

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOAL SETTING AND LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTS

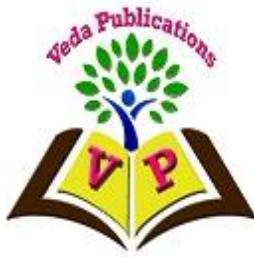
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Abstract



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The core mandate of educational institutions is to offer quality education to learners. As such academic goals are set to guide teaching and learning processes which is expected to take place in a conducive school environment. This study explored the relationship between goal setting and learners' perceptions of their school academic environments. The study sampled 12 public day secondary schools in Kisii Central sub-county, Kisii County, Kenya. The study adopted cross sectional survey and collected data from 12 principals and 336 students using interview schedules and structured questionnaires respectively. Data were analysed using means and chi square. The study established a statistically significant association between goal setting and learners' perceptions of school environment $X^2(4) = 13.281, P = 0.010$. The study concluded that goal setting is important as it helps learners to focus on learning thus influencing their perceptions of school environments.

Keywords: Goal Setting, Learners' Perceptions, Academic Environment.

1.0 Introduction

Any school interested in improving learners' academic attainment must focus on setting clear and realistic goals. Goal setting is considered important in a school as it provides direction to teachers and learners. Wallace Foundation (2012) observes that goal setting creates a culture of learning as it spells out expectations for the learners. Goals setting call for creation of conducive environments that nurture students' capacity to learn. Usaini and Norshuaily (2011) opine that school environment is important as children spend most of their waking time in school thus influencing learning. As such school principal should transform the schools into learning environments (Ndaita, 2013). This study looked at the relationship between goal setting and learners' perceptions of the school environment. While goals are believed to help learners focus their attention on learning, school environment influences how students learn as it shapes learning.

1.1 Goal Setting

Goal setting is perhaps the most significant way in which principals' impact students learning. Numerous researchers among them (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Weber, 1987; Day and Sammons, 2014) outline goal setting as one of the key functions of an instructional leader. Goals enhance the efforts directed towards their attainment. Locke and Latham (2002) established that setting difficult goals provoked high performance but of significance is not the difficulty of the goals but winning support of stake holders in working towards the attainment of the set goals. This calls for more than merely setting goals to involving stakeholders in the goal setting process. Sinay, Ryan, and Sarah (2018) observe that setting academic goals requires clear articulation of the desired outcomes and the means to attain the set goals. Clarity of goals promotes strategies that lead to their achievement. Principal as an instructional leader determines how school goals are set and create the environment in which such goals can be achieved.

1.2 School Environment

To ensure attainment of academic goals a school must enhance its' academic environment. School environment becomes particularly important to adolescent learners, who were the focus of this study, because it is a place that not only nurtures their academic growth but also other aspects of life as they transit from childhood to adulthood. Sunday & Olufunmilayo: 2008, Omutere: 2008, Sunday: 2012, Masuku: 2011, Usini & Norshuahaily and Nwachuku & Anina: 2014 emphasize the importance of physical environment in influencing learning. However, creating an effective academic environment calls for more than mere provision of physical and material resources which constitute school physical environment. Creating a positive school climate requires the principal to transform the school into a learning space that learners can connect with.

Blum (2005) defines an academic environment as one that emphasizes teaching and learning. School environment plays a critical role in students' life as it is not only a place where they grow academically but it also influences other aspects of their lives. For effective learning to take place the learners must feel connected to the schools they attend. Favourable perceptions of the school environment would enhance learners' connectedness to their school. School connected enhances learners' academic engagement which may prompt them to work towards attainment of set goal.

2. Statement of the Problem

The importance of goal setting and the role of a conducive school environment in influencing learning have been explored widely by previous researchers. The question on how significant goal setting is in helping students to adapt to their environment so that they can learn persists. The aim of the study was to investigate the association between goal setting and learner's perceptions of their school environment. The questions of this study are whether principals set goals for their schools, what are learners' perceptions of the school academic environments and whether goal setting influences learners' perceptions of the school environments.

3. Methodology

The study targeted 25 public day secondary schools in Kisii Central Sub- County, Kisii County, Kenya. Out of the 25 public day secondary schools in the sub-county, 12 forming 44.4% of the target population were selected into the sample using simple random sampling method which is in line with Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) who observe that at least 30% of the population is adequate for reliable findings. Cross sectional research design was adopted as it enabled the researchers to collect original data from a wide range of respondents on goal setting and school environment in one snap shot. Further, cross sectional survey research design was preferred for its appeal for generalization of sample findings (Macmillan and Schumacher, 2001) to the entire population and to other similar contexts.

The sample consisted of 12 principals whose schools were chosen for the study and 336 form four students selected through proportionate random sampling. Form four students were selected into the sample as they were believed to have stayed longer in school and could articulate issues on the subject of study better than lower classes. Data were collected from principals using interview schedules and structured questionnaires from learners. Nominal scale items were used to measure goal setting while a five point scale was used to measure the construct of learners' perceptions of school environments.

Descriptive measures (means and standard deviations) were obtained with the help of SPSS version 21. The researchers tested for association between goal setting using Pearson Chi square (X^2) while qualitative data were summarized into topical issues, and presented as

narrative and interpretive reports to depict the information as obtained from the source. These data were then integrated with quantitative data for discussion.

With the help of the school authority four students were assembled in one classroom after lessons. One of the researchers read out the questions one at a time as the students ticked the most appropriate responses. Upon completion the researcher collected the questionnaires from the students.

To collect data from principals the researchers booked appointments with each one of the 12 principals beforehand and met with them in their respective schools at the agreed time. Interviews were conducted in the principals' offices as the researchers recorded principals' responses in a note book.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Goal Setting

Learners were asked to indicate whether their principals set annual academic goals where 286 learners accounting for 88.8% of the sample indicated that the principal set annual academic goals while 36(11.2%) indicated that they do not. This indicates that majority of the sampled students (88.8%) confirmed that their principals set annual academic goals. However when asked to indicate the goal which was expected to be similar for students sampled from the same school they indicated different goals. The same question was posed to principals during interviews. Interestingly, while all principals indicated that they set annual academic goals for their schools, majority (10) of the principals reported different goals from their students.

The study further sought to establish how goals are set. Out of the 12 principals in the study, 8 indicated that they involved learners in goal setting. They explained that each learner sets a goal for each subject with the help of the subject teacher. The subject teacher then obtains the aggregate for the class which is combined with the mean for other subjects and finally the mean which is expressed as the annual academic goal for the school is obtained. The remaining four principals indicated that annual academic goals are set at the departmental level.

4.2 Learners' Perceptions of School Academic Environment

The study sought to establish learners' perceptions of the school academic environment. Their perceptions were measured on a five-point scale using 12 statements where (1)denoted strongly disagreed,(2) denoted disagree, (3) indicated neither agree nor disagree, (4) denoted agree and (5) denoted strongly agree. An aggregation of the mean was then obtained to indicate the mean of learners' perceptions of their school environments. Learners' responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Learners' Perceptions of School Academic Environments

Statement	Mean
School environment is friendly	3.8
Teac(hers in my school are encouraging	4.25
I find it easy to discuss academic matters with my teachers	3.73
I enjoy learning in my school	4.13
Most of the materials required for learning are available in my school	3.5
I enjoy school most of the time	4.18
I am proud of my school	4.26
I feel that I belong to this school	4.17
Students in my school are well behaved	3.61
My principal is mostly in school	4.15
Our principal encourages us to work hard in our studies	4.67
School physical appearance is attractive	3.51

Table 1 indicates that majority of students agreed to most of the statements as they rated all the statements measuring their perception of the school environment highly as indicated by the means shown in Table 1.

Learners' responses to various indicators of their perceptions of the school academic environment were aggregated and a composite index obtained to indicate whether they considered the environment favourable or unfavourable. There were 12 statements which implied that the scores ranged from a minimum of 12 which would have occurred if a student disagreed strongly with all the statements and a maximum of 60 if a student strongly agreed with all the statements. A score of 36 was considered the cut-off point separating favourable and unfavourable perceptions.

Table 2: Aggregation of Learners' Perception of the School

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
Learners' perception	322	12	60	47.96	13.717
Valid N (List wise)	322				

The analysis indicates that the mean index of learners' perceptions of their school environments was 47.96 which was higher than the average score of 36. This indicates that learners considered the academic environments to be favourable. The variation from the mean is 13.717 which is considered slightly high indicating heterogeneity in learners' perceptions of their various academic environments.

4.3 Relationship between Goal Setting and Learners' Perceptions of their School Environments

The study sought to establish if setting annual academic goals influences learners' perceptions of school academic environments. The null hypothesis:

H₀1: *There is no relationship between principals' setting annual academic goals and learners' perceptions of school academic environment* was tested using Pearson Chi square and the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Chi Square Tests on the relationship between Setting Annual Academic Goal and Learners Perceptions of Academic Environment

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.281 ^a	4	.010
Likelihood Ratio	11.554	4	.021
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.717	1	.000
No of Valid Cases	322		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.80.

Table 3 reveals significant association between principals' setting annual academic targets and learners' perceptions of the academic environment, $X^2(4) = 13.281$, $P = .010$, since the P-value is smaller than the chosen significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$). This suggests that there is enough evidence to suggest an association between the principals' setting annual academic target and the learners' perceptions of school academic environment. Thus the Null hypothesis that stated ' *There is no relationship between setting annual academic goals and learners perceptions of the school academic environments*' was rejected. The researchers concluded that there is a significant relationship between setting annual academic goals and learners' perceptions of the school academic environments.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that only a small portion of students indicated that their principals do not set goals. It is however interesting to note that students who indicated that their principals do not set goals were distributed across different schools in the sample. Few students indicated that their principals do not set annual academic goals while their counter parts in the same school indicated that they did. This suggests that students who indicated that their principals do not set annual academic goal were probably students who were detached from the school and may have been absent on the day the school annual academic goal was set. Another thought is that there is inadequate or no reference to the set goal in day to day school activities as this may enlighten students on school academic goal.

The study sought to determine whether there was congruence in the goal indicated by the principal and learners in the same school. Principals and learners were asked to indicate the school annual academic goal in terms of a mean score or mean grade. Ten out of the twelve principals in the study indicated different goals from their learners. There was incongruence in the goal stated among students and between students and principals in the same school.

The incongruence indicates that there was lack of clarity of the annual academic goal to principals and learners in the sampled schools. It further points out that there were systemic gaps in communication of academic goals in the sampled schools. The incongruence in stating the set goals may indicate that learners do not participate fully in the goal setting processes in their schools. Involving learners in setting annual academic goal makes learners to own and identify with the set goal thus work towards its attainment.

Incongruence in stating the annual academic goal by principals and learners may also point at lack of reference to the set goal after setting it or failure to connect the day to day activities in the school with the set goal. Referring to the set goals frequently reminds learners of their role in attaining the set goals. The incongruence in stating annual academic goals reflect the findings of Masuku (2011) where only prefects participated in goal setting and the clarity of the goal to the students was uncertain. Participating in goal setting may motivate learners to work towards the realization of the set goal.

Learners' rating of school environment was high. The statement *our principal encourages us to work hard in our studies* recorded a high mean of 4.67. This indicates that most of the students agreed with the statement. The mean suggests that principals interact with students perhaps reminding them to work towards attainment of the set goal. This finding supports assertions by Wallace foundation (2012) that an effective leader not only sets goals for the learners but also inspires them to achieve them.

The mean for the statement *teachers in my school are encouraging* recorded a mean of 4.25. The high mean indicates that most of the students agreed that teachers in their school were encouraging. Teachers' support is important as it brings about differentiation in learners' performance (Malik and Abbas, 2018). Lee, Walker, and Chui, (2012) add that when students view their teachers' attitudes towards them as positive, they tend to have better learning outcomes. Teachers participate in creating a conducive learning environment for the learners by teaching and providing support on academic and non-academic matters.

An aggregate mean of 47.96 indicates that students' perceptions towards school academic environments were favourable. A favourable attitude towards the school environment is important as it implies that learners are attached to their schools as indicated by the mean to the statement *I feel that I belong to this school* which recorded a mean of 4.17. Lee et al., (2012) observes that students learn more when they are attached to their school.

Attachment with the school enhances students learning as espoused by Blum (2005). Attachment to school enhances students' achievement as students who are attached to their

school tend to attend school regularly and attempt school work. This argument supports Blum (2005) that students who are attached to their school are academically engaged and enjoy learning. Attachment to school may also indicate that students feel accepted by teachers and other students which instil confidence and responsibility in learners. It makes learners proud of their school (Smith and Amushigamo, 2016) which may enhance their attendance and impact positively on their learning. Schaps (2005) observes that when students' needs of safety and belonging are taken care of, they act in accordance with school goals and values in spite of the fact that the physical environment may not have been adequate as indicated by the means to the statements *most of the materials required for learning are available in my school* and *school physical appearance is attractive* which recorded means of 3.5 and 3.51 respectively. The low means recorded by the two statements suggest that some of the schools do not have adequate physical and material resources. The fact that there were disparities in access to physical and material resources between schools is further underscored by a 13.717 standard deviation which suggest variability in students' responses.

6. Conclusion

In the light of the foregoing evidence the researchers arrived at the following conclusions:

- i) Goal setting is an important practice in shaping the learning environment. However, mere setting of goal(s) may not yield the intended effect if the set goals are not incorporated in the day to day activities in a school and referred to frequently. It is therefore incumbent upon the principals to devise strategies of keeping the goal alive throughout the period for which it has been set by constantly reminding learners about the goal so that they can own and work towards its attainment.
- ii) School is important to learners as indicated by the high rating of the school environment. School environment is critical in providing physical and social space in which learners' academic, social and physical needs are met. Principals' efforts to bring together the available resources and influence on their utilization may differentiate between a favourable and unfavourable school environment for learners.
- iii) Goal setting influences learners' perceptions of school environments as it spells out what is expected of learners and may also provide a road map to goal attainment.

7. Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations:

- i) Principals should communicate school goal to students frequently and clearly. They should ensure that school day to day activities are directed towards the attainment of the set goal. Frequent reference to the set goal may go a long way in prompting students to not only identify with the set goal but work towards achieving it.

ii) Principals and teacher should engage in activities that enhance learners' perceptions of school academic environment more often in order to promote learning. Teachers' and principals' support in and outside classroom may promote learners attachment to their school which may enhance school attendance and learning.

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