

Closing the gap: Analytical study on leadership and demonstrated competencies among primary school head teachers in Rwanda

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Abstract

This paper aimed at analyzing leadership competencies among primary school head teachers (HTs) with respect to their current school leadership practices and five key performance standards identified as creating strategic direction, leading learning, leading teaching, managing the school as an organization and finally community and parental involvement. The study utilized a mixed methods approach that integrated both qualitative and quantitative as a means of triangulation. A comparison of the mean scores for head teachers and teachers revealed a correlation coefficient with a negative linear relationship (-.34) between HTs and teachers on leading teaching and a weak linear relationship (.1) on creating strategic direction. It also confirms that there is a difference between head teacher current school leadership practices and the identified professional performance standards. These findings indicate that there is need for provision of specific school leadership trainings to respond to the broadened roles and responsibilities of primary school head teachers.

Key words: Leadership standards, competencies, organization, learning, teaching, community engagement

Background

After the 1994 genocide, the government of Rwanda embarked on the process of restarting and reshaping the education system which had broken down. This led to the adoption of the Education Sector Policy (ESP) in 1998 with a specific focus on providing solutions to challenges in the education sector (Ministry of Education [MINEDUC], 2003). Starting from the year 2000, the country main agenda was on expanding access to basic education. This initiative has so far succeeded in boosting enrolment substantially with primary gross enrolment reaching 127% in 2009. In addition, with the abolition of school fees, the net enrolment increased from 86.6% to 91.7% in primary schools from 2005 to 2010/11 respectively (MINEDUC, 2003). This rapid expansion required appropriate innovative strategies to ensure that school leaders demonstrated the skills and competences for improving student learning by shaping the conditions in which teaching and learning occur.

To cope with challenges that came with expansion of education sector, the Rwandan government initiated educational reforms which among them led to adoption of the decentralization policy of educational management. One of the major feature of this policy was that management and implementation responsibilities of the central government moved to districts and school levels. However, with these reforms UNICEF's (2014) report indicates that school leadership remains one of the critical challenges facing the education system. Further the report indicates that the role, responsibilities and expectations of school leaders within the current situation of education system, has made their job challenging, stressful and frustrating. According to the report, challenges faced by head teachers in Rwanda can be grouped into the following clusters: (i) challenges related to school administration (ii) challenges related to teachers, (iii) challenges related to students, (iv) challenges related to parents and local communities involvement as well as (v) challenges related to infrastructure. These challenges are critical need to be addressed in order for schools to promote quality education. A closer look at these challenges reveals that what the education sector faces is the lack of sufficient school leaders who are

capable to initiate and implement various innovations that are critical for school improvement in general and student performance in particular.

The recent structural changes in the education system have further created a complex leadership situation for head teachers who are not fully equipped with competencies to adjust accordingly. Notable among these changes is the high student population, combined levels of nursery, primary and secondary sections all under the same head teacher, fixed mindset of some of the local stakeholders, high dropout that is hard to capture in the official reports and lack of ownership of instruction that is characterized by a backward shift of blame to subsequent grades. It is in this context that in 2011, a unit of school leadership and management was set up under Rwanda Education Board [REB] to address issues related to the quality of school leadership in Rwandan schools. This initiative was reinforced in 2014 by the initiation of a continuous professional development in school leadership offered by the University of Rwanda - College of Education (UR-CE) through a memorandum of understanding between the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) and the Ministry of Education. The focus of this partnership was to build leadership and management competencies for primary school head teachers.

It is in light of this scenario that this study was undertaken to explore the link between the current practices of primary school head teachers and new set of expected competences. This study therefore, intends to answer the following research questions:

- How do head teachers rate their competences against the prescribed school leadership standards?
- How do teachers perceive their head teachers competences in relation to leading teaching and learning?
- Is there a significant difference between head teachers leadership practices and expected competences against the school leadership standards?

Literature Review

While the literature on school leadership is vast, this study focuses on school leadership professional standards appropriate to school leaders. Standards in this sense can be understood as definitions of what someone should know and be able to do to be considered competent in a particular domain (Ingvarson, Anderson, Gronn, and Jackson, 2006). The Ministry of Education came up with a vision of ensuring that every school has a competent school leader in place by the end of 2015. This leadership was expected to transform schools so that every student has the opportunity to benefit from the best possible education. The purpose of setting leadership standards therefore was geared towards supporting this aspiration by clarifying the minimum core expectations of school leaders, providing a framework to support professional development and certification, improving recruitment practices, monitoring and evaluation and creating a culture of reflection and self-evaluation

The leadership standards are divided into five key non-hierarchical structure of which, when taken in totality, represent the role of the school leader. Whilst particular knowledge and skills are assigned to each one of the five standards. It is important to emphasize that the standards are interdependent and many are applicable across all key areas.

Standard 1 refers to Creating Strategic Direction. This dimension of leadership practice includes actions aimed at developing goals for schooling and inspiring both teachers and students towards a particular

vision. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) argue that building a vision and setting directions is one of the core practices of successful leadership. Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) also identify establishment of goals and expectations as first among school leadership behaviors. They view goal setting in the education context as these establishment, communicating and monitoring of learning goals, standards and expectations. This process calls for the involvement of teachers and others so that there is clarity, consensus and ownership of the goals. It is anticipated that by developing a shared vision through consensus on goals and holding high performance expectations, school leaders will have a significant positive impact on student achievement. In turn it is also expected that conditions such as school culture, key teacher-related outcomes such as teacher satisfaction, commitment, empowerment and efficacy will ultimately improve (Leithwood and Sun, 2009).

Standard 2 refers to leading Learning. In academic setting, this standard is regarded as being significant by the fact that the work function of educational leaders is to facilitate improvements in student learning. Specifically, in line with this standard, an effective school leader is the one who promotes the success of all students. He oversees the management of the school as an organization in terms of its operations, resources allocation for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Leithwood et al., 2004). This standard is pivotal within the idea of several researchers that learning and teaching are at the heart of head teachers' tasks (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003; MacBeath and Dempster, 2009). Their views resonate with the argument that school head teachers lead the whole school community towards learner achievement. They establish, enhance and sustain positive ethos and culture of learning through which every learner is able to learn effectively and realize their potential. The same views are shared by Pont et al. (2008) who say that leaders enhance student learning by creating opportunities and safe environments for students to participate in learning inside and outside of schools. They achieve this by defining goals, measuring progress, holding teachers accountable as well as managing resources strategically for effective learning.

Standard 3 refers to leading teaching. Here again literature is clear that effective leaders devote considerable amount of time to supporting teachers in their efforts to strengthen the quality of instruction (Conley, 1992; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). Educational scholars have long argued that head teachers should serve as instructional leaders in their schools and that they should direct their efforts on creating a school environment conducive to teaching and learning (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Murphy et al. (2007) point out that the primary role of head teacher as instructional leader may take varied forms for instance, leaders make sure that teachers have all the necessary materials and resources required for them to be highly effective educators. In terms of social and human capital, leaders are expected to provide access to new sources of knowledge for the purpose of creating opportunities to expand, enhance, and refine their instructional skills. Furthermore, school leaders should be active in management of the curriculum and teaching programs, through monitoring and evaluation. They also build capacity of teachers through professional development and by establishing collaborative work cultures (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Branch, Hanushek and Rivkin (2012) also argue that effective leaders demonstrate leadership beyond the school borders by engaging with others whose knowledge, experience and skills may be harnessed in the interests of the school. Rightfully put, this means that effective leaders create learning communities within and outside schools that ensure that teachers have many

opportunities to work and learn from. This includes sharing ideas and knowledge, developing and testing new approaches of teaching and learning as well as utilizing student performance data for further action. These initiatives extend into associations with other schools, to professional networks, systems authorities, university researchers, politicians and civic leaders.

Standard 4 refers to managing the school as an organization. School leaders are charged with making appropriate decisions about how effectively the school's structures, policies, people and resources should be organized and managed in order to provide an effective and safe learning environment. An effective school leader knows how to use data strategically to inform resource allocation in order to enhance productivity, efficiency. Baikie (2002) observed that school leaders deal with human resources, which have to be properly managed towards the attainment of educational goals. Further, Ehiamentor (2001) notes that, apart from human resources, school leaders should make sure that school facilities are well managed and utilized for the benefit of learners. It is therefore seen that schools that have well managed facilities and instructional materials such as libraries with books, equipped laboratories, teaching and learning materials will perform better than where the facilities are not available or are available but not properly managed. Finally, Aguokogbou (2003) supplements this position with the view that school leaders should be able to analyze how resource inputs in school should best be distributed, utilized and managed to optimize school outputs. This should aim at encouraging successful teaching and learning that promotes continuous improvement.

Standard 5 is focusing on Community and Parental Involvement. Research has demonstrated that schools organized as communities, rather than bureaucracies have a propensity to exhibit academic success (Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; Louis & Miles, 1990). Logically, it follows then that an effective leader always keeps in mind that when plans for partnerships are linked to school goals for student success, stakeholder's involvement can considerably affect students' learning and development (Epstein, 2001; Sheldon, 2003). School-community connection may be seen as a formal partnership between the school and another local organization. This connection creates opportunities for students to learn and establish linkages into the community for real-life experiences (Murphy et al., 2007). Similarly, it is pivotal for school leaders to develop and sustain partnership programs that provide more opportunities for families and other stakeholders in activities that support all students' progress and success in school. Some researchers emphasize participation in activities that take place in school such as parent attendance at school events and participation in parent-teacher organizations (PTOs). Others include activities that take place at home, such as homework and discussions about school issues between parents and children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). It is significant to note that in order to make partnerships work, effective leaders should endeavor to provide parents with assessment results on an ongoing basis (Levine & Stark, 1982). This means that information about student progress is communicated promptly and regularly to students and parents at all times.

In precise terms, leadership competencies need to be viewed in conjunction with a more general understanding of school, student learning and available resources. Moreover, it is a key stipulated mandate that the school leadership is required to focus more on the core purpose of the school by providing all students with the best possible opportunities to learn. Consequently, school head teachers must have a deep and thorough

knowledge of teaching and learning so that they are able to serve as instructional and organizational leaders focused on the school's core purpose. It is clear that what school leaders do and the impact of their behaviors on teaching and learning is critical and has been the subject of scholarly inquiry for decades.

While the magnitude of the leader's role in contemporary school reform efforts in Rwanda has become a topic of great interest by policy makers and scholars, there is need to build capacity in form of leadership competencies within work settings. In view of this, the increased attention on school leadership and its potential to facilitate powerful teaching and learning has stimulated policy makers and researchers to develop performance standards. In order to bring about meaningful change, the standards should be strengthened and aligned with the evolving educational and leadership needs of 21st century schools. It is therefore significant to understand that the analysis of how school head teachers develop leadership expertise must recognize the broad and enduring influence of school leadership standards.

Methodology

The study utilized a mixed methods approach that integrated both qualitative and quantitative data with the aim of using the strengths of one method to balance the weaknesses of the other. Quantitative data were collected using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire that was administered to both primary HTs and 5 most experienced teachers from each of the 17 purposively selected schools. The selection of schools was based on their location within the vicinity of the so called 'schools of excellence'. This sample constitutes more than 50% of the targeted population that was deemed appropriate for the study. In total 100 questionnaires were completed by the respondents with a response rate of 98 %. Qualitative data were collected using observation whereby a check list of evidence-based competences was provided to measure performance indicators per standards. In addition, interviews were conducted for more reflection on the current and needed level of proficiency and competency perceived by the head teachers and teachers. From each school, focus group discussions were conducted with the 5 most experienced teachers and one-on-one interview with head teachers. Focusing on school leadership standards, clear sets of ethical and practical guidelines were agreed with interviewees in the early stages of the study. The validity and reliability of the instrument were ensured through a validation workshop with experts in school leadership' and pilot testing in the field. Data obtained from this test is detailed in table 1.

Standards	HT	Teachers	Correlation coefficient of the mean	HTs	Teachers	HTs	Teachers
		Mean				Reliability coefficients	
Creating strategic direction	4.20	3.91	0.10	0.72	1.00	0.984	α 0.993
Leading of learning	4.31	3.89	0.41	0.75	0.99	0.993	0.994
Leading teaching	4.12	4.00	-0.34	0.73	0.90	0.987	0.997
Managing the school as an organization	4.27	3.72	0.13	0.68	1.08	0.984	0.984
Parental involvement	4.25	3.84	0.73	0.71	0.97	0.978	0.987

Table 1: Reliability, standard deviation and mean scores on school leadership standards

A reliability analysis based on the 5-point Likert scale addressing the different domains of the standards, shows that all subscales are reliable, with Cronbach's Alpha values in between .978 and .997 for both teachers and HTs. Quantitative data collected was entered into a SPSS program and analyzed by calculating means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients for each research question, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the aims of the study focusing on head teachers and teachers' perceptions on critical school leadership competencies by examining if there were any significant differences in each of five school leadership standards. Their mean scores, Standard Deviations (SD) and the correlation coefficient of the mean were summarized and analyzed for the five school leadership standards in the table below.

Standards	HT	Teachers	Correlation coefficient of the Mean	HT	Teachers
	<i>Mean</i>			<i>SD</i>	
Creating strategic direction	4.20	3.91	0.10	0.72	1.00
Leading of learning	4.31	3.89	0.41	0.75	0.99
Leading teaching	4.12	4.00	-0.34	0.73	0.90
Managing the school as an organization	4.27	3.72	0.13	0.68	1.08
Parental involvement	4.25	3.84	0.73	0.71	0.97

Table 2: mean scores on head teachers' competencies the five leadership standards

When comparing the mean scores for head teachers and teachers, table 2 shows a difference with teachers scoring lower than their head teachers. This difference is well indicated by the correlation coefficient of the mean score whereby there is a negative linear relationship (-.34) between HTs and teachers on the standards of leading

teaching and weak linear relationship (.1) on the standard of creating strategic direction. This variation shows that there are differing opinions from head teachers' self-rating and teacher's assessment of their competences with the later rating consistently at lower rate. However there is a positive linear relationship of 0.73 on Standard parental involvement, an indicator that head teachers' competences on community and parental involvement is high.

Information gathered from interviews indicate that while head teachers reported that schools had good partnership and the school vision was jointly elaborated with the school leadership, teachers claimed not to be involved fully in the decision-making process and that community and parents were not actively participating in their children's' education. Dimmock (1995) points out that when head teachers execute essential tasks, teaching and learning improve. The importance of the school leader is underscored by Ubben and Hughes (1989)

observation that ‘there may be some bad schools with good head teachers but rarely an effective school with a bad head teacher’. In essence, the head teacher who works with others enhances conditions for evaluating the school’s performance. School community partnerships help to identify priorities for continuous improvement, developing policies and practices, ensuring that resources are efficiently and effectively utilized to achieve the school’s aims and objectives (Hussain et al., 2011). With regards to teaching and learning standard, a large number of head teachers claim taking full responsibility for raising the quality of teaching and learning and for students’ achievements. They procure teaching aids, create positive learning environment and ensure that rules and regulations for the schools are in place and respected. However, in contrast, some of the teachers explained that materials provided to them were not enough and not appropriate, especially for upper primary level, where one book is shared by more than one student.

In addition, some teachers were not satisfied with head teachers’ Commitments on maintaining students discipline and encouraging learners to do more exercises and home works in a bid to increase their achievement. Donham (2008) argues that instructional leaders shape the school culture, sets expectations for the school’s staff, and usually has the final word in budget decisions. Stewart (2006) adds that instructional leadership is widely recognized as important in restructuring the school with effort to define the school’s mission and goals, manage the instructional program, and promote a safe school environment. It is therefore such competencies that were found to be rare among most head teachers, and hence, a justification for quality head teacher training programs

Actual observation on competencies demonstrated

In terms of organizing the school, head teachers generally indicated that they established parent teacher committees (PTCs) and ensured school structures and policies are respected. They also organized regular meetings with school community and ensured that collaboration with teachers and parents is enhanced and that parents committee is established and PTC meetings are organized. To ascertain this, an observation was conducted to note evidence of performance demonstrated by head teachers. The observed data are categorized against the five leadership standards and are illustrated in the following table.

Standards	Observation check-list	
	Demonstrated	Not demonstrated
Creating strategic direction	61.0%	39.0%
Leading of learning	57.9%	42.1%
Leading teaching	64.1%	35.9%
Managing the school as an organization	74.1%	25.9%
Parental involvement	88.2%	11.8%

Table 3: Observation check-list about competencies demonstrated by head teachers

The ratings indicate that head teachers demonstrated their competencies at 61%, for the first standard on creating strategic direction for the school. There were critical gaps in head teacher’s competencies for the second standard where school head teachers demonstrated their competencies at 57.9% and did not demonstrate them at 42.1%. However, on parental involvement, it appears that head teachers demonstrated

sufficient competencies at 88.2% against 11.8%. With regard to managing the school as an organization, head teachers demonstrated their competencies at 74.1% against 25.9%.

Comparison between head teachers leadership practices and expected competences

The study also examined if there were any significant differences in perceptions of critical leadership competencies between school teachers and their head teachers. Statistical significance of the mean scores is detailed in table 4.

Standards	HTs		Statistical significance of the mean per standard (p-value)	
	Mean			
Creating strategic direction	4.20	3.91	0.003	significant*
Leading of learning	4.31	3.89	3.900	n.s
Leading teaching	4.25	3.84	0.00007	significant*
Managing the school as an organization	4.12	4.00	0.310	n.s
Parental involvement	4.27	3.72	6.250	n.s

Table 4: significance level of the mean scores Note-- n.s not significant; * $p < .05$ =significant 0.310

With a confidence level of 95%, for creating strategic direction and leading teaching, the p-value respectively indicates that there is a statistically significance result with only 0.003% and 0.007% chance that the connection between the mean scores are the result of chance or error. This is small to be scientifically relevant. Standards on leading learning, managing the school as an organization and parental involvement produced no statistical significance with probabilities of 3.9, 0.3 and 6.25 respectively. The relationship between the mean scores can be due to random chance alone.

The analysis of data from the two assessment tools reveals that the head teachers' opinions from the questionnaires were not matching with competences demonstrated from the observation check-list. HTs claim to demonstrate a significant leadership competence per each domain of the standard, with only a small portion of respondents disagreeing or entirely disagreeing with statement pertaining to the professional standards. This suggests that perceptions of HTs towards their own leadership competences are far from the reality. This is quite similar to opinions of teachers that also seem to be different from the findings obtained from observation checklist. The possible explanation of this discrepancy would be that teachers do not feel comfortable to negatively criticize their head teachers, or that head teachers rate themselves high because they have not set their performance goals to a level beyond what they are comfortable to do.

Quantitatively, the study findings were consistent with findings from interviews where in many cases head teachers were of the view that they had adequately accomplished certain tasks pertaining to communicating the school vision or to providing teaching and learning materials. However, teachers strongly indicated that they were not fully involved in decision making. These findings are consistent with Bush, Glover and Sood's (2006) argument that research in the field of educational leadership has been carried out with purpose to systematically describe what principals actually do and sometimes head teachers' ratings of themselves do not match actual performances. While this may at times be difficult to establish, Osler (2006) observes that, not much is known about the relationship between what is being done and what effective school leaders should know and be able to do.

A number of empirical studies demonstrate that many countries have been making an effort to define what is expected from school leaders (Ingvarson et al, 2006). In doing so, the key should be emphasis on their competencies in improving school functioning. Leadership competencies should be aligned with developed standards which specify the knowledge and skills necessary for school leaders to accomplish respective tasks (Pont et al, 2008; Barber and Mourshed, 2007). Today, the core challenge facing schools in Rwanda is improving student achievement and decreasing the achievement gap. Such improvement ultimately depends mainly on school leadership that ranks high on the list of factors making a substantial difference to the progress students make in school (Robinson et al., 2008). Available evidence suggests that effective school leaders play a significant role in boosting academic achievement for all students (Todd, 2007). This leadership also enhances the effectiveness of their teaching staff by consistently taking leadership actions to improve outcomes of learners (Oberg, 2006).

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study portray a somewhat promising view of the current status of school leadership. Although these results are encouraging, education leaders must undertake the responsibility of improving primary school head teachers' abilities to employ effective leadership practices and competencies. The information gathered from the survey, focus groups and through observation data consistently confirm that there is a great difference between the reality and the desired situation. This concern was strengthened by head teachers' views about the strategies to be put in place to improve their leadership. These include working hand in hand with parents and local authorities, having timely and annual plan as well as setting objectives to be achieved.

Findings of this study provide a broadened view of school leadership where the head teachers' role has shifted from a narrow focus on management of school as individual to including a range of stakeholders (head teachers, managers, teachers, faith-based organizations, parents and surrounding community) to have a shared sense of responsibility in managing the school. Although there is an abundance of studies related to school leadership, this study adds to the available body of knowledge about head teacher leadership. Specifically, this applies to the relationship between the existing head teacher's practices and the five established school leadership standards by the Ministry of Education in Rwanda. This study therefore adds another dimension to educators' construction of understanding of school headship by creating another bridge between research, theory and practice. Findings indicate the need for provision of specific school leadership trainings to respond to the broadened roles and responsibilities of primary school leaders. Particularly, there is need to have regular continuous professional development skewed towards enhancing their knowledge and skills in school improvement planning and in setting and communicating the school vision to all stakeholders.

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