

Insights on Aligning Teaching Practices with Competence-Based Education in Kosovo: Navigating School Leadership Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the gaps and challenges in developing students' key competencies and identifies the factors hindering school principals' effectiveness in supporting student achievements in Kosovo. It analyzes perspectives from school principals, teachers, and Quality Assurance Coordinators, using data from interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups.

Key findings identify major gaps in fostering students' key competencies, such as insufficient hands-on experiences, age-appropriate questioning, personalized instruction, self-assessment, and technology-based activities. Factors hindering progress include teacher underperformance at critical stages, an aging workforce, demotivation, poor infrastructure, and limited parental involvement. Despite school principals' clear vision for competency-based instruction, they face significant challenges in improving both teacher performance and student achievement.

The study recommends practical, school-based strategies to improve teaching quality, instructional practices, and support for students' competency development. These findings emphasize the need for targeted policy interventions and actionable strategies to overcome barriers and drive meaningful educational reform in Kosovo.

Key words: Competency-based Education, Effective Instruction, Teacher Performance, School Management, Student Achievement

Introduction

In 2011, Kosovo's Ministry of Education and Science (MES) reinforced its commitment to competency-based education through the introduction of the Curriculum Framework for Pre-University Education. This approach shifts the emphasis from mere content delivery to fostering

key competencies in all students. Consequently, teachers are expected to transition into roles as managers of classroom activities and facilitators of learning, organizing both individual and collaborative work, ensuring inclusivity, and supporting individual growth. Essential skills such as management, problem-solving, and organization are crucial for effectively guiding students (Case, 2009, Case Network Reports No. 87). These competencies must be integrated into teachers' daily responsibilities, with ongoing professional support to help them meet the new demands. Thus, effective teacher leadership is a critical component of quality education at every level, underscoring the vital role of school principals.

The full implementation of the new curriculum across Kosovo commenced in the 2017/2018 school year, following two phases of pilot testing. While evidence from various reform initiatives in OECD countries suggests that effective school leadership is crucial for improving the efficiency, equity, and quality of education—especially when schools have autonomy and principals are supported in making significant decisions (Pont et al., 2008)—the situation in Kosovo is characterized by inadequate management and insufficient support for teachers in meeting the new curriculum's demands. As noted by the OECD, this is directly reflected in the poor quality of teaching and learning processes, leading to subpar student performance (OECD, 2019).

Additionally, a study on the challenges of implementing curricular reform in Kosovo's pre-university education highlighted the need for a more cohesive and supportive approach to successfully establish the competency-based education system (Boshtrakaj, 2019). The study identified several issues in the process, including:

- Fragmented and incoherent implementation of various reform elements.
- Inadequate preparation and support for teachers, school management, and professional services during the curriculum's rollout.
- Absence of standardized requirements for learning progress and criteria for assessing competencies at different curriculum stages.
- Poor quality of education management at the school level.
- Insufficient engagement of Municipal Education Directorates (MEDs) in the curriculum implementation process.
- Lack of quality assurance mechanisms.
- Limited utilization of school autonomy in implementing the curriculum.

Given this context, the primary objective of this study is to explore school principals' understanding of the evolving roles of teachers and the quality of their performance in meeting these expectations. Additionally, the study examines principals' perspectives on the key factors that hinder instructional quality and their effectiveness in promoting teaching and learning focused on competency development. The aim is to identify actionable strategies to enhance instructional practices and foster a more effective, competency-based education system.

Research Methods

The research was based on purposefully selected sample, including 51 primary and lower secondary schools, 21 general upper-secondary schools, and 19 vocational upper-secondary schools. This sample of schools represents 11% of 785 primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools operating in Kosovo (ASK, 2020). The criteria applied for the selection of schools included:

- Size of the school, ensuring coverage of big schools, middle and small ones;
- Performance of schools, ensuring coverage of high performing schools, middle and low performing ones;
- Schools with committed and high performing principals, with preferable work experience of at least two consecutive years in their current positions;
- Ethnical composition of students that attend the school (ensuring that some of the selected schools have minority populations including Turkish, Bosnian, Serbian, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian);
- Geographical coverage of all the regions, as well as urban and rural areas.

The list of participating schools represents the sample of schools identified in consultation with the Ministry of Education Science Technology and Innovation based on the above criteria and willingness for cooperation.

Participants in the research included:

- 88 (out of 91) principals of participating schools;
- 28 Quality Assurance Coordinators;
- 840 teachers from participating school, that randomly agreed to fill in the questionnaire;
- 13 representatives from the Municipal Branches of the Trade Union of Education Science and Culture.

The data collection techniques applied in this research include in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issues.

In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with school principals to explore their perceptions of teaching quality and teacher performance, their role in enhancing student achievement, and their effectiveness in improving student outcomes.

The questionnaire administered to teachers consisted of 19 items using a 4-point Likert scale for self-assessment of their instructional practices. The self-assessment data were then compared with the interview data on school principals' perceptions of teacher performance quality.

To complement the data on teaching practices obtained through questionnaires and interviews, focus groups were conducted with Quality Assurance Coordinators (QACs) from 28 of the 91 participating schools, with groups ranging from 5 to 12 participants. These focus groups facilitated an in-depth discussion of preliminary findings and provided a better understanding of potential differences based on school type. Separate focus groups were held with QACs from primary and lower secondary schools, Gymnasia, and Vocational Education and Training institutions.

Additionally, to complete the overview of the situation, a focus group was conducted with representatives of the municipal branches of the Education Science and Culture Trade Union (SBASHK). A specific protocol containing four broad topics was prepared to gain their perspective on teaching quality, challenges and opportunities for enhancing teacher management at the school level, and their role in supporting these processes.

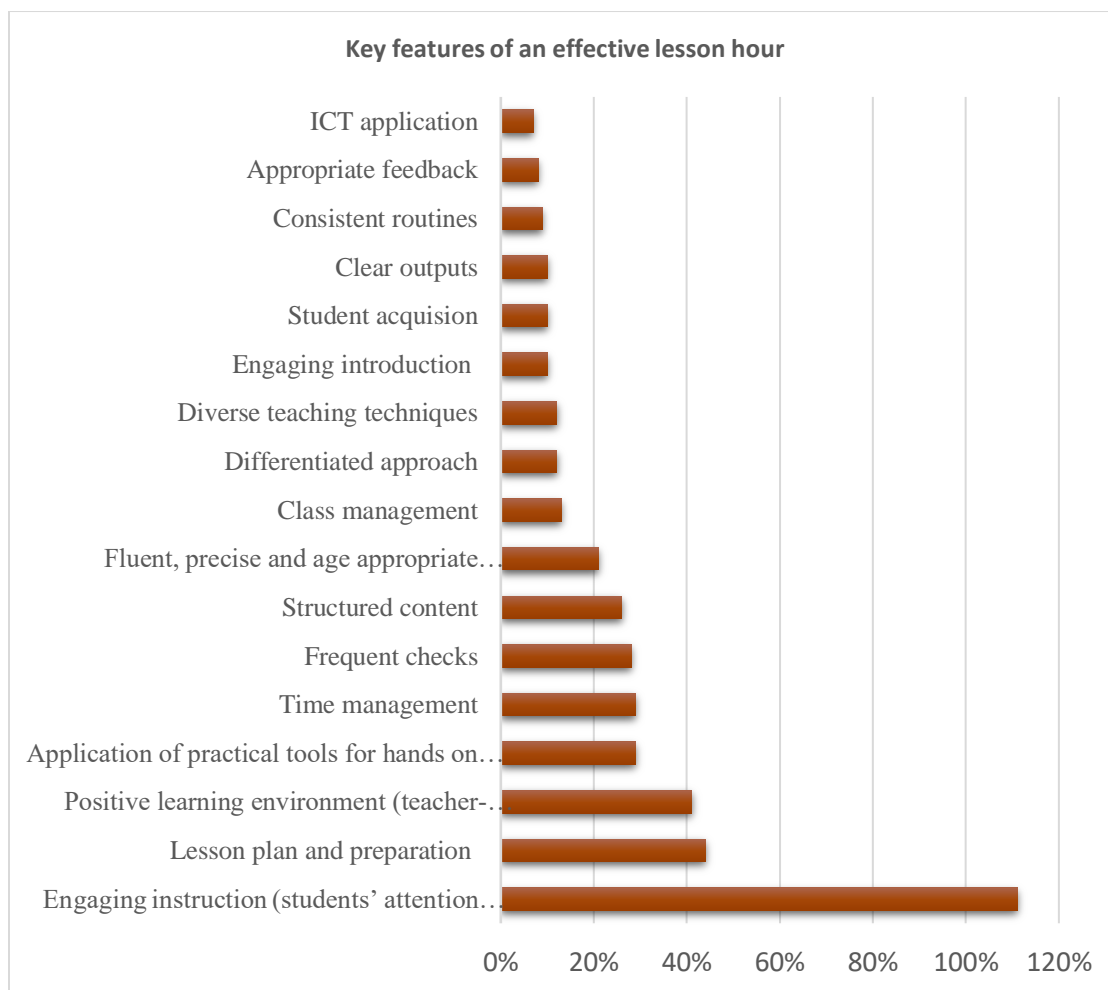
Results

Data analysis is structured around several sub-themes, beginning with an exploration of school principals' expectations regarding the effectiveness of instructional practices and their assessment of teacher performance within their schools, cross-checked by teachers' self-reflection. Additionally, principals' concerns regarding the overall quality of teaching in their respective institutions are examined. Drawing from these insights, the perceived roles of principals in enhancing both teacher performance and student achievement are analyzed, highlighting broader systemic issues that influence the effectiveness of school principals' efforts in supporting student achievements and implementation of competence-based education in Kosovo.

Expectations Regarding the Effectiveness of Instructional Practices

The responses of school principals on what constitutes an effective lesson hour reflects a balanced approach to effective teaching, highlighting engaging instruction as the most critical factor and paramount for an effective lesson hour. This is followed by the importance of thorough lesson planning, preparation, and maintaining a positive and respectful learning environment. Practical tools for hands-on experience and visualization, time management, frequent checks, structured content, as well as fluent, precise and age-appropriate communication are also significant. Aspects like classroom management, differentiated approaches, diverse teaching techniques and ICT were less emphasised by school principals, but still brought to attention.

Chart 1: Expectations of school principals for effective teaching



Teacher Performance and the Quality of Teaching

School principals generally assessed the quality of teacher performance as strong, based on their expectations for effective instructional practices. The majority of teachers are rated as proficient (41%) or highly effective (36%), with a small percentage (5%) considered distinguished. However, there are areas that require improvement, with 18% of teachers needing improvement and a very small portion (1%) rated as unsatisfactory.

The overview of teacher performance quality across different educational levels from the perspective of school principals shows that a substantial portion of teachers in primary and upper secondary levels are performing well. However, focused attention is needed in the lower secondary level, where the highest percentage of teachers (40%) require improvement. Additionally, teachers in vocational education and training institutions also need attention, with 21% needing improvement.

The data on teachers' perception of their own instructional effectiveness indicates that they are generally proficient in making assignments clear, managing the class, and providing clear instructions and feedback. Teachers also report strong awareness of students' abilities and strengths, as well as openness to students' concerns.

However, there are areas needing improvement across all types of schools, including the provision of hands-on experience for the application of concepts and skills, the use of age-appropriate questions, the personalization of instructional programs, formative assessment, and encouraging student self-assessment. Specific concerns at the lower secondary level include insufficient responses to inappropriate behaviour, maintaining student dignity, and the limited use of activities that engage all students. Urban and rural differences are minimal, but VET schools show unique trends in certain areas.

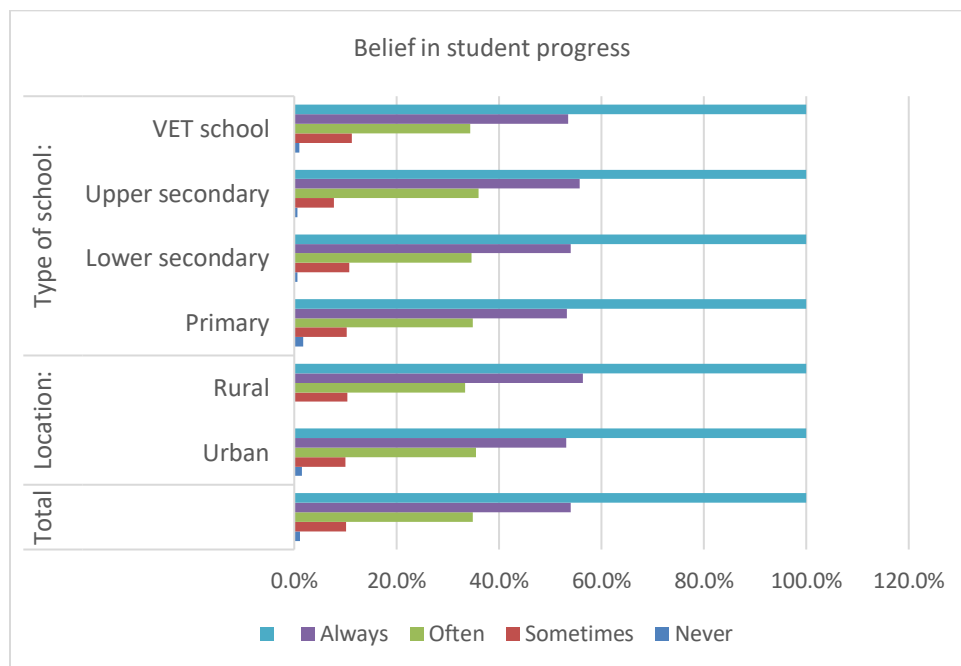
Additionally, the descriptive statistics of teachers' perceptions of their own instructional effectiveness confirm relatively high means for all items, ranging from 3.02 to 3.66 on a scale from 1 to 4. The items with the highest mean scores and the greatest consistency in responses are "I make assignments clear" (Mean = 3.66, SD = 0.599) and "I am open to students' concerns" (Mean = 3.63, SD = 0.618), confirming strengths in clear communication and responsiveness to students.

The item with the lowest mean and the highest standard deviation is "I use an appropriate level of questions" (Mean = 3.02, SD = 0.837), highlighting variability in responses. Other items indicating deficiencies in instructional effectiveness, due to moderate means (below 3.4) and high standard deviations, include "I am able to personalize the instructional program to my students" (Mean = 3.34, SD = 0.750), "I provide opportunities for application of concepts and

skills" (Mean = 3.23, SD = 0.709), and "My students are on task quickly at the beginning of each lesson or instructional activity" (Mean = 3.33, SD = 0.710). These findings suggest areas in need of improvement, primarily due to significant differences in how respondents perceive their effectiveness in these areas.

Other crucial items for fostering a positive learning environment, such as confidence in the potential of all students (Mean = 3.42, SD = 0.714), encouragement of student self-assessment (Mean = 3.40, SD = 0.726) and application of formative assessments (Mean = 3.40, SD = 0.726) also show variability in belief strength and would benefit from targeted interventions, despite high means. The belief that every student can learn and progress is critical for fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment and findings reveal insufficient confidence in the potential of all students expressed among 11 % of teachers.

Chart 2: Confidence in the potential of all students to progress

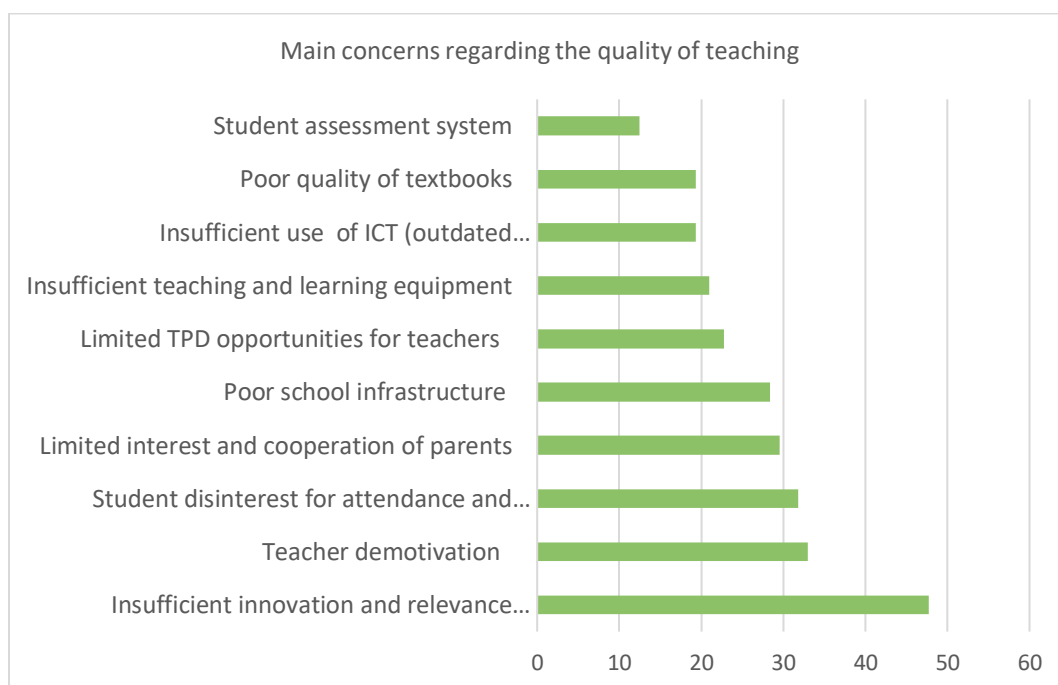


Overall, while both perspectives agree on the general strengths and some areas for improvement, teachers' self-assessments provide a more detailed picture of specific instructional practices needing enhancement, whereas principals' assessments focus more on overall performance levels. With regard to divergencies principals' evaluations highlight a higher proportion of teachers needing improvement compared to teachers' self-assessments, especially in specific educational levels.

Key concerns regarding the quality of teaching raised by school principals include:

- Insufficient innovation and relevance within the aging teaching workforce, as indicated by a lack of focus on student-centered approaches to instruction, the development of higher-order thinking skills, formative assessment, and the use of ICT.
- Teacher demotivation, expressed through frequent absences and lack of commitment and accountability.
- Student disinterest, expressed through lack of engagement and enthusiasm for attending classes and participating in learning activities.
- Limited parental interest and cooperation to support their children's education.
- Poor working conditions (roof leaking, heating, lack of facilities for physical education, work in shifts, shortened lesson hours, ...) which directly affect the quality of teaching but could also affect teachers job satisfaction and performance.
- Limited professional development opportunities for teachers, to enhance their skills and keep them updated with best practices in teaching.
- Insufficient teaching and learning equipment to support effective teaching and learning.

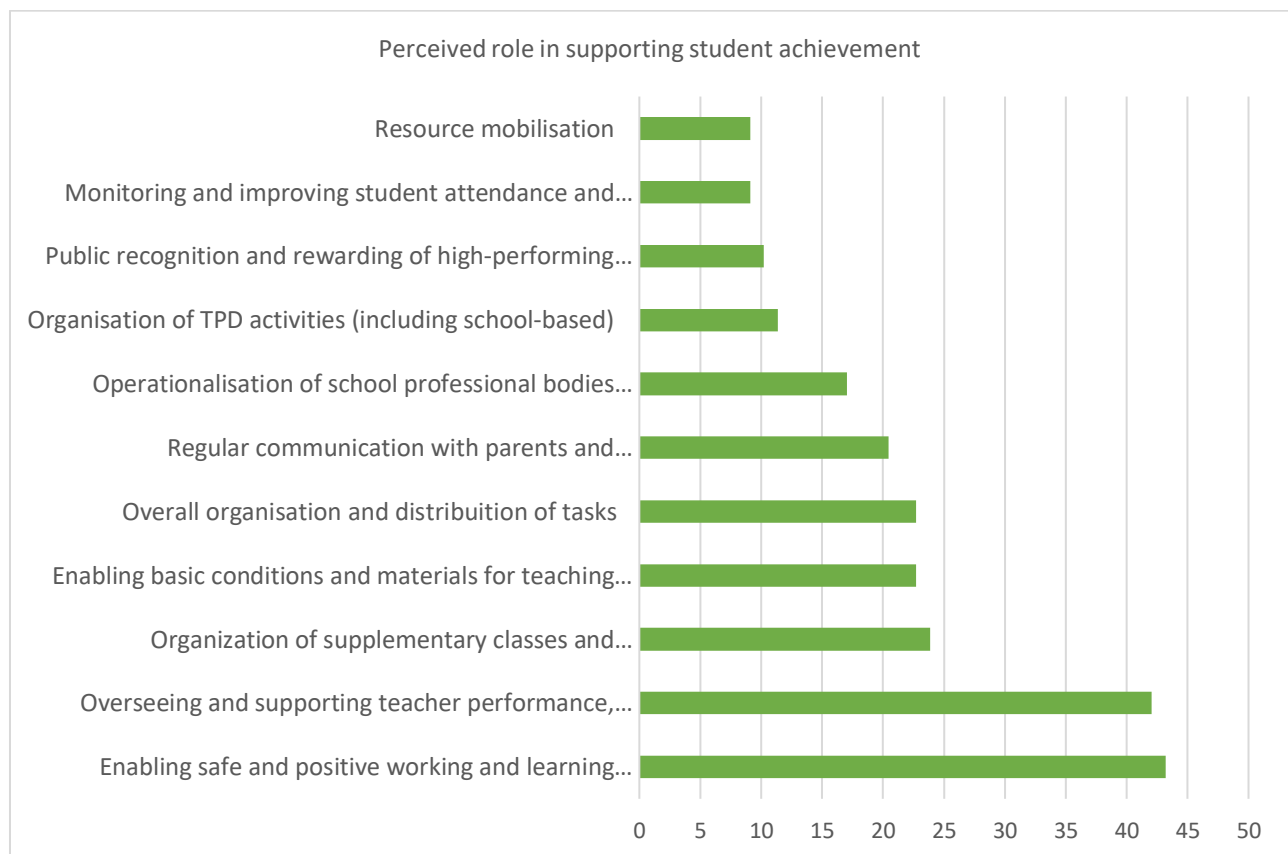
Chart 3: School principals' concerns regarding the quality of teaching in their schools



School Principals’ Perceived Role in Enhancing Student Achievement

Data gathered from interviews with school principals reveals that their primary focus for enhancing student achievement includes fostering a positive learning environment and promoting cooperation and constructive competition among teachers (46%). The second most crucial role perceived to improve student performance is providing oversight and support to teachers (42%). Organization of supplementary classes, extracurricular activities, and student competitions, as well as enabling basic conditions and materials for teaching and learning, and proper distribution of tasks are considered highly important by 23% of school principals. Communication with parents, operationalization of professional bodies, and professional development are also important, though slightly less prioritized. Public recognition of student achievements and addressing student attendance issues are seen as beneficial but not as critical as the aforementioned factors.

Chart 4: Primary tasks in improving student achievement



Despite recognizing their roles, only a minority of principals (11%) believe they fulfill these roles to a "great deal," while most of them (49%) feel they fulfill these roles to a considerable

extent. However, a significant portion of principals (40%) consider that they do not sufficiently fulfill these tasks (rating their fulfillment as somewhat, little, or not at all). Key success factors for principals that are effective in fulfilling their roles in improving student achievement include:

- Clear, honest, and direct communication with teachers (34%), maintaining open lines of communication.
- Setting clear expectations, and treating all staff fairly.
- High personal dedication and professional authority (33%), demonstrated by serving as an example of commitment and accountability, thereby influencing staff motivation and commitment.
- A completed and supportive team of managerial and professional staff, that aids principals in successfully carrying out their roles (16%).
- Direct and transparent communication and collaboration with students to address issues such as absenteeism, behavior, attendance, participation, and their feedback on teacher performance (15%).
- Regular update with new regulations and policies issued by MESTI (13%).

The challenges that hinder the effectiveness of school principals in improving student performance include bureaucratic processes for procurement of services and equipment to enable basic conditions and materials for teaching and learning, limited competencies for teacher management, infrastructural constraints for organization of supplementary classes and extra-curricular activities, and lack of professional staff.

Moreover, limited parental involvement remains a significant concern across all school levels and types. Specifically, in vocational education and training (VET) schools, there is notable concern about inadequate professional orientation and low achievement rates among incoming students.

Discussion

School principals' expectations regarding the effectiveness of instructional practices reflect a balanced approach to effective teaching, aligning well with the principles of competence-based education. Their emphasis on engaging instruction, practical application, and structured planning supports the goals of competence-based education by prioritizing student involvement and understanding, creating a supportive learning atmosphere, and fostering the development of practical skills and knowledge application. Key instructional elements such as effective time

management, frequent checks for understanding, structured content delivery, differentiated approaches, the use of ICT, and clear, precise, age-appropriate communication are also considered particularly significant in catering to diverse learning needs and leveraging technology for enhanced learning experiences.

However, when evaluating the quality of instruction within their schools, school principals identify significant gaps and challenges in supporting the development of students' key competencies. Notable issues include:

- Gaps in teaching quality at crucial educational stages hinder the overall effectiveness of the competency-based education system. For example, underperformance in Lower Secondary Education can impede the development of foundational skills essential for further education, while shortcomings in Vocational Education may prevent students from acquiring the practical, job-ready skills emphasized in the curriculum.
- Shortcomings in providing hands-on experiences, age-appropriate questioning, personalized instruction, and encouragement of self-assessment limit opportunities for developing critical competencies like critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-directed learning.
- Lack of teacher confidence in the potential of all students to progress exhibited by a notable percentage of teachers can lead to lower expectations, reduced support, and a less effective learning environment, ultimately limiting students' opportunities to reach their full potential.
- The aging teaching population that struggles to adapt to modern educational demands, with a lack of student-centered approaches undermines the goal of personalized learning. This cohort's insufficient focus on higher-order thinking skills suggests students may not be adequately prepared for complex real-world challenges. Additionally, issues such as frequent absences, health problems, and fatigue among older teachers further compromise instructional quality.
- Teacher demotivation leads to traditional, less engaging methods, which are ineffective to inspire students. It may also contribute to a negative school culture that stifles collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement.
- Low levels of parental involvement exacerbate teacher and student demotivation, hindering the learning process and student achievement. Without active parental support, students may lack the encouragement needed for success, and teachers miss opportunities for timely intervention.

- Student demotivation, often linked to teacher demotivation, insufficient parental cooperation, and overreliance on technology, creates a challenging learning environment that diminishes the overall quality of instruction and leads to lower performance.
- Poor infrastructure, insufficient teaching and learning equipment, and low-quality textbooks severely impair the quality of education.
- Insufficient emphasis on formative assessment means teachers may not have the necessary information to monitor student progress, provide constructive feedback and adjust instruction.
- Limited use of technology-based activities hampers students' engagement with digital tools, which are increasingly important for workforce readiness and life-long learning. ICT integration is essential for modern education, making learning more engaging and accessible.
- Restricted opportunities for teacher professional growth may resort teachers to outdated instructional practices, which are less effective in supporting competency development.

The data on the school principals' perceived role in supporting student achievements demonstrate a clear awareness of their critical role in supporting the implementation of a competence-based approach.

- Principals recognize that fostering a positive learning environment and promoting collaboration and constructive competition among teachers are foundational to enhancing student achievement, with 46% prioritizing these aspects. This emphasis on creating a conducive learning atmosphere aligns with the principles of competency-based education, which requires an environment where students can actively engage in learning and apply their skills in real-world contexts.
- The fact that 42% of principals prioritize providing oversight and support to teachers reflects their understanding of the importance of instructional leadership in implementing competency-based education. By closely monitoring and guiding teachers, principals can ensure that instructional practices are aligned with competency-based approach, thereby enhancing the quality of teaching and, ultimately, student outcomes.
- The inclusion of supplementary classes, extracurricular activities, and student competitions in their strategies, although prioritized by a smaller percentage (23%), indicates that principals also recognize the need for diverse and engaging learning opportunities that extend beyond traditional classroom settings. These activities are

crucial for the development of key competencies, such as problem-solving, teamwork, and critical thinking.

- However, the slightly lower prioritization of communication with parents, professional development, and the operationalization of professional bodies suggests that while principals are aware of these components' importance, they may not yet fully integrate them into their strategic approach to implementing competence-based education. This may indicate areas where further development and support are needed to fully realize the potential of competence-based learning in their schools.
- The systemic challenges that school principals encounter in fulfilling their perceived role in supporting student achievement include:
 - The underutilization of allocated budgets due to bureaucratic procedures, limited financial management capacity, and budget reallocations by municipal education authorities constrain resources for professional development, teaching materials, and classroom support. Principals often struggle to plan effectively due to unexpected budget changes and administrative delays, which detract from their focus on instructional leadership.
 - Principals' reluctance to insist on budget execution as planned indicates a lack of empowerment, which is crucial for effective school management. Empowered principals are better positioned to support teachers and implement performance management practices effectively.
 - The shortage of professional and managerial staff means that principals are often heavily burdened with technical, bureaucratic, and administrative tasks, which limits their ability to focus on instructional leadership and teacher development.

Lack of confidence and satisfaction with their effectiveness in supporting student achievement expressed by school principals may trickle down to teachers and students, negatively impacting the overall school climate and the quality of education provided. Without strong leadership, schools struggle to adopt and sustain improvements that enhance student learning and competency development.

Summary and Recommendations

In conclusion, significant gaps and challenges in supporting the development of students' key competencies include deficiencies in providing hands-on experiences, age-appropriate questioning, personalized instruction, and fostering self-assessment, as well as issues related to

teacher underperformance at critical educational stages, an aging teaching workforce, teacher demotivation, poor infrastructure, and limited use of technology-based activities.

The study also highlights the clear vision of school principals for competence-based instructional practices and their significant awareness of their role in supporting the implementation of a competence-based approach, particularly through fostering a positive learning environment and providing instructional leadership. However, there is room for growth in integrating other essential elements, such as parental involvement and continuous professional development, into their overall strategy.

The primary factors hindering school principals' performance in supporting the successful implementation of competence-based education revolve around bureaucratic processes in procuring services and equipment necessary for basic teaching and learning materials, limited authority in teacher management, infrastructural constraints for organizing supplementary classes and extracurricular activities, and a shortage of professional staff.

To address the gaps in supporting the development of students' key competencies and the factors hindering the performance of school principals, some of priority interventions include:

- Encourage student-centered and differentiated teaching approaches, by promoting critical thinking and problem-solving. This can include project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and the integration of real-world problems into the curriculum. Provide workshops, seminars, and collaborative learning communities to help teachers share best practices and refine their teaching techniques.
- Introduce formative assessment practices to provide ongoing feedback to both students and teachers. These assessments should inform instruction and help students understand their progress toward learning goals. Encourage student involvement in the assessment process through self-assessments and peer assessments, fostering ownership of their learning and the development of metacognitive skills.
- Foster a positive and inclusive school environment that values respect, diversity, and inclusion. Encourage positive relationships among students, teachers, and staff through community-building activities and inclusive policies. Integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum to help students develop emotional intelligence, empathy, and interpersonal skills. Support students' social and emotional needs to enhance their overall well-being and academic success. Strengthen home-school partnerships by actively engaging parents or guardians through open communication channels, involvement in school activities, workshops on parenting skills, and collaborative efforts between home and school.

- Create a conducive physical learning environment to support effective teaching and learning through various instructional methods. Allocate resources for the maintenance and upgrade of school facilities and equipment. Integrate ICT tools and digital learning platforms in schools, providing training and resources to teachers to facilitate interactive and engaging learning experiences.
- Improve budget management by providing training and resources to school principals and administrative staff on effective financial management and budgeting practices. This can enhance their capacity to utilize allocated budgets efficiently and effectively.
- Reduce bureaucratic hurdles and expedite the processing of requests and payments by the Municipal Education Directorates. Clear timelines and accountability measures should be established to ensure timely budget execution.
- Make sure that procurement guidelines are sensitive to situations with only one provider while ensuring that the procurement process remains fair, transparent, and focused on delivering value for money. Negotiate bulk purchasing agreements at the municipal level to secure better prices for common educational resources.
- Further investigate other factors that hinder the effectiveness of instruction (such as the quality of core curricula, textbooks, and other educational resources), and use the findings for informed decision to address them through a systemic and cohesive approach to establishing a competency-based education system.

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