EVALUATION OF ODL PERFORMANCE IN FACILITATING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A CASE OF CHIPINGE DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT
The study evaluated the extent to which ODL had facilitated instructional leadership in primary schools. Qualitative methodology with constructivist philosophical underpinnings was used. A case study design was adopted to allow for a naturalistic inquiry. The sample comprised two education inspectors, sixteen primary school head teachers and one hundred and two primary school teachers. Purposive and random sampling techniques were used. The researcher, semi-structured interview guides and observations were used to generate data. Presentation, analysis and interpretation of data were done narrative. The key findings were that ODL degree primary school head teachers were excelling in infrastructural development in cooperation with SDCs. They were coping with procurement of teaching and learning materials despite financial limitations resulting in improved pass rates at Grade Seven level. Gaps in their performance lay in use of ICT, lack of content subjects in their degree programmes, Basic Communication in English and in financial management. It was recommended that policy makers could re-visit ways of financing schools. In addition policy makers could make it a requirement for primary school teachers to acquire educational management degrees with relevant subject content. Finally, ODL service providers could make ICT and financial management modules more practical for skill acquisition.

KEYWORDS: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Performance, Instructional Leadership, Primary School.

1. Background to the study
Instructional leadership continues to occupy centre stage in educational organisations globally. Bush and Glover (2002) and Brundrett (2010) share the view that instructional leadership places emphasis on teaching and learning particularly direction and influence of teacher behaviour.
Open and distance learning as an educational staff development intervention has been hailed as useful in capacitating educational personnel in many African countries and in Asia.
UNESCO (2000) observes that in Burkina Faso a quarter of the country’s head teachers developed new knowledge and skills through ODL within four years. In Tanzania, Chale (1998), Sangai (2004) and Mbwette (2013) acknowledge that the country has used ODL as a human resource capacity building strategy. In Zimbabwe, educational management degrees have been offered through ODL to head teachers and teachers and it has proved to be a popular strategy over the years. The popularity of the intervention is supported in Zimbabwe by UNESCO (2000) and Nyamuda (2002). Kurasha (2005) and Chiome (2006) further concur highlighting the popularity of ODL as an effective re-skilling strategy in the education system.

However, doubt still lingers in relation to the capability of the strategy in producing graduates who could transform school organisations into effective teaching and learning places. This is the gap that the research study aimed to fill. Observations of researchers such as Sibanda (2005) and Gulati (2008) suggest that there are questions with regard to the credibility of ODL degrees. Librero (2004) and Mugridge (2006) also fuel the doubts about the strategy by suggesting that there is need to provide a rich learning environment and high quality materials for ODL programmes. The researcher however acknowledges that ODL was likely to meet such criticisms in environments that had a history of conventional universities predominance. It is within the provided background that the problem was stated.

2. Statement of the problem

Basing on the research evidence concerning the popularity of ODL as a human resource capacity building strategy and controversy that surrounds its effectiveness as an effective human resource capacitating intervention, the key research question is stated as follows: To what extent has ODL contributed towards providing instructional leadership in Chipinge District primary schools?

Research objectives

- To identify ways in which instructional leadership influences learning
- To evaluate the impact of ODL on primary school primary school performance
- To identify and find solutions to challenges faced by primary school heads in instructional leadership
- To suggest ways of improving instructional leadership through ODL degrees
Research questions

- How does instructional leadership influence teacher and pupil performance?
- What impact has ODL had on primary school performance?
- What are some of the challenges faced by ODL degreed primary school head teachers as instructional leaders?
- How best can ODL degree intervention be utilized for the improvement of instruction in primary schools?

Review of related literature

Most of the definitions of instructional leadership define it in terms of what an instructional leader does in a school. Blaise and Blaise (1998) argue that research indicates that instructional leadership comprises talking with teachers, promotion of teachers’ professional growth and fostering teacher reflection. Bush and Glover (2002) view that an instructional leadership focuses on the behaviour of teachers when working with students. In a classroom work situation, the leader’s influence is targeted at students’ learning behaviour through the teachers. This observation is in tandem with the views of Southworth (2004b) who posits that an instructional leader influences learning through three main strategies which are modelling, monitoring and dialogue.

The above observations suggest that an effective primary school teacher as an effective instructional leader should be someone who exemplifies the expected behaviour. Monitoring entails effective supervision of instruction by the head teacher. It would therefore involve class visits and compilation of reports and inspections of teachers’ scheme –cum-plans and pupils’ work. The head teacher is also expected to effectively supervise subordinates for educational goal achievement. Wiles and Lovell (1975) regard supervision as a way of modifying teachers’ behaviour for the success of the school. Dialogue would also refer to the creation of a school climate where there is cross-pollination of ideas using platforms such as staff development workshops. The concept of dialogue has strong links with that of teamwork. Head teachers and teachers would work as a team if there is open dialogue or communication among them. Senge (2006) advances that people who worked as teams become a formidable force compared to individual effort. It was therefore critical to establish the extent to which ODL degrees head teachers were transferring acquired knowledge on the value of teamwork for the betterment of instruction in the primary schools they led and managed.
This researcher was aware that the success or failure of ODL degreed head teachers in instructional leadership were influenced by challenges encountered in their operations. Some of the challenges could emanate from scarcity of resources and inadequate knowledge and skills among the head teachers themselves and the subordinates. Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993) assert that in certain circumstances, under qualified teachers might refuse to be guided in instructional issues by junior more qualified head teachers. This assertion is confirmed by Prasad (2001) who posits that status relationships between degreed and non-degreed teachers could block communication due to the inferiority complex or low self-esteem on the part of the lowly qualified counterparts. Zimbabwe’s Ministry of Education Sports and Culture (2004) expressed the view that poor infrastructure in most rural schools might make head teachers fail to be effective in instructional leadership because few qualified teachers want to work in those environments. Still on challenges ODL degreed head teachers might face, Winkler and Gershberg (2003) argue that their roles are ever expanding. Mulkeen (2005) echoes on this fact by elaborating that most head teachers in rural schools had to pay frequent administrative visits to district offices at the expense of instructional supervision in their schools. The National Centre for Education Statistics (2005) recognises that inability to use modern technologies and limited financial management might hinder effectiveness in instructional leadership. The centre argues that teachers needed educational technologies for data collection, information management for decision making and presentations within the schools.

Knowledge of possible limitations to ODL degreed primary school head teacher effectiveness in instructional leadership allowed the study to be carried out with the knowledge of other factors that might have influenced the findings. It was therefore imperative to gather the experiences of the people who actually lived the experience of ODL and how it had impacted on instructional leadership of their respective primary schools in Chipinge District.

Research methodology

The researcher adopted the qualitative methodology which utilises narrative descriptions of data. The selected approach was in tandem with constructivist philosophy which argues that social reality is better constructed from the subjective opinions of the people who experience the phenomenon under study (McMillan and Schumacher, 1997 and Berg, 2007). In addition to this, the philosophy also supports that a researcher should be in
direct contact with the people under study (Cresswell, 2003). The adopted methodology allowed for the creation of ‘thick’ verbal descriptions in relation to the benefits of ODL educational management degrees to Chipinge District head teachers. They were able to reveal their personal experiences as head teachers prior, during and after acquiring the degrees.

**Research design**

A multi case study design was employed by the researcher in the sense that sixteen primary schools participated in the study reflecting sixteen primary school scenarios. The case study design was justified in that the head teachers studied belonged to a single district of Manicaland Province (Dooley, 1995 and Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The researcher was aware of the limitations of case studies in general is ability but the focus of the study was on generating data that would capture detailed and accurate experiences (Cresswell, 2003) of primary school head teachers and the impact ODL educational management degrees have had on their managerial leadership effectiveness.

**Sample**

In this research study a sample of 2 education inspectors, 16 head teachers and 102 primary school teachers totalling to 120 participants was used to generate the required data. The issue of sample representative of the population was not of much relevance in this qualitative scientific inquiry. The researcher considered that the three sample strata would facilitate data triangulation towards addressing issues of trustworthiness which are critical in qualitative studies (Gillham, 2000 and Flick, 2006).

**Sampling procedures**

The researcher opted to use purposive sampling to select participants who were primary school head teachers. The procedure was deemed necessary because it was critical to select head teachers who had gone through ODL educational management programmes (Neuman, 1994, Veal, 1997 and Gay and Airasian, 2006). These had gone through the ODL experience. It was also pertinent to select head teachers who were easily accessible with the required data. In the case of teachers, the researcher used random selection of teachers in schools headed by head teachers who were in the study.
Data generation tools

The researcher was the main instrument in charge of utilising a questionnaire with open ended questions, a semi-structured interview guide and an observation guide.

Pilot testing of research instruments

To ensure that the chosen instruments would result in the generation of data that was credible, dependable, confirmable and transferable, the researcher pilot tested the tools in a school that was not included in the study (Bell, 1993 and De Vos et. al, 1998). The results of the test showed that there was no need to adjust the items in the tools. The questions were clear to the pilot test participants and it was agreed that the items included in the Observation guide were indeed observable.

Data generation procedures

The Questionnaire

As a way of generating data from the head teachers, the researcher personally administered the semi-structured questionnaire among the head teachers. The questionnaire was accompanied by a letter granting passage from the Provincial Education Director of Manicaland Province where Chipinge district is. Almost all the head teachers and teachers responded to all the questions with maximum utilisation of spaces provided for the responses. The researcher was assisted in collecting the questionnaires from head teachers and teachers by appointed contact head teachers in the district. The questionnaire was found to be very informative as observed by Sapsford (2007).

Interview

Appointments were made for interview purposes and were honoured by both parties. The researcher personally conducted the interviews with the two education inspectors for duration of forty-five minutes each. Interviews with education inspectors also yielded rich data as observed by Kvale and Brinkman (2008).

Observation

Observational data was generated by the researcher during visits to some of the selected schools when questionnaire were being administered and collected. The researcher used an observation checklist to generate relevant observational data. As the researcher
moved in schools, observations were made on indicators of instructional leadership. Observations allowed researcher to document evidence independent of participants (Taylor-Powell and Steele, 199,

**Data presentation, analysis and interpretation procedures**

Data was analysed and interpreted as it was being generated. It was presented normatively with some actual words of some participants quoted to facilitate the construction of ‘thick’ descriptions which characterise qualitative studies. Some categories and themes emerged during the generation process and these formed the basis for interpretations leading to research findings.

**Research findings**

The following themes emerged from the generated data concerning the effectiveness of ODL degreed primary school head teachers in instructional leadership. For the purpose of maintaining the anonymity of the participants the following codes with letters and numbers were used to represent education inspector, head teacher and teacher participants in the study:

- **HT**: Head teacher
- **EI**: Education inspector
- **T**: Teacher

**Development of infrastructure**

The research study established that the issue of the capacity of a head teacher to improve school infrastructure was critical in most of the participants. Of great concern was the construction of Early Childhood Development (ECD) classes in primary schools and the provision of furniture for both teachers and pupils.

**T 52**: We have since started building ECD block because of his influence. That is the reason why we prefer degreed head teachers in schools.

Most of the participants acknowledged the ODL degreed head teachers’ efforts in collaboration with SDCs in that direction, arguing that they were doing their best to meet these needs within the prevailing difficult economic environment. The observed efforts are in agreement with the views of English (2008) and Northouse (2010) who argue that effective
head teachers are expected to improve conditions of learning and to operate professional learning centres.

**Procurement of teaching and learning materials**

The ODL degreed head teachers were commended for ensuring that there were adequate textbooks and exercise books in their schools. One respondent actually said that there was a difference in the availability of these materials between schools headed by degreed and those headed by non-degreed head teachers in the district. Another teacher asserted that this scenario showed that degreed head teachers were pupil-centred. The two education inspectors also subscribed to this school of thought by arguing that degreed head teachers tended to be more concerned about the availability of teaching and learning materials in their schools than non-degreed ones.

Degreed head teachers tended to direct more energy towards acquiring the resources though there might be prohibitive financial challenges in the communities. As the researcher observed in the field during the data generation exercise, there was evidence that degreed head teachers were working hard in collaboration with communities to ensure that pupils had reasonable quantities of textbooks. The participants argued that the situation was aggravated by Government’s policy of not excluding non-paying pupils from lessons. Head teachers were of the opinion that such policies tended to encourage parents not to make an effort to pay fees even when they might be able to.

*HT 12: Failure of parents to pay building fund. It hampers progress of the school as money is needed for the smooth running of the school.*

*HT 8: Education policy on payment of school fees needs to be revised; it is blocking development in schools.*

Scarcity of necessary resources has been noted to be a characteristic of rural district schools and to be hindering effectiveness in classroom instruction. Moorad (1989), Mwiria (1990), World Bank (1994c) concur with the same observation.

**Supervision and planning of the teaching and learning processes**

Supervision and planning of the teaching and learning processes are areas that were highlighted as important indicators of effective instructional leadership. Head teacher participants agreed that effective internal supervision had contributed towards improved
performance of primary schools. They attributed the improvement to use of more teacher friendly methods of supervision that head teachers might have learnt in the ODL programmes. One head teacher confided that his supervisory practices had generally improved as he was able to identify weak teachers and help them appropriately according to their needs.

Improved pass rate was noted as one of the indicators that effective instructional leadership was taking place in the district. Most of the teachers were of the opinion that ODL degreed head teachers were able to control, coordinate and direct school activities in ways that were advantageous to school children who were the main clients.

_T 74: I have a feeling that the improved pass rate in the district has been realised through well-educated head teachers who are using better strategies in supervising, disciplining and motivating teachers, pupils and parents._

Education inspectors concurred with teachers on this by saying:

EI 1: _The presence of ODL degreed head teachers in the district has ushered in improved pass rates. I am satisfied with how they supervise pupils’ books, teachers’ scheme-cum-plans and lessons. Most degreed head teachers include meaningful comments in the reports._

EI 2: _They have better supervision, leadership and management practices. They do not struggle to staff develop subordinates. They are able to identify gaps in teachers’ performance and to devise ways of filling in the performance gaps._

The above observations of education inspectors of Chipinge District are in sync with Nandwah’s (2011) opinion that head teachers were responsible for organising school activities, coordinating, supervising and monitoring teaching and learning standards. Green (2002) also identifies the roles of scrutinising pupils’ work and observation of teaching and learning processes as critical in instructional leadership effectiveness.

In addition to the above views education inspectors claimed that Chipinge district had successfully adopted a zero tolerance of zero percent pass rate in primary schools due to the efforts of ODL degrees head teachers. It was observed that most of the head teachers who participated in the study were excited about the performance of their pupils in the previous year although they said they were not at liberty to divulge the actual statistics of the pass rates.
On the negative side a few teacher participants felt that some of the head teachers who were currently pursuing ODL degrees were short changing the pupils. The accused were said to be always coming up with excuses such as going for tutorials, submission of assignments and paying fees at the regional office. The participants claimed that such practices resulted in ineffectiveness in instructional supervision due to abandonment of core school duties.

The challenge that was revealed was that of young ODL graduates failing to effectively supervise older teachers who tended to resist professional guidance. There was also the problem of other teachers who still had negative mindsets in relation to ODL degrees but this later group was fast diminishing.

Staff development of teachers

The views of participants indicated that for a head teacher to be considered as an effective instructional leader he/she should show concern about the professional development of subordinates. Some participants were proud to say their ODL degrees head teachers were being utilised as resource persons in workshops at district level. This shows that ODL degrees teachers were role models to their subordinates. The issue of positive role modelling is critical in instructional supervision as observed by Drucker (1967) and Southworth (2004b).

Another teacher participant testified that at their school the quality of staff development sessions had improved significantly. The participant said that the sessions were now involving all members leading to a wider base for planning and decision making in the school. The researcher noted that the ODL educational management programme had indeed created a pool of knowledgeable and skilled instructional leaders for primary schools.

*T 17: Our head teacher is chairperson of Chipinge Examination Board and is also a marker of Grade Seven ZIMSEC examinations*
*T 27: The head teacher commands expert power due to additional qualifications.*
*T 23: School heads ho have undergone ODL are quite ‘pregnant’ with techniques on how they can mould teachers so that they can be effective teachers, hence promoting the standards of their schools*

The sentiments of the above teachers serve to show the extent to which ODL degrees head teachers were recognised as critical in staff developing other teachers not only in their respective schools but in the district as a whole. The sentiments further confirm the findings
of Lim, Latif, and Mansor (2011) who argue that globally, higher education now plays a significant role in the preparation of a workforce that satisfies the increasing demands placed on organisations.

**Aligning school activities to national educational goals**

In its mission statement, Zimbabwe’s Ministry of primary and Secondary Education (2001) states that it is committed to the provision of quality, basic education to all children through schools. The ministry also states commitment to values such as self-discipline, involvement and teamwork for effectiveness in schools. The commitment is in tandem with Delarue (2000) and Dackert (2004) who place emphasis on the importance of teamwork for goal achievement. In addition to the mission statements the line ministry is said to be guided by Ubuntu concept in its vision which according to Tirivangana (2013) is characterised by consultative and democratic decision making. The concept also believes in the participation of all members in organisational activities.

The study revealed that to a large extent ODL educational management degree head teachers were aligning their practices in line with the ministry’s expectations.

*EI 2: There is improved discipline in head teachers, teachers and pupils in schools in comparison with what was happening in the past. Degrees head teachers are emphasizing wearing of school uniforms and Ubuntu in teachers and pupils*

The observation of the education inspector is consistent with Cockran’s (2005) assertion that discipline was a valid measure of effectiveness and that undisciplined pupils were a reflection of an ineffective head teacher as an instructional leader. It was observed that in the majority of schools visited during data generation, teachers displayed discipline in the way they moved in the school, interacted among themselves and strangers in the school.

On the issue of cooperation, participation and teamwork participants had the following to say:

*T 31: There is more delegation of duties and the head teachers are now listening to teachers’ suggestions in resolving problems in schools.*

*T 45: In our school there is active participation in school –based staff development programmes.*

*HT 1: I get support when I require solutions to situational problems and I involve them (teachers) in decision making to maintain team spirit.*
The above observations by participants serve to demonstrate consciousness on the part of ODL degrees head teachers to achieve the ministry’s goals. The noted behaviour of ODL degrees head teachers is in line with the beliefs of Deal and Peterson (2000) that head teachers needed to acknowledge the idea of aiming towards achieving the standards of excellence as set by education ministries.

**Discrepancies in the performance of ODL degrees head teachers Communication**

The study showed that the majority of teacher participants in Chipping district were not satisfied with the competencies of ODL degrees head teachers particularly in Basic Communication in English. At social level, research evidence indicates that while there were open communication channels among ODL degrees head teachers, education inspectors and SDC members, the same could not be said with some teachers in certain schools.

*T 63: Some of the ODL degrees head teachers tend to be boastful of their high qualifications instead of actually helping us to be effective teachers.*

Open communication channels in a school organisation are considered as critical to head teacher effectiveness according to Hoy and Sabo (1990).

*T 51: Most of them lack communication skills so in some cases cannot handle issues such as giving clear instructions without resorting to threats.*

**Information Communication Technologies (ICT)**

In this 21st Century where school leaders are expected to be competent in using ICT for communication and data processing and storage (UNESCO, 2001), participants bemoaned the ODL degrees head teachers’ incompetence in this critical area.

*T 70: Some of the ODL head teachers are struggling in the e-registration programme that is being launched in schools.*

*T19: I think the problem is that they never received hands on training with computers in the degree programme. That might be the reason why they are not mastering the computers fast.*

On this discrepancy however, the researcher gathered from other participants that the blame could not solely be placed on the ODL degrees head teachers alone. The participants argued that the economic environment is not friendly to the construction of computer labs and
electrification of schools. A few other teachers pointed out that the government has been slow in training ICT teachers to train teachers and pupils in school.

Other teachers felt that ODL service providers were not practical oriented in the provision of ICT skills. From the observations in the above category, the finding is that participants were not happy with the quality of content through ODL in the identified area. The researcher also observed that the use of ICT was still way behind or almost non-existent at all in schools that were visited. The finding is in tandem with the view of Ruben (2003) who posits that programme quality and relevance could be considered as standards of leadership and management effectiveness.

**Under-skilled subordinates**

The research study noted that the imbalance in qualification between ODL degrees head teachers and the subordinates could negatively affect instructional leadership in primary schools. Some participants were of the opinion that teachers who did not have degrees were likely to resist new ways of doing things in schools. Their appreciation level was said to be most likely lower than degrees teachers. Some of the responses of participants tended to suggest an element of inferiority complex or envy on the part of non-degrees teachers. Such a scenario in a school could easily lead to disunity and conflict.

**Inadequate financial management skills**

Several participants were concerned about the limited financial management skills in head teachers. They argued that head teachers were a source of guidance to SDC members in financial matters. The participants doubted their effective performance in this role considering that the majority of SDC members were not highly educated people in financial matters. Other participants were of the view that ODL degree providers were not making the course as practical as it should be.

**Lack of subject specialisation in the degree programme**

Concerns were raised by some teachers and education inspectors concerning lack of subject specialisation in ODL educational management degree programmes. The participants supported their stand by arguing that primary school especially middle grades formed the base for subjects pupils would learn in high school. That being the case, the participants
argued that teachers who taught middle grades and head teachers were supposed to be knowledgeable in one or two content subjects at degree level.

In further support of their stand on this issue, most of the participants said content subjects were a necessity since head teachers nowadays have assumed the role of staff developing other teachers, supervising subject committees and other instruction related responsibilities. It was therefore critical that they had knowledge in content subjects that was way above the pupils they teach.

Conclusions

The study drew the following conclusions:

ODL degrees head teachers were considered as highly successful in infrastructural development resulting in new classroom blocks being built and old buildings being renovated. They have achieved this in collaboration with SDCs. This success story has facilitated enhanced teaching and learning in some primary schools of Chipping District.

Degree head teachers outshine non degrees ones in making efforts towards procurement of teaching and learning material as observed by the participants. These materials are critical in classroom instruction. However, the prevailing harsh economic environment and the Government’s policy of not excluding pupils on grounds of non-payment of fees are posing challenges to the efforts.

ODL degrees primary school head teachers are viewed as competent supervisors and planners of school activities. Effectiveness instruction depends on effective supervision, monitoring and planning not just on the part of the head teacher but teachers as well. However, some degrees head teachers are meeting resistance from non–degreed teachers as they try to implement new practices learnt.

The study recognised that ODL has been a successful intervention in the creation of knowledgeable and skilled primary school head teachers who are able to staff-develop others. The head teachers are achieving this at school and district level. In addition degrees head teachers were responding to national goals of providing quality education through, involvement, participation and maintaining the Ubuntu concept for discipline in schools.

Lastly, it was concluded that there were discrepancies in the performance of ODL in Basic English for Communication, ICT use, financial management of school funds and content subject areas.
Recommendations

In a follow up to the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were advanced for primary school instructional leadership effectiveness:

- The study recommends that educational policy makers could devise policies for making parents pay fees towards infrastructural development and procurement of resources to increase sense of responsibility and ownership.
- It is recommended that policy makers could make it compulsory for primary school teachers to be holders of university degrees with subject specialization to improve instruction.
- The study recommends that ODL service providers could pay attention to the call for the inclusion of content subjects and Basic English for Communication as modules in educational management degrees.
- It is further recommended that ODL service providers could make modules on Financial Management and ICT as practical as possible so that students go through ‘hands on’ experience.

Recommendation for further research

- It is recommended that a similar study involving more districts and provinces using qualitative and quantitative research designs be carried out for increased generalisability of findings.
- Further research could be carried out on how best the identified gaps could be addressed through the ODL curriculum for instructional effectiveness in primary schools

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