

Shift in the Role of the School Principal: Administrator to Instructional Leader

Surajo Halilu
Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education
Northwest University, Kano, Nigeria
lauratcj@gmail.com

Abstract

School is the most important institution in the socialization of children because it can cause an impact on children's development. Principal's leadership is often viewed as a major focus of efforts to pursue and achieve excellence in education. In other words, excellence or success of a school is influenced by effective principal leadership. Schools can make a difference to the level of students' academic performance; however, good or poor school depends on the person who leads the school. Students' academic performance is not only dependent on the performance of the school, but it is also influenced by the management and leadership of the principal. The paper discussed how to change the role of principal as an administrator to instructional leader. The method followed is by defining instructional leadership, knowledge and the instructional leader, skills and the instructional leader, instructional leadership and academic performance, and principal roles as instructional leadership. Going by these the paper recommended the redefinition of the role of principals, by eliminating bureaucratic structures and reinventing relationships in the school setting. And that principals should change their activities as instructional leaders by focusing on instruction; building a community of learners; sharing decision making; sustaining the basics scarce resources; leveraging time; supporting ongoing professional development for all staff members; redirecting resources to support a multifaceted school plan; and creating a climate of integrity for effective teaching and learning.

Keywords: Principal's role, Instructional leadership, academic performance, school effectiveness

1 Introduction

It has often been said that the school principal wears many hats being manager, administrator, instructional leader and curriculum leader at different points in a day. It is a balancing act of having to juggle between these various roles. Often times, more attention is accorded to managerial and administrative tasks and that of the instructional leader is relegated to others in the administrative hierarchy even though the core business of a school is teaching and learning. The role of 'instructional leader' by

school leaders is a relatively new concept that emerged in the early 1980's which called for a shift of emphasis from principals being managers or administrators to instructional or academic leaders. This shift was influenced largely by research which found that effective schools usually had principals who stressed the importance of instructional leadership (Brookover and Lezotte, 1982). Similarly a principal must be in a position to guide and provide expertise guardian in regards to curriculum development, teaching methods, and

evaluation as well as supervision of human and material resources. For the school to function well, the principal must be in a position to exploit all possible means to keep a healthy environment for the students, staff and the general public (Abdulrasheed and Bello 2015).

2 Defining Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership differs from that of a school administrator in a number of ways. Principals who pride themselves as administrators are too preoccupied in dealing with strictly administrative duties compared to principals who are instructional leaders. The latter role involves setting clear goals, allocating resources to instruction, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. In short, instructional leadership are those actions that a principal takes, or delegates to others, to promote growth in student learning (Flath, 1989). The instructional leader makes instructional quality the top priority of the school and attempts to bring that vision to realisation. More recently, the definition of instructional leadership has been expanded to towards deeper involvement in the core business of schooling which is teaching and learning. Attention has shifted from teaching to learning, and some have proposed the term "learning leader" over "instructional leader" (Richard DuFour, 2002).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) defines instructional leadership as "leading learning communities". In learning communities, staff members meet on a regular basis to discuss their work, work together to problem solve, reflect on their jobs, and take responsibility for what students learn. They operate in networks of shared and complementary expertise rather than in hierarchies or in isolation. People in a learning community "own the problem" and become agents of its solution. Instructional

leaders also make adult learning a priority; set high expectations for performance; create a culture of continuous learning for adults and get the community's support for school success. Blase and Blase, (2000) expressed instructional leadership in specific behaviours such as making suggestions, giving feedback, modeling effective instruction, soliciting opinions, supporting collaboration, providing professional development opportunities, and giving praise for effective teaching.

Instructional leadership refers to leadership that is directly related to the teaching process, involving the interaction between teachers, students and the curriculum. From a practical viewpoint, to implement leadership of the teaching process, a principal must play a role in the teaching and learning of teachers in terms of supervision, assessment, staff development and training services (Acheson and Smith, 1986). Keefe and Jenkins (2002) refers instructional leadership as the role of principal in providing directions, resources and supports to teachers and students in order to improve the teaching and learning in schools. While DeBevoise's (1984) opinion regarding instructional leadership involves the principal's actions to encourage growth in student learning.

In short, instructional leadership refers to the ability to develop educational programs. These include the abilities to interpret the curriculum and determine the objectives of teaching, the diversity of teaching methods, determine classroom management, provide learning climate, implement instructional innovation, able to influence and coordinate the teachers and students to achieve the goals of school education. Therefore, principal as instructional leader is the pivotal point within the school who affects the quality of individual teacher instruction, the height of student achievement, and the degree of

efficiency in school functioning. Therefore, commitment and application of instructional leadership will enable principals to successfully develop teaching and learning.

3 Knowledge and the Instructional Leader

Inherent in the concept of an instructional leader is the notion that learning should be given top priority while everything else revolves around the enhancement of learning which undeniably is characteristic of any educational endeavour. Hence to have credibility as an instructional leader, the principal should also be a practicing teacher. For example, in the United Kingdom, most principals spend an average of 20 percent of their time in a week on teaching (Weindling 1990). Instructional leaders need to know what is going on in the classroom. Many a time, principals are not in touch with what is going on at the classroom level and are unable to appreciate some of the problems teachers and students encounter. The tendency is to address instructional issues from the perspective when they were teachers.

Principals need to work closely with students, developing teaching techniques and methods as a means for understanding teacher perspectives and for establishing a base on which to make curricular decisions. Also, a teaching principal strengthens the belief that "the sole purpose of the school is to serve the educational needs of students" (Harden, 1988, p. 88). Whitaker (1997) identified four skills essential for instructional leadership.

First, they need to be a *resource provider*. It is not enough for principals to know the strengths and weaknesses of their faculty but also recognise that teachers desire to be acknowledged and appreciated for a job well done.

Secondly, they need to be an *instructional resource*. Teachers count on their principals

as resources of information on current trends and effective instructional practices. Instructional leaders are tuned-in to issues relating to curriculum, effective pedagogical strategies and assessment.

Thirdly, they need to be good *communicators*. Effective instructional leaders need to communicate essential beliefs regarding learning such as the conviction that all children can learn and no child should be left behind.

Finally, they need to create a *visible presence*. Leading the instructional programme of a school means a commitment to living and breathing a vision of success in teaching and learning. This includes focusing on learning objectives, modeling behaviors of learning, and designing programmes and activities on instruction.

While it is generally held that the principal is both administrator and instructional leader in many countries, including Nigeria principals tend to be more administrators oriented while that of instructional leader is most often delegated to the assistant principal. Even then, the label 'instructional leader' is seldom assigned to any one person but is assumed to be the responsibility of all teachers.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the trend is towards insisting that the principal assume the prominent role of an instructional leader. It will be a formidable task convincing principals to relinquish their image as administrator and take on the role of instructional leader.

In some cases, principals feel inadequate to initiate and develop instructional programmes given the assortment of subject areas taught with each having its own pedagogical uniqueness. For example, teaching reading is different from teaching science and would it be fair to expect the principal to be knowledgeable about instructional strategies for each of the

subject areas. Despite these apprehensions, proponents of the idea that the principal should be an instructional leader, is gaining serious attention. If that be the case then the principal needs to have up-to-date knowledge on three areas of education, namely; curriculum, instruction and assessment.

- Curriculum: principals need to know about the changing conceptions of curriculum, educational philosophies and beliefs, knowledge specialisation and fragmentation, curricular sources and conflict, curriculum evaluation and improvement.
- Instruction: principals need to know about different models of teaching, the theoretical reasons for adopting a particular teaching model, the pedagogy of the internet, the theories underlying the technology-based learning environment.
- Assessment: principals need to know about the principles of student assessment, assessment procedures with emphasis on alternative assessment methods and assessment that aim to improve rather than prove student learning.

Underlying these three areas of knowledge, is a deep understanding of on how humans learn. It may not be an overstatement to suggest that a principal is not fully equipped if he or she does not have a deep understanding of human learning (Phillips, 1996). The core business of a school is learning and recent research in cognitive science has produced a wealth of knowledge about human learning. It is crucial that principals know and understand these theories so that they may serve as a resource in enhancing instructional effectiveness. An impoverished understanding of human learning will make it difficult for the principal to explain and justify the

theoretical underpinnings of instructional strategies practiced.

Furthermore, with the growing importance of technology in schools, principals also need to be equipped with the knowledge of technology integration in teaching and learning. Increasingly, principals are looked upon as leaders who will inspire teachers to adopt innovative pedagogies in the classroom. For example, if some students are unable to read and write at secondary level, the principal as instructional leader should take steps to alleviate the problem by supporting teachers' instructional methods, allocating resources and materials, visiting classrooms frequently, providing feedback on instructional methods and techniques and using data to focus attention on improving the curriculum and instruction.

4 Skills and the Instructional Leader

Besides having knowledge in the core areas of education, the principal must possess certain to carry out the tasks of an instructional leader. These skills are; interpersonal skills, planning skills, instructional observation skills, skills in research and evaluation.

- Interpersonal or people skills are essential for the success of being a principal. These are skills that maintain trust, spur motivation, give empowerment and enhance collegiality. Relationships are built on trust and tasks are accomplished through motivation and empowerment wherein teachers are involved in planning, designing and evaluating instructional programmes. Empowerment leads to ownership and commitment as teachers identify problems and design strategies themselves. Collegiality promotes sharing, cooperation and collaboration, in which both the

principal and teachers talk about teaching and learning.

- Planning begins with clear identification of goals or vision to work towards as well as induce commitment and enthusiasm. Next is to assess what changes need to occur and which may be accomplished by asking the people involved, reading documents and observing what is going on.
- Observing instruction (supervision) aims to provide teachers with feedback to consider and reflect upon. But teachers should make their own judgement and reach their own conclusions.
- Research and evaluation skills are needed to critically question the success of instructional programmes initiated and one of the skills most useful would be action research. The task of being an instructional leader is both complex and multidimensional.

If principals believe that growth in student learning is the primary goal of schooling, then it is a task worth learning. If a principal possesses these knowledge and skills he or she are likely become an effective leaders - sharing, facilitating, and guiding decisions about instructional improvement for the betterment of student's education.

5 Instructional leadership and academic performance

It is not surprising that instructional leadership and academic performance are significantly related as reflected in the works of a few leadership researchers. Rossow (1990) outlined seven positive behaviors of principal such as priority to student performance, conducive school climate, clear goals, effective leadership, evaluation of students' progress, support staff development and coordination of teaching and learning programs have led to effective

teaching and learning to improve student performance in academic achievement. Rossow's study substantiated that factors such as controlling the quality of teaching, paying tribute to the achievements of students, analysing and evaluating students' progress directly affect students' learning performance. As such, it is important to note that principals are directly involved in the teaching and learning programs in schools.

Interestingly, Wang et al's. (1990) findings showed the school factors that comprised principal instructional leadership, classroom management, quality of teaching, classroom climate, student-teacher interaction and peers' influence have greater influence towards students' academic achievement. Furthermore, Duke (1993) found that staff development program which is 'Student-Based Staff Development' held in Albermale County Public School, United States is able to improve academic performance by 50 percent among poor students. Likewise, Bushman, et al's. (2001) findings on 118 schools in 24 different districts in California reviewed the efforts used by principals to improve education among low performing students showed that 84 percent of the principal focused on individualized instruction.

Therefore, principal's instructional leadership is positively related to student performance in school examinations. Teachers do have positive perceptions towards the effectiveness of instructional leadership when the classroom environment is good.

6 Principal roles as instructional leader

Instructional leadership role is the premeditated process to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Therefore, the roles of principals as instructional leaders are to provide guidance to teachers on curriculum and pedagogy, encourage students to analyse weaknesses and guide teachers and students. In addition,

instructional leaders should work with the limitations of existing school resources and improve the quality of teaching. Hence, it is a thornier path where principal must take into account the norms of the school in order to influence learning process positively. From the perspective as mentioned, leaders must equip themselves with skills, knowledge and specific efficiency to be effective leaders. According to John (2001), knowledge and skills are needed to build personal values, self awareness, feelings and moral capabilities. When principals play the role as instructional leaders, they need to have the knowledge of learning theory and effective teaching. In other words, instructional leaders must have the communication skills and must reflect the symbolic power to enthuse their subordinates in their school organisation.

In this context, principals as instructional leaders must possess leadership characteristics, needed to influence all members of staff such as encouraging school programs and activities to make learning meaningful and involving students in all aspects related to school life. With the understanding of these complex issues, there must be a transition of the role of a principle as a school administrator to that of an instructional leader. Therefore, principals must have sufficient knowledge, experience and skills to participate in instructional leadership.

7 Conclusion

If principals are to take the role of instructional leadership seriously, they will have to free themselves from bureaucratic tasks and focus their efforts towards improving teaching and learning. Instructional improvement is an important goal, a goal worth seeking, and a goal when implemented, allows both students and teachers to control their own destiny in making a more meaningful learning environment. The role of the instructional

leader be expanded to incorporate a shift away from "management" (working in the system of administrative tasks) toward "leadership" (working on the system) and in the case being argued it is 'instructional leadership'.

To achieve this quest, it takes more than a strong principal with concrete ideas and technical expertise. It is recommended the redefinition of the role of principals, one that removes the barriers to leadership by eliminating bureaucratic structures and reinventing relationships. And it is also recommended that principals should change their activities as instructional leaders by focusing on instruction, building a community of learners, sharing decision making, sustaining the basics, leveraging time, supporting ongoing professional development for all staff members, redirecting resources to support a multifaceted school plan, and creating a climate of integrity, inquiry, and continuous improvement. And realization of effective schools, the principal therefore, has an enormous opportunity to develop teacher capacity to thrive in teaching and learning reformation and innovation to attain current educational demands.

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