Research

Principals' instructional leadership practices in selected nursing and midwifery colleges under the Christian Health Association of Malawi

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Background. The job description of principals of the Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM) nursing and midwifery colleges highlights instructional leadership. However, it is not known whether CHAM college principals practise instructional leadership as stipulated in their job descriptions.

Objective. To explore the instructional leadership of CHAM college principals in managing their institutions.

Methods. This descriptive qualitative study was conducted with six CHAM college principals. Purposive sampling was used, and data were collected through in-depth interviews and analysed using thematic analysis.

Results. The study found that principals tried to indirectly implement instructional leadership practices in their institutions. However, they experienced a level of strain between their instructional leadership and their administrative practices.

Conclusion. We recommend that principals be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to provide instructional leadership. They should also take advantage of professional development opportunities to improve instructional leadership.

Keywords. Instructional leadership practices , Malawi, nursing, midwifery.

Instructional leadership comprises educational leadership that focuses on schools' technical core responsibilities of teaching and learning by defining the school's mission, managing the education programme and promoting a positive school learning environment.[1] The instructional leader prioritises improving of instruction and making efforts to realise the vision of the school.[1] One significant dimension of instructional leadership is the management of teaching and learning programmes. This is associated with the principal's role in working with teachers in areas related to educational technology, curricula and instruction. The principal of a nursing and midwifery college is the chief executive officer for the college and is responsible for the overall general administration of the academic duties under the supervision of the college board chairperson.[2] The job description for college principals, as provided by the Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM) secretariat, stipulates that principals are responsible for training students, reviewing and implementing the curriculum, and supervising and appraising students and staff.[2]

Interestingly, this suggests that principals' tasks hinge heavily on teaching and learning, which are directly related to instructional leadership principles. However, whether CHAM college principals practise instructional leadership, as stipulated in their job descriptions, is unknown. Hence, it is essential to understand how CHAM college principals play an instructional leadership role.

Instructional leadership is critical to achieving academic success. Some studies conducted in Africa and globally report that learner achievement is related to principals' instructional leadership practices[3-7] and also reveal the effects and importance of instructional leadership, in contrast to different types of leadership.[7,8] However, most principals in developing countries do not fully practise instructional leadership.[9,10] Furthermore, the literature on leadership practices in most developing countries is still in its infancy.[10-12]

Instructional leadership varies according to context.[6,11] For example, school principals in the USA, Turkey and Malaysia exhibit instructional leadership practices at high levels[8,13,14] compared with South Africa, Uganda and Nigeria.[12,15,16] A study conducted in Malawi secondary schools revealed that secondary school principals promoted teaching and learning.[13] These findings can help us to improve our understanding of instructional leadership in CHAM colleges. The current study was conducted to explore the instructional leadership practices of principals at CHAM nursing and midwifery colleges in Malawi. An understanding of how nursing college leadership executes its role can improve nursing and midwifery education in colleges, as best practices will be shared among college leaders.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were as follows:
- to describe instructional leadership practices exhibited by principals in managing instructional programmes;
- to identify facilitators of instructional leadership; and
- to establish barriers to practising instructional leadership.

This study was guided by the second dimension of the Instructional Leadership Model regarding the managing of instructional programmes.

Managing the instructional programme focuses on the principal's role in managing the technical core.[10] This dimension includes the following leadership functions: supervision, evaluation of instruction, curriculum co-ordination and student progress monitoring. It also focuses on the co-ordination and control of instruction and the curriculum.[14] The framework explains that co-ordination and control of the school's academic programme remain a key leadership responsibility of the principal. The framework guided the formulation of the study objectives, data collection tools, analysis and discussions.

Methods

Research design
This study used a descriptive, natural constructivist qualitative research approach to explore the instructional leadership practices of principals in greater detail and depth. The conceptual essence was derived from the participants' meaning of instructional leadership practices regarding the documented second dimension of such practices.[17] Data were collected through individual interviews, which allowed for identifying and describing the themes.

Setting
This study was conducted in May 2020 at six CHAM colleges. CHAM is a system of church-owned health facilities and training colleges that operate 11 nursing colleges. Nine CHAM nursing colleges offered a 3-year Nursing and Midwifery Technician (NMT) diploma programme, while the other two offered a 4-year Registered Nursing (RN) degree programme. CHAM nursing colleges were chosen because they emphasise instructional leadership in the job description of their college principals.[1]

Participants
The target population for this study comprised nine principals of CHAM colleges who had worked for >6 months in their current position, as they were expected to know instructional leadership. However, only six principals were eligible to participate in the study, as the others did not meet the inclusion criteria. There were male and female study participants; their ages ranged from 40 to 55 years. Four participants had a Master's degree and two had a Bachelor's degree. Three participants had served as principals for <2 years and the other three had served as college principals for 3 - 4 years. All participants had served in different leadership positions for >6 years and had experience of teaching, with a minimum of <5 years and a maximum of >15 years.

Sample size
The total sample size of the study was six, because some participants did not meet the inclusion criteria as they had served for <6 months in the principal position.

Sampling technique
Purposive sampling was used in this study. A purposive sample comprised respondents who were likely to provide information regarding the phenomenon under investigation.[11] In this case, the sample was composed of principals of colleges who had worked for >6 months in their current position, as they were expected to know instructional leadership.

Data collection instrument
The data were collected in English using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions and probes. Probes were based on the information provided by the participating principals. The development of the interview guide was guided by the second dimension of the instructional leadership model according to Hallinger and Wang, as well as the available literature on instructional leadership. The questions related to how the principals managed the instructional programme.

Data collection procedure
The principals were visited in their colleges and provided with the necessary information about the nature and purpose of the research and the value of their contributions. They were made aware of their right to participate in the study and withdraw at any stage of the data collection process. They signed a consent form indicating their agreement to participate in the study. Confidentiality of the information was guaranteed, as the identity and information provided by the participants were kept confidential and anonymous using codes. The data collected were kept secure and could be accessed only by the researcher and supervisor. Interviews with the principals were conducted one-on-one by the researcher and an interviewer and assistant, whose duty was to take field notes and verify the information. The assistant observed non-verbal signs and cues from participants during the interview process. The researcher would tune the ordering and depth of probing of individual questions to investigate further issues raised. Each participant had one interview session, which lasted 1 hour on average. For anonymity of responses, the respondents were labelled from P1 to P6.

Data analysis
Data from the in-depth interviews were digitally recorded and prepared through verbatim transcription immediately following the interview and stored on a computer for easy retrieval. Coded and thematic content analysis was performed manually following the six steps of Brooks *et al.*[18] First, the researcher repeatedly read the data to familiarise themselves and develop a deeper understanding of the data. Codes were then generated by pinpointing keywords in the responses, including *a priori* themes from Hallinger and Wang's instructional leadership model. Subsequently, the themes were organised into meaningful clusters, and new themes emerged. This was followed by defining an initial coding template, applying the initial template to additional data, and modifying it as necessary. Finally, the research report was presented.

Ethical considerations
The study proposal was reviewed and approved by the College of Medicine Research and Ethics Committee (COMREC), University of Malawi (ref. no. P.03/19/263). Before the participants were selected, the CHAM secretariat granted permission for the study and referred the researcher to the CHAM college principals, who gave verbal permission. This step was necessary because the college principals were employees of CHAM. Informed verbal and written consent were obtained from all participants in the study. Codes were used instead of the participants' real names to ensure that the interview guides only revealed the characteristics needed in the data analysis and not the identities of the individual participants.

Trustworthiness of the study
In this study, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability determined trustworthiness.[19,20] To ensure credibility during data collection, the researcher established a rapport before commencing the interviews and developed a trusting relationship that enhanced the participants' willingness

to exchange information. Detailed field notes of the interviews included in the analysis were retained. The researcher also employed member checking by asking participants to validate whether the analysis and interpretation represented an accurate account of their views and experiences expressed.[21] The participants affirmed that the summaries reflected their views, feelings and experiences. To demonstrate the applicability of the findings to other contexts, this study used a purposive sampling method, and the researcher included sufficient descriptive data to allow readers to assess their applicability to similar contexts.

The researcher ensured the completeness and accuracy of interviews. The data collection method, analysis and interpretation were described as part of the dependability of the study. This helped to demonstrate how the research could be replicated. An audit trial was also used, whereby an independent researcher reviewed the primary documents and coding schemes to assess whether the findings, interpretation and conclusions were supported.[21] There is evidence of a close link between dependability and confirmability.[19] Therefore, audit trials helped to ensure the confirmability of the study findings.

Results

Six participants (4 males and 2 females) were interviewed. The participants' ages ranged from 40 to 55 years. Four participants had Master's and two had Bachelor's degrees. Three participants had served as principals for <2 years and the other three had served as college principals for 3 - 4 years. All participants had served in leadership positions for >6 years and had experience of teaching, with a minimum of <5 years and a maximum of >15 years. The study revealed three themes: managing instructional programmes; instructional leadership abilities; and hindrances to practising instructional leadership.

Managing the instructional programme

With regard to managing school programmes, three functions are involved, which have been converted into subthemes: (*i*) supervises and evaluates instruction; (*ii*) co-ordinates the curriculum; and (*iii*) monitors student progress.

Subtheme 1: Supervises and evaluates instruction

The principals' responses indicated that they were rarely involved in routine monitoring and supervisory practices. Despite being aware of the need to formally evaluate and observe lecturers, principals hardly find time to do so. When asked how they monitor and supervise the progress of teachers and students during teaching and learning, one participant claimed that:

'I must admit that I don't monitor/supervise lecturers because of the business of this office; so I really need to commit a considerable amount of time to appreciate the successes and challenges that the tutors are facing in class.' (P1ᵐ)

Furthermore, one participant recalled the monitoring and supervisory role that he performed before becoming a principal:

'When we talk of supervising a lesson I have not done it as a principal yet but as a dean I used to sit in their classes.' (P2ᵐ)

The findings also indicate that principals would like to engage in informal supervision of a lesson through random walks around the college, but they are afraid of disturbing lessons. One participant explained this as follows:

'Sometimes I would want to walk around the school but when I realise that lessons are in progress I don't proceed since if you just pop in the classroom without prior notice, you will disturb the students and the class.' (P6ᵐ)

However, the findings revealed that some principals were able to supervise and evaluate teaching informally:

'I check the lesson plans and also if the tutors have their notes ready for their teaching; this is mostly done once a week (since am usually busy) just to find out if people are ready and they have notes with them.' (P4ᶠ)

Subtheme 2: Co-ordinates the curriculum

None of the principals was confident in co-ordinating the curriculum. The participants believed that co-ordinating the curriculum is not the role of the principal, but the responsibility of other leaders in the college, such as the dean of faculty and heads of department. When asked about their role in curriculum development, implementation and review, participants responded as follows:

'Like two years ago actually the college did review our curriculum, but it was the dean of faculty who was leading the process.' (P1ᵐ)

Similarly, another participant said that monitoring the curriculum was the responsibility of the dean:

'The dean is the one who deals with curriculum monitoring but am not sure if the monitoring involves seeing if the curriculum covers the school objectives.' (P3ᵐ)

Conversely, principals were not clear on who was responsible for co-ordinating the curriculum across class levels, as it was just left open in the hands of the dean of faculty and heads of department. One participant said:

'It's the dean who is in-charge of the curriculum in all classes, [laughs]! The office of the dean of faculty is really overwhelmed.' (P5ᶠ)

Despite the principals not being confident in monitoring the curriculum, some participants observed that their classroom curriculum covered the school's curricular objectives because it was derived from the Nurses and Midwives Council curriculum:

'The curriculum we use for [Nursing and Midwifery Technicians] NMTs in all [Christian Health Association of Malawi] CHAM colleges is from the Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi; so, it is in line with the needs of the colleges.' (P4ᶠ)

Subtheme 3: Monitors student progress

There is less evidence that principals are directly involved in student matters, as they usually wait for feedback from those who are directly involved. When asked how they handled students' results to improve the quality of teaching-learning activities, one participant shared the following:

'We have a designated officer who deals with students; dean of students deals with social issues, personal issues of the students. The Dean of Faculty deals with academic issues. I get to know if there are any issues concerning students from them since I am also a member of the disciplinary committee.' (P2ᵐ)

'The dean of faculty oversees all issues pertaining to academic performance of the students; I just get reports.' (P5ᶠ)

However, P3 had a different opinion, as he said that their college activities were shaped by the performance of the students, especially during licensure examinations:

'Remember in 2015 licensure examinations, a lot of [Nursing and Midwifery Technicians] NMTs failed. This made us as a college analyse the entire situation and implement measures to make our students pass the examinations. The objectives of the college changed, and our day-to-day activities also changed.' (P3^m)

The principals demonstrated an awareness of the need to use examination data to improve the curriculum, but it was shown that they do not do this. One participant claimed the following:

'Usually, we do not rely on the students' results to formulate college goals. Rather, resources are at the heart of every college work.' (P6^m)

The responses from the principals indicated that they were rarely involved in the routine range of co-ordinating curricula and monitoring students' progress. According to Hallinger and Wang,[22] the characteristics of an instructional leader in managing instructional programmes include pointing out specific strengths and weaknesses of teachers, conducting formal and informal classroom observations, using examination data to improve the curriculum, leading to reviewing curricular materials, informing teachers and students of school academic progress, and meeting individually with teachers to discuss students' progress.

Instructional leadership abilities

The principals in this study believed that certain features and competencies assisted them in practising instructional leadership. These principals related essential instructional leadership abilities to 'preventing nose diving'. The principals explained that they acted proactively before a future situation rather than simply reacting. The following extract confirms this hypothesis:

'I like seeking input and views of other people. We got to think of issues even in the abstract that we can do and bring the issues together and implement them. All in all, I am proactive.' (P3^m)

'I look at myself as being proactive, a motivator, and self-starter such that I look at myself being self-directed, I look at situations, I look at challenges, and then I try to think about solutions that would overcome that challenge.' (P1^m)

Hindrances to practising instructional leadership

The participants described the obstacles they encountered while engaging in instructional leadership. When asked if there was anything they would like to share about their experience of practising instructional leadership, the following subthemes emerged:

Subtheme 1: Lack of resources

Among the most frequent views by principals was the phrase, 'I need adequate resources'. Principals explained that they needed financial, human and material resources to execute instructional leadership roles. One participant said:

'Sometimes you really want to do something, but because maybe you don't have the resources even human resource maybe that cannot be implemented! [Shouting with unhappy face] For example, we do not have a human resource officer because there is no designation for that, and we use our clerk. I also join in sometimes.' (P5^f)

In her argument, P5^f continued to complain that her college was without funding for 9 months; hence, some services suffered. She also highlighted the shortage of staff. This was a barrier for the principals to be able to provide effective instructional leadership.

Another participant felt that a lack of resources was the main challenge in implementing instructional leadership:

'The main challenge is the dwindling financial base. We come from a scenario where students are supported by donors, and these donors would inject money into lump sum. Now that students are struggling to pay the fees by themselves, which is a big challenge; so really, I need a financial breakthrough.' (P1^m)

The abovementioned participant also wished to have partners who could provide financial support, learning and teaching materials. Moreover, the study revealed that resource constraints and delays in receiving funding hindered instructional leadership. Participants complained about their partners' delays in paying the colleges:

'Funds are not coming in well especially those from our partners. We stayed the whole semester without funding for six months. All these create hardships in the process of providing instructional leadership.' (P3^m)

Furthermore, a lack of human and material resources has led to inadequate clinical teaching. One participant explained this as follows:

'You want people to give enough time to teach the students in the clinical area, but you don't have money to send them. You find that they just go there for a day or two which is not enough for the students to learn.' (P2^m)

However, the availability of funds was not a guarantee for practising instructional leadership, but rather adequate knowledge and skills in instructional leadership. One participant commented:

'Availability of funds on its own may not lead to achieving college objectives.' (P2^f)

With regard to the barriers that principals encounter when acting as instructional leaders, the participants indicated that a lack of support prohibits some instructional leadership activities. Due to the current lack of support for principals to carry out instructional leadership activities, it was through a hit-and-miss approach that some principals could perform such activities. The inference drawn from the abovementioned respondents is that the practice of instructional leadership could be influenced by the necessary support given to the principals.

Subtheme 2: Increased workload

Increased workload was identified as a barrier to the implementation of instructional leadership. Principals explained that an increased workload leads to a lack of time to engage in instructional leadership activities. Participants felt that small tasks, especially administrative roles, curtailed their time to monitor teaching and learning. One participant reported as follows:

'I feel that the big challenge I am having is that I have to divide my time between classroom issues and administrative issues. It is like there is conflict that I am needed in the classroom, I am needed in the administration area one of the areas at one point or the other suffers.' (P6^m)

'Time is one of them, I have a couple of responsibilities. It is really hard to do hands on monitoring and supervising teaching.' (P3m)

The principals also emphasised that administrative roles were important:
'You know administrative roles are quite demanding. I have to attend letters, visitors, meet partners, and have meetings.' (P4f)
'Sometimes you come in office with a good plan, but at the end of the day you find that maybe from what you planned you have tackled only and one thing the rest were just things outside.' (P5f)
'I must admit that because of the business of this office it is very busy, I fail to monitor tutors and students.' (P1m)

Participants agreed that an increased workload was a barrier to the implementation of instructional leadership.

It was revealed that principals lack the time and knowledge to practise instructional leadership:
'I hardly find time to observe classroom teaching and learning.' (P2m)

Participants said that an increased workload was a barrier to the implementation of instructional leadership.

Subtheme 3: Inadequate knowledge about instructional leadership
The study findings also revealed that principals' inability to formally monitor and evaluate lecturers is due to a lack of knowledge and skills:
'I think I need support on how to supervise other faculty members. You know that supervising students is easier, but I need supervisor qualities so that I can supervise the faculty effectively. This can only be attained through training.' (P4f)

The study revealed that the ability to manage the instructional programme was associated with a lack of knowledge and skills by some principals, which required the implementation of a professional development programme to deal with this problem.

Discussion
It is assumed that principals try to implement instructional leadership practices according to Hallinger and Wang's[22] model. However, it can be stated that there are some facilitators and hindrances when practising instructional leadership. Strategies to encourage instructional leadership are discussed in this section.

Personal quality plays a critical role in implementing instructional leadership. Principals referenced their ability to practise instructional leadership in terms of their personal qualities. Motivators, self-starters, and self-directed and proactive leadership are essential for practising instructional leadership. This is supported by Mafuwane,[23] who identified some qualities of an instructional leader, including being proactive. Therefore, it can be suggested that personal qualities are internal support for instructional leadership, either within the principal's control or influenced by the principal's behaviour.

However, other principals devoted most of their time to monitoring and controlling the work of the staff and learners. As instructional leaders, the CHAM secretariat expects principals to undertake essential leadership functions, such as training students, reviewing and implementing curricula, and supervising and appraising students and staff.[2] However,

most principals complained about inadequate time to engage in such activities. Similarly, previous studies have revealed that principals struggle to balance their administrative and management functions with their instructional duties.[8,24] This implies that principals may be keen to perform instructional leadership practices but also feel tense regarding these practices, as the administrative roles are so demanding. However, non-instructional activities were slightly associated with student academic achievement.[8,25] Therefore, colleges with principals who do not spend much time on instructional leadership may have less academic success.

The inability of some principals to manage the instructional programme is associated with a lack of knowledge and skills. This highlights the need to develop and implement professional development programmes to address this problem. Hallinger and Murphy[8] explained that the barrier associated with a lack of knowledge is related to the expertise that principals are expected to possess. In addition, in a qualitative study, Mestry[3] found that several principals lacked the necessary instructional leadership expertise and skills and found it difficult to develop strategies of co-ordination and control to align with their school's academic mission. Similarly, the Royal College of Nursing found that a lack of skills development and formal preparation hindered nursing leaders from executing their roles effectively.[25] However, other studies have found that prior experience in teaching and leadership responsibilities, coaching and modelling may influence principals' knowledge.[9,10,26-28] It is therefore suggested that CHAM college principals need preparatory programmes to help them gain the knowledge and skills to practise leadership roles that are essential regarding effectiveness and improvement in the school by promoting learner performance.

Recommendations
Fewer routine and administrative tasks for principals in CHAM colleges could provide them with more time to focus on managing their instructional programmes. Although principals can apply a distributive leadership style to college management, they should not abandon their responsibility to promote teaching and learning. The principal may practise distributive leadership by delegating administrative and management responsibilities to their subordinates. Thus, they empower their subordinates to take on leadership positions while they dedicate more time to instructional matters.[10] Su[29] supported this finding and found that principals could use their time more effectively by delegating tasks to staff. For example, principals can delegate the task of disciplining students to vice principals and the task of receiving calls and emails to secretaries. Principals can also improve productivity by changing the work environment and schedule to avoid frequent interruptions.[29] For example, principals can keep their desks cleared of all projects, except for the top-priority ones, and should close their doors when they do not want to be interrupted. Principals should also be equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to provide instructional leadership through professional development opportunities to improve their perceived instructional leadership.[30]

Areas for further study
This study found that some principals exhibited instructional leadership practices, while others did not. Therefore, another area of study could be a performance comparison between colleges whose principals practise instructional leadership and those whose principals do not.

Study limitations

This study comprised a small sample size of six because some participants did not meet the inclusion criteria. This may have affected the results of the study. To ensure the quality of the data, there was more contact time with each participant, as each interview lasted 60 minutes. Although other college leaders, such as the heads of department, perform leadership roles, the study did not include these leaders. It focused on how principals carry out instructional leadership based on their views.

Conclusion

The findings from this study and evidence from the local and international literature suggest that some principals in CHAM colleges indirectly exhibit instructional leadership practices under the management of instructional programmes, according to the Hallinger and Wang model.[22] By contrast, others did not exhibit instructional leadership practices. Principals actively influence and improve their instructional practices through supervision and evaluation of instruction. However, the remaining challenge is to ensure that all CHAM college principals fully exhibit all aspects of instructional leadership in managing instructional programmes in ways that directly contribute to college improvement. Therefore, to foster accurate instructional leadership across all principals in CHAM colleges, measures should be taken to eradicate obstacles to implementing instructional leadership so that principals can focus on activities to improve student learning in colleges.

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