

The Strategic Leadership Role of School Principals in Developing Strategic Plans: The Case of Four Secondary Schools in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Dr. Amanuel Eromo Adillo

Kotebe University of Education

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how principals in Addis Ababa, contribute to the improvement of academic performance in secondary schools through strategic planning. In an attempt to address this issue, a qualitative case study was conducted in four purposefully selected senior secondary schools. The researcher collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with principals, department heads, and supervisors from high-performing and low-performing schools. Qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were coded and analyzed thematically. The relevant documents were also analyzed. The research result reveals that in schools, principals did not play strategic leadership role in creating and executing strategic plan at school level. The findings also indicate that principals lack strategic leadership skills and knowledge in areas such as conducting a SWOT analysis, defining the vision, mission, and values, setting goals and monitoring implementation. Moreover, there is a lack of coordination between strategic planning and academic performance. As a result, it can be inferred that secondary schools in the study area have not utilized a structured approach in developing their strategic plans based on the context and condition of schools, which included important elements to enhance student academic performance. Based on the findings, the study suggests that secondary schools should have a well-defined policy guideline regarding the strategic plan to enhance academic performance. In light of this, the Ministry of Education is advised to create this guideline to effectively support and managing school leaders to improve academic performance.

Keywords: Strategic Planning, Strategic Formulation, Articulation of Vision, Setting Strategic Goals, Strategic Implementation, Academic Performance. Policy Guideline

1. 1. Background of the Study

Strategic leadership in schools involves determining the school's direction, recognizing challenges and areas requiring attention, setting goals and developing a plan to accomplish them, and involving the school community in this process. Strategic planning for schools involves a methodical approach to evaluating the school's current state, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and creating a clear plan of action to achieve its

goals (Pearce, 2009). A strategic plan provides guidance and focus for employees by making decisions and taking actions to achieve organizational objectives.

As Beach and Lindahl (2004) argue, “The combination of policy around a single planning form may not be in public education’s best interests” (p. 1). So, educational planners are called upon to be apt with a variety of planning approaches, to know the strengths and weaknesses of each, and be able to assess their organization’s internal and external contexts to determine which to use for any given time or purpose. The planning and the ability to think strategically by planners, managers and employees alike, feed into the strategic plan document. Although the strategic plan document is not the most valuable output of the strategic plan formation process, neither is it a definite output, it is however tangible evidence that includes most of the planning efforts.

According to Chang (2008) a strategic plan is a dynamic document that outlines the direction, strategies, actions, and benchmarks for a school's development. It includes analyzing and prioritizing issues, planning to address them, and implementing the plan to ensure quality education for students. The plan is linked to the school's self-evaluation and performance objectives. Some governments require institutions, including schools, to develop strategic plans to improve management and academic performance.

According to Pearce and Robinson (2007), strategic planning involves making decisions about the future of an organization. A good strategic plan helps with implementation. It is important to note that schools without strategic plans show a lack of commitment to quality management, which can negatively affect the quality of education and student academic performance. This study aims to examine how well secondary schools in Ethiopia have developed strategic plans to improve academic performance.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The school management and administration must have a well-developed strategic plan to set expectations for their institutions. However, many people have mixed feelings about strategic planning because it often results in unused plans. This prevents schools meeting their expectations. Strategic planning is crucial to the school’s success, and poor planning is worse than no planning at all. It helps school managers anticipate the future, identify important trends, and adapt to new challenges.

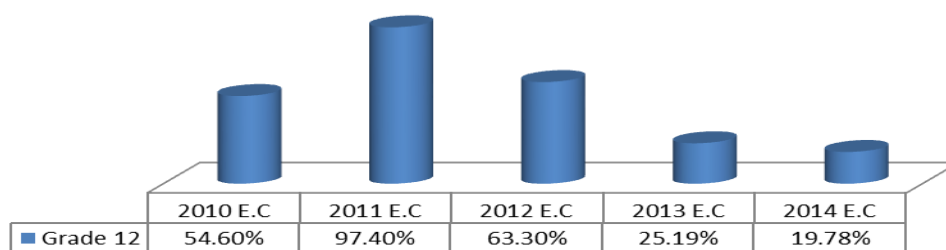
There is a recent study by Winrose C. (2022) in Kericho county, Kenya, the purpose of which was to find out the relation between school strategic leadership practices and academic performance in public secondary schools. The study found out that there is a significant relationship between strategic leadership practices and academic performance. According to Bustaman (2015), the strategic leadership issues that have been the topic of debate and often discussed in Ethiopian education are the issues of lack of expertise, failure to articulate vision and mission, facing non-strategic development, as well as giving answers for the analysis of strengths and weaknesses. Lack or absence of sufficient answers to the raised issues in the discussion has led to the school's failure to achieve its goals and has resulted in the unachievable return of investment that has been spent on various failed leadership training programs.

Likewise, a study carried out by Addisu Abebe (2016) examined research in Sidama Zone secondary schools. The study identified the challenges that encounter strategic planning, preparation and implementation the level in the school’s organizational plan, environmental uncertainty and length of future commitments of plan, lack of awareness and support of stakeholders from experts, communication barriers, lack of financing and commitments among stakeholders.

Likewise, a study conducted by Abdisa Bayissa (2016) examined the process of creating strategic plans in secondary schools in the West Shoa Zone. The results revealed that these schools were not adequately

reviewing a SWOT analysis of their plans and had limited involvement from stakeholders in collecting data and gathering resources. The study identified various issues, including a lack of knowledge and skills, resource capacity problems, lack of integration, and weak monitoring and evaluation methods in the preparation of school strategic plans. Ultimately, effective school improvement planning requires using data and involving people in the improvement process. Despite the government's efforts to enhance education in schools, there have been no successful results. The overall academic performance of grade 12 students in Ethiopia, especially in Addis Ababa, is unsatisfactory. Evidence indicates a decline in students' academic achievement in national exams over time.

Promotion Rate of Grade 12



Grade 12 National Examination Promotion Rate in years.

The graph in Figure 1, according to the educational statistics annual abstract (2021/22), Grade 12 National Examination Promotion Rate in years illustrates the fluctuating trend of the percentage of students who were promoted in grade 12 over the years. Accordingly, in 2019, the highest number of students (97.4%) progressed to higher education. Conversely, the percentages decreased in the subsequent years, with 63.30% in 2020, 25.19% in 2021, and 19.78% in 2022 (AACAE, 2023). This suggests that the performance of students in the national exam has significantly been declined. Because of this, the national exam scores of students have decreased significantly. This has led to questioning the reasons why this decline happened. Further research is necessary to determine the factors that are causing students' academic performance to worsen at an increasing rate each year. Was the reason related to the weak strategic leadership or the students' failure to master learning skills?

Moreover, the study conducted by Niyomugabo Nicolas (2018) examined the relationship between strategic planning and academic performance in secondary schools in Rusizi District, Rwanda. The results showed a positive correlation between strategic planning in schools and students' performance. In our condition, it seems that some schools did not develop strategic plans, thereby leading to poor school management and hence, lowering the academic performance and poor school environment. This casts some doubts on the extent of development of quality strategic plans and its implementation by secondary schools.

To achieve the strategic goal of the school, principals and the stakeholders face big problems in preparing and implementing strategic planning. With regard to the process of formulating strategic plans, Tefera Desha (2012) cited the state as a major reason why the terminology to describe the strategic planning process is inconsistent such as most often using different terms and definitions like long-term planning, short-term planning, strategic planning, financial planning operational planning and school development planning. From this, we can understand that principals and other stakeholders lack detailed knowledge and awareness about planning in a scientific way.

Previous research on this topic has mostly concentrated on non-educational settings and there is not much scholarship on these issues in the sphere of education. This study considers the aspects of strategic planning,

such as formulation, communication, participation, implementation, and monitoring, of strategic plans in terms of students' academic performance. Furthermore, previous studies have only used a quantitative research approach, whereas this study used a qualitative approach. Moreover, there is a lack of evidence regarding the amount of research conducted on the strategic leadership role of principals in developing plans to enhance academic performance. This also indicates that there might be knowledge and practical gaps in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategic planning. Therefore, we can say that this study suggests ways which help to tackle the causes of low academic achievement and examines the influence of principals' strategic planning on academic performance in government secondary schools in Addis Ababa. The study used specific questions as a guide for its research.

- 1) How do secondary school principals apply the strategic leadership role in developing strategic plans for the school to improve academic performance in the study area?
- 2) What are the strategies school principals use to develop the strategic leadership role in formulating, implementing and monitoring strategic planning to improve academic performance?

The Conceptualization of Strategic Planning

Different scholars have developed different perceptions of strategic planning as applied in an organizational setup. It is a process of investigating the organizational future and the identification of issues and trends that align with the priorities of the organization (United Nations, 2019). The description creates the analysis of organizational aims in teams, divisions and units to a high-level strategy that assures high chances of realizing goals. The United Nations document (2019) states that good strategic planning initiates focus, accountability and good results.

The education sector, like the economic sector, needs the use of human, material and financial resources to function. Clive (2005) defines strategic planning as setting out decisions and actions that result in the formulation and implementation of actions designed to achieve an organization's objectives. A strategy is a set of activities or processes that an organization intends to use in order to achieve its set of goals and aims (Pearce, 2009). Strategic planning and thinking involves making choices and decisions about the long-term future of an organization (Pearce, 2009). As Beach and Lindahl (2004) argue, "The combination of policy around a single planning form may not be in public education's best interests" (p. 1). So, educational planners are called upon to be up-to-date with a variety of planning approaches, to know the strengths and weaknesses of each, and be able to assess their organization's internal and external contexts to determine which to use for any given time or purpose. However, it has now become a major challenge amongst various secondary schools in Ethiopia.

The secondary school sector is crucial for students to prepare for their future in society and higher education. Strategic planning is necessary to meet this expectation and improve educational programs. Research shows that strategic planning is an important step for schools to address challenges and enhance the quality of education. Many organizational leaders have a strategy in mind, but fail to communicate it effectively, leading to limited action. Therefore, it is important to develop a strategy to achieve goals. Wilkinson (2011) provides reasons why organizations should create plans.

2.2 Academic Performance

Scholars and researchers want to know what things make students do well in schools. There are lots of things that can affect how well students do in schools, like how educated their parents are, how much money their parents make, how much their teachers know about what they're teaching, if they miss a lot of school, if they have enough books and a library to use, if they have a place to do experiments, and if they get meals at school (Chinyoka, K. and Naidu, N. 2013).

The home environment has a significant impact on academic performance, particularly for students from impoverished backgrounds who may have limited access to educational resources. Secondary school education is considered crucial for preparing students for higher education (Chindanya, A., 2012). Consistent lower academic performance at the Senior High School is a threat to every country's educational system, especially Ethiopia.

Theoretical Framework

There are various theories supporting strategic planning. These theories are explicitly discussed in this section. The major theory that provided an in-depth understanding of the Strategic Planning formulation in education institutions is the study noted that Kaufman and Herman's (1991) illustrated "Strategic Planning for a Better Society" was written. Under the section Educational Leadership, published by (Kaufman and Herman, 1991), This theory is appropriate to the pragmatic use of the 'Strategic Planning Model' which brings about the conceptual framework of administrative planners in their quest for attainable vision, mission, goals, and objectives of universities and other educational institutions.

The theory, as explained by Kaufman and Herman, consists of four main parts: scoping, data collection, planning, implementation, and evaluation. These parts are essential in creating a strategic plan to address the problems in an educational institution. The theoretical perspective of this study is defined as the framework that guides the methodology and provides context and justification for the process (Crotty, 2003:7).

Goal-Setting Theory developed by Edwin A. Locke (1968): The main purpose of goal-setting theory is to better understand the connection between how the goal-setting process influences work motivation and academic performance. From there, people and teams can use that understanding to help staff become more successful in hitting their goals in succeeding high academic performance.

The integration of two theories is relevant for this study because they are addressing problems in educational institutions, guideline to formulate a strategic plan and is, therefore, relevant for strategic planning in this context and condition of schools.

3.1 Research Paradigm

The study was conducted using a constructivist paradigm, which involves individuals reflecting on their experiences and connecting new knowledge with what they already know (Lichman, 2014:14). This paradigm emphasizes the importance of learners discovering their own meaning in order to learn effectively. The study is grounded in ontology and epistemology. This study focuses on the human world of meanings and interpretations, and takes a constructionist approach to understanding knowledge. This perspective, known as interpretivism, is considered more suitable for addressing problems in educational institutions and is, therefore, relevant for strategic planning in this context. By using this approach, the researcher was able to help the school improve the performance of students by integrating their efforts and providing strategic leadership.

3.2. Research Design

The study used a case study method to explore the knowledge and experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2012:97). A case study is important for researcher as it helps collect and organize data for analysis. The study focused on specific research sites and interviewed different participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of the problem being studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Johansson, 2003; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013).

3.3 Research Approach

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, which was chosen because it allows for a deep understanding of social incidents in schools (Creswell, 2014:113). This approach is based on the idea that it is important to understand how the complexities of the sociocultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood in a specific setting and at a specific time. In this study, a qualitative research model was used to learn how school principals develop strategic plans and use them to improve academic performance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was collected through interviews, data analysis, and reviewing existing literature.

3.5 Population Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive sampling to choose participants who could give useful information. Government secondary schools were chosen because they are responsible for planning and improving students' academic performance. Four government secondary schools were selected for the case study, specifically two high-performing and two low-performing schools based on the 2021/2022 National Exam results. These secondary schools are Addis Ketema, Kolfe, Agazian and Kechene Debre Selam. The researchers used purposive sampling to gather detailed information about balancing high-performing and low-performing information for their study (Patlon, 2002). Data were collected between March and June 2023.

3.6 Data Gathering Tools

It is clear that any study is based on information that can be collected utilizing different instruments. Thus, information related about benefits and successes, the role of leaders/managers, and challenges related to the supervisors, principals and department heads were obtained through interviews and document review.

For the purpose of triangulation, this study utilized a number of diverse information collection instruments to assemble adequate data from participants and other sources to test validity through the meeting of data from distinctive sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Three types of information-gathering instruments were utilized. These included interviews, FGD and relevant report analysis guides.

The study involved conducting interviews with supervisors, principals, department heads, and teachers. A total of four supervisors, four principals, and twenty eight department heads from four different secondary schools were selected for the interviews. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed later. Separate interview guidelines were used in different positions. The questions were prepared in English and translated into Amharic. The interviews were manually noted and audio recorded. Focus group discussions were also held with participants in the field of their profession. The four discussions involving 28 participants were led by the researcher.

The document review method was used alongside interviews and focus group discussions to gather data on teaching practices in the selected schools. This method involved analyzing existing documents such as strategic plans and school improvement plans to gain insight and understanding on the evaluation topic.

3.9. Methods of Data Analysis

It was important to analyze the data and collect it at the same time to avoid repetition of information or becoming overwhelmed. The researcher needed to reduce the amount of information, find important patterns, and create a framework. After the coding was completed, the information relating to each code was collated and combined into potential themes.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Developing Strategic Plans for the School to Improve Academic Performance

The majority of participants said they have a strategic plan, but some principals mentioned that they are unable to implement their plans due to certain obstacles. One principal suggested that the school improvement plan should be responsible for ensuring strategic planning is carried out. They all agreed that planning is a crucial task for principals as it serves as the foundation for other management responsibilities. The participants provided different types of responses.

Having strategic plans in place is crucial for schools as they provide guidance for necessary actions. However, these plans may not always be implemented due to the prioritization of daily issues and limited time. Instead, we often rely on the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) and school improvement plans. It is recommended that the City government Education Bureau should be responsible for strategic planning in schools (PA-S1)..

Principals understand the importance of having a strategic plan for their schools, as it provides direction and sets out goals for the future. This aligns with what is stated in literature, where it is mentioned that a school strategic plan typically includes the school's purpose, values, and goals.

Strategic planning is important for schools to grow and develop effective operational strategies. However, there are no government policy guidelines for formulating a strategic plan. The current education policy does not address strategic planning, and the school improvement guidelines and framework do not cover key aspects such as vision, mission, and values. There is a lack of clarity regarding the management of schools' strategic planning formulation (PB-S2).

It also seems that most, if not all, principals ensure that strategic plans are formulated at the school level. Other work-related operational tasks take priority, and the strategic plans shift to the side. The principal indicated that strategic planning is formulated at the City Government, Education Bureau, and our task is to make it contextual after cascading. The responsibility for the formulation of the strategic plan falls on the shoulders of the City government Education Bureau to ensure that such planning is done in conjunction with the other stakeholders and the vision, mission, values, and major goals stated at the city administration level.

Several participants expressed the belief that committees should regularly communicate their activities either verbally or in writing, however, not all committees adhere to this practice. In many instances, committees only highlight areas of concern and eventually give up on their efforts. Parent committees are particularly ineffective as they consistently involve the same individuals, resulting in a sense of hopelessness and lack of motivation.

I expect my people to get back to me. If I do not hear from them for a while I will call them into my office to get feedback. Then I can again provide feedback to the city administration education bureau. The different committees must bring feedback, but they do not always do. It becomes difficult for me to follow up on everything. The parents are not always willing to work for the school anymore. They get too busy with their own lives (PC-S3).

The responses suggest that there are some level of monitoring in place. It appears that when difficult problems arise, the implementation of strategic plans is often abandoned. This may be due to a lack of motivation and support, or because stakeholders perceive that there is no real consequence for not continuing with the implementation.

The principal's remarked that:

Without a clear strategic vision, the school will not be able to achieve any significant results. It is difficult to lead when not everyone agrees with your ideas, which is why the school has not seen much improvement in terms of results (PD-S4).

This indicates that school principals perceived the importance of strategic planning in order to improve students' academic performance. However, in practice, they did not formulate the strategic plan in the alignment of students' results.

Similarly, a supervisor from the education bureau of the Sub-city believes that a strategic plan should be treated as a living document that is regularly reviewed and considered. When used consistently, a strategic plan can be a valuable tool for schools. As described by (SupI-S1) it:

The speaker is confident in the strategic plan because it is not just a document that is ignored, but rather something that is referred to frequently and used to guide decision-making. They acknowledge that the plan is not perfect, but it is still valuable and influences how the school operates. This is the first time the school has had a written strategic plan (Sup1-S1).

In the focus group, participants who were head of departments discussed their involvement in the development of the strategic plan described that:

A lack of participation and communication among school head teachers and teachers has resulted in a lack of understanding of the vision, mission, and values of their own schools. As a result, they have not been effectively delivered instruction to students and achieving desired educational outcomes. This is evident in the low scores of students in the grade 12 national exam, with only 19.78% of students passing with a score of 50 or above (HoDFGD1-S1).

This means that the teaching and learning in government schools had problems because there was not enough involved in the planning of the strategic plan and communication was not effective. In describing the strategic planning process at Sub- city supervisor noted:

The strategic plan will involve input from parents, students, teachers, administrators, and support staff at the school level. However, in our situation, the city government and education bureau will create the plan based on city priorities and then we will incorporate performance targets and trend data over 3-year periods (SuI-S2).

The theme of alignment was further exemplified by the comments made by supervisors while discussing the development of vision, mission and goals of the Sub-city:

During the summer, I attend a retreat with administrators to assess how we can contribute to our strategic planning goals. Together, we establish goals for the district and the board of education, ensuring that they align with our strategic plan. These goals are presented to the board in August and are ready to be implemented on the first day of school in September (SupII-S2).

4.2 Participation of the School Stakeholders in Articulating the Vision, Mission, Values and Goals

Effective principals are expected to have a clear vision and fulfill various duties and responsibilities in order to serve the community. They should align resources and set priorities based on the school's vision, and involve other important individuals within and outside the school to achieve the goals outlined in the vision. In one school, the principal stated that their vision, mission, and values were determined and communicated by the city education bureau rather than the school.

I have played a significant role in helping the school succeed by aligning with its vision, mission, and values and supporting students in achieving excellent academic results. As a principal, I have encouraged teachers to plan effectively for their students and emphasized the importance of involving the school community in decision-making. I have also played a key role in identifying the strengths of school members, setting academic goals, and motivating others to achieve our vision and goals. However, the overall vision, mission, values, and goals are determined by the City Government and Education Bureau and are communicated to us (PA-S).

The principals' views prevented him from being a strategic leader and he acknowledged that he did not communicate the school's vision, mission, and values as required. However, he did influence the teaching staff to follow and implement these principles. Regarding developing the school vision and goal setting, interviews were held with the school two principals and he replied similar to previous school principal as follows:

I played a crucial role in analyzing the behavior of school members, setting academic objectives, and persuading teachers and others to work towards achieving our vision and goals. However, the vision, mission, and values, along with key goals, are determined by the city government and education bureau and then communicated to us. (PB-SII).

Both Principal A and Principal B highlighted the importance of the city government and education bureau in determining the vision, mission, and values, as well as key goals for schools. They expressed concern that principals are limited in their ability to exercise strategic leadership due to the influence of these cascaded goals and values. This lack of autonomy prevents them from effectively involving the school community and other stakeholders in transforming the school culture. Additionally, there is a lack of opportunity for principals to collaborate with others in establishing a shared vision, mission, and values and setting goals together.

The principals are expected to be dedicated and interested in achieving goals and satisfying stakeholders. The principal of school four also discussed the issues caused by the cascaded strategic plan during an interview.

The education bureau creates visions, missions, and values as part of a strategic plan at the city level and then shares them with schools. However, there are challenges in integrating these elements into the school's annual and daily plans, even though they are displayed on notice boards. Monthly discussions and evaluations do not lead to any changes or improvements in the way activities are traditionally conducted. (PD-SIV).

During the interview, the principals had differing opinions, but they were all related. They all agreed that strategic planning, specifically the vision, mission, and values, should be communicated to the teaching staff. However, the principals noticed that the staff did not see these elements as important for their daily work. It is expected that principals should motivate and understand the school's strategic missions, values, and goals, and make sure the school community is aware of them. Another supervisor also shared the same viewpoint.

Teachers do not have the ability to personalize the vision set by the education bureau. Despite their capacity and power to align with the vision, there is no significant effort to help them understand and feel connected to it. As a result, the principal's role in shaping the school's vision is minimal. (SIV-S1).

The supervisor believes that principals are responsible for creating a school's vision, mission, values, and strategic goals. They should provide support from relevant ministries to achieve these goals and promote sustainable development. Principals should communicate the vision and goals to their staff and ensure that they are included in the school's strategic plan. However, the supervisor thinks that the principal in question did not effectively communicate with staff and stakeholders and did not meet the national professional standards (SPS, 2013:10).

The school has experienced teachers who are well-accepted by the community, but there is a lack of equal participation among the teachers during the communication of the strategic planning. PA-S1)

This suggests that teachers are failing to effectively communicate the city-level strategic plan, despite it being developed by the education bureau.

4.3. Communication of Vision, Mission, Values and Goals

To have a positive influence on academic performance, principals must establish a positive work environment and regularly communicate with stakeholders and teachers to ensure alignment with classroom instruction. Principal A emphasized the importance of this approach.

The most crucial aspect is turning a vision into a mission. It is essential to clearly communicate the vision and ensure that all individuals involved understand their roles and responsibilities, particularly in terms of providing quality education. When the vision is effectively communicated and everyone participates, delivering high-quality outcomes become easier (PA-S1).

Principals need to effectively communicate with the school in order to achieve its goals. This includes creating a detailed plan and ensuring that all staff members are aware of their responsibilities. However, managers must do more than simply inform staff members of their roles in supporting the plan. Developing and communicating the school vision, mission, values and key strategic goals is a big role expected from the principal as a school leader. Regarding this, school one supervisor commented:

There is a lack of alignment between the school's vision, mission, and values and its strategies and context for change. The education bureau dictates most of the goals and they cannot be tailored to fit the school's specific needs. Teachers and school management meet regularly to discuss ways to improve the school based on a three-year strategic plan, but it is unclear if the entire school community understands this plan. The school evaluates its performance through conferences and reports at the beginning and end of the academic year (S1-S1).

The supervisor's response to the interview revealed that the principals do not declare the school's vision, mission, and values, and even the specific school's key goals were facilitated with the active participation of the key stakeholders, namely, teachers, students, non-teaching staff, parents, supervisors, and community leaders, to understand and support that vision, mission, and values.

The principal agrees that a school must clearly define its vision, mission, values, and strategic goals. However, they believe it is important to communicate these using various methods, such as displaying them on notice boards and in different areas of the school. The principal is concerned that only using meetings to share this information does not give the school community a sense of ownership. He remarked that:

As the school vision, mission, values and goals are sketched by the education bureau at the City level, the school has no option other than directly copy them. And it is not authorized to form its own. Despite the

vision, mission, values, goals, focus areas and others are formulated by education bureau, they are posted on the notice board and different places; the school community has failed to incorporate them into the day to day activities thereby achieving goals (PC-SIII).

The school community does not have input in creating the vision, mission, values, and goals, which makes it challenging to foster a sense of belonging. This could hinder the implementation of these strategies. However, to effectively change attitudes, it is crucial to consistently refer to the strategic vision and identify successful goals that can be sustained in order to continue improving the school program and gaining acceptance from the school community.

During a focus group interview, subject teachers expressed their concern that there was a lack of participation and awareness in the process of preparing the strategic plan, as well as in the development of the vision, mission, values, and key goals. The school community members were not informed about the significance of these elements in transforming the school culture and ensuring quality education, and they were not included in the planning process. They further commented as follows regarding this issue:

The school does not have its own vision, mission, or values. Instead, these are determined by higher authorities. This lack of clear direction leads to a lack of defined goals and expectations for students. However, there are efforts to address important issues and improve the school's action plan. The annual plan and progress will be shared with the school community at the beginning and the end of the year (HoDFG2-S2).

The teachers in the interview indicated that the school principal did not effectively communicate the school's vision, mission, values, and goals to the school community. The interview data also revealed that the school improvement plan was not integrated with the vision, mission, and values that involved the school community. The researcher observed that the school community did not properly develop and communicate the school's vision, mission, and values, as evidenced by the lack of documented minutes and other notices.

4.4. The Implementation of Vision, Mission, Values and Goals

The teaching staff believed that the school's vision, mission, and values were not actively involved in the school's activities. They argued that without aligning these principles with the school improvement plan, it would be challenging to improve the quality of education and transform the school culture. They emphasized the importance of aligning personal values with the school's vision to create a cohesive community that works together to achieve school goals. The staff felt that the school's vision, mission, and values were not well-developed, transparent, or effectively communicated to the school community. They believed that the principal should prioritize improving teachers' skills by creating a shared vision, establishing values, and shaping their beliefs and perspectives. A supervisor had this to say:

The principal does not involve staff and stakeholders in decision-making, and the school's vision, mission, values, and goals are determined by the education bureau rather than collaboratively with the school community. Additionally, the school community is not fully utilizing all the listed elements. (SII-S2).

The supervisor also indicated that there are gaps and lack of coordination between the principal and the school community as a result of which there are no values sketched to come up with better results. Principals were not effective in communicating and directing the school's vision and goals, leading to a lack of shared vision and values within the school community. This lack of leadership in developing core values and fostering a cooperative environment hindered the school's ability to achieve its goals and transform for the 21st century. The following ideas were shared by department head teachers who participated in the focus group discussions:

There was a lack of focus on training teachers who understand ethics and respect the school community. We did not prioritize this aspect or invest much effort into developing a clear vision, mission, values, and beliefs. As a result, we did not achieve exceptional results (HodFGD2-SII).

The focus group discussions revealed that there is a significant lack in the school's ability to create a clear vision and effectively communicate it to the school community. This has resulted in the school leaders not properly considering ways to improve the school. Additionally, the leaders have not identified the main purpose of the school, which is to improve student learning and make important decisions. The researcher noticed that the school's vision, mission, and values, which were displayed on the notice board, were not created by the school community and holds little meaning to them.

In the above sections, the qualitative details of data relating to the role of strategic leadership in articulating the vision, mission and values of quality education were presented. In the next section, the researcher discusses the findings in respect of strategic leadership team.

4.5 Effectiveness Monitoring of Strategic Plan Implementation to Improve Academic Performance

Monitoring is crucial for ensuring that teachers are committed, implementing policies, carrying out their work, providing for learners, and being punctual. It also aids department heads in providing appropriate guidance and leadership to both learners and subject teachers with the aim of enhancing the quality of results. Principal A alluded,

School principals must oversee the quality of teaching and learning in order to identify areas for improvement and create plans for future enhancement (PA-S1).

Principals B emphasized,

...the significance of subject teachers, department heads, principals, and parents providing effective guidance and leadership in secondary schools to improve student performance (PB-S2).

Principal C and D, in agreement, confirmed,

Consistent monitoring in schools is important for improving academic performance. It allows teachers to understand and address students' challenges effectively. Neglecting monitoring can lead to unforeseen consequences and a lack of accountability. In our situation, our students' performance in national exams has suffered due to a lack of monitoring. Our focus has been more on political tasks rather than observing and evaluating classroom activities. (PC&D-S3&4.)

All the participating schools implement various strategies to improve academic performance, with a clear monitoring program and curriculum improvement plan. The supervisor stated,

Strategic leaders bring light to the importance of teacher competencies that can stretch beyond conventional teaching practices. Therefore, the principal has a greater impact in terms of learning outcomes through monitoring learning progress by the periodic assessments result (SI-S2).

Another Supervisor also remarked,

The lack of a clear vision from the principal is preventing the school from achieving significant results. If people do not believe in the ideas of the principal, it becomes challenging to lead. This is why there has been limited improvement in grade 12 outcomes in 2021/2022 (SII-S2).

Supervisor of another school, in disagreement with supervisor SII, by saying,

A strategic leader should find a way to include everyone, regardless of their existing relationships, in order to achieve success. (SII-S3).

Supervisor IV agreed,

In order for a school to be successful, the principal must possess specific qualities that align with the school's vision and be able to inspire and motivate the staff to achieve their goals. SIV-S4)

The participants ensure that monitoring at all stages of strategic plan implementation doesn't assist to ensure that activities at each phase are being executed as planned to improve academic performance. To summarize, strategic planning is an effective tool to enhance students' academic performance and establish a systematic process for school improvement, innovation, and change.

4.6. Improving Academic Performance

This study examined how students performed on national exams based on the opinions of school principals, supervisors, and heads of departments. The principles anonymously described the participants' views on how students in certain schools performed below the expected standards in this exam. They expressed as:

The principals from the study area all agreed unanimously that the students' performance in the national examination was worse than expected and has been declining year after year. This could be due to various factors such as the teachers' job satisfaction, students' lack of involvement, lack of policy guideline, inadequate school facilities like a library and laboratory, and insufficient support from parents (principals A, B, C, and D-S1,2, 3&4).

However, supervisors' participant totally disagreed about the cause that the performance of students in national examination was declined below the expectations. They described as:

The Supervisors from the study area identified several reasons for the failure, including a lack of shared vision among the school community, a lack of strategic planning, inadequate leadership skills among principals, ineffective leadership styles, knowledge and skill gaps in school leaders a disconnect between annual plans and classroom instruction, and a lack of commitment from school leaders to develop teachers' professional development and improve instruction quality (SI, SII, SII, and SIV-S1,2,3,4).

The head of the department disclosed, the reason for the poor performance of secondary school students in the national exam. They revealed as:

The main reasons for under-performance of students in Head of departments are teachers lack of job satisfaction and competency among teachers, lack of motivation, economic crises leading to inflation, disciplinary issues and lack of engagement in learning among students, lack of commitment from leadership, lack of policy guideline, knowledge and skill gaps in school leaders, changes in exam administration, and poor strategic planning in goal setting. Another major factor is the ineffective delivery of classroom instruction (HODFGD1,2,3,4- S1,2,3,4)

These participants' opinions clearly indicate that all of them agree that schools lack strategic leadership who formulate the strategic plan in active participation of all stakeholders for improvement of academic performance. Besides that they mentioned the lack of policy guideline as the hindrance for formulating strategic plans to improve academic performance. However, teachers and non-teaching staff involved in the planning process may have limited knowledge of strategic management. Furthermore, the study reveals that principals

often fail to fulfill their role as strategic leaders. This suggests that principals do not engage staff and stakeholders in developing and communicating a vision and goals, and lack the skills to create, execute, monitor, and assess strategic goals for student success.

One of the most important practices for supporting teachers' instruction is to focus on school goals and expectations for student achievement (Quong and Walker, 2010:24; Leithwood, 2009;). The study found that principals were not fulfilling their expected professional standards in creating a school plan, as outlined in their job description. The principals admitted to copying the vision, mission, values, and strategic goals from the City Government Education Bureau. They unanimously submitted that:

We recreated the entire structure of the balanced scorecard, including its vision, mission, values, strategic goals, and key activities. We also utilize the balanced scorecard to assess our school's performance, so there is no necessity to adapt it for our particular situation.

The researchers discovered that the school principals believed they didn't need to establish their own core values for the school's culture. Instead, they simply adopted the values set by the City Government Education Bureau. The principals made no significant changes to these values, including the strategic goals provided by the Bureau. While a school vision is important, it doesn't immediately impact the principals' ability to provide clear direction for the school. This could hinder their ability to fulfil their duties, particularly in terms of teaching and learning.

Schools three and four were deemed ineffective due to their principals and the school community's experiences and feedback, which indicated that their planning process did not align with the principles of strategic leadership. Consequently, their performance in the national exam of 2021/2022 was unsatisfactory. This lowers the academic achievements of students as well as improving the quality of education. It is also noted that leadership in schools is a critical factor that determines the fate of schools, starting from the planning stage (Bush, 2010a:650).

The principal, as a strategic leader, understands the current situation and uses it to motivate teachers. They communicate a clear and impactful vision, inspiring teachers to be motivated, innovative, and creative. However, a majority of the head teachers disagreed with this perspective.

The school adheres to the vision, mission, and values established by the city's education bureau. Nevertheless, the school principals present their annual plan at the beginning of the academic year. However, the absence of specific goals and evaluation methods hinders any progress in this aspect.

According to the information provided, head of departments understood the importance of having a vision, mission, and values of their school. However, the principals were not committed to clearly communicating and establishing these shared goals at the school level. This lack of leadership from the principals caused a hindrance in guiding the day-to-day activities and values within the school community. Additionally, the principals did not have a comprehensive vision that aligned with national standards and principles, which in turn did not inspire or motivate teachers to go above and beyond in their work.

In order to successfully implement strategies, it is crucial for the principal to promote awareness and understanding of the shared goals and values, ultimately transforming the school's culture. Lastly, the principal should prioritize openly and consistently communicating the school's vision to all members of the school community. As the prominent scholar, Blankstein (2010:103) said:

Having a common set of values in schools is crucial to prevent division and ensure that everyone's actions align with the school's objectives.

The core values of collegiality, performance, and improvement are believed to be centred on quality, achievement, and learning for all students as well as positive and proactive approaches for staff and students. These values are connected to the schools' visions and missions. However, the study did not consider the values that guide and direct the school and community in their day-to-day activities. Additionally, it is important for school leaders to effectively communicate the school's vision to all stakeholders, but the interviews revealed that school principals in Addis Ababa did not articulate a shared vision as strategic leaders. Instead, they simply copied the vision from the city-level education bureau. Many head of departments in the focus group felt that principals were not strategic leaders who effectively communicated a comprehensive vision. The following are excerpts which teachers shared about principals' vision.

Our school has not made arrangements to utilize local educational institutions and trained professionals. It has not adequately prepared itself to devise a plan that identifies important tasks. Moreover, little effort has been put into establishing a clear vision, mission, values, and beliefs. The school simply inherits its vision, goals, values, and objectives from higher authorities without much consideration. It lacks a distinct vision, goal, and value system, relying solely on brief announcements and a notice board.

The study revealed that teachers were not organizing their daily tasks in line with the school's goals, which hindered their ability to successfully achieve these goals. This suggests that the practice of goal-setting theory was not being implemented. Insufficient understanding of goal setting theory affects the relationship between work motivation and academic performance (Lock, 1968). Sub-city supervisors have helped train principals in articulating the school's vision, mission, and values, but the principals are still hesitant to create these with the goals set by the city government education bureau. Additionally, while principals sometimes lead and facilitate the vision of learning, teachers feel that a shared vision is rarely implemented in the school. This suggests that principals need to better practice articulating the vision, mission, values, and strategic goals to ensure everyone understands and works towards them, leading to improved education quality.

Principals need to work closely with their staffs to create goals and strategies that improve teaching and learning. They should encourage teacher collaboration, where teachers work together to plan, observe, and discuss teaching practices. It is important for school leaders to communicate the school's vision to all members of the community through various means, such as staff meetings, newsletters, and professional development activities. Schools have made efforts to communicate their visions and missions using these methods as follows:

The community's vision, mission, and values communicate in different ways, but there is a problem with individuals feeling like they belong and actively working towards the mission. Staff find it difficult to embrace and incorporate the values because they were not part of the process of creating them. This causes, the importance of the vision to be reduced.

Although the school had clearly displayed its vision, mission, values, and goals, the researcher found that there was little input from others in creating them. This suggests that the principals did not effectively communicate these aspects to the school community. Previous studies have highlighted the benefits of having a strategic plan for a school, including the development of a clear vision, mission, goals, and objectives, and the communication of these to all stakeholders. However, in this particular school, teachers seemed more focused on personal gains rather than internalizing the vision and improving the school's culture. As a result, disciplinary measures had to be taken against them. The lack of a vision at the school level has a negative impact on the school's direction and certainty. Walker and Quong (2010) found that unplanned principal

succession is a major cause of schools' failure to improve, regardless of the efforts of teachers. They also found that unplanned principal succession has particularly negative effects on efforts to improve low student achievement. Senge (2008) similarly argues that a shared vision is crucial for a learning organization to thrive and adapt during times of stress. The study found that principals did make efforts to communicate the vision, mission, and values of their schools, but they did not effectively fulfil their role in articulating, communicating, and implementing these elements. With regards to communicating strategic plan with school community Hallinger (2010) suggests that the principal's role is to ensure the existence and effective communication of the school's mission, vision, core values and SMART goals. Additionally, Hallinger (1987) argues that a shared sense of purpose derived from the mission is crucial for unifying the school community. However, the four schools in question poorly crafted and non-result-driven vision and mission statements, leading to their underwhelming academic performance. In summary, the principals failed to develop, communicate, and implement the vision, mission, values, and key strategic goals, which go against expectations for strategic principal leadership in improving academic performance. This finding aligns with Simeneh's (2015:89) study, which also highlighted similar results.

Secondary school principals in Addis Ababa do not have the required abilities and understanding to successfully establish a common vision, mission, and values, as well as specific strategic objectives. As a result, they are unable to bring about positive changes in their schools and enhance academic outcomes for students.

The study found that principals did not effectively use their leadership role to transform schools. They were expected to develop plans and work cooperatively to achieve the school's vision, mission, and values. However, the study found that principals did not involve stakeholders in articulating these goals and also did not meet the professional competencies outlined in the standards (SPS, 2013). The lack of formal strategic planning in schools can be attributed to the Ministry of Education's policy guidelines, which require schools to create a strategic plan to improve education quality and achieve long-term goals. Furthermore, the challenging and ever-changing environment in which schools operate requires them to identify strengths and weaknesses and allocate limited resources to gain a competitive edge in the education industry.

In summary, the participants believe that principals need to improve their strategic leadership skills by involving stakeholders in school administration and empowering them during planning, decision-making, and implementation. They also suggest monitoring the progress of teaching and learning through student assessments to provide timely feedback for improvement.

5. Conclusions, Implications, Recommendations and Suggestion for Further Study

5.1 Conclusions

From the research that has been conducted the following conclusions were drawn:-

This study aimed at investigating how the role of the principal as a strategic leader can develop a quality strategic plan and improve academic performance in schools. The findings revealed that there were deficiencies in developing and implementing important aspects of the strategic plan, such as analyzing SWOT, articulating a vision, setting goals, and monitoring progress. Consequently, it can be concluded that principals did not effectively play strategic leadership role in creating a strategic plan which is aligned with their schools' specific characteristics and needs, which is leading to lower academic performance than expected. The

researcher suggests addressing these issues by applying integrated theories and policy guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education to guide and influence principals in developing and executing strategic plans that can enhance academic performance.

5.2 Implications

The strategic plan developed by the Addis Ababa Education Bureau did not consider the individual circumstances of each school. The plan was not effectively communicated, implemented, or monitored in terms of student learning and results. Furthermore, there has been a noticeable decrease in academic performance among students, highlighting the need for competent leaders and effective strategic planning to address the disparities in academic achievement. This study contributes to the existing research on how schools are working to close the gap in academic performance.

5.3. Recommendations and Suggestion for Further Study

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are derived.

- ✓ The study suggests that to improve the academic performance of schools, policy guidelines should be developed to assist in analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, setting and prioritizing goals, ensuring commitment from school leaders, conducting regular consultations, and providing training for important individuals involved.
- ✓ Strategic planning is a powerful instrument to improve students' academic performance and ensures that a coherent action-planning process for school renewal, innovation and change exists. Other stakeholders like teachers and non-teaching staff who constitute the strategy formulation panel also have actively participated in developing a strategic plan in order to successfully bring about change at the school level.

5.4 Suggestion for Further Study

The study examined a specific group of secondary schools in Addis Ababa and concentrated on how principals contribute to enhancing academic achievement. Further research should explore additional factors like student engagement, parental involvement, teacher commitment, and school environment, as they also influence academic performance. Future researchers should aim to fill a research gap by studying all schools in the country using a mixed approach of research methods to improve knowledge and practice.

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