



School head leadership practices and pass rates in Zimbabwean Primary Schools.

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to examine how school heads' leadership practices influenced pass rates in Glenview Mufakose district primary schools. Fifty teachers and five school heads participated in this study. Data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews, and it was analysed through graphs and tables. The findings revealed that school leadership practices play a crucial role in determining learners' academic performance. The varied instructional leadership activities enacted by principals contributed to high learner academic performance. Contributory factors found to determine the improved pass rates included teacher motivation, school discipline, resourcing schools and the cultural behaviour of schools. The researcher recommends the creation of conducive working school environments that encourage teachers to apply their performance in the schools.

KEYWORDS: School; Instructional Leadership; Examinations; Leadership Practice

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I. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the new curriculum in schools by the Zimbabwean government in 2016 was aimed at making the Zimbabwean education relevant to the world of today. School heads as leaders in schools had the task of monitoring the implementation of the new curriculum to ensure that it succeeded. Teachers implemented the new curriculum in their classes and the roles of school heads was to ensure that this was done effectively through the provision of the necessary support. Thus, both teachers and school heads are important as they are critical change agents who define significant influence on the development of schools into 'learning organisations. Even though the two are important, school heads determine school success and research links high-quality leadership with positive school outcomes (Hornig and Loeb, 2010)[1]. This brings in Leithwood *et al.* (2004)[2] statement that leadership is important in schools as it falls second only to classroom teaching among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school. It indicates the head's role in providing the necessary supervision and support. Amough and Odeh (2018)[3] submit that quality education is achieved when there is effective supervision of both teaching and non-teaching staff in schools, since people are more committed to their work when closely supervised. This portrays the instructional leadership role that school heads play to produce quality education in schools. Despite the school heads in Glen View Mufakose district having supervised the teachers, there has been an experience of low pass rates at grade seven level for some years. Since school heads influence learner outcomes in schools the leadership practice by the school heads could have contributed to this level of learner performance. This can be aligned to Leithwood and Riehl's (2003:1)[4] statement which says, "Scratch the surface of an excellent school, and you are likely to find an excellent principal. Peer into a failing school, and you will find weak leadership." This suggests that the school heads' leadership practices play a part in the pass rates at the different schools. It is believed that it is those schools with effective instructional leadership that quality education is experienced.

Effective school leaders adopt diversified leadership skills. Varied leadership dimensions help improve learner academic performance. They also contribute to improving teacher attitudes towards their schools. The resultant effect is a positive teacher learner bond that contributes to improved learner performance. Teacher learner bond increases teacher understanding of learners hence offer appropriate help to learners. Leithwood *et*

al, (2007)[5] stress that leadership dimensions that focus on attaining school objectives, building a good name of the school, and setting a good school direction are the best dimensions for improved learner academic outcomes. Robinson (2007)[6] adds on saying schools that perform well are those that are led by school heads who are well focused and use their time to outline clear lines of communication on how to attain the school's academic goals. Despite this and the need for school heads to be instructional leaders to improve the quality of education, there is not much research done in Zimbabwe to ensure that school heads take on the instructional leadership roles to improve pass rates. Much of the research done in Zimbabwe focused mainly on managerial and administrative roles of school heads without particular focus on how to improve pass rates through their chosen leadership styles. It thus left me to find out if school heads take on the instructional leadership role to improve school pass rates in national examinations.

11. RESEARCH QUESTIONS.

The research questions below guided the study:

1. What leadership practices influence learner's academic performance in schools?
2. To what extent have leadership practices by Glen View Mufakose district school heads improved pass rates?
3. How can school leadership practices be improved for learners benefit?

11.1. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The rapid changing of times than ever before signifies the need for school heads to have the knowledge and practice of leadership that accommodates them to these changes if they are to remain relevant. With this in mind, it is incumbent upon school heads to identify factors that affect learners' academic performance and rectify them. This is likely to happen when school heads employ the appropriate leadership model. Following is an outline of some leadership models that are found in schools that influence learners' performance.

Instructional leadership has been defined by Kabeta *et al.* (2013:1876)[7] "... as that leadership that puts teaching and learning in the school as a priority in order to improve student learning." It calls for a shift of emphasis by school heads from concentrating on managerial and administrative tasks to instructional matters. Neumerski (2012)[8] contends that instructional leadership is tied to teaching and learning in schools. This entails that instructional leadership practice must comprise instructional leadership and instruction. The widely used model on instructional leadership is that proposed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985)[9] that has three dimensions which are; defining the school's mission; managing the instructional program; and promoting a positive school learning climate. Each dimension comprises varied tasks that principals perform under them. Day *et al.*, (2016)[10] argue that this leadership model emphasises the significance of highly improved classrooms for teaching and learning purposes. A study by Robinson *et al.*, (2008)[11] point out that instructional leadership affects learners' academic performance, mainly through the provision of conducive working conditions for teachers, well-defined school goals and an improved school culture. Research indicates that this leadership model focuses more on learners' academic performance than other styles, since it focuses on teaching and learning.

This leadership style focuses on creating an improved school culture and a clear vision, improving the quality of teaching and learning, developing teachers' positive attitudes towards their work, and hence attain the school's goals (Day *et al.*, 2016) [10]. Shatzer *et al.*, (2014)[12], state that school heads with this leadership style share the school vision, lead, and inspire others using examples. Marks and Printy (2003:375)[13] advocate that Leithwood and colleagues put forward nine transformational leadership functions all clustered in three areas viz (a) mission centred, performance centred and culture centred. The mission centred functions include the development of a widely shared vision for the school, and the building of consensus about school goals and priorities. The performance centred function involved the holding of high-performance expectations, providing individualised support, and the supply of intellectual stimulation. The third function, culture centred involved modelling organizational values, strengthening productive school culture, building collaborative cultures, and the creation of structures for the participation in school decisions. School heads create a culture of learning and encourage the professional development of teachers. Marks and Printy (2003)[13] further states that transformational leaders motivate their teachers by raising their consciousness about the importance of school goals and by inspiring them to consider school needs ahead of theirs. A challenge with this model as Marks and Printy (2003)[13] point out is that it lacks an explicit focus on instruction as compared to the instructional model.

This leadership model is concerned with the values and ethics of school heads. The main goal is to ensure clarity of the values of the school heads as they make decisions about schools. Begley (in Bush *et al.* 2010)[14] advocates that effective and moral school heads keep the central purpose of education at the forefront of their administrative work. Thus, school heads must have a purpose driven educational leadership. Neubert *et*

al. (2009)[15] advocate that ethical school heads influence perceptions of an ethical climate, which in turn positively affects school members' job satisfaction and commitment to the school. Having trust in the school creates a positive attitude towards the school by stakeholders resulting in them working towards the school's vision and goals hence improving learner academic performance. Msila (2012)[16] argues that morality and values are core in education, thus, school leaders require certain abilities to survive the challenging demands of their work. Greenfield (2004)[17] advocates that school leadership is a moral activity. Davidson and Hughes (2020:4)[18] say this is because "... it requires minute-by-minute mindfulness and demonstration of the kinds of qualities that contribute to the well-being of the human community, such as love, honesty, fairmindedness, compassion, care for the vulnerable, equity, social justice, and respect for others." Thus the development of moral leadership in school leaders is important for the success of schools.

The changing world of today has made teachers seek for greater professional autonomy and authority in decision making regarding their work and their welfare. Different authors have looked at the issue of participation by workers in different organisations and argued for the need for participative leaders. Sagnak (2016)[19] advocates that "... participative leadership is defined as deciding jointly or as the shared influence for deciding between superiors and subordinates." Thus, participative school heads consult their teachers, ask for suggestions, and they consider their teachers' opinions (Chen and Tjosvold, 2006)[20]. Through participative leadership, leaders encourage teachers to find new opportunities, and to improve performance which is likely to improve pass rates. Through participative leadership teacher behaviour and pass rates are likely to improve, as teachers get motivated are committed to their schools. Enabling teachers to participate in school leadership activities is important for improved school productivity. Griffin (2011)[21] argues that the participation by teachers gives them a voice when it comes to deciding about their own work. Through allowing teachers to participate in the decision-making process at school enhances their self-esteem and commitment to implementing the decisions properly. Sagnak (2016)[19] advocates that participative leadership affects teachers' behaviour as it intrinsically motivates them. Leithwood and Sun (2012)[22] argue that through an integrated approach, change has been implemented successfully in schools and standards in teaching and learning improved. It thus signifies that for instructional improvement in schools, leaders must enact a wide range of leadership practices.

IV. ROLES TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

School heads play essential roles to improve teaching and learning with an aim of producing high learner academic results. They focus on key areas to advance learners' academic performance. The first is the school leader's ability to improve teaching and learning. In this area, school heads promote a culture of collaboration, innovation and creativeness in learning, teaching, and assessment. They encourage a commitment to inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of each learner. In doing so, the school head manages the planning and implementation of the school curriculum and encourages teacher professional development. Omebe (2014)[23] advocates that professionally developing teachers is critical in education since the success of the education system depends heavily on the quality of teachers. With heads performing these activities, pass rates are likely to improve.

The aspect of school management is another area that school heads focus on to improve pass rates. School heads must create highly secure, orderly, and healthy school environments through effective communication system. It calls for school heads who effectively manages the human, physical and financial resources of the school to create a conducive teaching and learning environment. School heads must have the capacity to handle challenging and complex situations in a manner that demonstrates equality, fairness, and justice if they are to improve pass rates at their schools. In focusing on school management, school heads must also develop and implement a system that promotes professional responsibility and accountability among teachers. In their study of public schools, Kigenyi *et al.* (2017)[24] concluded that an improvement in the school environment led to a substantial increase in the performance of teachers, thus showing the importance of environment to instructional activities.

It is also the school head's role to lead in the development of the school. To achieve this they must communicate the school vision to teachers and stakeholders and lead in its realisation. Hallinger (2005)[25] advocates that in defining the school's vision and mission, principals determine the central purposes of the schools and in addition enact a role in which they work with teachers to ensure that the school has clear, measurable, time-based goals that focus on the academic progress of learners. Widely communicating these goals to other members increases their knowledge and support of the goals. School heads must lead schools' self-evaluation, build, and maintain relationships with parents, sister schools, and the wider community. They must also manage, lead, and mediate change to respond to the ever-changing needs of the school, and the education system. Thus, effective school heads improve the teaching and learning environment. Another aspect that school heads must focus on to improve pass rates is the development of leadership capacity. On this aspect, school heads develop their understanding of effective and sustainable leadership and empower teachers to take

on leadership roles. They also need to develop professional networks. School heads with an objective to improve learners' academic performance dedicate much of their time in designing and implementing policies that improve quality education and, in the end, improve examination results.

Quality and efficiency in education are achieved when school heads practise good leadership which in turn create a conducive teaching and learning environment. Hallinger (2005)[25] point out that school heads have an indirect impact on learners through the provision of a conducive school climate, which promotes academic performance. Thus school heads' leadership practices affect the instructional activities at schools. Hallinger *et al.*, (2005)[26] further state that heads that develop activities that align with the mission, vision and goals of the school contribute to improved learner's academic performance.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research design.

A descriptive survey research design was used in this study. Lodico *et al.* (2006)[26] explains that the aim of the descriptive survey research design is, "... to describe behaviours and to gather people's perceptions, opinions, attitudes and beliefs about a current issue in education." The descriptive survey research approach is quantitative and the surveys are administered to a random sample of the population to which the research results are generalised. This research design was appropriate for this study as it enabled the gathering of data on the opinions and attitudes of participants. Fifty teachers were sampled from five schools with ten teachers from each school. The school heads from the sampled five schools participated in this study. Data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews, and it was analysed through graphs and tables.

5.2 Research Instruments

Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data in this study. Questionnaires were hand delivered to teachers and latter collected from teachers by the researcher. There was a hundred percent response rate. Semi structured interviews were conducted with school heads being asked about the extent to which their leadership influenced grade seven pass rates. Interviews enabled the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the respondents' experiences. The researcher later analysed the data from interviews and questionnaires.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study that examined the leadership impact of school heads on learners' examination performance at grade seven level. The data is presented in tables and pie charts, then is analysed and discussed. To begin with is the biodata of the participants.

Biodata of the Respondents

The biographical data of the respondents is presented from two views, that of school heads and that of teachers.

Teacher's gender

The gender distribution in the research study is presented in figure 1 below:

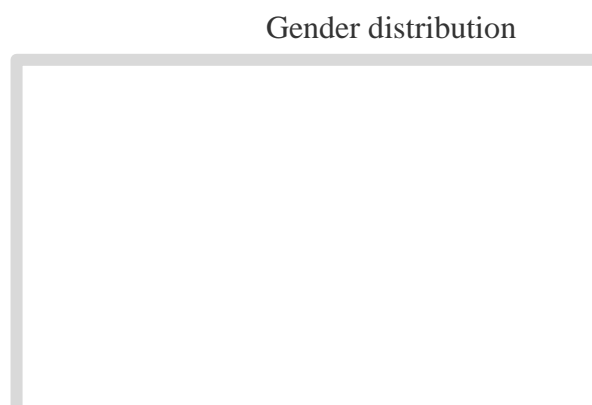


Figure 1: Teachers' gender (N=50)

The information above shows that there were 54% females and 46% males. This is characteristic of urban schools; female teachers outnumber male teachers.

All the teachers were qualified primary school teachers. They all had the basic teaching qualification of a diploma or a certificate in education. Others had higher qualifications than diplomas thus showing the level of education of the teachers.

Table 1: Teacher qualifications (N=50)

Qualifications	Responses	
	Number	%
Master's degree	4	8
First degree	10	20
Diploma	26	52
Certificate	10	20
Total	50	100

The table indicates that most of the teachers held diplomas (52%). Certificate holders were 20% and first-degree holders were 20%.

Heads' Biodata

Five heads of schools participated in the study and of these three were males and two were females. Though the number of female teachers outnumber males in urban areas, the reverse is true when it comes to school head positions. All the school heads were above the age of fifty and had been school heads for more than fifteen years. This shows that the school heads were all experienced people who had been in the service for long.

VII. ACTUAL RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 2: School head leadership preferences affect school pass rate. (N =50)

Responses	Number of teachers	%
Agree	30	60
Strongly agree	14	28
Disagree	6	12
Total	50	100

Most teachers agreed that leadership preferences by school heads contributed to the level of pass rates in schools. The leadership styles used in the schools thus impacted on learners' academic performance in their examinations as indicated by most teachers in the study. Dinham (2005)[27] points out that schools whose heads concentrate on teaching and learning, have exceptional learner academic performance. With the low pass rates in the schools indicated that the principals did not fully employ the instructional leadership model. School heads concurred with teachers that leadership preferences by school heads had a bearing on both teachers and learners' academic performance. It is therefore important that principals employ leadership models that improve instructional activities since the core business of schools is teaching and learning.

Table 3: School environments have an impact on learner pass rates (N =50)

Responses	Number of teachers	%
Agree	27	54
Strongly agree	18	36
Disagree	5	10
Total	50	100

The responses given indicated that school environments influenced both teachers and learners' academic performance. A response rate of 90% indicated that the environment had effects on the pass rates of learners. School heads concurred with teachers that school environments affected learner pass rates. The school heads indicated that when school environments are not conducive to instructional activities, teachers do not put in their best and as of learners, they cannot effectively concentrate when the learning environment is not conducive such as when lessons are always disrupted. This signifies the importance of creating a positive school environment that motivates teachers and students' learning. Included in improved school environments is the collaborative leadership practice by the school heads which included the deputy head and the teacher in charge. This team work at the leadership level depict a picture to other teachers of the importance of team work to improve teaching and learning. All the school heads agreed that working as a team with deputy heads and teachers in charge increased the inflow of different ideas for instructional improvement and it also lessened the work burden on them. In actual fact, Timperley (2005)[28] advocate that it's a thing of the past for principals to regard themselves as individuals to be heroic leaders who can drive schools to stardom.

Table 4: Instructional materials contribute to improved learning (N =50)

Responses	Number of teachers	%
Agree	22	44
Strongly agree	12	24
Disagree	10	20
Strongly disagree	6	12

Total	50	100
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Findings indicated that instructional materials contributed to effective learning. A response rate of 68% indicated that instructional materials enhanced learning, Maicibi (2003)[29] point out that when human resources (teachers) and material resources combine in the correct quality and quantity, school objectives are achieved. Thus, schools must invest in human and non-human resources if pass rates are to be improved. When asked whether material resources were adequate in their schools, heads indicated that the human resources aspect met the requirements of the schools. What lacked were instructional materials such as textbooks, computers and adequate furniture for learners.

Table 5: School discipline influences learners' pass rates (N=50)

Response	Number of teachers	%
Agree	25	50
Strongly agree	15	30
Disagree	10	20
Total	50	100

Responses indicated that effective school discipline is crucial in schools if they are to achieve their objectives. Unruly behaviour by learners disturb teaching and learning thus, such behaviour must be contained if schools are to have high pass rates. This was indicated by 80% of the respondents. Twenty percent of the respondents disagreed to the notion that the type of school discipline influenced the level of learner academic outcomes. Eshetu (2014)[30] argues that school discipline influences the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Thus, a school with high discipline is likely to produce high academic performers, since students are likely to be focused on their studies more than anything else.

V111. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn from the study:

First, it has been found out that the leadership practices in schools by school heads influence learners' academic performance at school. Thus participants showed the importance of choosing appropriate leadership practices in schools by school heads to improve learner performance.

Second, school heads play a great role in improving learners' academic performance. This is made possible through working together with the deputy head and the teacher in charge at the schools.

Third, schools have instructional materials, but these fall far short than those needed for effective learning and improved pass rates. Instructional resources enhance learners' discovery learning and improve their understanding of concepts.

Fourth, discipline affects both teachers and learners, thus high performance is experienced when discipline prevails. Well-disciplined schools achieve their school goals.

Fifth, collaborative efforts among the school head, deputy head the teacher in charge and teachers create improved teaching and learning in schools.

8.2 Recommendations

From the findings and conclusions made from the study, the following recommendations have been made.

1. School heads must employ instructional leadership practices that improve learners' academic performance.
2. Teaching and learning environments should be made conducive to enable effective learning to take place. Schools that experience a lot of disruptions during teaching and learning time are detrimental to high learners' academic performance.
3. School heads must acknowledge teacher efforts to sustain their motivation. Teachers are crucial in imparting knowledge to learners, thus sustaining their motivation contributes to improved performance.

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