff and created a conducive learning environment. Their instructional leadership role includes developing a shared vision, providing appropriate resources, creating a conducive learning environment, undertaking classroom visits, setting high expectations for staff and learners, coaching and mentoring teachers. However, other principals merely devoted most of their time to monitoring and controlling the work of staff and learners. It is expected from the provincial department of education that principals, as instructional leaders, work collaboratively with SMTs and teachers to undertake essential leadership functions such as coordinating the curriculum, supervising instruction, evaluating the academic programme, and monitoring learner progress. However, most of the principals interviewed preferred to hone their strengths on administrative and management issues. Those who did spend time engaging with SMTs and teachers on curriculum matters, experienced difficulty in balancing their administrative and management functions with their instructional duties (Hallinger, 2005; Hoy & Hoy, 2009).

By way of self-reflection, most principals emphasised the importance of attending professional development programmes. This is in keeping with

Hallinger's Instructional Leadership Model. Several principals lacked the necessary instructional leadership expertise and skills and found difficulty in developing strategies of coordination and control to align their school's academic mission with strategy and action. In retrospect, they realised that instructional leadership is one of their core functions and indicated that they require training on how to balance their administrative and managerial functions with their leadership duties. Neglect of either could seriously disadvantage the culture of teaching and learning (Blasé, Blasé & Philips, 2010; Bush, 2007; Gupton, 2003). Principals realised that they should take the initiative to identify their own professional needs and arrange for reputable service providers to conduct the professional development programmes. They should not depend on the education district office to conduct workshops or execute 'one-size-fits-all' professional development programmes. Research shows that effective principals are lifelong learners who should engage continuously in professional development opportunities, both inside and outside the organisation. Principals have serious reservations about the role of the education districts in making professional development programmes available to principals. However, they should not wait for education districts to invite them to participate in professional development programmes, instead they should take the initiative of professionally developing themselves. They should encourage peer collaboration and make every effort to encourage principals in the area and teachers to engage in educational opportunities within and outside the school (Blasé *et al.*, 2010; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Gupton, 2003).

Although clear directives are provided by the Department of Education pertaining to the principal's curricular functions, the selected principals considered the control of academic matters as one of their primary concerns. They thus used the distributed style of leadership, delegating most of their instructional responsibilities to deputy principals and HoDs. Those principals who applied the distributive leadership style expect deputy principals and HoDs to ensure that LTSM is procured and effectively managed; guide teachers on assessment policies; monitor the delivery of teaching, and analyse learner performance. While distributed or participative leadership reduces the workload of principals (Sergiovanni, 1984 cited in Bush, 2007), it also empowers subordinates to take on leadership positions and facilitate healthy staff relations. However, principals are expected to play a more pronounced role in all aspects of teaching and learning (Van Deventer, 2003; Ibtesam, 2005).

Conclusion and recommendations

One of the primary reasons for the poor academic standards of learners in South African public schools is the ineffective instructional leadership role of principals. This study has shown that many principals place more emphasis on their managerial and administrative duties rather than focussing on teaching and learning. Although principals are accountable for the plethora of administrative and managerial tasks, there is a dire need for them to take an active role on instructional leadership role, which is pivotal to enhance learner performance. Principals should be conversant with innovative teaching theories and practices, and encourage teachers to model them in classrooms. The principal has the power to influence learner-learning outcomes by setting the school's goals and promoting effective instructional practices. The core of instructional leadership is to transform schools into conducive environments where teachers and learners reach their full potential. To advance a culture of teaching and learning in schools where learner achievement features strongly, principals are duty-bound to balance their administrative and managerial duties with instructional leadership functions. Although principals could apply a distributive leadership style of school management, they should not abdicate their responsibility of driving the teaching and learning agenda. The principal may apply the distributive style of leadership by delegating the varied administrative and management duties to subordinates. In this way, they will empower their subordinates to take on leadership positions while they devote more time to instructional matters. Thus, a paradigm shift is required where principals devote more serious attention to instructional leadership. Principals should be empowered to generate new knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to manage curricula matters effectively and efficiently. This is achievable through well-constructed professional development programmes.

Professional development activities can be undertaken through the active participation of university faculties, practising principals and prospective principals engaging in study groups, curriculum development, peer observation, and through collaborative school-based research. Principals should be innovative by creating more professional development and training opportunities instead of waiting for the Department to arrange professional development programmes. These programmes should be custom made rather than having a 'one size fits all' training. Themes could include curriculum planning, effective provision and utilisation of resources, procuring physical assets, teaching and learning support materials, instructional leadership, and learner discipline should form the nucleus

of the continuing professional development programme that can be offered to them. Perhaps, it should be made mandatory for newly-appointed principals to take a structured leadership course offered by higher education institutions. This course should emphasise the role of principals as instructional leaders. For example, as part of their continuing professional development, principals and aspiring school managers should complete the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) – Leadership and Management course offered at different tertiary institutions. This course provides practising as well as aspiring principals with important leadership and management knowledge and skills embracing teaching and learning, managing people, managing school finances and physical resources, and engaging with education law and policy matters

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