

Instructional Leadership Practices of Heads of Senior High Schools in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

A non-experimental survey was conducted to investigate the instructional leadership practices of senior high school heads in Ghana. Data were collected using a closed-ended Likert type items from a simple randomly selected sample of a defined population of school heads of senior high schools in Ghana. Data collected were analysed using rank-ordered means and independent samples test of differences of means. The study findings revealed that the school heads frequently adopt major key practices of instructional leadership. However, the school heads most frequently adopt the practice of communicating the school's goals. The study further revealed that differences exist the frequency at which heads of high performing schools and those of non-high performing schools adopt instructional leadership dimensions of defining the school's goals and promoting a positive school learning climate.

Key words: instructional leadership, effective schools, school improvement, learning outcomes

INTRODUCTION

Schools in the 21st century are expected to create a culture of learning that connects students with relevant and authentic learning to make them globally competent for the future. The schools should equip learners with varied competences – knowledge, abilities, and skills to become global citizens who are responsible stewards for the world and anticipate the consequences of their actions. Schools must understand the importance of relevant, authentic learning that prepares a student for the future world. Preparing students for the future requires that schools teach students to be globally aware, communicate well, be adaptable, be creative, be innovative, have information processing skills and be able to use technology to solve problems. Amakyi (2017) opines that schools should inform and form, and transform learners to cope with an ever-changing society as they educate the learners to become critical and analytic thinkers, problem solvers, and good citizens. Such schools are created and they do not just happen. According to Kowalski (2013), effective school leaders are required to superintend over such schools that will equip learners with essential qualities to embrace complex challenges as well as valuing common prosperity, sustainability, and wellbeing of society. School leaders need to be aware of how to develop new skills, competencies or literacies that are required by students when entering the workforce of the future. It is expected that school leaders will foster practical knowledge and transformative change in their leadership.

Horth and Vehar (2014) suggest leaders demonstrate effective creative leadership to first get in touch with their own creative thinking skills and develop a creative leadership culture that will promote and sustain innovative thinking. It behooves on school leaders to lead schools to produce the learning outcomes that focus on preparing students to be competent, creative, analytic thinkers, and problem solvers.

It is imperative therefore on school leaders to lead schools to prepare students for such responsibilities and for teachers to understand how to do this. It is the role responsibility of the school leader to set the standards, expectations, and the context for success for the school, particularly both teachers and students. School leaders are to understand and articulate what is required to be effective and successful in these responsibilities. According to Day, Leithwood, and Sammons (2008), school leaders in discharging their duties are to evaluate teachers on their effectiveness, establish professional growth opportunities, evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum, and develop the academic culture of the school. School leaders need to understand and articulate what is required to be effective and successful in these responsibilities.

Cunningham and Cordeiro (2012) suggest that the school leader should empower others, especially build trust and confidence in the school community, highlighting the school's vision and mission, and creating enthusiasm and optimism for stakeholders to work together in creating future directions for the school.

Literature is replete with examples of how the normative role of the school leader has gone through different transitions from primarily manager to instructional leader (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Fink & Resnick, 2001) with emphasis on being an inspirer (Hallinger, 2009), facilitator (Hall, Negroni, & George, 2013), and communicator (Kowalski, 2010).

Various authors have pointed to instructional leaders in schools as creating a shared sense of purpose in the school; developing a climate of high expectations that focuses on the improvement of teaching and learning; and having a visible presence in the school modeling the values that are being fostered in the school. The authors identify instructional leadership as when those in a leadership position focus their efforts on the implementation of practices that will positively impact student learning. For example, DeWitt (2020) describes instructional leadership to be the type of leadership that leads to the most significant impact on student success and the successful creation of a culture of learning. DeWitt identifies implementation, focus on learning, student engagement, instructional strategies, efficacy, and evaluation of impact as the key driving forces of instructional leadership.

Also, Ng (2019) sees instructional leadership to include all leadership activities that affect student learning, both directly or indirectly. Reflecting on the seminal work of Hallinger and Murphy (1986), Ng (2019) identified three broad dimensions of the instructional leadership. First, the school leader defines the school's mission, which includes establishing and articulating a clear school vision with the focus on enhanced student learning. Second, the school leader manages the instructional programme of the school engaging in supervising, monitoring, and evaluating instruction and curriculum-based activities in the school. Third, the school leader promotes a positive school climate that supports teaching and learning practices and stakeholder engagement. Similarly, Kowalski (2013) commenting on leading a school effectively, posits that the instructional leader creates and shares a vision of success with

stakeholders empowering them and holding them accountable to the vision. Again, the instructional leader creates a professional learning community embracing change and innovation and pursuing opportunities for protracted school improvement.

Jenkins (2009) intimates that the instructional leader makes the core business of schooling, which is teaching and learning, the top priority of the school and attempts to bring that vision to realization. According to Lashway (2002), the instructional leader is expected to possess planning; interpersonal; instructional observation; and research and evaluation skills to enable them to effectively carry out the tasks of an instructional leader. The planning skills enable the instructional leader to have clear identification of goals or a vision to attain and determine the strategies to get to the preferred future. The interpersonal skills allow the instructional leader to build relational trust, give empowerment, and enhance collegiality to promote ownership and commitment to planned activities in the school. Instructional observation skills are to create a reflective practice environment to provide teachers with feedback to consider and reflect upon. Research and evaluation skills allow the instructional leader to support evidence-based practice in the school through action research and project-based learning (Fullan, 2014; Lashway, 2002).

Student learning outcomes that meet stakeholder expectations dictate the discussions around school leadership. Brolund (2016) observes that when all is said and done, the goal of instructional leadership is for the school head to work closely with teachers in order to increase student achievement. Bush (2016), citing Leithwood et al. (2006), makes a profound statement about the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes, postulating that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning. The goal of the instructional leadership model is to promote student learning (Carraway & Young, 2014)

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) posit that there is a significant relationship between school leadership and student achievement. They argue that effective leaders not only know what to do, but how, when, and why to do it. These leaders are able to choose the appropriate strategy from a list of proven strategies and apply it to optimize student achievement. Waters et al. proffer that effective leaders produce effective schools, which in turn produce competent students.

Sergiovanni and Green (2015) are of the firm belief that there is a strong relationship between the type of school and the type of principal in the school. The authors argue that quality schooling does indeed lead to quality learning, and the key to quality schooling is the amount and kind of leadership that the school principal provides directly and promotes through and among teachers and supporting staff. In an era of heightened stakeholder interests in school learning outcomes and increased accountability from schools, the works of authors establishing that leadership accounts for learning outcomes are significant. Specific effective leadership practices when identified can be replicated and sustained for protracted school improvement practices.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A member of the task force on “Reinventing the Principalship” constituted by School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative, Institute for Educational Leadership, Washington, DC in 2000, is

credited with the saying that “no one can say for certain how the schools of the new century will differ from those of the past century, but there can be little doubt that these schools will require different forms of leadership” (p.1). *Are school leaders having practices that will take the schools towards 21st century agenda?*

Instructional leadership practices have been identified as important contributory factor to teacher effectiveness and students’ performance in schools (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). However, there is knowledge deficit regarding the instructional leadership practices of heads of senior high schools in Ghana. This poses a challenge to designing curriculum for leadership capacity-building programmes for heads of senior high school in Ghana. A descriptive study into the instructional leadership practices of heads of senior high schools is therefore needed to inform the design of curriculum for professional development courses for practicing and aspiring heads of senior high schools in Ghana. This study sought to investigate the instructional leadership practices of school heads in Ghana. The study was framed by two research questions:

1. What instructional leadership practices are frequently adopted by heads of senior high schools in Ghana?
2. Is there a significant difference in the instructional leadership practices of heads of high performing schools and non-high performing schools in Ghana?

Such a study will help to establish any skill-gap regarding instructional leadership practices of existing senior high school heads to inform practice-based capacity building programmes for them.

RESEARCH METHODS

The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study and it was deemed most appropriate choice since the study was meant to collect data and report on the situation as it existed. This study sought to collect data on instructional leadership practices of heads of senior high schools in Ghana without any interventions administered nor any variables manipulated.

The study population consisted of school heads of accredited senior high schools in Ghana (N = 681) A simple random sampling technique was used to select the study sample (n =300). This sample size was in agreement with the recommendation by Krejcie and Morgan (as cited in Heiman, 2013) that a minimum sample size of 242 is ideal for a population of 681.

The study instrument, a questionnaire, which was an adapted version of Hallinger’s Instructional Leadership Model (2011) was used to collect data for the study. The instrument consisted of 40 Likert-type items which covered three broad dimensions of instructional leadership postulated by Hallinger (2011); *defining the school’s goal*, *managing the instructional programme*, and *promoting a positive school learning climate*. Each of the 40 items was assigned to only one of the three-dimension typology covering 10 sub-scales that address key instructional leadership practices:

1. Defining the school’s goal (what is to be achieved by the school and the direction the school is heading to) - *frame the school goals; communicate the school goals*.
2. Managing the instructional programme (controlling and coordinating things related to curriculum and teaching) - *supervise and evaluate instruction; coordinate the curriculum; monitor student progress*.

3. Promoting a positive school learning climate (norms and attitudes of teachers and students that affect learning process in school) - *protect instructional time; maintain high visibility; provide incentives for teachers; promote professional development; and provide incentives for learning.*

The items on the questionnaire elicited responses from respondents of their instructional leadership practices. The responses to identify instructional leadership practices were selected from one of four response choices: seldom; sometimes; often; and always and coded as "1", "2", "3", and "4" respectively. The decision rule to interpret the response choices on a continuous scale was as follows:

$1.0 \leq M < 1.5$: Seldom

$1.5 \leq M < 2.5$: Sometimes

$2.5 \leq M < 3.5$: Often

$3.5 \leq M \leq 4.0$: Always

The survey instrument was distributed in person to the school heads with the help of research assistants. The study respondents had gathered for a conference and the tendency of the respondents to discuss the survey instrument may have had some effect on their responses. Nevertheless, collecting data from respondents at one location offered a high response rate for the returned survey.

The final number of returned surveys used for the data analyses was 259, constituting a response rate of about 86 %. The results and findings were presented and discussed under the following themes: frequency of instructional leadership practices and differences between instructional leadership practices of heads of high or low performing schools. Means and standard deviations computed for the responses of the study participants and ranked-ordered from the highest to the lowest. The top quarter of instructional leadership practices were identified to determine which of the 10 subscales they belong to. A test of difference of means at 5 % significance level was used to analyse the data collected to ascertain whether there was a significant difference in the instructional leadership practices of heads of high performing schools and non-high performing schools. The grouping was determined using the Ghana Education Service (GES) classification of schools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

To address the research question, what instructional leadership practices are frequently adopted by heads of senior high schools in Ghana? respondents indicated the frequency with which they demonstrate their adoption of a particular instructional leadership practice by selecting one of four response choices: seldom; sometimes; often; and always. First, means and standard deviations were calculated for the responses to each item and rank ordered. The results of the ranked-ordered computed means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Ranked-ordered means of instructional leadership practices

Instructional Leadership Dimension	Mean	SD
Communicate the school's mission to members of the school community	3.71	.31
Develop a focused set of annual goals	3.68	.25
Discuss the school's academic goals with teachers at staff meetings	3.62	.21
Refer to the school's goals in meetings with students	3.62	.36
Encourage teachers to use instructional time for teaching	3.60	.25
Share school's academic progress with students	3.50	.35
Use test results to assess progress toward school goals	3.50	.46
Limit the intrusion of extra and co-curricular activities on instructional time	3.48	.22
Conduct informal observations while walking around campus	3.48	.50
Provide feedback on teacher's instructional practices	3.48	.65
Share student accomplishments with external stakeholders	3.46	.46
Acknowledge teachers' exceptional performance	3.46	.48
Lead teacher professional development	3.40	.78
Set aside time at staff meetings for teachers to share ideas from professional development programmes	3.40	.86
Conduct informal observation in classrooms	3.40	.86
Refer to the school's academic goals when making curricular decisions with teachers	3.40	.88
Ensure that classroom priorities of teachers are consistent with the goals of the school	3.35	.71
Use data on student performance to develop goals	3.34	.24
Take time to interact with teachers	3.34	.74
Monitor the classroom activities to see that it covers the school's curricular objectives	3.33	.53
Reward special efforts by teachers with opportunities for professional recognition	3.33	.66
Reinforce extraordinary performance by teachers at staff meetings	3.33	.71
Compliment teachers privately for their efforts or performance	3.33	.80
Frame school's goals in terms of staff responsibility in meeting them	3.33	.83
Use needs assessment to secure staff input on goal development	3.33	.83
Discuss academic performance results with staff to identify curricular strengths and weaknesses	3.33	.784
Take part in school assemblies	3.30	.28
Use students' results when making curricular decisions	3.30	.31
Actively support the use in the classroom of skills acquired during in-service activities	3.30	.66
Ensure in-service activities attended by staff are consistent with the school's goals	3.30	.71
Recognize student exceptional achievements	3.30	.71
Use assemblies to honour students for academic accomplishments	3.30	.71
Support teachers in their recognition of exceptional accomplishments of students	3.30	.71
Meet individually with teachers to discuss student progress	2.88	.66

Instructional Leadership Dimension	Mean	SD
Ensure students are not called to the administration during class hours	2.85	.51
Attend extracurricular activities	2.60	.54
Ensure absentees are given appropriate sanctions	2.58	.62
Review student work outputs when evaluating classroom instruction	2.55	.52
Assess the overlap between the school's curricular objectives and the school's achievement	2.48	.48
Participate actively in the review of curricular materials	2.48	.55

Out of the top quarter ($n=10$) of instructional leadership practices frequently adopted by the school heads, three of the top practices belong to the “communicate the school goals” subscale, that is, *communicate the school's mission to members of the school community* ($M= 3.71$, $SD= .31$), *discuss the school's academic goals with teachers at staff meetings* ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .21$); *refer to the school's academic goals when meeting with students* ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .36$).

Two each of top practices belong to the sub-scale of “protect instructional time” that is, *encourage teachers to use instructional time for teaching* ($M= 3.60$, $SD = .25$) and *limit the intrusion of extra and co-curricular activities on instructional time* ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .22$) and the sub-scale of “monitor student progress” that is, *share school's academic progress with students* ($M = 3.5$, $SD = .35$) and *use test results to assess progress toward school goals* ($M= 3.5$, $SD = .46$).

The sub-scales of “frame the school's goals”, “maintain high visibility” and “supervise and evaluate instruction” have one instructional leadership practice each of the top sub-scales, that is, *develop a focused set of annual goals* ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .25$), *conduct informal observations while walking around campus* ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .50$), and *provide feedback on teacher's instructional practices* ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .65$) respectively.

The mean of means computed for the 10 sub-scales is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Means of instructional leadership practices sub-scales

Sub-scales of instructional leadership practices	Mean	SD
Communicate the school goals	3.59	.45
Frame the school goals	3.42	.61
Provide incentives for teachers	3.36	.22
Promote professional development	3.35	.41
Provide incentives for learning	3.34	.44
Monitor student progress	3.30	.28
Supervise and evaluate instruction	3.20	.61
Maintain high visibility	3.18	.50
Protect instructional time	3.13	.21
Coordinate the curriculum	2.90	.62

The findings showed that the “communicate the school goals” sub-scale is the most frequently utilized instructional leadership practice and it is always adopted by the school heads. This finding is consistent with the postulates of various authors (e.g., Danielson, 2006; Hall, Negroni, & George, 2013; Lasater, 2016) on effective school leadership who identify communicating and

sharing school goals with stakeholders as foundation upon which all other school leadership practices thrive. Danielson (2006), for example, opines that communication is an important part of education leadership and that in order to maximize student learning, communication among educators, particularly communicating school goals, is essential. The position of Danielson is affirmed by Lasater (2016) who says that effective school leadership is shaped by the key variables of trust, collaboration, professional learning communities, and distributed leadership. Lasater concludes that these variables are held together and given meaning through the skill of communicating the goals of the school by the school leader.

Computed means for the three broad dimensions of instructional leadership practices is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Means of instructional leadership dimensions

Dimension	Mean	SD
Defining the school's goal	3.51	.58
Managing the instructional programme	3.13	.44
Promoting a positive school learning climate	3.27	.25

The results from Table 3 show that per the decision rule, stated earlier, the school heads “always” (i.e., $3.5 \leq M \leq 4.0$) practice the ‘defining the school's goal’ broad dimension of the instructional leadership functions. The results also reveal that the school heads “often” (i.e., $2.5 \leq M < 3.5$) practice both the ‘managing the instructional programme’ and ‘promoting a positive school learning climate’ dimensions of the instructional leadership functions.

This finding is congruent with effective school leadership practices. The findings show that the school heads give priority to defining the school's goals. Authors, such as, Kowalski (2010) describe effective school leaders as those who know what the school should look like in the future. Amakyi (2017) opines that in the absence of such a direction, school personnel tend to be reactive instead of being proactive. Mestry (2017) notes that school leaders pursuing instructional leadership functions are goal-oriented. They take the lead in defining a clear direction for their schools and personally coordinate efforts to increase learner achievement. The finding is thus consistent with research on effective school leadership that highlights defining the goals of a school as a key primary function carried out by a school leader who seeks success for the school.

To address research question two, the data were disaggregated to ascertain if differences existed in the instructional leadership practices frequently adopted by heads of high performing schools ($n = 121$) and the practices frequently adopted by heads of non-high performing schools ($n = 138$). An independent sample t-test of difference of means was conducted using the following hypothesis:

M_1 is the mean score of instructional leadership practices adopted by heads of high performing schools

M_2 is the mean score of instructional leadership practices adopted by heads of non-high performing schools

$H_0: M_1 = M_2$; there is no difference in the mean scores of instructional leadership practices adopted by school heads

$H_1: M_1 \neq M_2$; there is a difference in the mean scores of instructional leadership practices adopted by school heads

Reject H_0 if $p < .05$.

Table 4 depicts the results of the hypotheses tests.

Table 4: Test of difference of means							
Group statistics – Defining the school's goals							
	School Head	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Score (Function)	High performing school	121	3.58	.61	7.32	257	.006
	Non-high performing school	138	3.47	.15			
Group statistics - Managing the instructional programme							
	School Head	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Score (Function)	High performing school	121	3.17	.25	1.05	257	.611
	Non-high performing school	138	3.12	.50			
Group statistics - Promoting a positive school learning climate							
	School Head	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Score (Function)	High performing school	121	3.31	.25	6.81	257	.023
	Non-high performing school	138	3.14	.66			

The results of the independent- samples t-test conducted at 5% significance level show that there was a statistically significant difference in the frequency of adopting the 'defining the school's goals' dimension by school heads of high performing schools and school heads of non-high performing schools, $t(257) = 7.32$, $p = .006$.

Similarly, there was a statistically significant difference in the frequency of adopting the 'promoting a positive school learning climate' dimension by school heads of high performing schools and school heads of non-high performing schools, $t(257) = 6.81$, $p = .023$.

However, there was no statistically significant difference in the frequency of adopting the 'managing the instructional programme' dimension by school heads of high performing schools and school heads of non-high performing schools, $t(257) = 1.05$, $p = .611$.

The findings are consistent with the postulates of research on high performing schools.

School heads of high performing schools focus on defining the school's goals and setting direction for achieving the goals and creating a climate of success for all learners (Fullan, 2014;

Hoerr, 2015; McEwan, 2009; Moorosi & Bush, 2019; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). The authors summarize the defining characteristics of school heads leading high performing schools to be adopting the function of defining the school's goals and sharing that goal and pursuing a supportive climate which focuses on student learning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Extant studies on effective school leadership have identified instructional leadership as a model most prevalent to actualize the mission of the school in promoting learning for all students. The practice of instructional leadership provides focus and direction to establish conditions that support teachers and help learners to succeed. Based on the findings, the study concludes that heads of senior high schools in Ghana actively adopt instructional leadership practices in the administration of the schools. More specifically, the school heads always engage in defining the school's goals and often engage in promoting a positive school learning climate and managing the instructional programme in the school. Also, the study concludes that there is a significant difference in the frequency at which heads of high performing schools and heads of non-high performing schools adopt the broad dimensions of defining the school's goals and promoting a positive school learning climate. Heads of high performing schools adopt the two dimensions more frequently than heads of non-high performing schools.

Based on findings and conclusions reported in this study, the following recommendations for policy and future research are offered. First, the Ghana Education Service (GES) should include in the professional experience qualifications for school heads a curriculum for continuous professional development to support and hone the skills of school heads to actively engage in instructional leadership practices. Second, this study provides no insights into how academic and professional profiles of school heads account for the adoption of instructional leadership practices. This topic needs to be explored in greater depth, especially in relation to preparation of heads in acquisition of knowledge and dispositions toward leading effective schools.

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