The Changing Roles of School Managers: Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Nobert Wanjala Wanyonyi &Irene Simiyu

Abstract

School Managers in Kenya are a group faced with an array of emerging and challenging roles in a rapidly changing society. This is coupled with increasingly great expectation by education stakeholders that school managers and the human resource they lead will ensure retention and successful completion of school by every Kenyan child. However, it is the contention of this paper that school managers may not meet the cut if they are not cognizant of their changing roles and the new skills they need to develop. This paper sets out to examine these challenging roles and the accompanying skills required. The argument is premised on the view that one can best handle challenges they are clearly aware of. The authors hope that the ideas raised will inform educational stakeholders and especially, school managers and educational policy formulators.
Key words: School Managers, Traditional roles, Emerging roles

Contact detail: Nobert Wanjala Wanyonyi, Department of Psychology, Criminology and Social Work at Kibabii University College Email- wanjalawanyonyi@yahoo.com

Introduction

It is a truism that like all public sector organizations the world-over, the education sector in Kenya has been the subject of enormous changes in the past ten to fifteen years. These changes have been in the areas of the curriculum taught; the kind of school leadership expected; rules governing the management of school resources and most importantly, how to deal with the consumers of knowledge and the facilitators of

this knowledge: the students and teachers. This situation is not helped by the fact that school managers-herein defined as school principal or Head-teacher- are given the same pre-service training like their colleagues in the classroom and none or very basic pre-service and in-service preparation for their roles. The situation is further exacerbated by the existence of the 'great-man theory' of leadership that seems to suggest that leaders are born and not necessarily trained and therefore an expectation that such leaders will 'emerge' at a certain point in the practice to be identified for the position. Yet the benefits of preparing managers are evident in non-educational organizations and attest to the confidence and efficiency that comes with such preparation. This is not the case in institutions of learning where school managers are sourced from the teaching fraternity after they meet certain qualifications that include the numbers of years they have served as practicing teachers, their active involvement in the daily running of the school, application and interest in the position of principal or after serving as deputy principals for a number of years. The initial teacher training they undergo places great emphasis on approaches in content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, hence student-teachers leave training institutions equipped to teach and not to manage institutions. Any basic elements of school management in their course work are soon forgotten given that it is viewed as knowledge for future use and not for immediate needs that pose challenges to the novice teacher.

The above situation leads to school managers who are ill equipped for their roles, lack confidence in their abilities and those of others around them and who therefore

end up too stressed to lead their institutions to achieve their mandate in society. The recent Kenya Secondary Schools Heads meeting in *Mombasa-* Kenya provided a glimpse into the experiences of school managers at this level. According to a study carried out by Dr. Ken Otieno of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology and cited by a Nation newspaper correspondent, 52% of Principals experience high levels of stress and some even die in office (Daily Nation, 2014, 26th June, pg 6). The reasons for the stress are varied and range from having to undertake too many tasks in school due to inability or reluctance by the school manager to delegate duties; the demand for quality grades from stakeholders despite the prevailing situations in the context; challenges of managing the various resources in the schools and now, the emerging challenge of keeping within the procedures acceptable under the new constitution and the Education Act. To understand this development in the previously untroubled office of the school manager, this paper will examine the traditional roles of school managers, the emerging challenges of the 21st Century, the new roles and skills required to mitigate these challenges and the implications of these to school managers themselves and education policy formulators. True to the saying-when the rubber meets the road, friction and sparks emerge which are not necessarily a bad thing but a pointer to the fact that onward progress as well as change are a necessity and not an option!

Traditional Roles of School Managers

A typical school manager in Kenya is normally engaged in three broad roles, that is: management, instructional leadership and coordination, although a careful

examination of a day in the life of a school manager will reveal that a large percentage of their time is spent in management. According to Memon and Bana (2005), this tendency to lean towards management arises because most school managers lack the necessary leadership skills and are therefore at ease managing. Yet even in the position of a manager, the performance of the school manager cannot be compared to that of a manager in a non-educational organization who are highly specialized and trained in their field. Some of the areas where the latter receive training are: financial management, human resource management, procurement, conflict and disaster management and project planning and management. Additionally, non-educational organizations have officers who are in charge of certain positions like communications officer, company secretary, procurement manager and even project manager. This means that the latter group of managers will handle issues effectively and efficiently, due to the high levels of knowledge and skills gained from their training or have their work made light by other officers and managers.

Instructional and curriculum leadership, another role played by school managers, involves ensuring that teachers attend to their duties and students are present in class learning. This process is supervisory and hierarchical in nature since it involves the Principal instructing teachers on what should be done in their teaching and inspecting this periodically. This role inadvertently places the school manager in a position where they are viewed with suspicion, creating a relationship of fear rather than respect and appreciation. In this role, the Principal's concern is in the 'tools of

work' for the teacher and for the students, their notes and other documents that show learning. However, the school is not just about the above aspects but also involves the hidden curriculum and human relationships that have to be natured and which contribute significantly to school success. Instructional leadership engenders feelings of dependence on the headship by both teachers and students who wait to be led and are helpless in terms of decision making or taking initiative in coming up with new ideas and implementing them.

The school manager's other role is one of coordination by ensuring that resources and activities of the school are working in harmony to achieve the desired goals. It involves harmonization of the various school activities in a manner that the whole school flows smoothly without delay, friction or collision. To achieve such a system in school, the manager is continually involved in organizing meetings, setting deadlines and most importantly communicating to stakeholders thus ensuring that all are of the same thinking. Communication is a process that involves transmitting accurate information and eliciting feedback from stakeholders. In non-educational organizations, communication is done by a communications officer who records the proceedings of the meetings, communicates with stakeholders and reports their feedback to the meeting. On the other hand, in a school environment, communication for teachers is majorly inclined towards classroom management and pedagogy, a factor that suggests that the school manager may have to learn the art on the job or through continuous attendance of workshops which are usually placed far apart. Schools with managers who are poor

at communication are identified by disorder and lack of harmonization in their programs brought about by inability to share/communicate ideas and progress and the inability to convince stakeholders to support a worthy cause.

The above traditional roles of the school Manager have in the recent past been challenged by emerging issues in the 21st Century which seem to threaten the status quo. This paper will identify and discuss some of the prominent ones and look at new roles that school Managers need to adopt as well as the skills they will need to develop to mitigate these challenges.

Emerging Challenges in the 21st Century

The 21st century educational system worldwide is faced with rapid and diverse changes that require school managers to adopt new roles and develop new skills that will make them relevant and effective. In the Kenyan context, one of the striking exigencies is the demand for accountability and knowledge of procedures in tandem with the new Education Act and, Ethics and Governance issues in the new constitution. This is necessitated by the fact that the education sector in Kenya gets significant budgetary allocations every year, making it an area that is keenly watched by stakeholders and the public that fund it. Issues of transparency and accountability have become critical in the education sector and the new constitution has ensured this through a number of laws that guide the conduct of those placed in charge of such public resources as those found in schools. The implication is that the school manager

must understand the legal framework and principles that guide the decisions they make in their management role. There are numerous Acts and laws: like the Public Procurement and Disposal Act 2005 and Regulation 2006 which exist to guide efficient public procurement and disposal of equipment by public entities; the Anti-corruption and Economics Crime Act, 2003, the Public Officers Ethics Act, 2005 and other laws that guide ethical issues including those regarding the use of ICTs and even those that guide the application of corporal punishment. These are just a few that a school manager must know and apply if they have to be safe from legal suits and conflict with their employer and the public. Herein lies the challenge, the school manager has to understand and apply these laws couched in legal language yet their initial training did nothing to prepare them for such an eventuality. In non-educational organizations, a legal officer or a company secretary undertakes this role on behalf of the board of management.

Secondly, school managers of the 21st Century have to contend with the emergence of teachers who are not satisfied with being classroom teachers only and who are eager to be included in the school leadership. This situation has arisen due to the current believe in collective action, the right to be heard and the democratic space created by the constitution and various laws. However, sometimes this eagerness can be misconstrued as intended to undermine the head teacher, a factor that leads to friction, bad blood and eventually has an effect on school success. Yet according to McNeill, Cavanagh and Silcox (2005), teachers can be leaders within and beyond the classroom and can identify and be involved in whole school development issues. This teacher

leadership can be exercised through formal positions like Head of Department or informally where teachers are involved in decision making, continual re-designing of teaching and schooling, vision building and policy development and, in leading cross-school networking where teachers collaborate with colleagues in what is famously called "benchmarking" (Grant, 2006). In a study carried out by Grant (2006) in South African to examine teacher leadership, the research participants understood teacher leadership as leading to collaboration, distributed leadership and trust between the teachers and the principal. This scenario is contrary to where a singular view of leadership is adopted leading to power struggles as a result of resistance to change by teachers who feel they were not part of the decisions and feel they should not play a part in implementing proposals handed down to them. This makes any effort to introduce change a slow and difficult process as teachers view themselves as victims of change rather than change agents.

The next significant challenge for the school Manager is the 21st Century learner whose character traits and experiences are unique and far removed from those of learners of past years and therefore calling for new approaches of handling them. These learners can be found in both extremes of being very knowledgeable, an only child who is spoilt or techno-savvy and whose future is already secured or, likely to be suffering low self-esteem, lacking a vision for the future arising from the kind of home they come from; is infected or affected by HIV/AIDS or other life threatening illnesses; is a young parent or one who is sexually active and therefore facing the likelihood of sexually

transmitted infections or pregnancy; comes from a socioeconomically disadvantaged home or is drawn into drug and substance abuse. Daniel Otieno, in his article entitled *Girls balance books and babies* (Daily Nation, Monday, 2014, 23rd June, pg 30), cites the story of a student in *Oldonyiro* Secondary School who has to sprint home to breastfeed during break-time. According to the Principal of the school, even boys in the school are challenged since some marry early and have to be assisted to balance family and school life. According to Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll and Russ (in Muijs and Harris, 2007), such learners are also likely to have challenging behavior in terms of learning, achievement, socialization, discipline, school completion and participation in school matters and thus need more positive reinforcement to keep them in school. This situation is compounded by the fact that the guidance and counseling that was done in our traditional societies is no longer available and therefore the burden of the youth has been shifted to schools and therefore an issue for the school manager to handle. Such learners place a great demand on the school manager who has to engage in guiding and counseling and in efforts that inspire trust and confidence in learners, driven by feelings of empathy. The school manager has to lead the staff in supporting such learners and will only succeed if they (school managers) have knowledge in guiding and counseling as well as a focus on developing a school culture that is caring.

The last significant challenge for the school manager is one of managing inadequate resources while ensuring that the school meets its goals and obligations to both the students and teachers. It is a fact that despite government support in terms of

free primary and secondary school fees allocations, a vast majority of schools exist in economically challenged communities that makes it difficult and sometimes impossible for parents to meet their part of the fees. Yet, there is an expectation that such schools should meet their obligations to students and ensure retention and successful completion of school by these students. KESI (2011) defines management as the process of acquiring and utilizing resources in order to achieve organizational goals. And while more emphasis is placed on how to utilize the available resources, very little is said about how to acquire the resources in the event that they are missing in a school. Views like those cited by Gichobi and Nyassy in their article *Fresh Call to Ease Burden for Parents* (Daily Nation, 2014, June 24th ,pg 1 and 2) where the Director of Secondary and Tertiary Education, Mr. Robert Masese asked head-teachers to come up with innovative ways of raising money for their schools, abound. Ideas like the introduction and use of solar energy, recycling waste and other income generating activities intended to ease the burden on parents have been put forth. This places a demand on the school manager to look for resources yet they may not have had any experience as a resource finder nor the skills of effective resource mobilization. It is at such times that some school managers find themselves captives of unscrupulous politicians and even traders who defraud the school making a bad situation worse. The process of identifying where to get the resources and whom to partner with is new and challenging to an untrained school manager.

How can the school managers of the 21st Century Kenya mitigate the above challenges that literary threaten their lives and the progress and success of the institutions they lead? This question can be answered by advocating the uptake of the following roles (among other roles not discussed here) and the development of the skills discussed below.

Roles and Skills of an Effective School Manager of the 21st Century

To begin with, school managers need to recognize that the role of instructional/curriculum leadership is one that served many schools very well in the past centuries, but in light of the changes in schooling, there is need to adopt a more inclusive leadership style. Instructional leadership focuses the administrators' attention on improving the technical instructional activities of the school through close monitoring of teachers' and students' classroom work (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992). However, 21st Century thinking posits that such leadership is limited in the sense that it takes care of the 'what' that includes the subject content taught in class and syllabus completion, leaving out the 'how' that involves what content knowledge is shared with learners and 'when' that focuses on the time when teaching happens and when the syllabus is completed (MacNeill, Cavanagh & Silcox, 2003). This suggests that the school manager who is an instructional leader may only focus on instructional activities and not on the human resource of students and teachers in a way that includes them in leadership, as well as distributing duties and roles to them. Sergiovanni (1998) proposes

pedagogical leadership that is concerned with capacity building by developing social and academic capital for students and intellectual and professional capital for teachers. He further argues that the value of capital generated will result in schools that are caring, focused and are inquiring communities within which teachers work in collegial relationships, where teacher leadership is encouraged and students are encouraged to improve their academic engagement and performance while feeling part and parcel of the school they want (Ibid). This is of course contrary to the common belief that equates school leadership with the 'headship' inadvertently viewing school improvement and school success as an individual endeavor and not a collective action. Therefore, a school manager who is a pedagogical leader will need to develop a number of skills including: skills of delegating duty as a way of distributing leadership, inspired by Andrew Carnegie's words that "No man will make a great leader who wants to do it all himself or to get all the credit for doing it" The school manager must also increase the opportunities for teachers to exercise teacher leadership in ways that enhances ownership of change, results in positive effects on pedagogy, on school culture and educational quality (Harris, 2004). The school manager must also develop the skill of a facilitator by manifesting his power through others and not over them in autocratic and hierarchical ways (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992). Lastly, the school manager must develop the skill of a counselor, given the challenging situations of both teachers and students, especially in the 21st century. Wachira Mwangi in his report entitled *6000 teachers 'infected with HIV'* (Daily Nation, 2014, June, 25th, pg 6), pointed out that 6000 teachers

are HIV positive, while 242,000 students under the age of 14 years are also infected.

These groups and others, like young parents and expectant school girls have to be

understood and assisted to go through their situation and still acquire education.

The second role that school managers have to adopt is that of communications officer.

Most communication in a school community is made for students, teachers, parents,

sponsors, support staff and the public. According to KESI (2011), most problems in a

school can be solved or prevented with effective communication among members, led

by the school manager. Due to the complex relationships that exist in an organization,

barriers to effective communication abound. A scenario where there is lack of trust

among members, poor working relationships, poor listening skills, unclear messages,

lack of feedback and even wrong choice of channel can affect the smooth running of the

organization/school. To avoid this situation, the school manager needs to develop skills

like: effective communication skills that include good listening skills that will allow one

to listen with empathy and for understanding; speaking skills to enable effective

communication in ways that deliver the message to stakeholders; effective writing skills

and effective exploitation of non-verbal cues in communicating to members of the

school community. The school manager must also be sensitive to the silent

communication that happens in an organization and instead of reading malice, reflect

on what message is being sent.

The school manager also needs to adopt the role of a resource finder. It is

assumed that the school manager be able to manage the various kinds of resources in a

school in order for the school to successfully achieve its goal. These resources include the human resource, educational resources, financial resources and other school resources like land, vehicles and equipment. However, this is only possible if the school has the said resources so that the school manager can engage in effective management through cost/benefit analysis, best value, budget control, resource control and adapting existing resources to fit the need (KESI, 2011). To do this effectively, the school manager needs to develop the skills of networking and effective fundraising.

Lastly, the school manager needs to be the leader of a learning community that espouses lifelong learning. The 21 Century is replete with new phenomenon and challenges that have not spared the school community. To begin with, teaching is a complex and demanding job and the success of the teacher is dependent on their engagement with new knowledge, alone or with others. Nevertheless, most teachers are content with the initial teacher training they received and continue to use the same approaches and teaching methods they begun with as novice teachers. Yet, the professional development of teachers has a direct implication for student learning outcomes. The school manager who will lead a successful school in this century must encourage lifelong learning and model this through engagement with fellow school managers. The school manager should develop skills of organizing professional development ventures like team teaching, lesson study and action research. Such collaborations among teachers can be extended to working with other schools so that schools learn and do so with other schools. The school manager should be a team player

collaborating with fellow managers in order to exchange knowledge and even learn from time tested ways of handling school issues. According to Alvin Toffer, "the illiterate person of the 21 century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn". The school community should be encouraged to acquire more knowledge, current information and to love exploring new ideas without fear of condemnation and counting on the support of the school manager.

Recommendations

The implications of the above discussion touch on two groups that are important in the school system: the school manager and education policy formulators. Firstly, the school Manager of the 21st Century in Kenya will find it a necessity rather than a choice to acquire skills in guiding and counseling in order to provide support both to the teaching staff and the students. This is despite the fact that the school manager could be experiencing personal challenges or even more serious challenges related to their position. Secondly, the school manager will be required to update themselves with knowledge in matters of the law, financial management, resource management and resource mobilization. This will ensure that they operate knowledgeably and avoid stress that emerges from areas related to management. Thirdly, the school manager will need to join professional learning teams of fellow school managers to gain moral and social support and share knowledge and challenges so as to lessen the stress associated with this position. It is a truism that the position of a school manager often leads to loneliness and one can end up struggling with issues that they cannot share with

teachers. At this point one needs colleagues who can connect with the challenges and who can freely share time tested solutions.

For the education policy formulators, there will be need to establish educational management colleges that will offer a curriculum tailored for school managers who are already serving in this position or future managers who can then be posted to manage schools. This will go a long way in equipping them with skills, knowledge and predispositions in the role of school management. Secondly, while teacher training colleges specialize in subject areas for content delivery, more course units in the area of school management should be included for those hoping to be school managers. Thirdly, the field attachment undertaken by student-teachers should be extended to more than the current duration and renamed Internship to allow student-teachers to be oriented in all departments of the school and thus allow those interested in school management to be identified early and to be prepared further for the role.

Conclusion

The presence of a school manager and the role they play in an educational institution is one that cannot be downplayed. This is especially so given the resources found in a school, the need to provide leadership and coordination for school to meet its core business of ensuring effective teaching and learning. This necessitates the school manager to acquire skills and knowledge that will enable effective service delivery that is within acceptable standards and expectations. This can only happen if educational

stakeholders and policy formulators adopt the preparation given to managers in non-educational organizations in order to reap maximum benefits from school managers.

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About Authors

Nobert Wanjala Wanyonyi is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology, Criminology and Social Work at Kibabii University College. He has been a school manager in a public school in Bungoma County of Western Kenya. He holds a Master Arts in Sociology and Bachelor of Education. His research interest is in school management, participatory leadership. Email- wanjalawanyonyi@yahoo.com

Irene Simiyu- Is a lecturer in the Department of Communication, Linguistics and Media Studies at Kibabii University College. She is a holder of Master of Education and Bachelor of Education. Her research interest is in teacher learning and literacy instructions. Email- irene_wanjala@yahoo.com