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Exploring instructional leadership practices of school principals and the culture of teaching and learning in three primary schools in Johannesburg East District

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Abstract

This study investigated how instructional leadership practices of the school principal impact on the culture of teaching and learning in schools. It is widely known that instructional leadership practices can improve learner outcomes. However, many primary school principals in the South African context do not conceptualise instructional leadership. The quality of education in public schools seems to be at an all-time low with research showing that educational outputs are not matching financial inputs. It is therefore recommended that principals focus their attention on leading, as opposed to the various managerial issues that seems to occupy most of their time.

The research study also explored how principals' instructional leadership practices impact on the culture of the school. School culture is created by all the stakeholders in the school. It is acquired in the form of norms, values, habits, beliefs and perceptions. Therefore, the study also focused on relationships in schools, particularly between principals and teachers and how this affects "culture behaviours" (professional collaboration, affiliative and collegial relationships as well as efficacy and self-determination (Wagner, 2006; Phillips, 1996).

The study was qualitative in nature as it allowed me to have an in-depth understanding of the issues being investigated. The methodologies used were questionnaires and interviews. The participants in the study includes the principal, the deputy principal, the Head of Department (HOD) and the teachers in three ex-Model C schools in Johannesburg East. The schools were selected on the basis of learner outcomes. It included an exemplary performing school, a good performing school and a moderate performing school.

In this study, I used Hallinger's (2011) model of instructional leadership as a conceptual framework –*Leadership for 21st Century Schools,* which identifies three dimensions of the principals' leadership role namely: Defining the schools mission, Managing the Instructional Programmes and Promoting a School Climate as a measure of instructional leadership practices. This model indicates the instructional leadership practices required to improve learner outcomes. Emphasis was placed on the creation of a positive school climate where I explored aspects related to school culture and relationships in schools. This was done in order to ascertain if instructional leadership has a positive influence on school culture which in turn, leads to improved learner outcomes.

My findings indicated that in the exemplary performing school, the principal displayed strong instructional leadership practices. This school is run as a learning organisation where there is an emphasis on professional learning and improved instructional practices. The principal displays strong instructional leadership practices and promotes an organisational culture that places emphasis on professional dialogue and collaboration. This leads to healthy relationships between principals and teachers which in turn, creates a good school culture that exhibits high levels of professional collaboration, affiliative collegiality, as well as self-determination and efficacy.

In the good and moderate performing schools where the instructional leadership practices were not as strong, there was less emphasis on teacher professional development and the organisational culture was not one of shared knowledge and collaboration. Thus, an implication of my study is that principals who practise strong instructional leadership practices are able to establish an effective school culture which will result in commitment from their teaching force and therefore a rich culture of teaching and learning.