Curriculum Planning in Secondary Schools: Principals’ Practices and Challenges in an Era of Knowledge and Learning Management

Olibie, Eyiuche Ifeoma
Department of Educational Foundations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State Nigeria
Email: utchackonsults@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the curriculum planning practices and challenges of secondary school principals in Anambra State in an era of knowledge and learning management. Two research questions guided the study. The descriptive survey design was used. The entire population of 268 principals was studied hence, there was no sampling. A Questionnaire titled “Principals’ Curriculum Planning Practices and Challenges Survey” containing 21 items was validated, tested for reliability and used as the data collection instrument. Mean scores were used in answering the research questions. The findings of the study indicated that there is insufficient curriculum planning among the principals. The perceived challenges faced by principals in school curriculum planning include: inadequate allocation of resources and funds for school curricula and co-curricula activities, incompetence and poor understanding of curriculum change visions inadequate training on curriculum innovations, and poor ability to use statistical data to make inferences for curriculum improvement. It was therefore recommended among other things that principals should pay serious attention and improve on their planning practices especially with respect to organising, controlling, planning, and coordinating practices of curriculum, in that order. The principals should engage in reading professional journals, peer mentoring, and participating in professional conferences and seminars to help them achieve excellence in school planning for curriculum and learning management.

Keywords: Curriculum planning, instructional leadership, curriculum innovations, Knowledge and Learning Management

Introduction

The world of the 21st century is a world of Knowledge and Learning Management (KALM). Knowledge and Learning Management (KALM) is described as all conscious provisions made to improve what is taught and what is learnt in schools as well empower learners to apply the knowledge taught in classrooms in practical life situations. It also implies what Igbo and Aroh (2010) described as the provision of an enabling climate for fostering self-actualisation and becoming independent learners who can assume responsibility for independent learning in their various
present and future profession. In an era of KALM, the goal of education is to provide knowledge and experiences that will create a foundation for success in the professional world.

The need for KALM emerged as a result of the several challenges in the world today. One of such challenges according to Okeke-Oti (2010) is the increasing acknowledgement of innovative curriculum developments about the nature and process of learning. Another challenge is the overall dissatisfaction with attainment of curriculum objectives and a desire to raise the quality of education to gain an edge in an increasingly competitive global context (King, 2002; Jaiyeoba, 2004). There is also the challenge of knowledge explosion. According to UNESCO (2002) in the knowledge-based economy, the knowledge that needs to be included in the curriculum doubles every 3-5 years depending on the discipline. It is for these and other challenges that there is an emphasis on principals’ curriculum planning in secondary schools.

In the light of the foregoing, this study aimed to establish the extent to which a group of secondary school principals in Anambra State of Nigeria engaged in curriculum planning practices and explored their views of the challenges they face in fulfilling and maintaining that role. It made recommendations for diminishing these challenges and thereby increasing principals’ effectiveness as curriculum leaders.

**Curriculum and Curriculum Planning**

Curriculum is everything learners experience in school. It involves all the actions of the school, which are aimed at getting the child to begin a course and at the end attain educational goals. Tanner & Tanner (2007:121) offer the following definition of curriculum, derived from Dewey’s definition of education; “That reconstruction of knowledge and experience that enables the learner to grow in exercising intelligent control of subsequent knowledge and experience”.

It is in the light of this definition that school curriculum is seen as a programme of selected content and learning experiences offered by a school and capable of either modifying or changing the behaviour of learners. According to Henderson, and Hawthorne (1995) it involves interaction between teachers and learners, between learners and learners, between learners and curriculum content. School curriculum planning is a dynamic, ever changing series of planned learning experiences. Implicit in this definition are the following ideas:

- There is a source from which content and learning experiences are selected.
- One or more people select content and learning experiences. Their selection is based on specified criteria and/or influenced by a number of factors.
- The learner should experience a change in behaviour and these changes should be those expected by educators in the teaching learning process.

For any school curriculum to achieve the listed ideas requires curriculum planning. Curriculum planning requires decision-making, which is, choosing from among alternative future courses of action (Lee & Dimmock, 1999). It is a process of formulating and selecting curriculum objectives and content as well as the actions to achieve them. It is used to describe the designing and mapping out...
of activities, decisions and strategies for curriculum delivery. In essence, curriculum planning refers to the planning and delivery of instruction, which are essential elements of effective educational programs. It is meant to provide a rational approach to achieving pre-selected institutional and curriculum objectives.

**Principals and Curriculum Planning**

One of the duties of secondary school principals within the current emphasis of KALM involves the application of curriculum planning practices that are aimed at fulfilling the anticipated goals of the school. A vast literature is available in relation to the role of principals in schools’ curriculum planning (Weber, 1987; Hallinger & Heck, 1997; Blase & Blase, 2000; Quinn, 2002; Southworth, 2002, Jazzar, & Algozzine, 2006). These authors tried to denote the significance of the influence a principal can exert on instructional improvement through curriculum planning. The principals’ role in curriculum planning is that of instructional leadership which implies a direct and primary focus on instructional matters. In a broad description of instructional leadership which stresses the principal’s accountability for learning experienced in a school, Cardno (1990) stated that the notion of the principal as instructional leader embraces the whole range of the principal’s responsibilities in the school. Instructional leadership demands that principals display commitments to improve teaching and learning through their administrative practices (Hayes, 2007). They should establish a culture that enables innovation as well as a shared sense of responsibility for curriculum innovation (Kirkland & Sutch, 2009). Every facet of the organization which contributes to the educational endeavours of the staff and the educational experiences of the students is the principal’s responsibility. This means being a leader in terms of the learning-teaching facet which should be at the crux of all school leadership endeavor.

The argument in favour of principals’ instructional leadership is based on the assumption that pupils’ achievement of curriculum objectives depends, in part, on the nature and quality of instruction they encounter in the classrooms (Carr, 2005). The quality of that instruction is itself highly dependent upon multiple critical system components – such as the quality of the teacher, and the soundness of the curriculum, the appropriateness of the teaching methods etc. In turn, the strength of these system components depend, in part, upon the degree to which there exists a quality instructional leadership that is capable of providing continuing resources and processes that can upgrade the quality and effectiveness of the key system components that are needed for good instruction. A lack of leadership capacity might be a factor in the failure of education institutions to systemically achieve the objectives of the curriculum.

It is most important that every school administrator plans ahead the steps to be taken in order to achieve the school’s curriculum objectives. This can sometimes be affected in conjunction with the teachers (during staff meeting) and in conjunction with the parents (during the Parent Teacher Association meeting), at the beginning of the school year (Jaiyeoba, 2004). The principal need to prepare a plan that would embrace students’ affairs, school supervision, school-community relationship, budgets, curricular and co-curricular activities, extra-mural lessons, subjects in the school curriculum, the number of students, the number of classes, the number and qualifications of
teachers to teach the subjects, and the instructional materials that are required for the curriculum. He ensures that the time-table for instructions is prepared in such a way that clashes are avoided.

The notion of curriculum planning thus includes the principal giving attention to both instructional and non-instructional tasks. Effective principals are those who engage in the full spectrum of curriculum and instruction – from planning the curriculum to planning the how of instruction. Evans (1999:11) made the point that principals who are not guided by efficient planning “... resort to a thoroughly bureaucratized way of school administration” and as a result, school administration becomes an occupation that is not defined by expectations. Where these planning activities are not creditably applied, it places limitations and challenges to the realisation of Knowledge and Learning Management (KALM)

**Statement of the Problem**

In the education sector, planning is also expected to play a critical role in non-instructional activities, including data management, lesson preparation, and communication. School administrators are expected to effectively plan their administrative practices, improve the delivery of curriculum content and plans for ways of ensuring that instructional delivery is such that provides training in the skills students need to enter the modern workforce.

However, in Anambra State of Nigeria, planning of activities and administration in secondary schools appears not be result-oriented. Apart from poor state of planning and coordination of school activities, some principals appear to find it difficult to plan for curriculum supervision, relevant tasks for teachers, termly performance report, appointment of prefects, inter-house sports, and organize students adequately for co-curricular activities. Hence, it appears that there is inefficient planning of school curriculum and co-curricular activities which could be attributed to several challenges. Given the current emphasis on KALM, these challenges would result in inefficient curriculum delivery and gross inadequacies in attainment of curriculum objectives. The pertinent question that constitutes the problem of this study is therefore: what curriculum planning practices do secondary school principals in Anambra State apply in their schools to facilitate knowledge and learning management? What challenges do principals face in curriculum planning?

**Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study was to determine the curriculum planning practices and challenges of secondary school curriculum principals in Anambra State. Specifically, the study tried to find out the perceptions of the principals regarding the:
1. Curriculum planning practices performed by secondary school principals in Anambra State, and
2. challenges encountered by principals in school curriculum planning.

**Research Questions**

The study sought answers to the following research questions:
1. What curriculum planning practices do principal apply in secondary schools in Anambra State?
2. What are the perceived challenges encountered by principals in school curriculum planning?

Research Design

This study adopted the descriptive survey design. A survey is a process of collecting data from a specified population in order to determine the current status of that population with respect to one or more variables. This design was appropriate for this study because the researcher collected data from secondary school principals in Anambra State in order to analyse their curriculum planning practices and challenges.

Population of the Study

Two hundred and sixty eight (268) principals were the population for this study. The rationale for involving the principals in this study was because principals were in charge of day-to-day administration of secondary schools. It is their duty to plan, manage personnel, human relations, time and finances of the schools through the application of vital competencies. This puts them in a situation to identify the curriculum planning practices that principals generally perform and the challenges encountered in these curriculum planning practices.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Since the population of the study was small, the entire 268 principals were used. Therefore, there was no sampling.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher. The questionnaire titled “Principals’ Curriculum Planning Practices and Challenges Survey” (PPPCS) comprised 21 items separated into two sections. Eleven of the items were on the planning practices while the other ten items were on the challenges perceived by principals in school planning practices. The items were structured on a 4-point rating of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree.

Validation of Instrument

In order to ascertain the face validity of the instrument used for the study, the drafted questionnaire was given to 2 (two) experts in Curriculum Studies. They made useful suggestions that led to some corrections in the final draft of the questionnaire.

Reliability of Instrument

In ascertaining the reliability of the instrument, it was pilot-tested using 10 principals. These principals filled the copies of the copies and the researcher retrieved the completed copies from them. Their responses were tallied and the scores were calculated. Then cronbach
alpha method was adopted to test the reliability of the instrument. The use of the above method was because it provides a stable measure of homogeneity of items in an instrument. The cronbach alpha yielded coefficients of 0.81 and 0.87 for the two sections respectively. This was an indication that the items in the instrument were reliable for the study.

**Method of Data Collection**

The researcher visited the selected schools to administer the questionnaires personally to the respondents. She administered and collected some copies of instrument from the respondents on same day they were administered. In the case of respondents who could not promptly respond, appointment was arranged with them, and their copies were collected later. However four principals did not return their copies even after repeated visits up till two months after the administration of the instrument. So out of the 268 copies of the questionnaire distributed, only 264 were recovered and used for data analysis.

**Method of Data Analysis**

To facilitate the analysis of the data, the principals’ responses were assigned numerical values as follows: ‘strongly agree (4 points), agree (3 points), disagree (2 points) and strongly disagree (1point). The total score for each item was calculated and the mean score was computed. The responses to the research questions were analysed in sections using mean scores. A score of 2.5 was taken as a cut off point for accepting an item as agree while scores less than 2.5 were taken to mean disagree.

**Presentation And Analysis Of Data**

Research Question 1: What curriculum planning practices do principals apply in Anambra State secondary schools?

Table 1

**Principals’ Mean Ratings of the Curriculum Planning Practices Applied by them.**

*(Number of Principals =264)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Planning with students and staff on the appointment of school prefects for students’ curricular and co-curricular activities</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Planning for taking on extra mural lessons to improve students’ learning.</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Working with teachers in planning and developing curriculum guides, lesson diaries, and pamphlets needed in instructional</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
areas.

4 Planning for workshops and seminars for teachers upon introduction of curriculum innovations. 2.2 disagree
5 Planning and preparing budget for infrastructure maintenance towards attaining schools’ curriculum objectives 2.1 disagree
6 Planning with staff to coordinate extra curricular activities such as debates every session. 3.8 agree
7 Planning curriculum and instructional supervision activities in conjunction with the vice-principals, heads of departments and dean of studies. 3.5 agree
8 Planning with PTA to use community power structures to raise funds for the school for the provision of learning resources 2.8 agree
9 Planning with vice-principals on ways of disseminating curriculum-related material and initiating curriculum debate 2.4 disagree
10 Personally over viewing curriculum effectiveness and planning necessary future improvements through regular meetings with Heads of Departments 3.1 agree
11 Engaging in planned classroom visits (where students and teachers are observed) as a significant means of showing the importance of teaching and learning 3.4 agree

In Table 1, items 1, 2, 6, 7, 10 and 11 have mean ratings above 2.50. This indicates that the principals perform the curriculum planning practices listed in those items. Items 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9 have mean ratings below 2.50 indicating that many of the principals do not perform the stated curriculum planning practices. Hence, curriculum planning practices which the principals perform include: planning for the appointment of prefects, extracurricular activities, students’ extra mural lessons, instructional and supervision activities, personal overview of curriculum effectiveness and planning for future improvement.

Table 2

Principals’ mean ratings of their schools’ curriculum planning challenges

(Number of Principals =264)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/no</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Inadequate resources and funds for school curricular and co-curricular activities</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Frequent transfer of staff</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Urgent and often competing curriculum policies</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Lack of teacher compliance with principals’ directives on teaching and learning activities</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The principals’ mean ratings of items 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20 and 21 are above 2.50. This shows that the principals perceive the issues listed in these items as the challenges they encounter in school curriculum planning. On the other hand, their mean ratings of items 13, 17 and 18 are less than 2.50, indicating that the statements in these items were not among the challenges perceived by principals in curriculum planning for their schools. Therefore, the challenges encountered by principals in school planning: inadequate allocation of resources and funds for curricular and co-curricular activities, urgent and often competing curriculum policies, inadequate training on curriculum innovations and lack of principals’ competence in curriculum planning. Others are inability to understand vision related to curriculum change, lack of statistical skills to carefully analyse students’ achievement in order to review curriculum and plan necessary future improvements.

### Discussion of Findings

In this study, it was found that secondary school principals in Anambra State performed four out of the seven stated curriculum planning practices. These are: planning for the appointment of prefects, extracurricular activities, students’ extra mural lessons and instructional supervision activities. This finding agrees with King (2002) who stated that planning for successful leadership and extracurricular activities are some of the roles of principals needed for effective school management. This is an encouraging finding because by engaging in these curriculum planning activities, the principals have prepared themselves ahead of some steps needed to achieve school curriculum objectives in this era of KALM.

Three areas of the principals’ curriculum planning practices need to be appreciated with caution. These are the areas of planning for taking on extra mural lessons to improve students’ learning, personally over-viewing curriculum effectiveness and planning necessary future improvements through regular meetings with Heads of Departments and engaging in planned classroom visits (where students and teachers are observed) as a significant means of showing the importance of teaching and learning. These findings are of concern because they indicate that rather than delegate or distributing some curriculum planning tasks, secondary school principals appear to be attempting to practise curriculum leadership through personal engagement in classroom observation and by taking on teaching tasks themselves. Here one can see evidence of
well-intentioned but outmoded efforts to enact a view of instructional leadership that Leithwood (1994) indicates was never intended for the secondary school anyway. There are some curriculum planning tasks which the principals need to delegate in order to avoid becoming overburdened and overwhelmed by the complexities in their instructional leadership roles. Fullan (2000) is of the view that the increasing complexity of the role and its associated constraints place principals in a poor position to be instructional leaders, and by implication, poor curriculum planners.

Further, the study observed that the principals did not work with teachers in planning and developing curriculum guides, courses of study, bulletins and pamphlets needed in instructional areas. They were also found wanting in planning for workshops and seminars for teachers upon introduction of curriculum innovations; planning and preparing budget for curriculum and infrastructure maintenance for attaining schools’ curriculum objectives, as well as plan with vice-principals on ways of disseminating curriculum-related material and initiating curriculum debate. Unfortunately, these areas are highly essential for KALM that as Onyia (2010) pointed out, where principals do not plan for them, efficiency in providing curriculum and instructional leadership in areas cannot be assured.

It was found in this study that some perceived challenges encountered by principals in curriculum planning include: inadequate allocation of resources and funds for school curricular and co-curricula activities, inadequate allocation of resources and funds for curricular and co-curricular activities, urgent and often competing curriculum policies, inadequate training on curriculum innovations and lack of principals’ competence in curriculum planning. Others are inability to understand vision related to curriculum change, lack of statistical skills to carefully analyse students’ achievement in order to review curriculum and plan necessary future improvements. These finding tow a similar line with Mkpa (2010) who reported that inadequate resource allocation, incompetence and unavailability of policy documents presented challenges to principals in Nigeria. Without policy document, principals will not be sure of their expected administrative practices. This situation does not augur well for curriculum planning in secondary schools in this KALM era. For principals to effectively carry out their administrative practices, they need to be well informed, and they must have clearly defined and documented policies guiding them.

Another problem perceived by the principals is inadequate training on curriculum innovations. This finding is in agreement with Onyia (2004) who observed that development of secondary school staff leaves much to be desired as staff are not often sponsored to exposed to workshops, symposia and seminars, to keep them abreast of curriculum innovations. From all indications, in-service training of school administrators has not been given the proper attention by successive governments in Nigeria, because teaching experience is the major yardstick used by government to promote teachers from the classroom to administrative positions. But it must be emphasised that teaching and administration are not the same. Moreover, lack of principals’ competence in curriculum planning, inability to understand vision related to curriculum change, and lack of statistical skills to carefully analyse students’ achievement in order to review curriculum and plan necessary future improvements would no doubt, hinder the fulfillment of KALM. These areas could be improved through regular in-service training.
Conclusion

The findings from the study showed that principals in secondary schools in Anambra State generally performed moderately in some areas of curriculum planning and they perceived several challenges in their school curriculum planning. The principals will be commended in areas they have performed well in order to spur them to more positive work, thereby ensuring quality within the system and also ensuring that the schools maintain minimum curriculum standards acceptable in education practice. However, principals need to be sponsored to in-service education to enable them understand the visions of curriculum change, update as well as acquire new competencies in curriculum innovations, statistical analyses and curriculum planning for the Knowledge and Learning Management era.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study:

1. Principals should improve on their curriculum planning practices especially with respect to organising, controlling, and coordinating school curricula and co-curricula programmes
2. Principals should engage in reading professional journals, peer mentoring, and participating in professional conferences and seminars to help them achieve excellence in their curriculum planning practices.
3. Special principals’ training in curriculum planning and statistical skills using practical activities and demonstrations should be encouraged through seminars, workshops and conferences.
4. Before any teacher is appointed as a principal, s/he must be made to undergo a course in school curriculum planning. The Nigerian government established the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) for improving principals’ abilities, so the body should be utilized for that purpose.
5. Principals require refresher courses, workshops, and conferences, professional and in-service training to keep abreast of curriculum innovations and visions as well as perform their curriculum planning practices effectively. Therefore the Ministry of Education, the Association of Secondary School Principals (ANCOPPS), the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), Curriculum Organisation of Nigeria, State Education Commission and other relevant bodies, should organise professional training in school curriculum planning for principals.
6. Government should provide the necessary funds, resources and facilities needed in schools in order to create an environment where principals succeed in effective school curriculum planning practices.

References

