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Instructional Leadership Practices of Principals

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Abstract- South African Education system has undergone numerous transformations, which gave rise to a new complexion in the instructional leadership practices in schools. As a developing country that is striving to match the global standard of education, incorporating new ideologies in leading and managing curriculum for the well-being of its learners has been a great leap that is commendable. The ideals of effective instructional leadership are among others that school principals in previously disadvantaged backgrounds are still grabbling with so far. This phenomenological empirical study sought to investigate the instructional leadership practices that school management team members perceived to be working well or not working well in their different schools. The manuscript captured some of the successes and hiccups and presents research findings from data collected from school stakeholders who expressed their desire to see growth and development that aims at improving schools for the better. Qualitative findings made showed that constructive interaction with teaching staff and other role players, creation of a positive working climate, equitable personnel work distribution, interchangeable leadership styles, and curriculum support worked well in schools. The study came up with the following in tackling what did not work well: communication, unnecessary disruptions by teacher unions, meagre and inequitable work distribution, as well as limited and poor parental support.

Keywords: instructional leadership, curriculum, educators, school leadership, school management team.

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Instructional Leadership Practices of Principals

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Abstract- South African Education system has undergone numerous transformations, which gave rise to a new complexion in the instructional leadership practices in schools. As a developing country that is striving to match the global standard of education, incorporating new ideologies in leading and managing curriculum for the well-being of its learners has been a great leap that is commendable. The ideals of effective instructional leadership are among others that school principals in previously disadvantaged backgrounds are still grabbling with so far. This phenomenological empirical study sought to investigate the instructional leadership practices that school management team members perceived to be working well or not working well in their different schools. The manuscript captured some of the successes and hiccups and presents research findings from data collected from school stakeholders who expressed their desire to see growth and development that aims at improving schools for the better. Qualitative findings made showed that constructive interaction with teaching staff and other role players, creation of a positive working climate, equitable personnel work distribution, interchangeable leadership styles, and curriculum support worked well in schools. The study came up with the following in tackling what did not work well: communication, unnecessary disruptions by teacher unions, meagre and inequitable work distribution, as well as limited and poor parental support.

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I. Introduction

Instructional leadership is a concept that has been developed over 30 years ago, with its key focus on effective schools where leaders focused on instruction (Neumerski, 2012). A massive assortment of literature in this field of instructional leadership tackles issues about principals as instructional leaders, the ability of educator leaders as well as instructional coaches, rethinking of instructional leadership, instructional leadership, and learner performance, and roles of instructional leaders. Yet it appears there is the deficiency of research revolving around instructional leadership practice that works well or does not work well in various school settings across the globe (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Gedifew, 2014; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, and Portin, 2010). The researcher in this manuscripts admits the vital role played and pays homage to the pioneers and gurus of instructional leaders but wished to investigate whether attributes by various scholars on this phenomenon can be applied to all populations of the world and their diverse milieus. It became evident from this study that most of the attributes, if not all, function well even in this particular circumstance. These include sentiments that principals as instructional leaders needed to explain why and how to improve instructional delivery to educators; that principals as instructional leaders are crucial in promoting learner performance; that principals required to recognize the need, understand change, build support structures, create new focus, and build learning communities for schools to improve their academic performance; and acquaint themselves with the instructional leadership models as well as factors associated with instructional leadership (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Neumerski, 2012; Sisman, 2016; Tyagi, 2010; Zepeda, 2013).The question remained that propelled this empirical investigation as to whether all these attributes work well under all successful schools. Prior studies also indicated the need for principals as instructional leaders to be skillful in delegating some of their leadership duties to educators to have time for instructional matters aimed at improving instruction (Harvey & Holland, 2013). The researcher specifically selected good performing schools to probe if adherence to instructional leadership practices prevails on not. This selection of good performing schools was done mainly to inquiry components of successful schools as measured against good instructional leadership practices.

The basis of Instructional leadership is on fundamental theories that solid leaders give directives, they possess the ability to create a school culture that supports teaching and learning, are goal-oriented and hi-deep in curriculum and instruction (Hallinger, 2012). It is also against this backdrop that perceptions on instructional leaders relate to holding the key to effective and improved learner academic performance (Mthiyane, Bengu & Bayeni, 2014). According to Marishane, Botha, and Du Plessis (2011), it is the responsibility of principals as instructional leaders to set the tone of teaching and learning. Educators are also supposed to be continuously developed professionally to improve teaching and learning in schools (Tyagi, 2010).

It is evident enough from various scholars that principals' instructional leadership role is of pivotal value in ensuring there are improved teaching-learning activities. The essential role that principals play is undeniably explicit in all these studies but is it what is actually taking place in schools, or are there other

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important factors that need exposure. The current state of knowledge around instructional leadership seems to be precisely intact, still, the researcher is inquisitive about the actual preliminary work on the ground in terms of what stakeholders' experience. It is of crucial importance to close the gap between the ideal and the practical occurrences that are taking place on the ground. The theoretical foundation seems concrete, but the need for exposure to the realities that school life with all its challenges bring call for much exposure. Assumptions that there is a link between theory and practice are the bone of contention for this study to be conducted. Research findings made in this study might be an eye-opener that even if this research study took place in South Africa, somewhere else in the corners of this world education officials might be thinking the ideal is a reality only to find out it is a mirage.

II. Method

a) Participants

Fifteen School Management Team members took part in this study. They consisted of five school principals, five deputy principals, and five departmental heads from five different schools. All of them had been in those management positions for a period of three years and more, and the same schools for three years and more.

b) Procedure

This phenomenological research design intended to investigate instructional leadership practices of school principals from five secondary schools, in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The researcher employed qualitative research interviews as a data collection tool. Often qualitative data is presented in words, either descriptive or narrative visible in the form of the interview transcript, observation notes; journal entries; transcriptions of audio or video recordings or existing documents; records, or reports (Mertler & Charles, 2011). In this phenomenological study, semi-structured interviews as the most relevant and appropriate strategy for profound data collection were used (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Phenomenological in-depth interviews which, required an insurmountable amount of time to deeply scrutinize instructional leadership practices of school principals that worked well and those that did not work well was the route taken to generate in-depth data from participants (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The researcher focused attentively on participants' responses to ascertain they achieved a broad coverage of issues throughout the interview process (Chan, Fung & Chien, 2013). Probing interrogations intended for more clarity or depth emanating from identified questions set in advance assisted in gaining participants' world view on the phenomenon studied (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). The researcher ensured they kept their interview focused on the actual and not abstract or hypothesis. The researcher also ascertained avoidance of the temptation of putting words in the participants' mouth, kept records of the participants' responses verbatim, kept their reactions to themselves, bore in mind that the data they were getting was not necessarily facts, and took group dynamic into account (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

III. Data Analysis

From the field notes taken, and the tape-recorded data, the researcher then transcribed the raw data verbatim (Burton & Bartlett, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher continued to make summaries in the form of field and interview notes. From the transcriptions, the researcher prepared the data for visual review ready for data analysis process by organizing, accounting for, and explaining data logically about participants' definition of the phenomenon noting similar patterns, themes, categories, and regulations (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013). To avoid data filtering, influence and distortions by the researcher's interpretations, the researcher returned to participants of this empirical study to validate their results (Polit & Beck, 2010). To mark textual descriptions, sentiments of the participants' transcript, and relevant topics participant in this study expressed, the researcher described their own experiences with those of the participants to identify personal judgments and prejudices. The researcher went further and avoided affecting the entire data analysis process by following horizontalization of the data in which the researcher listed all the relevant quotes of the studied topic by giving equal value regarding group expressions (Creswell, 2012). Pertinent topics were then grouped into units of meaning by the researcher, who then wrote textual descriptions that included relevant quotations. The researcher moved further and made the structural analysis of the texts and identified common and significant experiences of the phenomenon. Since the phenomenological data analysis is similar to thematic data analysis, data were organized into various segments of texts before generating meaning (Creswell, 2014). The researcher then coded the collected data by putting available tags, names and labels against pieces of that collected data (Punch, 2013). To retain the core of the original data and have the collected data representing the exact words used by the participants, the researcher, in this case used the exact phrases as well as sentences as articulated by research participants to provide evidence for generated themes (Cohen et al., 2013).

IV. Findings

The researcher invited participants in this empirical study to articulate their perceptions regarding the instructional leadership practices of school principals that worked well in their schools as well as

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those that did not work well. Their diverse positive responses identified anchored themselves within the following sub-themes under what works well; constructive interaction with teaching staff and other role players, creation of a positive working climate, equitable personnel work distribution, interchangeable leadership styles, and curriculum support. What appeared to be a hurdle that hindered good instructional leadership and happened to adversely affect instructional leadership practices of principals was communication, unnecessary disruptions by teacher unions, unfair and inequitable work distribution, as well as limited and poor parental support.

V. Instructional Leadership Practices of School Principals that Work Well

Several participants indicated their appreciation for constant interaction their principals had with educators. They specified such collaboration as the fundamental cause for educator participation and owning up to all curriculum decisions made in their schools. Educators' involvement caused them up and above owning up curriculum matters and decisions, to come up with solutions to curriculum challenges that arose at any level of curriculum delivery. The following selected responses from school management team members are indicative of the above sentiments.

> Another good practice is to make sure that whatever you do in the institution, you engage the educators. They must own everything and then at the end of the day, you find ways to be able to resolve the challenges that you might be having. (Principal 2)
>
> Work with them from that point and not always bark instructions at them …consulting with them and finding out what is it that is bothering them, what is preventing them from achieving tasks given to them. This is working well and is filtering down in the way they approach learners. (Principal 3)
>
> She normally meets with the staff and stresses challenges that might have been identified or any problems she has identified in terms of classroom conduct of learners. (Deputy Principal 5)

Through effective communication and interaction, principals allow active involvement of educators in curriculum implementation issues. What it all presupposed was that principals' democratic engagement of educators had a positive bearing on instructional matters of the school. Interactive involvement of educators permitted the principals to listen to diverse voices and inputs, which in return helped them in providing effective curriculum leadership. On the other hand, principals as instructional leaders created a platform of growth among educators. They helped those educators create a positive rapport for teaching and learning practices to transpire in schools. Such an approach, as one participant alluded to, heightened a platform of uprooting unwanted tendencies that could hamper instructional success.

As the various participants echoed the need for principal-educator relations, they also highlighted the interaction to cover other school stakeholders like parents and learners as they are integral role players of instructional success. On the one hand, principals needed to keep parents abreast of their children's schooling to enhance their involvement in strengthening instructional understanding and eradicate any factors that might deflate learners' focus towards content assimilation and acquisition. On the other hand, for learners as the heartbeat of the curriculum, end receivers and applicants of content knowledge gained were not to be left in the latch with the expectation that they are just mere recipients. Participants perceived interactive engagement of all these vital stakeholders as a remedy that enhanced instructional leadership practices of school principals.

> The principal must interact with parents and learners concerning the curriculum condition of the school. (Deputy Principal 1)
>
> The other one that is working for us is meeting the learners, talking to them per grade, and visiting classes which are experiencing challenges. (Deputy Principal 5)

One more wing that research participants required principals to interact with was the immediate school community where the schools are based: this is the community from which these children are based. With the assumption that each community requires its children to become better citizens who are also educated, interaction with those communities yielded great support for schools in ensuring discipline prevailed in those schools. Research stakeholders portrayed maintenance and upholding of healthy interactions among the school population members as the principal's responsibility as the instructional leader.

The SMTs perceived the creation of a positive working environment as another factor that works well. Characteristics of such a positive working climate included environments of acknowledgment and appreciation of school stakeholders by the school principals, provisioning of support, and ongoing professional development of educators. With this good working climate, possibilities of improved work ethics and morale, best curriculum delivery, and innate desire to go the extra mile by educators were the likelihood as educators felt motivated, valued, and respected. This kind of climate also had the potential to breed an environment of trust, commitment, and confidence in those who were involved directly or indirectly with the instructional matters. The participants stated the following about this issue:

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A very positive climate works wonders. (Principal 2)

What works well is that she calls individuals who are not working to her office, and it helps improve their behavior regarding teaching and learning. (Departmental Head 5)

If I am not good at a section, say Geography, somebody else will come and fill that gap for me. In addition, that person will teach our educators the way of teaching that particular aspect and this empowers us. (Departmental Head 4)

After the class visit, you must give the feedback because you do not have to call the teacher only if the teacher did not do well. (Principal 5)

Most stakeholders in this research shared a similar outlook that principals as instructional leaders needed to vary their leadership styles while leading instruction. They emphasized the need for one on one interaction in one circumstance, dialogue and maximum participation of all educators in another while listening to their challenges and suggestions, and an authoritarian approach in another context. With these varied approaches as called for by different situations, they indicated principals would avoid demoralizing their staff members, unlike using the one size fits all instructional leadership approach. Below are some of their expressions.

What works well for us is when you say, let us talk. (Principal 3)

He is a situational kind of a leadership person; he is a positive motivator at all times. (Deputy Principal 3)

I leave them to do it; I encourage initiatives. (Principal 1)

The final thing that appeared to work well related to the provisioning of curriculum support to educators. Stakeholders indicated that they received support from their principals around monitoring and controlling of written work done, the introduction of extra classes for syllabi coverage reasons, as well as constant direct interactions and providing of professional support and encouragement.

On a monthly basis, we have a summary of written work output compiled by the departmental heads and deputy principals, which they report on in our quarterly meetings. (Principal 5)

The issue of the afternoon study is working well for us. I believe the improvement of the results is because of properly monitored and supervised afternoon studies. (Deputy Principal 5)

On the contrary, research participants raised issues around instructional leadership practices that seemed not to work well in their different schools. Those instructional leadership practices included; matters of poor communication by instructional leaders with their subordinates, unnecessary and too much interference of teacher unions into school matters that adversely affected curriculum, inequitable work distribution among staff members, and limited or lack of parental support on curriculum matters of their children.

While other stakeholders indicated maximum interaction between their principals and their entities around curriculum issues, others felt the non-availability of such collaborations in their schools. Lamentations on autocratic leadership approaches that gave no room for consultation were perceived to have hampered to some extent educator-learner morale in their teaching-learning roles. Educators found themselves frustrated by the ineffectiveness of this lack of interaction and consultation from the principals' side. Such nonexistence of opportunities to discuss curriculum issues resulted in educators working in isolation. Operating, under those circumstances, restricted platforms of corroborative working prospects of learning from and with each other.

Communication between the principal and the staff is not working well, and decisions are implemented without teachers' views. (Departmental Head 1)

Those leadership practices that do not work well is when she just imposes, and no one carries out what she said. (Departmental Head 5)

We never had a staff meeting to talk about school matters, and there are a lot of outstanding issue. (Deputy Principal 1)

Some educator unions emanated as another detrimental challenge towards effective instructional leadership. They seem to receive preferential treatment by the education department authorities, as one participant indicated. This research viewed them in that light as participants mentioned that it is one unfavorable factor concerning a conducive school climate as members thereof occasionally conduct themselves in an unprofessional manner. Constant union activities that often took educators out of their classrooms hindered principals from executing their full instructional leadership roles. Principals, as asserted, were more often than not obstructed from exercising their authority due to union members abusing their power and undermining principals' authority and leadership. In the end, teaching and learning activities became gravely affected, and this at times hindered full learners' academic performance.

Another thing that is problematic to us as instructional leaders or as leadership within the schools is unionism. The government is in cahoots with other unions to the extent that they don't regulate the activities of those unions. (Principal 4)

Personnel work distribution, which is unfair, emerged as another impediment to effective instructional leadership practices. There seemed to be situations where educators found themselves

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overloaded with work, are un/under qualified to teach the subject, or where they are faced with overcrowded classrooms that deter them from effectively executing their expected instructional duties. In some instances educators themselves struggled with content knowledge and skills, which caused them fail to cope with the expected performance indicators. This work overload and less knowledge of content subject, seemed to pose a challenge for principals as they find themselves unable to address the prevalent hurdles of overcrowded classrooms and lack of relevant training for subjects allocated to educators. It appears this impediment is beyond the scope of abilities of the principals as instructional leaders.

> What seems not to work well when we usually tell them every day we need written work they will talk about big numbers in the classroom. (Principal 1)
>
> Sometimes they are saying, madam, it is because this subject I don't like it because I have not studied. I am not qualified in it and so on. (Principal 2)
>
> There are these subjects like in the language department, they will tell you, look, I am a single teacher in this subject, and I have got to do one learner three time. I am overloaded. (Principal 3)

Stakeholders also hinted on the lack of parental support as one of the elements that are barriers to a successful instructional breakthrough by principals. Either there is no such support, or it is partial in some instances. This partial or lack of support, according to this research, weakens efforts by school principals of providing learner teacher support material (LTSM) for proper curriculum delivery and support to learners. Lack of socio-economic support of needy learners appeared to also culminate in unfavourable learner academic performance. What this finding suggests is that some principals also fail to act promptly on matters that negatively affect teaching and learning activities in their schools. Participants' responses further recommended that there needs to be identification and management of obstructions to effective teaching and learning and curb such barriers to achieve positive teaching-learning outcomes.

> I think we are not taking care of learners that don't have parents. You find that most of those learners without parents are those learners that are troublesome in most cases. They are taking drugs, and girls fall pregnant. (Departmental Head 3)
>
> He is not into issues that relate to managing the school in general. I think there is a weakness when it comes to the question of resources. (Departmental Head 4)

VI. Discussion

The main aim of this article was to investigate instructional leadership practices of principals through the lens of SMTs. The study focused on principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads from five secondary schools in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The researcher intended to investigate instructional leadership practices which worked well and those that did not work well to help readers comprehend that, what works well in another setting might not necessarily function in others. The researcher further wanted to hint on the idea that instructional leaders from various parts of the globe should customize instructional leadership practices to their very own settings to achieve their best in managing and leading curriculum. The findings discussed under what works well elaborated on the following sub-theme: constructive interaction with teaching staff and other role players, creation of a positive working climate, equitable personnel work distribution, interchangeable leadership styles, and curriculum support. In tackling what did not work well the following, i.e., communication, unnecessary disruptions by teacher unions, imbalanced and inequitable work distribution, as well as limited and poor parental support.

Horng and Loeb (2010) in their study emphasized on personnel management of successful principal, but they did not touch on what (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012; Sisman, 2016; Bush, Joubert, Kiggundu & van Rooyen, 2010) studies found that there is a need for educator involvement in the curriculum decision making the process of the school while principals served as managers of these educators. The latter researchers concurred with the finding of this study that constructive interaction of the principals and their subordinates worked well as an instructional practice. The researcher, therefore, views such an interaction between instructional leaders and instructional role players as a building block for a positive instructional climate, with the view that where such does not prevail, possibilities of hostile relations that might have a negative bearing on teaching-learning activities and inadequate learner academic performance might be the result.

With virtuous interactions, school principals have the potential to create a positive work climate as this study found out. Virtuous collaborations with educators that created a climate of effective teaching seemed to be in line with studies by Yu (2009) and Copeland (2003), who viewed principals as goal-oriented entities responsible for creating favorable teaching and learning environments beneficial for desired learner performance. Based on the above, the researcher ruminates that trust and collegial working associations are likely to be built. Another significant finding made that participants indicated worked well in their schools was an equitable distribution of work among the staff members. The researcher is not sure whether this is an attainable reality though, if so, it can bring about educator satisfaction. Studies by (Yu, 2009; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; and Copeland, 2003) also indicated

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that no even-handed work allocation among educators was core to good instructional deliveries by educators. Rigby (2014); and Horng & Loeb (2010 highlighted that what is significant in the entire equation is not an equitable distribution of work but rather principals' task of ensuring increased learner performance by maintaining educator satisfaction.

The consensus that principals required to vary their leadership skills while leading instruction appeared to be at the core of what worked well for almost all research participants. Bush & Middlewood, (2013); Day, Gu, & Sammons, (2016) maintained it was essential for principals to identify means through which different dimensions associated with features of leadership, school, and classroom linked with improved learners' performance, to dynamically combine and accumulate various leadership values, strategies, and actions. Researchers and participants spoke in one voice that with one specific leadership style, it might be problematic for principals to influence all facets of instruction because diverse circumstances might possess a tendency to require different approaches. The researcher also concurs with all these variations of leadership styles. It also rest on the material condition on the ground to decide which leadership style to employ as curriculum situations and environments differ.

This empirical study reported divergent perceptions around adherence to the vision and mission of the school by principals. Other stakeholders showed non-existence of adherence to school vision and mission in their school, while others mentioned it as an effective instrument that enhances instructional leadership practices. In either one of the circumstances, schools in this study perform well academically. Hallinger, Wang, & Chen (2013); and Hallinger & Lee (2014) maintained that one role of instructional leadership includes the definition of school vision and mission. Granted such instructional leadership role of defining the vision and mission of the school, it then suggests that schools in this study might consciously or unconsciously be adhering to the school vision and mission as leaders without vision are directionless leaders.

Majority of this research participants, agree with Rigby (2014); Furman (2012; Le Fevre and Robinson (2015) that there is a need for curriculum support by instructional leaders. This agreement then suggests that such support should be visible and that all those dimensions that are not working well in schools be properly aligned with each other for the smooth running of education institutions.

VII. Conclusion

Based on the research findings made in this particular research study, it became evident that instructional leadership practices of school principals in schools require great attention. This study reports good practices of principals about how they manage instructional leadership, but there are grey areas that need attention. Stakeholders are not satisfied that all is well and this requires the necessary consideration. The researcher recommends that other areas that do not work well in other parts of the world need research so that scholars can the identified gaps. Having the understanding and knowledge of what instructional leadership entails without having leaders that implement that knowledge is a challenge. It appears if adherence to instructional leadership models can prevails, effective curriculum delivery will yield positive results required in schools. Some of the hitches that schools face like overcrowding in schools require the intervention of higher education authorities that will help provide the necessary human and physical resources. It is, therefore, the duty of all involved in the education system to identify which of the challenges are their responsibility and act on them. Not all fault can solely be put on principals as the instructional leaders. Principals as instructional leaders are employees of the country's ministry of education, and therefore require the necessary support that will help them carry out their duty with ease. Instructional leaders need support so that they can also provide required support to their subordinates. If all systems can be put in place, instructional climate in schools will be conducive and curriculum delivery, which is the core of every school, might be carried out to yield positive learner academic results.

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