

Learners' Perceptions of Principals' Influence on Their Academic Behaviours

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to assess learners' perceptions of the principals' influence on their academic behaviour. The study adopted cross sectional research design and proportionate random sampling to select 336 form four students in 12 public day secondary schools. Data were collected using a five point rating scale and analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that students valued their interaction with the principal, recognition and emotional safety they derived from their interaction with the principal. The study concluded that students' perceptions of principals' influence on their academic behaviours was favourable. The study recommended that to nurture positive academic behaviours among learners, principals should enhance their interaction with students in and out of classroom.

Keywords: Leadership, Academic behaviours, Academic achievement

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1. Introduction

School leadership particularly regarding instruction has been linked to students' academic achievement (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson, 2004; Pinto, 2014). School principals have been entrusted with school leadership and are therefore held responsible for school performance. School leadership is considered important in driving a school to achieve their core mandate; ensuring that students learn. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010) indicate that leadership is second to teaching in influencing academic achievement.

Influence of principals on students' learning has been argued to be indirect (Alig-Mielcarek, 2003; Day & Sammons, 2014; Wallace Foundation 2012). Most of the previous studies look at effects of principals' leadership on learners' achievement as an antecedent factor or as being mediated by other variables. But one question emerges: How would principals carry out their day to day activities without influencing learning directly? The roles of a principal as an instructional leader have been outlined to include goal setting, management of the curriculum and creation of school learning environment (Hallinger, and Murphy, 1986). These roles call for a near if not direct interaction between the principal and learners. Most of the previous researches restrict the influence of principal's instructional leadership roles to teaching (Hosani, 2015; Lineburg, 2010). It is also important to note that the principal as an instructional leader goes beyond the prescribed roles of goal setting, managing the curriculum and creation of a learning environment. Although goal setting is seen to enhance students achievement as espoused by Hou, Cui and Zhang (2019) its influence on learners' academic achievement would be mediated by teaching. While Wallace Foundation, 2012; Day and Sammons, 2014) link school leadership to students' achievement through creation of a conducive school environment, Lous et al. (2004) look at the indirect principal's influence on students' academic achievement as being mediated by teachers' behaviour. The view that influence of principals is indirect is also shared by Hosani (2015) and Lineburg (2010) who opine that principal's role is vital in influencing teaching practices adopted by teachers which in turn contribute to students' improved learning. The observation that influencing teachers' behaviour enhances learning is pegged on the premise that teachers have direct contact with the learners.

Although principal's influence on students' achievement has been considered to be indirect, it is important to note that the responsibility of improving students' academic achievement lies with the principals. This requires the school principals to go out of their way to enhance students' academic achievement. It raises questions how the principal would interact with students during school assemblies, lesson observation and sometimes teaching especially in small schools and not influence students' learning directly. It is apparent that principals engage in practices that directly influence learning. Alsafran et al (1995) observe that principal can have a direct impact on students' academic achievement through motivation, modelling positive behaviour, recognition and providing individualized support. Engaging with students in and out of the classroom, discussing school issues and guiding them on academic and non-academic matters may enhance learning. Principals influence learning by enhancing students' academic behaviours which are factors that influence students' academic achievement. These factors include class attendance, attention to school work and discipline.

2. Statement of the Problem

The influence of principal's instructional leadership practices on learning has been described to be second only to teaching. It is, however, important to note that previous studies have concentrated on teachers' evaluation of principals' instructional leadership leaving out students views on the same. Students' perceptions of principal's leadership practices become important as these may inform instructional leadership practices. Students' perceptions of principals' influence on their learning takes centre stage in this study as students are the recipients of instructional practices that take place in school. Students' feedback on how they perceive principal's influence in their academic lives is important as it may inform instructional leadership practices that directly influence learners' academic behaviours and consequently academic achievement. This study assessed learners' perceptions of principals' influence on their academic behaviours.

This paper presents findings which are part of a larger study that looked at the influence of principal's instructional leadership practices on school academic environment in public day secondary schools. The paper addressed learners' perceptions of principals' influence on their academic behaviours in public day secondary schools in Kisii Central Sub-county Kisii County, Kenya. This study documents influence of principals' instructional leadership practices on learners' academic behaviour as this may provide first-hand information on principal's influence on learning.

3. Methodology

The study adopted cross sectional survey research design for its' appeal for generalization (Macmillan and Schumacher, 2001). The research design was preferred as it is an efficient method of collecting original data in one snapshot. The design also allows generalization of the research finding to an entire population and other similar contexts. The study targeted students in 25 public day secondary schools in Kisii Central Sub-county. Twelve schools that formed 44.4% of the target population were selected through simple random sampling methods as prescribed by Mugenda and Mugenda(2003) who opine that 30% of the target population is adequate for reliable findings. Proportionate random sampling was used to select 336 students. However only 322 were considered for the study as the other students did not fill the instrument of data collection fully.

A five point rating scale was used to collect data on learners' perceptions of principals' influence on their academic behaviours where '1' denoted strongly disagreed, '2' denoted disagree, '3' indicated neither agree nor disagree, '4' denoted agree and '5' denoted strongly agree.

To administer the instrument students were assembled in one room in each school after lessons and the researchers guided them as they ticked the most appropriate response to each statement in the rating scale. The data obtained were coded and summarised into frequencies and percentages and then mean for each statement was obtained. A composite mean was then obtained to depict learners' perceptions of principals' influence on their academic behaviours. Standard deviation was also obtained to facilitate interpretation of data.

Findings

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on learners' perceptions of the principal's influence on academic behaviours. The table shows the means for different statements that were used to measure learners' perceptions of principals' influence on their academic behaviours. The key described in the methodology section was used to determine whether students agreed or disagreed with the statement where mean between '1' and '2' indicated that majority of the students disagreed with a statement, between '3' and '3.4' indicated that majority of the students neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and '3.5' to '5' indicated that majority agreed with the statement.

Table.1 Principals' Influence on Learners' Academic Behaviours

| Statement | MEAN |
|--|------|
| Principal rewards good performance | 4.11 |
| Principal encourages us to work hard in our studies | 4.68 |
| Principal visits our class when lessons are going on | 3.56 |
| Principal interacts with us outside classroom | 3.61 |
| Principal is present in school most of the time | 4.00 |
| Presence of principal influences learning | 3.94 |
| Principal encourages us to maintain a favourable environment | 4.46 |
| Principal encourages us to attend school regularly | 4.65 |
| Principal encourages students to behave well | 4.51 |
| Principal encourages us to utilize available resources well | 4.57 |

N=322

Table 1 indicates that students rated principals' influence on their academic behaviours highly. The statement *principals encourages us to work hard* recorded the highest mean of 4.68 indicating that students strongly agreed to the statement. The lowest mean was recorded on the statement *principal visits our classroom while lessons are going on*.

The mean for learners' responses to various indicators of their perceptions of principals' influence on their academic behavior were aggregated and an average obtained to indicate their perceptions. The scores ranged from a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 50. A score of 30 was considered the cut off. The results of the analysis are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Aggregation of Learners Perceptions of principal's influence on Learners' academic behaviors

| | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std Deviation |
|--|---------|---------|-------|------------------|
| Learners perception of principal's influence on academic behaviour | 10 | 50 | 42.09 | 10.294 |

N=322

4. Discussion of the Findings

Table 1 indicates that majority of the students agreed with the *statement principal rewards good performance*. A mean of 4.11 indicates that most of the sampled students agreed that their schools reward good performance. This suggests that principals were conversant with role of incentives in promoting academic performance among learners as Smith and Amushigamo (2016) posit that rewarding students for good performance reinforces positive academic behaviour. Positive academic behaviour is expected to enhance learning. Rewarding students for good performance communicates to the learners the importance of working towards realising desired academic outcomes. Rewarding students for good performance not only motivates a learner to work towards the achievement of the set goal, but it enhances common efforts for learning that lightens teaching and learning. Weber (1987) observes that rewarding students for good performance motivates them to learn.

A mean of 3.61 indicates that a moderate number of students agreed with the statement that *principal interacts with us outside classroom* which suggests that some principals spent time in school and could afford time to interact with students. This finding corroborates findings by Gentulluci and Muto (2007) who observed that some principals who exhibited high influence instructional leadership behaviours on students' learning spent time discussing students' academic progress. Discussing academic issues with students communicates to them that the principal cares about their academic success. Other than academic issues students in secondary school encounter challenges as they undergo social, emotional and physiological changes that may affect their learning. Interacting with learners outside classrooms on non-academic issues communicates to them that the principal values them and is interested in their wellbeing. When students feel valued by the school authority they are likely to reciprocate that and value other learners and teachers which may result to high order discipline in the school. Informal interaction with students helps breaks the fear for adults in the school and opens a window for students to share challenges they may be encountering in school or in life.

Principals' informal interactions with students enhance sense of emotional safety. When a principal engages in informal interactions with students it makes the students to be at ease and this promotes their desire to consult other teachers on academic and non-academic matters. This observation agrees with Hosani (2015) observation that when principals engage with students informally it accords them an opportunity to discuss issues relating to students' learning. The mean to this statement corroborate with that of the statement *principal encourages us to work hard in our studies* which shows that the principal interacted with students even outside classroom. It also indicates that principals discuss academic issues with students. This may have been facilitated by principals' presence in school most of the time as indicated by the statement which scored a mean of 4.00 indicating that most of the sampled students agreed with the statement. The observation corroborates with findings of Weber (1987) that being available for students and interacting with them helps in connecting all stakeholders in the school and more importantly the students' interaction with teachers becomes easier. Hosani (2015) adds that maintaining high visibility accords the principal an opportunity to interact with students during breaks where s/he can guide them accordingly.

The statement *principal visits class when lessons are on-going* posted the least mean (3.56). Principals may visit classes as they monitor instruction. The mean may be explained by the fact that monitoring instruction may be a shared responsibility between the principal, deputy principal, heads of departments and other teachers. Principal may influence students learning especially their attention to school work during classroom visit by checking students' books as argued by Getulluci and Muto (2007) who observe that principals who had high influence instructional leadership behaviours directly influenced learning by checking students' work.

Majority of students agreed that their *principal encouraged them to maintain a favourable environment* as indicated by a mean of 4.46. Maintaining a favourable environment is particularly important and it implies strict adherence to set school rules which enhances discipline. Principal's efforts to assist learners maintain a favourable environment may imply that the principal assists learners to see school as a natural environment in which they can learn alongside others. Basing this on the premise that one role of the principal as an instructional leader is to create an orderly environment as espoused by Hallinger and Murphy (1986) the principal must then

ensure that all parts of the school work in cohesion and learners are not to be left out.

Maintaining a favourable learning environment may enhance academic behaviours among learners as this may influence their attachment to the school. Principals can encourage learners to maintain a favourable school environment by enforcing school rules that influence behaviour and communicating their expectations to students regarding acceptable behaviour in school such as reporting time and the recommended time for leaving school after classes. The mean to this item correlate to the mean posted by the statement *principal encourages students to behave well* to which nearly all students agreed.

The statement *principal is present in school most of the time* posted a mean of 4.00 which indicates that majority of the students agreed to the statement. When the principal is present in school most of the time it influences learning as indicated by a mean of 3.94 which indicates that majority of the students agreed to the statement the *presence of the principal influences our learning*. Principals' presence in school also encourages teachers' presence in school and by extension students' learning.

Further the findings indicate that the mean for the statement *principal encourages us to attend school regularly* is 4.65 which is high indicating that nearly all students agreed with the statement. Regular school attendance enables learners to connect with the subject matter and this enhances easy grasp of the content which ultimately results in good academic achievement. Absenteeism may indicate that learners have no connection with their colleagues, teachers and school. Absent learners usually miss out teaching on content that may be required for adequate understanding of subsequent topics in a subject. Additionally, absenteeism may be occasioned by other factors outside the school which the principal may not have control of.

Nearly all students agreed with the statement *principal encourage students to utilize available resources well*. This suggests that nearly all principals promoted optimal utilisation of the available resources to maximize the realisation of desired academic outcomes. The call for the students to use available resources well plants in their mind the importance of being responsible at whatever level or position in society. The findings of this study are in line with weber (1987) who posits that encouraging students to take care of school facilities makes them active participants in enhancing the school environment by helping them realize that taking care of available resources is partly their responsibility.

Aggregation of Learners' Perceptions of Principals Influence on Academic Behaviour

Table 2 shows that the mean index of learners' perceptions of principal's influence on academic behavior was 42.09 which is greater than the average score of 30. This result indicates that learners had a favorable perception of principal's influence on academic behavior. Favorable perceptions of principals' influence on academic behavior shows that the students feel that their principals understand their experiences, helps them feel that they belong which helps learners connect with their peers, teachers and school. Attachment with their school, teachers and peers may enhance school attendance.

It may also indicate that many of the principals are sensitive and cater for their needs as adolescents and help them to know themselves and navigate through life. Having favorable perceptions of the principals' influence on academic behavior gives learners a head start in the realization of desired academic outcomes. Favorable perceptions of principals' influence on academic behaviors also encourage learners to work towards the achievement of their academic goals. This finding supports Wallace Foundation (2012) claim that principals contribute 25% of the variation in school academic performance by bringing school factors together and galvanizing the school environment. Thus, principals' role in academic performance cannot be underestimated. The variation from the mean is 10.294 which was considered large indicating heterogeneity in learners' perceptions of the principals' influence on their academic behaviors.

5. Conclusion

In light of the evidence presented the researchers conclude that principals interaction with learners in and outside classroom is important as it communicates that the principals are interested in learners' wellbeing. Showing concern for learners may influence their school attendance, discipline and attention to school work. Furthermore, the interaction may help learners experience emotional safety which may enhance learning.

6. Recommendation

Principals should interact with students quite often. They should go beyond maintaining visibility in school and engage in discussions that enhance students' academic behaviors by advising, encouraging students and giving praise where it is due.

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