

Intervention strategies to improve student performance

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Abstract

Student performance has dominated current discussions on educational matters and many believe that the new curriculum is not yet absorbed in schools and consequently student performance leaves much to be desired. This has resulted in finger pointing among stakeholders. However, the fact of the matter is that something should be done to improve the current status quo. Every one has a right to basic and further education and thus all children and youth can learn and need support. This implies that every student has the potential to learn and become a responsible citizen if given a conducive atmosphere. More research has been done with regards to identification of barriers to learning and little has been done on how to overcome those barriers. This paper seeks to identify intervention strategies that can be used to improve students' performance at FET colleges. Intervention strategies will be discussed in terms of capacity building, monitoring and other related aspects that will enhance student's academic performance.

Key words: Interventions, strategies, performance, improve.

1. Introduction

FET colleges are central to the delivery of priority skills needed to ensure success and participation in the country's growing economy. They are designed to offer young people real opportunities to learn new skills and create new jobs and establish their own enterprises. The FET Act (DoE, 1998) aims at enabling students to acquire knowledge, practical skills and applied vocational and occupational competence. These aims cannot be achieved if students are experiencing difficulty in handling the subject matter and students are battling to cope, thus reducing the overall student academic performance. The informal research that the authors of this paper have done shows that although colleges do have intervention strategies, some students still do not perform well. So the question that can be asked is "Are the programs introduced at FET colleges doing what they are supposed to do? Quiet often it would seem that the computer programmes that has been bought to help students with, say, reading and maths problems, does not achieve its goal. This could be partially attributed to the fact that when programs of whatever kind are designed for students, their valuable knowledge and experiences that could make programs more relevant are not considered.

2. INTERVENTION

Intervention is the systematic and explicit instruction provided to accelerate growth in an area of identified need. Interventions can be provided by both special and general teachers and they are designed to improve performance relative to a specific, measurable goal. Interventions are based on valid information about current performance, and realistic implementation and ongoing student progress monitoring are essential. This suggests that for any intervention to be effective, the programmes designed should be based on clearly defined objectives, and the program should be monitored and evaluated. More particularly, students' needs should be analysed and programs should be designed to address these. **It is important that intervention strategies should not be implemented because they are popular or interesting rather they should address the needs of**

the students in that particular institution.

3. PURPOSE OF INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

It could be argued that teaching can be a lonely profession given the challenges faced in today's classrooms. Teachers/ lectures report feeling overwhelmed in their attempts to meet the diverse and often complex needs of growing number of students along with ancillary duties they are expected to assume. Still, intervention strategies are necessary for students in FET colleges who are underachieving. When intervention is considered, there should be aims and goals for conducting the particular exercise. In most instances it is assumed that interventions will, decrease retention rates and lower failure rates, and students will be given additional opportunities to master concepts, which would hopefully, raise their performance levels.

4. SUGGESTED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

It is worth mentioning that intervening at the earliest stages, can lead to students' success. One also has to bear in mind that colleges operate in different contexts, therefore, there is no one size fits all. Approaches will vary according to the college context.

The following intervention strategies are suggested by this paper to enhance students' performance.

4.1. Leadership

The literature conducted by Kurian(2008) reveals that effective management and leadership is an essential characteristic of a successful school. Institutions that perform poorly require visionary and innovative managers to turn those institutions into centres of excellence Kurian, (2008). Managers have to seek the assistance and cooperation of the community and business people to improve the quality of education provided in schools. Since ill-disciplined and non-committed learners pose a challenge, the school management should have management systems to ensure effective teaching and learning and should provide a suitable atmosphere needed for curriculum delivery in the school. This can be done through the monitoring and evaluation of programs implemented at the college and also monitoring performance of the lecturers and all the staff. According to Clarke (2001), structural leadership changes should be instituted that allow for meaningful involvement in decision- making by students, teachers, family members and the community. Supportive communication should take place within these groups. Clarke (2001) outlines the actions needed to support such involvement of stakeholders, they are:

- Formalize participation of students, teachers, family and community members in site-based decision making teams, school leadership councils, strategic planning and school improvement teams.
- Develop programs to support student Personal Plans for Progress that allow students to plan their learning and the activities to support it.
- Institute student-led conferences in which the students lead the discussion (e.g., students would lead the discussions about strengths and areas of improvement in the parent/teacher /student conference).
- Provide student government and other leadership forums with opportunities to be included in discussions of substantive issues.
- Offer families significant opportunities to monitor students' progress on a regular basis.
- Encourage family and community members to become involved in curriculum and fiscal conversations.
- Meet with families over weekends, at home or accommodate their work schedule.

4.2. Student support programme

Student support within the education system should be defined as all activities that increase the capacity of schools to respond to diversity and to challenges faced by their students, lecturers and staff as a whole, (SIAS) Screening Identification Assessment and Support (2008).

It would be difficult to improve academic performance without providing sufficient individual student support. In the South African context, according to the Education White paper 6 (EWP6), Inclusive Education and Training is about acknowledging that all children and youth can learn if they are provided with effective support (DoE, 2001). Students at most FET colleges have access to student support programs, but the question is whether student support programs addressing the real issues that concerns the diversity of students at FET colleges. Improving student support is inextricably tied to student engagement, and engagement for each student can only be accomplished through a more personalised academic and intellectual programme. Various researchers have referred to student support as including: mentoring, counselling, coaching, advice and guidance and tutoring. In addition, students can be given academic support through extra lessons, remedial lessons, reading labs - these should be facilitated by a qualified and dedicated person who supports the college's vision.

4.3. Behaviour modification

According to Mestry, Moloi and Mahomed (2007) discipline in public schools is ranked as one of the major concerns expressed by all stake holders. There is a perception that student discipline is emerging as a serious problem that is making many schools ineffective institutions of learning and teaching. Mestry *et al* (2007) further point out that in some instances disciplinary policy is either ineffective, or not implemented and managed properly. Squelch (2001) contends that discipline is one of the key characteristics of an effective school and is a necessary condition for effective teaching and learning to take place. A study done by Mestry *et al* (2007) reveals that students who display disruptive behaviour are academically weak and often performs at their worst when they had to demonstrate learning output. In cases like these a zero tolerance approach to managing discipline is suggested. Mestry *et al* (2007) suggest that zero tolerance can be implemented successfully provided that:

- the learner disciplinary policy or code of conduct is developed and approved by all relevant stake holders.
- it takes into account the context of schooling in South Africa and is tailored to individual schools and their local needs.
- it specifies clear consequences of transgressing the rules, with consistency of application
- schools' Code of conduct is reviewed regularly.
- an ethic of care and accountability, coupled with counselling strategy, is present in the school.

4.4. Life skills programme

Rich (1997) points out that "mega-skills" are needed for successful living in the twenty first century. Mega -skills includes disciplined work habits, caring attitudes, and the ability to cope as well as to create one's own opportunities and all these factors are essential for adult success. Consequently students need an integrated Life Skills program in order to cope with their day to day academic life. Life Skills are essential for successful living and learning, Rooth (2000). Life skills may include

emotional skills, coping skills, health and hygiene skills, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. When Life Skills are mastered, the growth and development of people becomes a reality and people are then empowered.

4.5. Parental involvement

Colleges should not underestimate the role that involving families and parents can play in gaining the trust of students. Research indicates that students whose parents are involved tend to fare better academically and socially than those whose parents are not involved.

Mestry *et al* (2007) contend that the progress of student's'- educational development in the school context depends to a large extent on effective contact with and cooperation between the parents and school personnel. This sentiment is shared by Kurian (2008) who believes that active participation of parents in the education of their children is essential to improve discipline in schools as well as the academic performance of the students. Some of the following strategies could be used to involve parents:

- Parent support programmes such as: Holding parents evenings and parents meetings to provide information to parents useful in supporting their children in the college, this facilitates shared vision and cooperation among the stakeholders.
- SMS system to inform parents about student's attendance and other matters pertaining to their children at the college
- The formation of PTA to facilitates communication between college and parents. The college can use feedback from parents to enhance educational environment in the school.

Hopkins (1998) points out that innovation in schools often fail because of the schools' inability or unwillingness to involve parents in a meaningful way in its programmes development and implementation.

4.6. Capacity building

In the Mail and Guardian of 30 June 2008 McGrath maintains that at the heart of the challenges for FET teacher training is the need to respond to the new curricula, content and learners. These clearly requires new pedagogies, including a radical shift in approaches to learner support .This will require the re-skilling of college lecturers to enable the delivery of the new programmes. Teachers are the largest single occupational group and profession in the country. Their role has strategic importance for the intellectual, moral, and cultural preparation of our people, (DoE 2007). Teachers are the essential drivers of good quality education. Therefore, for them to be able to do that, they must be equipped with skills and knowledge that is required of them. Smit (2001) points out that the role of teachers cannot be overlooked if policy and educational change should have the desired effect. She adds that policy structures should be accompanied by a supportive process intended to strengthen the role of teachers.

Most reports of South African education indicate that the majority of teachers have not been sufficiently equipped to meet the education needs of the growing democracy in the 21st century global environment. For example, DeClercq (2008) mentions that it is accepted that teachers need competencies such as subject matter, pedagogical and societal knowledge which will enable them to understand their learners, learning and the environment, as well as the appropriate nature of curriculum resource materials. Clarke (2001) suggests that there should be alignment in the school wide comprehensive, ongoing development program and individual Personal Learning Plans of staff members with the content knowledge and instructional strategies required to prepare students for graduation. Actions to support this strategy include:

- Ensure each educator creates personal Learning Plan that addresses his or her need to grow, stressing the knowledge and skills related to improved student learning and aligned with the school's essential learning. This will facilitate self-appraisal and that 'self-reflection' becomes more effective when pursued in a formal and systematic way. The plan should draw on:
 1. Portfolio teachers maintain of their teaching activities
 2. Observations by supervisors and colleagues
 3. Teachers' own professional reflections
- Institute a formal, comprehensive orientation program for new and transfer lectures
- Provide opportunities for teachers to teach teachers what they have learned from various professional development seminars, conferences etc

It should be noted that professional development is critical to the success of any program designed to improve students' performance. Guskey (2002) indicates that even though professional development has been accepted as essential in improving education, review on professional development research point out that that is ineffective in that most programs designed for teacher development. Fullan(2007) contends that most programs do not take the needs and concerns of teachers into account and that follow-up support should be provided.

CONCLUSION

By and large, organisational and individual support is crucial to the success and improvement of students' academic performance. Programs designed to assist student should have clearly defined objectives, be implemented by people with necessary expertise, be monitored and evaluated for them to have the desired impact. All stake-holders such as parents and the community need to be involved in school development processes to ensure their success. In addition, students' needs and expectations should be central, that is, students should be consulted when programs are designed. A well targeted research, including listening to what students believe and already know, can help to address motivation for behaviour and to ensure an acceptable and appropriate program.

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