A contemporary examination of instructional leadership activities and distributed leadership practices in elementary education

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Abstract

While the success of schools is often attributed to the efforts of principals, it is important to determine how schools can embrace distributed instructional leadership to enhance academic performance among learners. It is evident that instructional leadership alone is inadequate and necessitates complementation with a distributed leadership model. This study exclusively focuses on how instructional leadership aligns with distributed leadership, paying special attention to distributed instructional leadership implementation in primary schools in Zimbabwe. In this particular qualitative study, the interpretivist theory served as the guiding framework. The study involved observation and conducting interviews with school teachers and principals to gain insight into the instructional and distributive leadership activities that were taking place within their respective schools. The analysis of the data was approached through the lens of Hallinger and Murphy's model of instructional leadership. The findings of the study highlighted the importance of active involvement from all members within a school for effective leadership. Furthermore, it was revealed that a holistic approach to school leadership styles is essential, emphasizing the interconnected nature of instructional and distributive leadership activities (distributed instructional leadership). The study ultimately determined that distributed instructional leadership is achieved through collaborative efforts in formulating school visions and embracing shared supervision practices among the members of staff. It was also identified that creating opportunities for staff development in the schools plays a pivotal role in reaching the goals of distributed instructional leadership.

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1. Introduction

The Zimbabwean educational system has been grappling with persistent challenges in effectively conceptualising the content learnt by the students, leading to a concerning trend of learners struggling to translate their learning into practical implementation. In fact, poor academic performance in Zimbabwe was confirmed by Gambiza (2021), Marongedza (2022), Moyo and Maseko (2016). The investigation conducted by Muranda et al. (2016) revealed a pervasive lack of emphasis placed by school administrators in Zimbabwe on the teachers to provide essential guidance for effective teaching and learning. Consequently, this oversight deficit has been pinpointed as a significant contributor to the substandard academic performance exhibited by students. A study conducted by Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2021) unequivocally identified inadequate supervision as a significant cause of poor academic performance among learners in Zimbabwe. These researchers assert that effective supervision is indispensable for the professional development of teachers. Since there is a direct link between teacher quality and student learning outcomes (Lipton & Wellman, 2014), effective leaders need to consistently visit classrooms to gain firsthand understanding of classroom dynamics (Miles, 2008). Hence, empirical evidence unquestionably places educational leaders as the linchpin for student performance.

The persistent underperformance of students has sparked growing national apprehension over the years in Zimbabwe (Kusure & Basira, 2012). The president of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) pointed out that the new curriculum in Zimbabwe is suffering from a lack of appropriate monitoring and evaluation at every stage of learning and teaching, which strongly implicates school leadership in this issue. The study of Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) showed that most Zimbabwean school principals focused more on financial matters, sporting activities and on sprucing up the physical appearance of their schools at the expense of instructional supervisory activities. Furthermore, Meshack (2013) identified pervasive issue of learners encountering difficulties in comprehending and interlinking learned concepts. Despite rigorous efforts to enhance learners' performance in the classroom, the primary school level continues to grapple with unresolved challenges (Meshack, 2013). The problems of low-performing or underperforming schools have also been approached internationally in various ways and on many levels. The complex web of factors contributing to underperformance normally includes issues such as the leadership of schools, limited opportunities for teacher collaboration, ineffective scheduling,

and conflicts in leadership roles (Ahlström & Aas, 2020). Moreover, Hidayat and Wulandari (2020) underscore the pivotal role of principal leadership in shaping and elevating school performance, stressing that the optimal functioning of schools hinges on the strategic actions and resource utilization spearheaded by the school principal.

In response to the educational issues, the government of Zimbabwe implemented a new curriculum in 2017 known as the Curriculum Framework (2015 - 2022). This framework outlines guiding principles for educational activities. It emphasises the crucial role of school leaders in creating safe, welcoming, and supportive learning environments for students. According to the framework, school leaders are encouraged to delegate responsibilities to other staff members to improve the overall learning experience. Additionally, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe has tacitly intensified its efforts to promote distributed and instructional leadership as a means to boost students' academic achievement. In an effort to enhance school leadership and management, the ministry of primary and secondary education in Zimbabwe collaborated with UNICEF to conduct a comprehensive survey and training needs assessment in 1080 primary and secondary schools in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (Mupfumira. 2023). Following the survey, it was recommended that school heads, deputy heads, head teachers, and school development committee members receive essential training in education leadership and management to ensure the delivery of high-quality education and effective school management.

In early 2022, UNICEF and the education ministry, with support from GPE, the Education Development Fund, and the United Kingdom, initiated a school management and leadership training program. The program aimed to provide school leaders with a comprehensive framework for managing schools to promote learning and focused on the latest education policies, human resource management, school and community engagement, learner welfare, and disaster risk management. It served as a guide for teaching and learning processes, administration, curriculum, and the roles and responsibilities of school management committees. The results of the training program revealed that there were significant improvements in instructional leaders' supervision and monitoring skills, communication and teamwork with teachers to achieve school objectives, which reflects the successful implementation of combined instructional and distributed leadership. Camburn et al. (2003) observed that leadership responsibilities within educational institutions are frequently divided among various individuals, often specialised in different areas. This indicates that the

effectiveness of school leaders is best comprehended through a collective lens rather than an individual one. The school leader's capacity to cultivate collaborative team dynamics significantly influences the overall school performance. It therefore, demands principals to showcase strong skills and proficiency in instructional and distributed leadership in order to improve their schools (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). This approach is a result of distributed leadership, which enables instructional leadership practices to be delegated to various members within a school, expanding beyond traditional leadership roles (Hairon, 2017). In this study, when these two constructs are utilised in conjunction, it is termed as distributed instructional leadership.

Following-up to the training program, this study aims to explore how Zimbabwean primary schools implement distributed instructional leadership practices in order to improve academic performance among primary school children. The study focused on identifying the specific activities that define instructional leadership practices in Zimbabwean primary schools and how these activities demonstrate characteristics of distributed leadership for academic enhancement. Furthermore, existing research on combined distributed instructional leadership is limited, with most studies focusing solely on instructional leadership or distributed leadership in isolation (Tenha, 2022). This study introduces the novel concept of distributed instructional leadership and seeks to address the question: How do Zimbabwean primary schools embrace distributed instructional leadership practices to enrich the academic performance of primary school children?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Instructional leadership

According to Hidayat and Wulandari (2020), the crucial role of principal leadership is the driving force behind a school's pursuit of its objectives. It is necessary for principals to exhibit leadership behaviors that inspire optimal performance among educators and other personnel through various mentoring processes, coaching, evaluation, and reflective practices, both individually and in group settings. All leadership activities should be geared towards enhancing the quality of services provided to students. In addition, the implementation of instructional leadership strategies is pivotal to the success of school principals in fostering improvements in educator performance, education personnel, student achievements, and student character. Furthermore, multiple studies have confirmed the direct and comprehensive

impact of school leadership on learners' academic performance, solidifying the critical importance of effective leadership in the educational setting. For example, Subarto et al. (2021) highlighted the significant influence of principal leadership styles on both work satisfaction and student achievement while Azar and Adnan (2020), using mixed methodology, underscored the pivotal roles of distributed leadership, and high-quality teachers as the primary factors influencing students' academic performance. Additionally, Cruickshank (2017) pinpointed substantial influence of school leadership on the quality of teaching and learning, ultimately impacting student success. However, Charles and Mkulu (2020) identified management challenges faced by school administrators affecting pupils' academic performance, which implies a strong correlation between principal leadership and students' performance (Kaso et al., 2019).

Empirical evidence highlights the significant impact of instructional leadership on students' education (Si-Rajab et al., 2019) where school principals play a pivotal role in leading their schools towards high performance (Bhengu & Mkhize, 2013). Because effective schools are often attributed to the exemplary work of principals (Şişman, 2016), they are considered key figures in improving academic performance, guiding teachers and influencing the direction of instructional activities in schools (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012) through their proactive leadership and coordination. According to Burkett and Hayes (2023), various attributes of school principals may negatively affect the academic achievement of students such as being more reactive than proactive, lack of clear vision or goals for the school, and prioritising ego over the needs of staff and students. Some principals also exhibited a "my way or the highway" mentality instead of fostering a collaborative approach, which was linked to a syndrome of heroism, where principals did not involve others in decision-making processes and valued their voice above all. Furthermore, some principals were noted to promote discord instead of consensus among teachers, which in turn impacted the quality of teaching. Some principals hindered collective efficacy by being ineffective in their leadership approach (Burkett & Hayes, 2023). These findings hold implications not only globally but specifically for schools in Zimbabwe.

2.2. Distributed leadership

The literature on educational leadership highlights the importance of embracing distributed leadership in schools. In Zimbabwe, Masuku (2011) identified a strong sense of

individualism in schools, attributing it to principals taking on excessive workloads due to a hero-based leadership approach. This individualistic mindset may lead leaders wanting to handle all responsibilities without delegating tasks to their subordinates. Hence, Harris (2012) emphasises the need for effective leadership in guiding schools towards future success, suggesting that future schools may require multiple leaders rather than relying on individual leadership. In the current school settings, distributed leadership is increasingly prominent, focusing on leveraging expertise across all levels of the school to facilitate change and enhance capacity for improvement (Shava & Tlou, 2018). Burkett and Hayes (2023) link failures in schools to a lack of teamwork, trust, and outdated leadership approaches by principals, highlighting the necessity to adopt distributed leadership characterized by high levels of trust, interdependence, reciprocal accountability, and a shared purpose (Harris, 2008). Similarly, expanding leadership roles in schools beyond formal administrative positions is a pervasive idea in educational leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2009), which demonstrates the success of distributed leadership in driving higher performance and academic achievements (Harris, 2009).

Relying solely on instructional leadership may not be enough in educational institutions, implying a combination with distributed leadership, where leadership roles are shared among different individuals. This approach acknowledges that having a single principal overseeing all school activities may not be sustainable and could hinder the growth of certain activities due to the overwhelming responsibilities placed on principals. The concept of distributed leadership has gained traction in the educational landscape and has significantly influenced leadership practices. This means that leadership within the school setting, particularly instructional leadership, should be shared among multiple individuals and be reflected in their daily interactions. Recent evidence in education indicates a positive relationship between distributed leadership, organizational improvement, and student achievement. The studies underscore the importance of distributed leadership in facilitating positive organisational change and improving academic performance.

2.3. Linking instructional leadership with distributed leadership

While instructional leadership concerns itself with practices aimed at improving teaching and learning, distributed leadership pertains to the principals' capacity to involve various stakeholders in the decision-making processes within the school (Magnate, 2023).

Dong and Seong (2014) delineate instructional leadership as encompassing all functions contributing to student learning, including managerial behaviors and organizational culture. Niqab et al. (2014) further emphasise that school principals engage in various activities such as curriculum management and staff and student supervision within the realm of instructional leadership. Although instructional leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing academic performance by supporting and guiding teachers to refine their teaching methods, improve student learning, and boost achievement (Magnate, 2023), it falls short in addressing certain areas such as promoting democracy in schools, enhancing school outcomes, fostering professional learning, and predicting teachers' job satisfaction through professional collaboration. These areas can be better addressed through distributed leadership (Magnate, 2023). The amalgamation of these two leadership styles may result in promoting organisational satisfaction and commitment (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Halingger et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020), focusing on organizational quality rather than individual quality (Magnate, 2023). According to Otoum (2021), teachers' job satisfaction, influenced by factors such as their relationships with colleagues and the administrative style of their leaders, significantly impacts their commitment and performance. Furthermore, the job performance of teachers often correlates with the academic performance of their students (Otoum, 2021).

In a research conducted by Martin (2018) in the United States of America, it was found that the degree of principals' involvement in instructional leadership varied across different schools. Similar variations may also exist in distributed leadership practices, warranting an examination of these aspects in the Zimbabwean context in this study. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the potential embracement of instructional and distributed leadership practices in Zimbabwean primary schools to enhance students' academic performance. While prior research has predominantly focused on these constructs individually (Tenha, 2022), the amalgamation of these two elements presents a novel area worthy of investigation within the school environment.

2.3. Theoretical framework

This study is based on Spillane's (2005) distributed leadership framework, which suggests that leadership is distributed among multiple members. Leithwood et al. (2004) argue that successful leaders recognize and leverage the contributions of other members within the school, encompassing both "leadership plus" and "leadership practice" (Spillane & Healey,

2010). According to Spillane (2005), leadership practice is shaped by the interactions between school leaders, subordinates, and their specific circumstances, including what activities are undertaken, how they are carried out, and why. Individuals without formal positions may also contribute to and complete school activities (Spillane, 2005). In contrast, the "leadership plus" aspect involves tapping into the expertise of various individuals within the school. Both the leadership plus and leadership practice facets provide a crucial framework for studying the daily activities of principals (Bolden, 2011).

Goksoy (2015) aligns with Spillane's viewpoint on distributed leadership, which delegates responsibilities to individuals holding various roles within the school organisation. This implies that effective leadership cannot rely solely on a singular individual. Consequently, the concept emphasises that a lone leader cannot be the sole catalyst for all school advancements (Spillane, 2005; Bolden, 2011). It involves other staff members in the process of making instructional decisions and strategising for the future. Distributed leadership prioritizes the interactions among members over their individual actions (Spillane, 2005). Therefore, distributed leadership emerges as a crucial contemporary leadership theory in education, aiming to enhance schools by leveraging the diverse expertise of various individuals in school activities (Hairon & Goh, 2015) and contributing to the overall effectiveness of schools (Yangaiya & Ali, 2013). Bennett et al. (2003) outlined three fundamental principles of distributed leadership.

1. A network of interacting individuals. This principle stresses interaction and is similar to the 'practice' aspect by Spillane (2005).
2. No limits to leadership. This pertains to the involvement of all members in the school organisation.
3. Varied expertise that is extended to different members in leadership. This resonates with Spillane's (2005) leader-plus aspect which recognises the existence of different members in the school.

This study delves into the integration of distributed leadership into instructional leadership to improve the academic performance of primary school students. The research aimed to assess the implementation of distributed instructional leadership in primary schools, focusing on three leadership dimensions: supervision practices, crafting vision and mission statements, and staff development (Aziz et al., 2017; Cansoy et al., 2020). Several principal

activities fall within these dimensions, including formulating and communicating vision and mission statements to other stakeholders, emphasizing that vision formulation is not exclusively the responsibility of school principals. Additionally, creating a favorable school environment involves functions such as safeguarding teaching and learning time, promoting teacher professional development, and facilitating resources for teachers and students (Aziz et al., 2017; Hallinger, 2011). Ultimately, the study aimed to link these leadership practices in schools to students' academic performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research is framed within the qualitative research approach, utilising a multiple case study design to investigate the primary activities associated with instructional and distributed leadership practices in primary schools in Zimbabwe. Klenke (2016) defines the qualitative approach as a naturalistic exploration seeking a profound understanding of a phenomenon within the participants' natural environment. This approach identifies the central activities that exemplify instructional and distributed leadership practices in the chosen primary schools. This method delves into the meanings attributed by participants to the activities that characterize instructional and distributive leadership.

3.2. Sampling and Instruments

The researchers conducted interviews and observations with school principals and teachers in primary schools to analyse their interactions within their work environments. Employing the interpretivism paradigm, the researchers were able to interpret the observations of various activities in schools. Three primary schools were selected based on recommendations from district supervisors. A total of three principals and nine teachers, purposively selected (3 from each school), participated in the study. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the schools (Matanga, Bepura, and Chrim primary schools) and to the principals and teachers from each school (refer to table 1 for pseudonyms). The study strictly followed several research ethical practices including informed consent, proper interview and observation protocols and confidentiality of gathered data. The study also secured proper permissions to gather data.

In order to ensure a comprehensive representation of Zimbabwe's educational landscape, a deliberate selection process involved the identification of three schools from distinct environments: public, private, and council institutions. This strategy aimed to attain a diverse and inclusive participant pool that effectively mirrors the broader educational spectrum present within the country.

Table 1

Participants' pseudonyms

School	Principal / Teacher	Gender
Matanga Primary School (Government School)	Mrs Muzuwa	Female
	Mrs Sora	Female
	Mr Muko	Male
	Mrs Rega	Female
Bepura Primary School (Urban Council)	Mr Shama	Male
	Mrs Ndaba	Female
	Mr Ngata	Male
	Mrs Koni	Female
Chrim Primary School (Private)	Mr Kanyo	Male
	Mr Nyika	Male
	Mr Hasva	Male
	Ms Manaki	Female

3.3. Data analysis

The analysis of participants' responses utilised textual data to provide an overview of instructional and distributed leadership activities within the selected schools. An evaluation of the implementation of distributed instructional leadership in primary schools was centered on three key leadership dimensions: crafting vision and mission statements, managing instructional programs, and fostering staff development (Aziz et al., 2017; Cansoy et al., 2020). The answers from the participants were arranged into the three main themes to identify the various practices. Several answers were included verbatim to highlight the key indicators as mentioned by the participants.

4. Findings of the Study

The study involved an exploration of various aspects within each participating school, including, teacher supervision, school's vision and staff development, all in accordance with

the theoretical framework. These attributes of the schools facilitated the examination of the activities that define instructional and distributed leadership practices in primary schools in Zimbabwe. The study aimed to analyse how these activities demonstrate characteristics of both distributed and instructional leadership.

4.1. Supervision of teachers

According to Heaton (2016), lesson observation serves as a form of supervision aimed at enhancing teacher competencies to facilitate effective instruction and the achievement of school objectives. Heaton (2016) aligns this viewpoint with The Director's Circular Number 7 of 2003 in Zimbabwe, which emphasizes that teacher supervision is designed to support their professional development. At Matanga Primary School, the practice of lesson observation involves the school principal, vice principal, and the teacher in charge (TIC). When questioned about the method of teacher supervision at Matanga school, Mrs. Muzuwa provided the following insight:

> *We have the Deputy Head, the TIC from the Infants Department and myself. Those are the three people who do the supervision. The strategy that we use is, we look at our teachers, obviously there are some teachers who are new in the system and then there are some teachers who need some help one way or the other, so we concentrate on those ones. If they improve, then it is done. Such teachers can be supervised teaching twice a term. Though I don't check the correctness of the subject content, I use what I call random supervision, just to get into a classroom and sit and just talk to the teacher like we are doing.. ......Sometimes, I just go and sit and ask how so and so is doing, I look at the wall charts, the floors, so I use random supervision. Sometimes I also write reports.*

The supervision strategies encompassed various methods such as conversations, updates, random visits, and targeted approaches. Mrs. Muzuwa emphasized the implementation of random supervision as a means for principals to directly experience classroom dynamics (Marshall, 2013). It was evident that the principal's supervisory activities demonstrated practical engagement in instructional leadership. Similarly, Mr. Shama from Bepura school underscored the significance of teacher supervision and advisory responsibilities in his role as the school principal. He specifically mentioned providing support to underperforming teachers through demonstration lessons. It is noteworthy that the

supervisory role, an essential function of instructional leadership, is often not given due priority by many principals (Manaseh, 2016). However, Jita (2010) highlighted the positive impact on learning outcomes when school leaders concentrate on instructional responsibilities and position themselves closer to the classroom. Mr. Shama echoed Mrs. Muzuwa's approach, emphasizing that lesson observations were conducted collectively by the school head, deputy head, and the TIC, thus reflecting a shared responsibility. In line with the head of Matanga, Mr. Shama also expressed a keen interest in supervising novice and underperforming teachers. The close monitoring of novice and underperforming teachers aligns with the assertion put forth by Aunga and Masare (2017) that newly engaged staff require more supervision compared to experienced employees. Mr. Shama also highlighted the importance of providing timely feedback as a key instructional leadership practice, expressing a preference for immediate feedback to prevent oversight. Mrs. Ndaba and Mr. Ngata of Bepura school echoed Mr. Shama's views. Their approach aligns with the emphasis of Hallinger and Wang (2015), who underscore the role of timely feedback in enhancing teachers' instructional capacity. Furthermore, the supervision practices in schools align with Brandon et al.'s (2018) conclusion that effective teacher supervision fosters professional growth. At Chrim school, Mr. Nyika and other teachers agreed that supervision primarily involved the school principal, indicating a lack of shared responsibility and emphasizing instructional leadership.

During the supervision, the TIC of Matanga school and the deputy head of Bepura school in agreement raised a significant concern regarding subject content knowledge. Mr. Muko of Matanga school expressed the following:

> *Yes, we provide supervision, but for effective supervision, it's essential to have a good understanding of the content being taught and how to teach it. Otherwise, our feedback will be limited to issues like classroom layout, instructional material usage, and classroom management. In my case, I find teaching mathematics particularly challenging. We are thinking about involving teachers specialising in the same area to supervise their colleagues.*

In his discourse, Mr. Muko first underscores the paramount importance of subject knowledge in ensuring effective supervision. He also deliberates on the allocation of roles based on subject expertise to guarantee the adequacy and appropriateness of supervision, a characteristic indicative of distributed leadership. According to Mr. Muko, while general supervision suffices for classroom management, it proves inadequate in addressing teachers'

subject content needs. This position aligns with the findings of Evans et al. (2014), who assert that subject specialists are better suited for supervision compared to non-specialists. These scholars note that non-specialist supervisors may lack the capacity to provide relevant feedback on subject content. Evans et al. (2014) posit that non-specialists' lack of expertise and confidence impedes their ability to assist subject experts and offer appropriate guidance, since they are insufficiently equipped to offer subject content advice. Mr. Muko's proposal to involve subject experts in the supervision process signifies a promising embrace of distributed leadership practices. Hairon and Goh (2015) assert that distributed leadership enriches educational institutions by harnessing the diverse expertise of individuals involved in school activities.

4.2. School Vision

In the study by Turkoglu and Cansoy (2018), it was asserted that the establishment of a school vision fosters a shared sense of purpose among both staff and students. Crafting and disseminating the school vision is thus a pivotal undertaking in the realm of instructional leadership, as visions serve to steer educators and learners towards a collective objective of elevated school performance. The specific visions conceived by schools often articulate their desired destinations. The works of Tian and Risku (2019) and Mombourquette (2017) contend that effective leadership can be realised through the extension of this vision to all members, with the principal transmitting a clearly outlined school vision. To gain insights into the fundamental process of envisioning within a school, school leadership were asked regarding the development of the school's vision and mission statements. Mrs. Muzuwa, the principal of Matanga school, responded as follows:

> *...We have what I can refer to as shared leadership, whereby everybody is a leader. Everybody is a participant in the production of good results. So, to come up with our school vision we got input from teachers through their representatives. We have various committees in the school, and these are led by different teachers. From the teachers' input, the head, deputy head and TIC sat down and crafted the school vision and mission statements and shared them with teachers. You will find as you meet our teachers, that most of them are very much intrinsically motivated. They are in a system where they share information to produce good results.*

The aforementioned statements regarding the attainment of favorable outcomes strongly imply that the formulation of the school's vision and mission statement was inherently linked to the enhancement of instructional methods and students' achievements. The description of the vision's development indicates the involvement of all staff members, with specific individuals designated for leadership responsibilities in the process. Mrs. Muzuwa characterised this as shared leadership. Her statement, "... whereby everybody is a leader..." suggests the delegation of leadership responsibilities to other members within the school. This reflects an acknowledgment that leadership can be extended to various individuals within the school community (Bolden, 2011), a fundamental aspect of distributed leadership. Mrs. Muzuwa's observations were further validated by Mrs. Rega, the Teacher-in-Charge, who has had a longstanding tenure at the school.

Responding to the same question, Mr Shama of Bepura primary school posed:

> We got input from committees, we have got teachers who are in committees, we got their input then we sat as a committee. The chairpersons of the committees represent the committees in the organogram so that is how we get input from stakeholders. We also got input from parents through the school development committee and from children through the prefects' board. That is how we came up with the vision and mission statements. It is not like we take everything, but we take the salient issues guided by policy. However, formulating the school vision is one thing, implementing it is quite another thing…

Mr. Shama's statements suggest the involvement of other members of the school in the development of their institutional vision. Mbera (2015) supports the idea that it is crucial for school leaders to engage with the school community when formulating and integrating the school's vision into its structures and activities. Involving other members in creating a vision aligns with the sharing of instructional leadership responsibilities. Similarly, Mrs. Ndaba, from the same school, agreed with Mr. Shama, while Mr. Ngata, a new teacher at Bepura School, admitted to being unaware of how the school's vision was developed. However, he acknowledged its visibility to all. Mr. Ngata also displayed a limited understanding of the school's vision, interpreting it as hard work and targets to be achieved. This lack of awareness may indicate a failure on the part of school principals to properly educate and sensitize new members, as noted by Dishena and Mokoena (2016). Mombourquette (2017) stressed that school visions are influential in shaping learning practices in schools, underlining the

importance of comprehensive communication. Similarly, Hallinger (2011) argues that it is the principal's responsibility to ensure that a school carefully formulates and effectively communicates a clear vision to all stakeholders. On the contrary, Mr. Shama's recent statement carries significant weight: "*However, formulating the school vision is one thing, implementing it is quite another thing…*" This statement suggests that while there has been inclusive participation in creating the vision, reflecting distributed leadership, other school members may perceive it as a mere ritual. This prompts the question of whether the school's outcomes align with the envisioned goals.

The formulation of the school vision at Chrim Primary School did not involve the participation of the teachers. According to the principal, the school vision was created by the school's founder, as outlined in the school policy. Mr. Kanyo, the principal, asserts this position.

> *This is a private school. It has only one responsible authority and we try to work*
> *as a family as we have a mandate of fulfilling the vision. Once each member*
> *understands the vision and knows that they are part of a family, it will be easy to*
> *make them perform. We, as a school, we try our best to ensure our teachers*
> *appreciate and perform to achieve the vision.*

During the discussion, it became evident that the principal emphasized the imperative nature of the school staff adhering to the directives set forth by the founding authority. However, as the educational leader, Aziz et al. (2017) emphasized his prerogative to impart the school's vision to teachers and other stakeholders. It was emphasized that mere communication was insufficient; rather, it was essential to ensure the realization and appreciation of the vision. This indicated proactive measures by the school authorities, including incentivising teachers to align with the vision. Nevertheless, when questioned about their comprehension of the school's vision, Mr. Nyika and his counterparts were unable to articulate it and instead delineated the school's expectations as focused solely on achieving high academic results. This perspective was also shared by Ms. Manaki and Mr. Hasva. The misinterpretation of the school's vision suggests that teachers were overly fixated on achieving pass rates and less concerned with embracing the vision comprehensively, which could undermine distributed leadership within the school. Notably, Mrs. Rega of Matanga school and Mrs. Koni of Bepura school concurred with this view. These teachers expressed that they

perceived the vision as a superficial ritual aimed at controlling teachers and failed to recognise its contribution to teachers' professional development. Mrs. Koni remarked:

> *....It is mandatory to know the school vision. Educational authorities, including the ministry, expect us to be familiar with it. Consequently, teachers often commit it to memory as a formal requirement. However, it seems that the vision is routinely overlooked, and its significance may not be fully recognised by all staff members.*

The expressions suggest that while the teachers may feign comprehension of the vision as an element of their instructional responsibilities, it merely serves as an operational obligation rather than advancing the standard of education.

4.3. Staff development

According to a study by Sleegers et al. (2014), the enhancement of instructional practices can be achieved through staff development initiatives. At Bepura School, the school principal's input indicated a proposed collaboration between committees and the administration team to recommend staff development activities. This approach reflects the principal's commitment to distributing instructional leadership. In a study by Beverborg et al. (2015), it was found that the professional development of staff improved their instructional practices, leading to enhanced learner performance. At Matanga School, Mrs. Muzuwa showed support for the continuous learning of teachers. She emphasised the importance of ongoing professional development by stating:

> *I usually utilise staff development of teachers at grade level. If it is in the Infants Department, we usually combine grades one and two teachers. This is because the grade one teachers would be preparing to go into grade two and these are closely linked, so I normally do the Infants Department on its own. Sometimes I take grades 3 to 5 on their own then grades 6 and 7 on their own. At times we conduct staff development for all teachers. For an example, when the new curriculum was introduced, those teachers who had an idea of how it was done helped in making clarifications for other teachers. My main aim is to ensure that all teachers are staff developed to be conversant with the current trends in education but sometimes workload forbids. We end up focusing on administrative issues such as school enrolments, disciplinary issues, and facility maintenance.*

The practice of organizing staff development activities based on departments reflects a commitment to effectiveness. Staff development serves as a key instructional leadership practice (Niqab, 2014). Mrs. Ndava of Bepura School confirmed that the principal occasionally delegates the responsibility of spearheading staff development to them due to her busy schedule. This exemplifies distributed leadership, aiming to enhance performance. Engaging teachers in leading certain aspects of staff development exemplifies effective leadership, utilising the skills of various members to foster teacher growth (Chan et al., 2019). Mrs. Ndava also noted the involvement of experienced teachers and supervisors in determining workshop topics, illustrating shared responsibility in staff development.

At Chrim School, Mr. Kanyo and the three teachers unanimously agreed that teachers contribute topics for staff development at their schools. This collaborative involvement of teachers underscores their significant role within the school's framework. Mr. Hasva, in concurrence with Mr. Nyika and Ms. Manaki, affirmed this standpoint:

> *Yes, we are consulted but most of the time it is the head, the deputy and the TIC who come up with final staff development activities and topics. It is not every topic that we suggest is considered.*

The consultation suggests that while school leaders would oversee the activities, they would do so in collaboration with teachers, demonstrating a form of distributed leadership. Given the dynamic nature of education, both the curriculum and the education system consistently adapt to meet current demands (Kosgei, 2015). To ensure that teachers therefore remain competitive in this dynamic environment, continuous staff development is essential to equip them with the skills necessary to address emerging issues in schools. However, Mr. Hasva admitted that not all topics suggested by the teachers are approved, indicating that their input is constrained.

Despite agreeing with others on staff development, Ms. Munaki argued;

> *While we are involved in some staff development activities, I believe we lack the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively conduct instructional activities. In my opinion, supervision should help school leadership identify relevant topics for staff development because the main goal of supervision should be to guide teachers in improving their classroom practices. Supervision should empower leaders to identify the unique needs of both teachers and students and develop strategies to address those needs through workshops. However, I've noticed that many workshop topics seem to be random and uninteresting.*

Ms. Munaki strongly asserts that school principals must diligently observe both the shortcomings and advancements of teachers through lesson observations. The data gleaned from these observations must be utilised to proactively plan further professional development activities to bolster teacher growth. Implementing corrective measures is absolutely essential, as oversight without such measures is rendered ineffective.

5. Discussion

The primary focus of this study was to investigate the implementation of distributed instructional leadership practices in Zimbabwean primary schools to enhance the academic performance of primary school students. Three schools participated in the study, with three teacher participants and one principal from each school. The study, therefore, analysed the major activities carried out by principals and teacher leaders in these schools, which demonstrated characteristics of instructional and distributed leadership practices.

5.1. Supervision Practices

In this research, it was discovered that the improvement of teaching and learning outcomes is contingent upon the consistent and proficient supervision of instructional leaders. The study involved three principals who actively engaged in supervising teachers' instructional practices through various strategies such as walk-ins, lesson observations, and providing feedback. Despite the principals' assertions that their supervision enhanced school performance, this was only evident in the private school, as the results from public and council schools remained notably low. This deficiency in performance may signal inadequacies in the supervision of teachers within these institutions. As highlighted by Ricard and Pelletier (2016), teachers play a pivotal role in any educational system; thus, effective supervisory practices by principals are imperative for achieving quality teaching and learning outcomes. The unsatisfactory results observed in public and council schools could potentially be attributed to shortcomings in the instructional supervision process.

The study revealed significant barriers to effective supervision, including deficiencies in supervisory skills and content knowledge among the supervisors. Some participating teachers like Mr Muko, expressed concerns that their leaders lacked the necessary content knowledge to conduct effective instructional supervision. They emphasized that the leadership's grasp of content knowledge was crucial for effective teaching, suggesting that

supervision or lesson observations performed without this expertise may become merely procedural and deviate from their intended purpose.

Based on the statements of various educators, there is a clear link between a leader's content knowledge and their ability to provide effective feedback to teachers on instructional practices. It was noted that leaders lacking sufficient content knowledge may be hindered in their capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional practices. A principal mentioned that a significant amount of time and effort is devoted to assessing the communication, planning, and classroom management skills of teachers during classroom observations. This aligns with the findings of Evans et al. (2014), who suggested that subject specialists are better equipped to conduct supervision compared to non-specialists, as the latter may lack the expertise and confidence to provide advice on subject content. Consequently, it is suggested that instructional supervision is most effective when the leader's field of expertise aligns with that of the teachers. In such cases, they would be able to discuss the effectiveness of classroom practices, teaching methods, and techniques that best served the diverse learning needs of students. Some schools in this study are considering involving subject experts in the supervision process to enhance teaching and learning, which represents an incorporation of distributed leadership practices in instructional methods. This approach may lead to greater effectiveness and success in content teaching.

5.2. School vision

The study also revealed that the realisation of the school vision required dedicated efforts from the school leadership. Although both instructional and distributed leadership were theoretically capable of delivering results, the practical implementation of the vision remained ambiguous. Each of the three schools had a unique vision tailored to its specific context. In government and council schools, the principals spearheaded the creation of school-specific visions as representatives of the responsible authorities at the stations. Conversely, at Chrim Primary, a private school, the school's vision was developed by the school's founder in collaboration with a school board appointed by the owner. While the schools acknowledged the necessity of specific visions catering to the individual needs of each school beyond the generic Ministry vision, the execution raised concerns. According to some teachers, the vision was perceived as a perfunctory ritual to exert control, with little perceived contribution to teachers' professional development, resulting in its predominantly theoretical nature. This

suggests that the intended purpose of generating the vision as an instructional leadership practice to enhance performance is not being fully realised. In the study by Davis and Boudreaux (2019), it was posited that the responsibility for crafting visions for schools typically falls on principals. However, this study revealed that the actual implementation of these visions is contingent upon the specific type of school.

The research highlighted that at Chrim school, a private institution, the principal demonstrated dedicated efforts to ensure the adoption of the vision. Conversely, other schools focused more on formulating and disseminating the vision with the involvement of various stakeholders, but lacked clarity regarding the subsequent steps for implementation. Notably, crafting and communicating the vision to educators embodies an instructional leadership role essential for effective principals striving to foster academic excellence within schools. This sentiment echoes the perspective of Hallinger and Wang (2015), who assert that principals should establish and communicate the school's vision to its members. Nevertheless, the perception of teachers viewing this process as a mere ritual could undermine the objectives of both instructional and distributed leadership, as the overarching aim is to enhance student performance. Participants in the study revealed a lack of clarity regarding how the visions were employed to support teachers' professional development and pedagogy. Moreover, no principal indicated conducting follow-up observations to ascertain whether teachers genuinely benefitted from the established vision to enhance the quality of their teaching practices. In light of these findings, it is arguable that school principals may not be effectively utilizing vision formulation as a mechanism to enhance the capacity for teaching and learning within their respective institutions.

5.3. Staff Development

The inclusion of teacher input in determining staff development topics as indicated by Mrs. Muzuwa, serves as evidence of distributed leadership and exemplifies effective leadership, utilising the skills of various members to foster teacher growth (Chan et al., 2019). Mrs. Ndava also noted the involvement of experienced teachers and supervisors in determining workshop topics, illustrating shared responsibility in staff development. The findings of this study therefore, underscore the significance of staff development as an investment in teachers, as it has the potential to enhance instructional practices (Sleegers et al., 2014). According to Beverborg et al. (2015), staff development for teachers has been shown to enhance school

instructional practices and subsequently improve student performance. However, the study noted that time constraints as noted by Mrs. Muzuwa and Mr. Ndava, often placed school principals in a quandary, as they must balance teaching responsibilities with managerial duties. Principals reported allocating a substantial amount of time and effort to bureaucratic tasks, disciplinary issues, enrolments and facility maintenance. Consequently, they often delegated staff development activities to other members of the school community. The findings buttress the results of a separate study focusing on Zimbabwean schools by Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013), which revealed that many principals prioritised financial matters and extracurricular activities, while overlooking instructional activities, thereby neglecting the potential impact of staff development on the teaching and learning environment.

When discussing topic suggestions for teacher development, it is evident that the input of teachers regarding workshop and seminar topics is not consistently taken into account. The final selection of staff development topics typically originates from the principal or from the teachers, albeit in a modified form, directed by the leadership. This indicates limited decision-making authority for teachers, despite the appearance of autonomy. Mr. Hasva disclosed that the ultimate decision regarding workshop topics is made by the leadership. In addition, Ms Manaki asserts that the topics are random and proposed that topics should stem from supervisory or lesson observation outcomes to enhance teaching performance. Muranda et al. (2016) affirmed that inadequate guidance from school administrators is a significant factor contributing to students' subpar academic performance. Consequently, while distributed instructional leadership is practiced in schools, its impact on academic performance remains limited due to implementation methods.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals that instructional leaders demonstrate a concerted effort to enhance school system performance by delegating responsibilities to staff members. However, the effectiveness of distributed leadership practices in improving instruction varies across schools due to differing contexts and leadership styles. The study emphasises the crucial role of school principals in extending instructional leadership practices to staff members, highlighting the interdependence of instructional and distributed leadership. The integration of these leadership approaches is recommended for comprehensive enhancement of school performance. Mokhele and Jita (2012) assert that distributed instructional leadership is pivotal for successful program

implementation in education. They emphasise the need for proper implementation and acceptance of distributed instructional practices by classroom practitioners for impactful academic performance. When educators perceive strong support from their superiors and experience satisfaction within their organisation, they are more inclined to uphold the institution's mission (Magnate, 2023). This has substantial implications for educational leadership, highlighting the need for leaders to provide appropriate support and direction to foster and maintain the commitment and contentment of their staff.

While Cansoy et al. (2024) and Gordon and Ross-Gordon (2018) contend that instructional leadership involves a systematic process wherein school principals observe teaching, identify areas requiring further professional development for teachers, devise individualized professional development plans to support teachers' classroom practices, and assess the effectiveness of these plans, this research indicates that principals are less likely to implement distributed instructional leadership as a means to enhance school performance when they lack the essential skills for effective distributed instructional supervision. To optimize outcomes, distributed instructional practices should prioritise teacher reflection on instructional methods and active involvement in school-wide curricular and instructional decision-making processes.

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