

Ways Through Which Principals Acquire the Leadership Competencies Required for Effective Management of Secondary Schools in Nairobi County, Kenya

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Abstract

The last two decades have seen principals in Kenya come under heavy criticism over some serious cases of mismanagement that resulted in some of the worst institutional accidents, disasters/tragedies, unrests and even social and economic crimes that Kenya has witnessed. This study sought to find out ways that principals acquire the leadership competencies required for effective management of secondary schools in Nairobi County. It adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods. The target population was all the principals/deputy principals, heads of departments, teachers, students' leaders and members of the Boards of Management of all public secondary schools in Nairobi County. A sample of 30 schools and their 30 principals/deputy principals, 60 heads of departments, 120 teachers, 180 student leaders and 20 members of the Boards of Management participated in the study. Stratified random technique was used to select the schools, the teachers and the heads of departments to participate in the study. All principals/deputy principals, senior student leaders and their student leaders and heads of Board of Management of the selected schools automatically participated in the study while the other student leaders and other members of Board of Management were selected through random sampling procedure. Data was collected using questionnaires, focus group discussion and interview guide. The quantitative data collected was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11.5. The findings of the study established that , leadership competencies were acquired through pre-service, in-service and on-the-job training. In pre-service training, the principals who had a bachelor's degree had been exposed to a one unit course in education administration in the universities. The unit was also offered as an area of specialization at masters level in public and private universities for those principals who had masters degrees.

Keywords: Principals, Leadership, Competencies, Effective Management

1. Introduction

The school administration is responsible for providing competent leadership in the school in order to achieve educational aims which are the reason for existence of schools (D'Souza, 1997). There are many different personnel at various management levels who are concerned with school management. Among these, the single most important person is the school principal. The cog around which the wheel of the school activities and operations revolve is the principal. The school principal, more than any other person in the school is responsible for school climate, for the outcome of productivity and for satisfaction attained by students and staff (Sullivan, 2006). Reiterating the same point, Daft, (2008) pointed out that, "the principal is that major component of school administration on whose ability and skill, personality and professional competence will largely depend the tone and efficiency of the school." However, besides the principal, there are many other factors that determine the efficiency of the school. Among these are the quality of the students, the school community, the teachers and the instructional materials and resources available, among others. For a principal to be able to provide the required leadership, he/she should have adequate academic and professional qualifications; a full knowledge of the methods and techniques of educational practices, an understanding of the interdependence of the various sections of the school community; sound knowledge of school finance including accounting procedures and a full understanding of the national goals of education as well as the mission of the school (Good, 1998). The principal occupies that important position of management and leadership that controls the characteristics of school effectiveness and is therefore able to determine school outcomes in many respects. When management and leadership of the school is effectively carried out, the result will be improvement in output of the teachers, the learners as well as the support staff which will enhance achievement of the school objectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Education in Africa

Mbamba, (2002) opines that, viewed as a profession or discipline, educational management is relatively young in the African continent. Professional educators in Africa have for a long time managed their educational systems, but they have very much depended by and large on their educational background and on-the-job experience out of which they were expected to acquire knowledge, skills and attitude needed to manage the educational systems effectively and efficiently. Available evidence shows that it is lack of formal or other training in managerial

skills which has been largely responsible for the great deal inefficiency and ineffectiveness observed in performance of many educational systems in Africa.

Indeed, the practice in many African countries like Kenya has been and continues to be the appointment of principals from among classroom teachers who are without any pre-service training. This, many educationists believe, does not guarantee that any good classroom teacher can make a good school manager (Dean, 1995). There have been persistent calls for professional development of principals in many forums. Lingu, (2003) points out that “it is better to train than not, however, for through training, practitioners become more aware or sensitized to various issues of administration.” He further asserts that, rapid socio-economic changes as well as emergent needs within the African continent have among other things made education become complex. Consequently, the management of education system demands sophisticated skills that would enable managers to steer systems effectively. In this regard, there is need for all African countries to institutionalize and reinforce the training of educational managers.

2.2 Education in Kenya

Education in Kenya, like many other African countries for that matter constitutes an important sector in the overall macro level framework of national growth and development. Proper management of the education sector at all levels is of absolute necessity for the successful operation of the education sector. As already pointed out, one of the major constraints to effective and efficient management of education in the country in general and educational institutions in particular is poor management. This problem can best be understood against the background of the growth of educational management as a subject of theory and practice in Africa

2.3. The Contribution of a Principal in Education

Good leadership is required for a successful organization. Principals, the target group of this study must lead effectively in order to influence their teachers towards the accomplishment of their schools’ objectives. Fiendler, (1999) established that highly skilled leadership was required to reconcile and utilize constructively different abilities, viewpoints, attitudes and ideas in the performance of group tasks and organizational missions. Principals therefore, are expected to be highly skilled leaders in order to be effective in attaining school goals. They have responsibility in the development of quality of education which they share with teachers. Principals should be the education leaders who create a school climate and a learning centred atmosphere that encourages professional development of the teachers and the highest success levels of the students (Hyden, 2007). In addition, the principals should possess competencies in administrative task areas such as human resource management, financial resources management and instructional leadership (Hale, 2003). Competence consists of two components, namely knowledge and skills and is defined as “possessing the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to exhibit behaviour (Daft, 2008)”. This requires that a principal need to be trained in both cognitive and psycho-motor competencies.

Graiger, (2005) highlights the importance of principals acting as leaders and emphasizes the fact that educational administrator training programmes should be based on five aspects; that is, theoretical, technical, problem-solving, controlled application and completion of projects which offer a chance to exhibit acquired skills. Coker (2006) summarizes the responsibilities and duties of principals under five similar categories. These include; working effectively with people, an effective business management, preparing a sufficient school building and environment, developing education programme and serving profession.

According to D’Souza, (1997), the main services that a principal should provide include; ability to provide professional leadership to all sections of the school community; ability to understand each part of the school curriculum and how each part relates to the learning programme as a whole; ability to plan ahead and bring such plans to fruition, ability to communicate with, motivate and harmonize the various sections of the school community to work in the interest of the school and a capacity to work effectively with and through other people, singly or in groups. According to Muchiru (1998), many teachers are elevated to head schools without proper training in management practices and therefore lack the requisite leadership competencies for the management of the various administrative tasks. Dadaey (1999), define competencies as “the ability to use knowledge and other capabilities necessary for successful and efficient accomplishment of an appointed task, transition, work, goal realization or performance of a certain role in the business process.” According to him, competencies encompass knowledge, expertise, skills, personal and behavioural characteristics, beliefs, motives and values, among others.

3 Ways Through Which Principals Acquire Training

Professionals in the field of education strongly believe that educational managers such as the secondary school principals can be equipped with the requisite school management competencies through training. This view was also held by Mbamba, (2002) who states that efficient and effective educational managers can be produced by a variety of means, among them through in-service and pre-service education aimed at equipping service educators

with relevant knowledge, skills and technique. Training should enable the educational administrators to understand their roles and how these affect the actions and performance of other people within the organization. Besides, it would enhance their capacity to make better managerial decisions and deal more with deficiencies in the work behaviour of their subordinates. Moreover, it would help them to develop positive attitude towards management and execution of their administrative duties

Akinyi, (2011) contends that leadership competencies of principals could be enhanced through formal and informal training. Formal training could be acquired through pre-service and in-service training whereas informal training could be acquired through experience, interaction and on-the-job training. The researcher notes that, both pre-service and in-service training has been the main ways of preparing educational managers in Western countries. However, in developing countries like Kenya, on-the-job experience has mainly been used.

3.1 Pre-Service Training

Programmes specifically tailored for pre-service training of principals and more specifically secondary school principals are non-existent. The nearest to such a programme is the educational administrative unit taught to Bachelor of Education degree students at the public universities or offered as part of professional studies unit in the teacher training colleges (Onyango, 2001). In the public universities where a Bachelors Degree in Education is offered, educational administration is a common unit taken by all students taking the four year Bachelor of Education degree course. The contents of this course in the public universities are more or less similar. Other than at the Bachelors level, Education Administration is also offered as an area of specialization at the masters' level in the public and private universities. Then there are other post graduate courses – such as Master of Education for primary teacher educators in which some students specialize in Educational Administration (Muoka, 2007).

3.2 In-Service Training

The post-independent period in Kenya witnessed a rapid expansion of secondary school education. The heads of secondary schools were appointed from among classroom teachers, a situation that is still in practice today. There was no clear government policy regarding the pre-service or in-service training for school principals and therefore no locus for conceptualizing, planning, developing and implementing training for principals, until early 1980s. However, starting from around early 1980s, there was a marked shift in government orientation towards improving the management structures at institutional levels especially with regard to in-service training of principals. This commitment culminated in the creation of Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI.) with the assistance of International Development Agency in 1981 and its official establishment in 1988 through legal notice no.565 (Commonwealth Secretariat Report, 2004). Since its official inception, KEMI has mounted several in-service training programmes for various educational personnel including heads of institutions. A large number of both primary and secondary school principals have undergone in-service courses that range from a few days to two weeks in duration.

The government with the assistance of international donors has also initiated specialized programmes aimed at developing principals on the management of schools. In 1996, the government, through the Ministry of Education with the assistance of the Overseas Development Association (O.D.A.-Britain) mounted Primary School Management Project (PRISM). Its objective was to provide in-service training to about 12,000 primary school principals. There have also been efforts made by private organizations to provide in-service training to heads of educational institutions. A case in point is the Kenya Institute of Management (KIM) which, among other management courses mounts two week in-service courses for heads of institutions (MOEST, 2001).

4. Discussion of Findings

The study sought to find out the principals' views on the various ways of acquiring leadership competencies in Kenya. According to the principals, leadership competencies were acquired through pre-service, in-service and on the job training. The latter included experience in other administrative responsibilities such as being a class teacher, head of department, deputy principal and housemaster/ mistress among others.

In pre-service training, the majority of the principals had been exposed to the one unit course in education administration in the university which they said was elementary, sketchy and lacking in management skills content. They therefore said that they had no pre-service training in educational management skills. The bachelor of education programme was basically designed to produce classroom teachers and therefore the principals viewed it as lacking in management skills content necessary for preparing the principals in leadership competencies.

As for in-service training, majority of the principals had received in-service training. Most of them had received it twice while others had received it only once. Ideally, in-service courses should be frequent with a view to refreshing and/or updating the principals on the curriculum or changes in it. The principals expressed shortcomings of the in-service courses. Among these were; that they took a very short duration leading to a

crash programming; that they were not timely because sometimes they came after the principals had made numerous mistakes over the years; that they lacked evaluation system to assess whether the principals had grasped the content and that they failed to address emerging problems in school management since they were not frequent enough.

As for on-the-job training, they had learnt how to manage schools through practical experience as principals. They expressed the view that on-the-job training was the most effective mode of principalship preparation as it moved from theoretical to practical school management issues. The main finding here was that on-the-job training experience involved “trial and error”, sink or swim” experiences. The connotation was that the principals had little or no guidance on how to manage schools and they had to struggle to keep “afloat” as it were.

All in all, the three modes of preparation into the role of principals had some shortcomings hence, the inadequacy in preparation of the principals in the necessary management skills. However, it emerged that good outcomes would be guaranteed if the three modes were improved. Pre-service training would be more effective if it would provide adequate content on the management skills

The study required principals to respond to questions pertaining to the various courses they had undertaken and the type of training or professional development they desired. The principals were asked to state the extent to which the course in educational administration that they had undertaken in the universities or colleges had prepared them for the management of secondary schools. All the principals agreed that the course had provided them with sound knowledge and understanding of various facets of educational administration. However, they pointed out that the course was too theoretical and was not tailored towards providing skills in school management. They pointed out that there was a wide gap between the course and the field of practice. One teacher commented:

‘The course taught at university just gives one a very general theoretical background on educational administration. Hardly any skills are taught and most probably that is not the intention of the course. So, in terms of skills required to manage schools, the course was not quite useful. This should be followed by a full and proper training in school management’.

The principals also pointed out that the mode of delivering the lessons on educational administration at the universities/colleges did not give room to students to ask questions. The lecture method was reported as essentially one way traffic. They mentioned that given their experience in the practical management of their schools, they had realized that the lecturers were not up to date with regard to issues in actual school management. The principals recommended that there should be a course which is specifically tailored to suit the needs of practicing secondary school principals in the management of secondary schools.

Other than the educational administration courses taken at the university or college, all the principals had not undertaken any pre-service training. However, the majority indicated that they had undertaken induction courses which in some cases had been organized by the Kenya Secondary Schools Principals Association (KSSHA) and in-service courses organized by the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI). The majority of the principals had at least gone through one in-service training session with the institute. The principals stated that the KEMI in-service course ranges from a few days to two weeks in duration. Many of the principals felt that the duration was rather short to cover certain critical areas of school management. One of the most frequently mentioned topic was financial management. As one principal commented:

‘The management of school financial resources is a very critical area of school management. Out there, people take even an year to learn the basics of accounting, for example. For someone to expect us to master aspects of financial management in two weeks... Is that really possible? Problems in the management of school funds will not be blamed on the bursar but on me’

The principals were quite critical at the whole approach towards in-servicing of the principals by KEMI. They pointed out the long periods between different courses and the limited period for each session. They emphatically stated that the courses were woefully inadequate to meet their school management needs. They agreed that by and large, in-service training had largely been unsuccessful in bringing out significant transfer of the skills taught and knowledge in school management processes. The principals however acknowledged that in-service training programmes were indispensable so long as they were properly organized.

The principals were asked about the relevance of the content covered at the in-service courses organized by KEMI to various aspects of school management. The majority stated that the courses were somewhat relevant to their needs as principals but the time allocated to cover them was rather limited, the mode of delivering the lessons did not allow them to fully acquire the skills required and that the courses were given on ad hoc basis. The majority of the principals felt that the courses had only to some extent assisted them to cope with the various challenges of school management. They said that lack of follow-up programs after the course had been delivered was a major anomaly in the whole approach to in-service training. The principals aspired for continuous guidance after undertaking in-service courses. They suggested that the function of peer-groups clubs, study circles, among others, would be good forums of sharing and exchanging experiences

pertaining to school management. They also felt that it would be a good idea to continuously monitor and assess school activities of principals. Such assessment, they recommended, should constitute part of the requirements for promotion of principals to the next grade.

The principals' views regarding their preferences in relation to professional development in terms of certification, duration, content, resource persons, among others were sought. The principals agreed unanimously that it was time the government considered the issue of pre-service training of principals seriously. This, they stated, would go a long way in streamlining secondary school management. School based in-service training should be an integral component of principals' professional development, the principals suggested. For pre-service training, the principals stated that there should be a full-time course at the end of which the principals should be examined and given certificates upon successful completion of the course. According to the principals, such a course should be organized in such a way that they were removed from their positions – that is, the course should be school based. This approach, the principal stated, would allow them to practice the new skills learned and refine or strengthen certain skills they "possessed". Many principals preferred a diploma level training while others suggested a Bachelors and Masters Degree in school management.

The principals stated that the courses should cover all aspects of school management with a view to inculcating the essential competencies required for effective and efficient secondary school management. They added that the mode of delivering the lessons should be one that leads to skill acquisition, for example, case study, simulation, role play and other problems solving approaches.

5. Conclusion

The study sought to find out how the principals acquired the leadership competencies required for effective and efficient management of secondary schools in Nairobi County. According to the principals, leadership competencies were acquired through the various training levels which included, pre-service, in-service and on-the-job training. In pre-service training, the principals who had a bachelor's degree had been exposed to a one unit course in education administration in the universities. The unit was also offered as an area of specialization at master's level in public and private universities for those principals who had master's degrees. Majority of the principals had taken in-service programmes. A good number had received it twice while others had received it only once. This was done in Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI) and Kenya Institute of Management (KIM) where principals would undergo in-service courses that ranged from a few days to two-week duration. As for the on-the-job training, the principals learnt how to manage schools through practical experience as principals. This was the most effective mode of principal-ship preparation since it moved from theoretical to practical school management.

6. Recommendations

The principals were also asked to state some of the adjustments that should be made so as to improve on in-service courses – particularly the ones that were given at Kenya Education Management Institute. Their suggestions were as follows: proper needs assessment should be conducted by KEMI officials before mounting the courses so as to find out the areas the principals would wish to be trained in; KEMI courses should be made affordable so that many principals and teachers could attend; ample time should be allocated to each topic during training for the topics to be effectively taught; more content should be covered to cater for the expanding needs of the principals in the management of the schools; the courses should be offered regularly so as to keep them up dated on the new trends and that the scope of the courses should be expanded to cater for even heads of departments as well as all the other teachers with responsibilities in the schools.

In-service training on the other hand needed should be made mandatory to ensure uniform exposure of all principals and to ensure they have a balance between duration and content to be covered; have an evaluation system to enable facilitators to know whether or not they are achieving their objectives and to be frequent enough so that it could address emerging issues on the school management. On the other hand, on-the-job training call for proper induction of newly appointed principals and enough forums where successful experienced principals share experiences and views with other principals.

On the resource persons involved in the in-service training programme, the principals suggested that it would be desirable to complement the resource persons who were mainly from the Ministry of Education headquarters and KEMI with lecturers from the universities. The principals believed that this approach would enrich theory and practice of school management. The principals also pointed out that the modes of delivery of the courses were somewhat suitable. They however suggested methods that could enable them to acquire and practice the skills taught, such as case studies, simulation and problem solving strategies.

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