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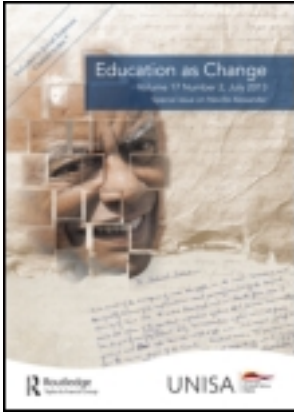


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Principals' instructional leadership practices in improving learner achievement: Case studies of five secondary schools in the Umbumbulu area

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Abstract

The article presents perspectives from five secondary schools principals whose leadership practices focused on improving the quality of teaching in the classroom. This was a qualitative study that was conducted in the Umbumbulu area, in the south of Durban, South Africa. In the past fifteen to twenty years, more attention in South Africa has been given to the role that school leadership can play in improving the teaching and learning situation. Literature has increasingly demonstrated that when school principals focus on effective teaching and instructional leadership practices, improved learner achievement is achieved. The five secondary schools were conveniently and purposively sampled for their proximity and their special characteristics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, HODs and teachers. The findings show that management practices had a positive influence on learner achievement. While the findings indicated that all five principals collaborated with staff members in charting their respective schools' future, learners achievement in matric was not consistent.

Keywords: effective leadership, instructional leadership, invitational leadership

Introduction and background

The core purpose of principalship is to provide leadership and management in all areas of the school to enable the creation and support of conditions under which quality teaching and learning can occur (Bush and Glover 2003; Bush, Joubert, Kiggundu and Van Rooyen 2010). Scholars such as Thrupp (1999) and Leithwood, Aitken and Jantzi (2006) share similar views and emphasise that successful schools have successful leaders. The focus is on issues of environment or climate that is conducive to effective teaching and learning believed to be contributing to learner achievement (Duke 1987; Ubben and Hugh 1997). One way in which conditions under which quality teaching and learning can occur is to ensure that activities in the school focus on instruction and that school principals should become instructional leaders (Hallinger and Heck 1998; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom 2004; Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe 2008). Another way in which principals support their teachers is by ensuring that they are exposed to professional development (Davis and Nicklos 1986; Supovitz and Poglinco 2001). However, empirical studies have indicated that some principals have not succeeded in doing this (Wilzler, Bosker and Krüger 2003; Southworth 2004; Ross and Gray 2006; Berkhout 2007; Sims 2011).

Chisholm (2004), for instance, argues that despite the large amount of money spent on education in South Africa, schools are consistently underperforming.

This article explores leadership practices of five principals in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) whose schools are located in socio-economically deprived communities in the south of Durban, South Africa. In this province, 14 809 (16.8%) of 88 287 teachers are either unqualified or underqualified (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education 2013). Of the 14 809 teachers, 51% (7 550) teachers are unqualified, with only a National Senior Certificate (NSC) qualification, and all these unqualified teachers are found in rural areas such as Umbumbulu where this study was conducted (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education 2013). The study on which the article is based documented accounts from principals' perspectives on how they practise instructional leadership, particularly in relation to whether or not these principals viewed such practices as contributing to improved learner achievement. Instructional leadership has been highlighted as pivotal in bringing about school improvement and enhanced learner achievement (Hallinger and Heck 1998; Cotton 2003; Stiggins and Duke 2008; Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe 2008). However, Bush, Glover, Bischoff, Molo, Heystek and Joubert (2006: 1), argue that 'there are no accounts of how school principals and school managers, exercise instructional leadership in their schools'. It is therefore important that a story is told about what some principals do in providing an environment where effective instruction can take place.

Three of the five secondary schools that took part in the study are located in a rural community under the authority of an *inkosi* (chief) in terms of the KwaZulu-Natal Traditional Leadership and Governance Act (No.5 of 2005), while the other two are located in a township within the Umlazi District. These schools had gained a reputation over the past few years for having 'turned around' in terms of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) after many years of underperformance. Correctly or wrongly, there are many people in this country who associate school performance with the NSC examinations results, and that influenced our decision to focus on this aspect. All five principals had assumed duties as principals between 2005 and 2007 and had embarked on a school development drive. We call these five secondary schools Zama, Philani, Khulani, Mphemba and Thula. The contribution of effective leadership in supporting achievement of improved learner outcomes has been highlighted in previous sections. The South African Standards for Principalship (Department of Education 2005) advocates that the principal, as a professional and an instructional leader, is expected to provide direction, guidance, resources and support to heads of departments (HODs) in performing their core duties. Therefore, the principal is held to account for the management of curriculum and instruction in the schools (Southworth 2002; Sofo, Fitzgerald and Jawas 2012).

School principals have a 'multifaceted and enormous task of establishing an environment that could lead to effective schooling' (Mestry and Grobler 2004:2). It is the principal's leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for teaching, the level of professionalism, the morale of teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become (Marzano, Waters and McNulty 2005). Therefore, principals are engaged in countless day-to-day activities that sometimes take them away from the important work of instructional leadership (Zepeda 2007). These activities include attending to learner discipline, intervening with angry parents, doing paperwork, complying with special education rules and regulations, administering NSC examinations, and seeing to the maintenance of the physical environment (Zepeda 2007). Since schools are about teaching and learning, therefore, all other activities are secondary (Hoy and Hoy 2006). The notion of principals as instructional leaders is precisely about the focus on practices that comply with this leadership approach. Therefore, principals are expected to spend significantly more time facilitating the teaching and learning processes and providing direction to their schools' instructional programmes (Tirozzi 2001).

In the South African context, there is a discourse among scholars such as Chisholm (2004) that contends that despite major shifts in education policies, systems and structures, there are still schools

that are characterised by lower levels of learner achievement. In KZN province, the benchmark for acceptable performance in secondary schools has been increased since 2008 from 50% passes in the NSC examination to 60%. Due to an overemphasis put on NSC examinations as the main indicator of school achievement, principals have to account if their schools' results fall below 60%. Research indicates that for the implementation of improved strategies in education, the effective unit remains the individual school (Davidoff and Lazarus 1997), and the key person in the school is the principal (Lyons 2010). This arises because the principal is held to account for student performance, school effectiveness and quality education provision (Steyn 2008); the overall performance of schools is the principal's responsibility (Department of Education 2005; Ross and Gray 2006; Berkhout 2007; Clarke 2007; Prew 2007). To achieve these, school leaders need to be alert to and have a keen interest in what goes on in the classroom (Southworth 2002).

The reality is that despite the known efficacy of putting all efforts in ensuring that effective teaching happens in the class, many principals do not seem to do this (Wilzler, Bosker and Krüger 2003; Southworth 2002, 2004; Ross and Gray 2006; Berkhout 2007; Sim 2011). The reasons for this failure to focus on the quality of teaching have not been clarified either. While this article does not attempt to provide reasons for that failure, it is important to understand what some principals do, which they believe makes a contribution to improved learner achievement. To this end, the following questions were posed to guide the study.

Research questions

- What do principals regard as the contribution of instructional leadership practices in improving academic achievement of their learners?
- How do the five principals in the Umbumbulu area ensure that effective teaching takes place in their schools?

The review of literature points to the strong connection between principals' instructional leadership and improved learner achievement (Chapman, Snyder and Burchfield 1993; Sindhvad 2009). For instance, Sim's (2011) perspective of principals as instructional leaders is that they are to provide guidance to teachers on curriculum and pedagogy, encourage students to analyse weaknesses and guide teachers and students. Various scholars (Southworth 2002; Harris and Muijs 2003; Leithwood and Jantzi 2005; Bush and Glover 2003) argue that effective principals are more powerful in making decisions regarding curriculum and instruction than those in ineffective schools. This confirms the increasingly and strongly held view that the principal's leadership is pivotal for the achievements of high learner outcomes and other aspects (Ross and Gray 2006; Berkhout 2007). However, scholars such as Wilzler, Bosker and Krüger (2003), Vidoni and Grasseti (2003) and Southworth (2004) seem to agree that this may not necessarily be achieved through any direct manner. There is no conclusive evidence to suggest a causal relationship between principals' leadership practices and learner academic achievement (Mafuwane 2011).

The role of instructional leadership in enhancing learner achievement

Hallinger (2005) provides a broad framework to conceptualise instructional leadership. His conceptualisation is based on the review of literature in instructional leadership over the past 25 years. Hallinger's (2005:233) conceptualisation focuses on a number of principals' activities, and these include: creating a shared sense of purpose in the school, including clear goals focused on student learning; fostering the continuous improvement of the school; developing a climate of high expectations and the schools' culture aimed at innovation, and improvement of teaching and learning; coordinating the curriculum

and monitoring student learning outcomes; shaping the reward structure; organising and monitoring a wide range of activities and being a visible presence in the school, and modelling the desired values.

These key focus areas are consistent with organic instructional leadership as advocated by Reitzug, West and Angel (2008). Organic instructional leadership assumes that instructional improvement ‘occurs as a result of the ongoing learning of teachers and other school personnel about their individual practice and the school’s overall practice’ (Reitzug *et al.* 2008:703). Organic instructional leadership involves developing a supportive environment in which teaching, learning and their relationship to other school practices can be extensively and intensively studied and discussed (Reitzug *et al.* 2008). Such a conceptual framework emphasises the importance of an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning, which ultimately affects learner outcomes. Our analysis of the data was informed by both Hallinger (2005) and Reitzug, West and Angel (2008).

Invitational leadership and effective teaching and learning

Purkey and Novak (1996) use the ‘invitations’ metaphor to describe messages that are communicated to people (intentional or unintentional), which inform them that they are able, responsible and worthwhile. These ‘invitations’ are communicated through the leader’s interactions with staff and other people, and through policies, programmes and practices in the school, as well as the physical environment in the school (Purkey and Novak 1996). According to invitational leadership theory, the way a leader interacts with others will display either invitations or disinvitations. The ‘disinvitations’ metaphor refers to messages to people (intentional or unintentional), which are uncaring, demeaning, devaluing, intolerant, discriminatory and hurtful (Stoll and Fink 1996). Therefore, the way in which people respond to the leader is usually influenced by the extent to which they feel welcomed or unwelcome. This is helpful in understanding, for example, the manner in which teachers and other stakeholders respond to the principal’s invitations or disinvitations. As leaders, principals are expected to communicate invitational messages to the people around them as a way of showing them that they are welcome to participate in a range of school activities. It is evident that invitational leadership also deals with issues of the environment where people interact in the process of supporting teaching and learning in the school.

Methodology

The research on which this article is based was conducted between June and December 2012 and it adopted a qualitative multiple case study design. This design was deemed suitable because the aim of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of principals’ leadership practices that enabled them to change their schools’ situation. Qualitative research enables participants to have a more open-ended way of giving their views (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit 2004). Qualitative studies are naturalistic, interpretive and use multi-methods approach (Kvale 1983; Lincoln and Guba 1985) in capturing the lived experiences of the researched from their perspective (Terre Blanche and Durrheim 1999; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007).

Various scholars describe case study research differently, depending on what they emphasise. For instance, Nieuwenhuis (2007:75) describes case study research as a ‘systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest’. For Picciano (2004), a case study is used to explore, describe, and to explain a phenomenon. This means that the purpose of a case study is to examine in detail a specific activity, event, organisation or people. We chose a case study design because it would help provide a wealth of descriptive materials about the

principals in their natural environments, which would assist us in exploring their attitudes and characteristics regarding instructional leadership practices.

Since the focus of the study was on understanding principals' instructional leadership practices, the participants were mainly the principals. However, HODs and teachers were included in order to triangulate and balance the descriptions of leadership practices within the schools. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods was used to identify the schools. It was purposive because we wanted schools that were located in previously black and socio-economically depressed areas, and also schools known in their community as having improved achievements in the NSC examinations in the past five years. It was convenient in the sense that we wanted schools that were not too far away in order to minimise travelling costs as the study was self-funded. In the light of this sampling methodology, no generalisations will be made to the population of principals in the Umlazi district.

Semi-structured interviews were preferred because of their flexibility (Dahlberg and McCaig 2010). They also offered participants an opportunity to open up and talk freely (Lofland and Lofland 1984; Wolcott 1992). Documentary analysis and informal observations were also used for triangulation purposes. Document analysis comprised looking at various school records such as time books, log books, NSC results, as well as other documents for verification purposes.

The data was transcribed *verbatim* from an audio-tape into written form and subjected to qualitative content analysis technique, which entails creating codes of meaning and were later organised into themes, which Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004) refer to as chunks of meaning. Guided by Creswell's (2003) and White's (2004) framework, before breaking it down we did a thorough reading of the transcripts in order to get an overall sense of the data. We then organised the data under thematic headings guided by both research questions and a conceptual framework. This process is also known as classification of the data. It was then interpreted in order to give clear and logical answers to the research questions.

It is important that findings can be trusted. To ensure trustworthiness, various techniques were employed. These included triangulation of data sources, principals' stories were triangulated with those of HODs and teachers. In addition, different methods were employed, that is, semi-structured interviews and the documents kept within the schools were studied. Throughout the study ethical considerations were observed. These included seeking and obtaining permission from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, and from each participant. Other issues such as voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time during the study, and the guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity were explained to the participants and adhered to.

Profiling the case study site

Zama Secondary School is located in a rural area about 34 kilometres from Durban. It had an enrolment of 1 444 learners accommodated in 33 classrooms. There is also a fully equipped science laboratory, computer and music rooms. The school has 44 teachers and a management team comprising a principal, two deputies and five HODs. According to the records kept in the school, the overall NSC results have improved from 56% in 2008 to 68% in 2012.

Philani Secondary School is located in a rural area and is about 47 kilometres from Durban. Learner enrolment is 440 and it has 17 teachers with the School Management Team (SMT) comprising a principal, three HODs and a deputy principal. It has 18 classrooms of which 14 are being utilised and four are unused. There was also a science laboratory (not operational and not furnished), a computer room with four computers, which are also not working, and a fully operational library. According to the records kept in the school, the overall NSC results have improved from 42% in 2008 to 80% in 2012.

Khulani Secondary School is located in the township, serving learners from the township and adjoining low-income earning communities, and is about 29 kilometres from Durban. It has 918 learners accommodated in 24 classrooms. It also has a science laboratory, a computer room and a library. This school has 27 teachers, a principal, and four HODs. According to the records kept in the school, the overall NSC results have improved from 50% in 2008 to 57% in 2012. In 2010 and 2011, NSC results stood at 63% and 65%, respectively.

Mphemba Secondary School is about 24 kilometres from Durban and is surrounded by an informal settlement and poverty is rife. It has 536 learners, and 18 staff members consisting of a principal, one deputy principal, three HODs and 13 teachers. Learners come from different areas in this province and also from Eastern Cape Province. There are two blocks with five classes each, a science laboratory (unfurnished and not operational), and is therefore used as a classroom. According to the records kept in the school, the overall NSC results have improved from 39% in 2008 to 53% in 2012.

Thula Secondary School is built in the township and is about 28 kilometres from Durban. The school has 1 614 learners and 60 staff members consisting of a principal, two deputies, four HODs and 53 teachers. Facilities available include six fully equipped technical classrooms, a science laboratory, a biology laboratory and a computer room. According to the records kept in the school, the overall NSC results have improved from 44% in 2008 to 81% in 2012.

Findings

The findings are presented thematically based on the participants' responses to the questions that were posed to them. All participants were asked if they believed that principals should be instructional leaders and if they did, why. In the case of principals, they were also asked why they regarded themselves as instructional leaders. In the case of HODs and teachers, they were asked if they regarded their principals to be instructional leaders and why. Further, participants were asked how principals in their respective schools practised leadership and whether or not they believed that their leadership practices impacted on learners' academic achievement. Five themes emerged, namely, the importance of instructional leadership; creating an invitational school environment; monitoring and supporting instruction; recognising and rewarding good performance; and promoting professional development of teachers. The five themes are discussed in the following section.

The importance of instructional leadership

This theme is directly linked to the first research question and it provides an explanation regarding the contribution of instructional leadership in learner achievement. All five principals were emphatic in their argument that they should be instructional leaders. 'It is not a matter of believing, principals should be instructional leaders,' said the principal of Zama Secondary. A similar response came from the principal of Philani Secondary, who said:

It is not a matter of belief that principals should be instructional leaders but the principal is an instructional leader by virtue of being the principal of a school. It requires you as a principal to influence, give support and directions as a leader.

When the same question was posed to Thula's principal, he responded:

Of course they are ... principals' position makes him or her to be an overseer of every component of the school's activities.

In a similar vein, Mphemba's principal maintained that 'principals need to be instructional leaders as teaching and learning is the core business of the school', while Khulani's principal argued that 'without instructional leadership, schools will fall into the drain because teaching and learning is the centrepiece of the existence of the school'. Principals' declared conviction that they are instructional leaders tells us more about how they viewed their functions and as leaders who are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring effective curriculum delivery.

The views of some of the teachers who participated in the study did not differ from those of their principals. Extracts presented below suggest that it is the position of the principals that makes them instructional leaders. A teacher from Zama maintained that:

Principals need to be instructional leaders. There is no way that the principal can be somewhere else. Schools are there for one reason, teaching and learning. I think that other things, for me, are secondary.

A teacher from Philani Secondary attributed the school's success and quality teaching provision to principals who practised instructional leadership. This is what she said:

I can say successful schools, schools that are performing well, are schools where principals are practising instructional leadership. Through instructional leadership practices of our principal, we get quality education.

These findings are important in that, although they do not tell us anything about the principals' practices as such, they emphasise their functions and focus areas. According to the South African Standards for Principalship (Department of Education 2005), principals should influence, direct and support the best quality teaching and learning to enable learners to attain the highest levels of achievement in their own interest, the interests of their community and of the country as a whole.

Creating an invitational school environment

In line with the importance of preparing an environment that is conducive to effective teaching, this theme speaks to the question about how the five principals enacted instructional leadership. Principals' responses indicated that they created a positive climate characterised by an invitational leadership metaphor (Purkey and Novak 2006). The data shows that these principals promoted the principles of invitational leadership in two ways, namely, vision creation that enhances ownership and direction the school is taking, as well as active teacher participation in dealing with assessment issues, and parental participation in this exercise. Vision creation is important and the principals' role in setting the tone and establishing an environment that could lead to effective schooling has been highlighted (Mestry and Grobler 2004; Marzano *et al.* 2005). The finding on assessment is also important because 'assessment serves as a success check for the fulfilment of teaching and learning' (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education 2013:48).

The principals in these schools expressed the view that teachers and other stakeholders had a right to participate in crafting the school vision. In this regard, the principal of Zama said:

You need the muscles of all these other people to get going so that the load does not rest on your shoulders alone.

The participation of teachers in vision crafting was supported by a teacher from Zama, and his views were that collective vision played an important role in enhancing learner achievement. This is what he said:

Everybody has an input on the vision the principal has and on what the principal conceptualises. We also put our ideas. We have a common vision and goals that we are here to achieve, namely, the enhancement of learner achievement.

These narratives assume that when all stakeholders have 'bought' into the vision, implementation becomes easier. The importance of beginning with a vision when deciding on a new path is supported by Duke (1987) and Ubben and Hugh (1997) who maintain that good planning starts from the vision and goals. They propose that the vision of effective teaching is essential to the improvement of teaching and learning.

An invitational school environment was also created through promoting active teacher participation and parental involvement in monitoring and in discussing issues pertaining to assessment of their learners. While teachers are responsible for the formal and informal assessment of learners to monitor learner progressing towards meeting set outcomes, principals are responsible for monitoring this process (Stiggins and Duke 2008). In fact, Stiggins and Duke (2008) emphasise the need for principals to be trained in assessment and understand its value in relation to improving teaching and learning. In this study, the results were analysed and discussed by the principals and teachers in formal meetings. Later on, information sharing meetings were held with the parents about learners' assessment and progress they were making. Substantive engagements with the teachers were meant to generate better strategies to improve teaching and learning. In this regard, the principals of Philani Secondary said:

We give learners assessment tasks which indicate effectiveness of teaching and learning. We analyse and discuss results with all educators and discuss improvement strategies. Remedial work is done where necessary.

This view was shared by some teachers as well. For instance, a teacher from Thula Secondary stated that:

The principal ensures that there are meetings where we discuss learner progress in each learning area and how we can improve. Parents are also called to discuss results.

Some principals also insisted on discussing the performance of their children. They called parents' meeting quarterly where they requested that only parents registered on their databases attended. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) support the view that principals, as instructional leaders, work with other stakeholders to analyse, discuss results and strategise about practices that would help improve the performance of learners. These narratives are supported by literature (Cotton 2003; Marzano *et al.* 2005; Robinson *et al.* 2008), which suggests that monitoring and evaluating learner progress, discussing results with educators and parents help improve performance of learners. However, in this study, the quality of engagement of different stakeholders could not be established and the manner in which such engagements made contributions to learner achievement could not be determined with any degree of certainty.

Monitoring and supporting instruction

This theme speaks to the second research question. Three main issues emerged, namely, monitoring and supporting instruction, minimising disruption to teaching time, and providing sufficient learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs). Monitoring involves visiting classrooms, observing teachers at work and providing them with feedback, and such a function is widely distributed among principals, deputies and HODs (Southworth 2004). A general view expressed by the principals who participated in this study was that they had a keen interest in what was going on in the classroom. Therefore, they played an active role in monitoring instruction. However, the notion of playing an active role was not understood and practised the same way by all five principals. For some of them, supervising HODs and ensuring that they reported progress being made in the classroom formed part of playing an active role.

Therefore, they delegated class visits function to the HODs whom they regarded as central to the process of monitoring teaching. The principal of Mphemba had this to say:

The HODs are in the core as specialists to monitor teaching and learning in their departments. They are the people that are doing that stuff (monitoring of instruction) because they are expected [to do so] and that is what they are paid for.

For others, playing an active role entailed principals conducting class visits to observe teaching and learning activities. For them, class visits should not be left with HODs. They argued that in instances where they could not visit classrooms on their own, they gave direction about how this had to happen; "I give instruction to the HODs on how to carry on with their duties so as to monitor and support teaching and learning," as the principal of Khulani put it.

The process of monitoring instruction and the achievement of high learner academic achievement may not be divorced. We argue here that through monitoring what happens in the classroom, school leaders may be in a position to understand the level of quality in the teaching and learning process. This may also ensure that teachers are accountable and responsible for the attainment of improved learners' achievement (Myende 2012). However, ensuring that effective instruction takes place may require other strong measures as well. For instance, the data has revealed that principals, as part of their instructional leadership practices, promoted conditions that discouraged interruptions to instructional time. Narratives from some of the principals revealed that instructional time was crucial for effective teaching and learning and, therefore, interruptions of instruction should be avoided as much as possible. "I do not compromise on instructional time," the principal of Zama Secondary asserted. His views were echoed by the principal of Thula who maintained that:

Insurance people come during break and I stop them even if they are not finished when break time is over. People must understand that we are here for one thing only, teaching and learning and not business. I have timetables and relief timetable for absent teachers. No class remains without a teacher.

This position advocated in the above extracts are shared by Murphy (1992) who maintains that instructional time is a direct correlate to student achievement. Murphy is of the opinion that where principals encourage teachers to make maximum use of subject allocated time for teaching and engaging students in learning, higher student academic achievement can be realised.

Monitoring and supporting instruction cannot only be achieved through continuous class visits and encouraging an interruption-free environment. There is also a need to ensure that LTSMs and resources are made available for effective teaching and learning (Myende 2012). There was a general view from the participants that principals as instructional leaders made sure that LTSMs were always available and that they were used. They also made sure that the budget of the school focused on getting materials and physical resources that enhanced teaching and learning. In addition, sponsorships from the business sector were also solicited, which addressed shortfalls in the school budget. Commenting on this issue the principal of Khulani Secondary had this to say:

Through sponsorship, I have got [a] library, science laboratory, computer laboratory which are very useful to both our teachers and learners. We have got overhead projectors which make teaching and learning interesting. All the learners have books and I am very strict on the recovery policy of books.

Contributing to the instructional leadership debate, Krüger (2003) acknowledges that the primary role of the principal in the school is to make sure that all the school's resources are used to make sure that the educative teaching duties are carried out to the desired level. Scholars such as Chapman, Snyder and Burchfield (1993) and Sindhvad (2009) also affirm this view about the creation of instructional materials in enhancing learner achievement.

Recognising and rewarding good performance

The data indicates that one of the ways in which principals who participated in the study practised instructional leadership was to reward good performance by the teachers, and also by the learners. They believed that such a practice helped them to motivate teachers to put more effort in ensuring effective teaching and learning. Some of the methods that were mentioned by some principals were to motivate learners. The principal of Zama Secondary said:

We have got a rewarding kind of a set up for top learners where they are called in front and given tokens to uplift their spirit and motivate learners that are a little bit lazy.

This position was also shared by some of the teachers in the study. For instance, a teacher from Philani Secondary said:

The principal praises those who produce good results. He believes that good performance got to be recognised and made public so as to encourage good performance and instil that attitude in others as well.

These extracts from some of the principals are in line with those of Sim (2011), which indicate that principals as instructional leaders performed two roles excellently, namely, identifying outstanding students who excel in the academic area by awarding incentives, for example, in the form of certificates and utilising morning assemblies to motivate the learners.

Promoting professional development of teachers

The data reveals that principals in this study promoted professional development in various ways. Some conducted some of the professional development activities while others merely encouraged teachers to attend workshops organised by the education department. They believed that promoting professional development of their teachers was part of supporting effective instruction. To this end, Philani's principal stated, 'Professional development of educators is important for the enhancement of their teaching.' The principal of Zama adopted a more direct approach: 'I conduct workshops with educators ... I have got a schedule for that.' The principal of Mphemba on the other hand prefers workshops organised by the education department. This is what he had to say:

Workshops are the best things that helped me develop educators professionally. I also allow them to attend workshops which are conducted by the Department of Education. This is important for the enhancement of their teaching.

This approach was followed by the principal of Khulani who highlighted the need to utilise expertise from various sources, including staff internal to the school. This is what he had to say:

We do professional development in different ways. At times HODs, who are specialists in their areas, handle that part of development. I also request expertise from outside to empower my educators. I also make sure and encourage that educators attend developmental workshops organised by the department. The result of these staff development is improved teaching and learning in the classroom.

The practice of exposing teachers to professional development is supported by various scholars (see Davis and Nicklos 1986; Supovitz and Poglianco 2001) who argue that the provision of teacher professional development aims at leading to changes in professional learning and changes in professional practice, which ultimately impact on student achievement.

Discussion and conclusion

The data shows that principals in the sampled schools believed that to achieve high learner outcomes, teaching should remain the main focus. Such views have been expressed by many scholars as has been highlighted in the literature section. What the literature review has also shown is that principals' leadership actions contribute to learner achievement, but that there is no direct causal relationship as other factors that cannot be easily isolated play a role (see Hallinger and Heck 1998; Southworth 2002; Witzier *et al.* 2003; Gentilucci and Muto 2007; Robinson *et al.* 2008; Reitzug, West and Angel 2008). The findings confirm the literature, which emphasise the principals' instructional leadership practices that focus on influencing effective curriculum delivery (Sim 2011; Mitchell and Castle 2005; Marzano, Waters and McNulty 2005; Zepeda 2007; Gentilucci and Muto 2007; Reitzug, West and Angel 2008). To contribute to improved learner achievement in the NSC examinations, principals in this study did a number of management tasks, including sharing school vision with staff, monitoring instruction, and other activities discussed in the findings and discussion section above.

The table below summarises the performance of Grade 12 learners in NSC examinations of the five participating schools over a period of five years since the principals embarked on their respective school development programmes. Information was generated from the review of documents kept in the schools and those of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (2012 & 2013), Department of Education (2009) and the Department of Basic Education (2010; 2011).

The table indicates that there has been an improvement in learner achievement in all five schools between 2008 and 2012. It has also been noted that during the five-year period, the number of learners enrolling for NSC examinations oscillated at different rates in different schools, and so has the actual number of passes, as well as the pass percentages. This could be related to contravening factors that might affect migration of families and learners to urban areas, which are known to have better services and which are not too far from these areas.

Although none of the five participating schools has shown a clear upward trajectory, nevertheless, the average learner achievement of the five schools has increased from 46% in 2008 to 67.8% in 2012. This is an increase of 21.6%. Over the same period, the average pass rate in the province has increased from 56% in 2008 to 73% in 2012, showing an increase of 17%. It is worth noting that the average increase in NSC learner results in the participating schools has occurred despite some challenges faced by rural schools in this province, such as the underqualified and unqualified teacher phenomenon. At present a combined underqualified and unqualified teacher percentage figure stands at 16.8% of 88 287 teachers on the provincial education department's payroll (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education 2013). Of these teachers, 51% of them have only passed Grade 12 and have National Senior Certificates only.

The findings are congruent with two strands of scholarship regarding the link between leadership and learner achievement. The first maintains that leadership matters in affecting school climate and learner achievement, although such effects are not direct and difficult to measure (Hallinger and Heck 1998; Southworth 2002; Witzier *et al.* 2003; Robinson *et al.* 2008). In this study the focus has been on organising an environment where effective teaching and learning can take place. The data has also pointed in a direction where principals in the study embarked on activities that they believed would enhance learner opportunities to succeed. The second strand argues that the direct effect of principals on learner achievement is zero (Leithwood *et al.* 1999; Witzier *et al.* 2003; Ross and Gray 2006). Both positions have credibility. While there is no evidence of direct impact of principals' activities on learner achievement as these scholars suggest, an indirect relationship between their activities and learner achievement has been established.

We have to highlight at this stage that instructional leadership practices mentioned by five principals are not new as they have been highlighted by many authors cited in this paper. However, it is important to

Table 1: Learner achievement in five schools over five years.

	2008		2009		2010		2011		2012	
	school	KZN DoE	School	KZN DoE	school	KZN DoE	school	KZN DoE	school	KZN DoE
Zama Sec	56%	57.8%	65%	61%	80%	70%	72%	68%	68%	73%
	63 of 112	83058 of 143511	68 of 104	81618 of 134643	80 of 100	86556 of 122444	84 of 117	83201 of 121859	60 of 88	93003 of 127253
Philani Sec	42%	57.8%	38%	61%	43%	70%	66%	68%	80%	73%
	22 of 52	83058 of 143511	18 of 48	81618 of 134643	18 of 42	86556 of 122444	31 of 47	83201 of 121859	28 of 35	93003 of 127253
Khulani Sec	50%	57.8%	35%	61%	64%	70%	65%	68%	57%	73%
	42 of 84	83058 of 143511	28 of 80	81618 of 134643	33 of 52	86556 of 122444	49 of 75	83201 of 121859	47 of 82	93003 of 127253
Mphembe Sec	39%	57.8%	41%	61%	72%	70%	57%	68%	53%	73%
	19 of 49	83058 of 143511	19 of 46	81618 of 134643	26 of 36	86556 of 122444	25 of 44	83201 of 121859	16 of 30	93003 of 127253
Thula Sec	44%	57.8%	40%	61%	56%	70%	84%	68%	81%	73%
	87 of 198	83058 of 143511	77 of 192	81618 of 134643	103 of 184	86556 of 122444	170 of 174	83201 of 121859	104 of 129	93003 of 127253
Total Average	46.20%		43.80%		63.00%		68.80%		67.80%	

note the importance of providing leadership – taking responsibility for the direction the school is taking and to focus on those activities known to contribute towards effective teaching. Some of these activities are highlighted by Hallinger (2005) and have been found to be the focus of instructional leadership debates for the past 25 years. The same activities highlighted by Hallinger (2005) and Reitzug, West and Angel (2008) were discussed in this article as the main themes that emerged from the data. This study has indicated that the principals sampled focused on these issues and believed that as instructional leaders their focus was on ensuring that an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning was created and sustained.

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