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School inspectors' perspectives of their instructional leadership support to schools in Zimbabwe

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Over the past 2 decades, worldwide research has established that the district office of education matters. Various policy initiatives are directing district offices to shift from limited managerial functions and begin to directly support learner instruction. The intention of this article, therefore, was to tease the question: How do school inspectors provide instructional leadership support to schools in Zimbabwe? Guided by the instructional leadership conceptual framework, we employed a qualitative research methodology in which we used 2 case studies focusing on 6 officers purposively drawn from 2 district offices in the Masvingo province of Zimbabwe. Data collection tools used were document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that school inspectors carried out school staffing; spearheaded need-driven circuit-level and district-level professional development; instituted supervision of schools; supported school development efforts; and ensured stakeholder and partner engagement. But school inspectors provided limited support to scaffold learner instruction. To improve district instructional leadership support at school level, we recommend strategic human and material resource mobilisation and utilisation. Inevitably, more research is needed to allow deeper insight into the observed inadequacies of the current district office in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: district office; instructional leadership; leadership practices; learner support; school inspector

Introduction and Background

Global research on leadership practices over the past two decades has firmly established that districts matter because they provide invaluable support to school development and learner achievement (Aldaihani, 2017; Darfler & Riggan, 2013; Fink & Riggan, 2013; Mitgang, 2013; Naicker & Mestry, 2016; Park, 2019). Traditionally, districts focused on managerial functions, but in recent years, various policy initiatives have called on district offices to shift to full-scale instructional leadership support for schools (Enfield & Spicciati, 2014; Sumintono, Hariri, Nugroho, Izzati & Sriyanto, 2019). Whether the district leaders focused their instructional leadership support for improved teacher practices and learner achievement remains questionable.

Authorities in the United States of America have paid little attention to how district offices can support schools more effectively (Honig & Rainey, 2015). District offices tended to play an administrative rather than an instructional supervision role. However, MacKinnon, Young, Paish and LeBel (2019) argue that, although school leadership in the past in Canada was administrative and restrictive, there has been a gradual shift to instructional leadership which allows principals and teachers to adequately respond to the pedagogical aims of school development. In South Africa, for example, it is the responsibility of the district offices, through planned school development and training interventions, to ensure that central government-initiated policies are implemented (Boateng, 2014). The key function of district officers in South Africa is to work closely with learning institutions to increase opportunities for learners to be enrolled and retained in professionally managed and performing schools (Van der Voort & Wood, 2016). While these studies suggest that districts address some of the challenges that schools encounter in their efforts to provide quality education to learners, little is known about school inspectors' (for the purposes of this article, SIs) instructional leadership practices. With this study we sought to add insights into the practices of SIs as they shift their roles towards instructional leadership as an intervention for school improvement in Zimbabwe.

Goldring, Grissom, Rubin, Rogers, Neel and Clark (2018), Hassan, Ahmad and Boon (2019), and Spillane (1999) hold the view that SIs should implement changes that are rooted in standards that make each school responsible for the quality of their teaching and learning. Although this is a signal that districts matter when it comes to instructional improvement in schools (Chenoworth, 2015; Spillane, 1998), it is important for the district office to be equipped with knowledgeable and skilled officers (Spillane, 1999; Travers, 2018). Indeed, districts play a pivotal role in influencing "key resources essential to turnaround … school leadership, instructional quality, personnel policies, budget, assessment, and curriculum" (Hitt, Robinson & Player, 2018:4).

If Trujillo's (2013) findings are anything to go by, then standards-aligned curricula, coherent organisational structures, strong instructional leadership, frequent monitoring, and evaluation are a platform for effective teaching and learning. In the same vein, Bloom and Wilson (2016) and Burch and Spillane (2004) propose that the staff at the district office should be knowledgeable about teaching and learning to boost principals and teachers' confidence in their leadership. The same could be said about SIs. Bloom and Wilson (2016) and Honig (2008) suggest that more research needs to be conducted to establish the SIs' leadership practices that can support teaching and learning improvements.

In the light of the top-down SI-school interactions so prevalent in Zimbabwe, we set out to investigate how the SIs understand their leadership practices, and how effective they believe these practices are as innovations in school improvement. Thus, we sought to address two related questions which interrogate SIs' instructional leadership support to schools:

1) What are the school inspectors' perceptions of their instructional leadership support to schools?
2) How effective are the school inspectors' instructional leadership practices in improving teaching and learning in schools?

Literature Review

Although some studies show that district offices and schools plan and work collaboratively (Prew & Quaigrain, 2010; Walter, 2018), such studies have not dealt with what SIs as district level leaders believe they do as they provide instructional leadership support for improved teaching and learning in schools. Indeed, Ovando and Huckestein (2003) show that district officials' work schedules do not only appear to be disjointed activities, but also seem to allow them the freedom to choose to initiate supervisory tasks or not to. Although research on educational leadership has identified district offices as key providers of instructional leadership support to principals, not much has been said about how SIs, as part of the district office staff, go about rendering such support (Honig, 2012; Williams, 2020). It is against this background that we decided to examine the district office in Zimbabwe more closely to understand SIs' perspectives on their practices of instructional leadership.

Bellamy, Crockett and Nordengren (2014) and Printy (2010) confirm that in some cases, while district leaders try to help principals improve the quality of instruction in schools, it is disturbing to observe that, more often than not, district leaders themselves are ignorant of principals' exact needs. SIs, as district leaders, might not be an exception. The SI, in the district quality control department, can be matched with the area instructional officer (AIO) in the Chicago Public Schools district of the United States of America (Elmore, Grossman & King, 2007). These officers are part of the district office supervisory leadership in both countries and focus on school improvement. This aligns with the instructional leadership role. An internal policy of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe mandates SIs to visit each school "at least once every year for institutional assessment" (Chiri, 2020:iv). Hence SIs, who are district level quality control leaders in Zimbabwe, hold schools accountable "for the standards of educational services and outcomes" in line with the national education policies (Ngcamphalala, Nxumalo & Bhebhe, 2019:316). However, school inspection, "an outside school evaluation process that is mainly concerned about accountability" (Garira, Howie & Plomp, 2019:1), has been noted as an irregular operation in Zimbabwe and other developing nations due to resource limitations.

Conceptual Framework

Research on educational leadership and management, from as early as the 1960s, was fertile ground for the evolution of the instructional leadership conceptual framework that highlighted its critical contribution to making people understand how educational leaders affect learners (Hallinger, 2011; Shaked, 2022). Renowned scholars such as Hallinger (2011), Johnston, Kaufman and Thompson (2016), Louis (2015), and Rew (2013), for example, concur that instructional leadership practices have a significant, albeit, indirect influence on learner performance. In the same vein, Rew (2013) suggests that instructional leadership positively, significantly, and indirectly affects learners, although a direct relation, when unearthed, cannot be disregarded. Similarly, Mac Iver and Farley (2003:11) show that the major district office (and SIs') instructional leadership roles that relate to instruction and learner improvement include "decision-making about curriculum and instruction; supporting good instructional practice; and linking evaluation research to district policymaking."

Jaquith, Aiello and Khachatryan (2015) and Leithwood (2013) observe that district instructional leadership support is pivotal to improve schools with regard to teaching and learning, with district leaders carefully catering for the varying student, teacher, and principal learning needs through coordinated and interlinked activities of the district personnel (particularly SIs in our study) whose focus is on improving teaching and learning throughout the district. To further concretise the idea of instructional leadership and its influence on teaching and learning, Hallinger used the instructional leadership framework to develop the principal instructional management rating scale (PIMRS) (Hallinger, 2011:276).

Although not much research has dwelt on district instructional leadership, we used Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) instructional leadership conceptual framework to underpin our study. The framework is premised on principals' or district instructional leaders' (SIs in this case) functions regarding school improvement. These functions are: defining the school's mission that ropes in framing school goals and making them visible through school development efforts and staffing; managing the instructional pogramme that underscores spearheading need-driven professional development, and school supervision; and promoting a positive school learning climate that focuses on stakeholder and partner engagement. Therefore, this conceptual framework guided our examination of whether SIs' work provide instructional leadership support for school improvement.

The instructional leadership conceptual framework is likely to offer some guidance to the SIs as they take part in critical multi-level reform-related decision-making (Printy, 2010; Woulfin, 2018). This framework, as articulated in the PIMRS, was also useful because it laid bare the major functions that are supposed to enhance the management and administration of schools (Brolund, 2016; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The framework was, therefore, critical for examining whether and how the practices of the SIs aligned with these major functions for the principals and schools that receive support from them. Unlike other studies of instructional leadership that tend to focus on the schools, it was our intention to explore the importance of the SIs' instructional leadership and how it added value to the programme of curriculum improvement in the schools, if at all (Klar, 2012; Waters & Marzano, 2006). We take note of Brolund's (2016) and Heck and Hallinger's (2009) assertion that leaders at various levels of the education system drive change in schools, particularly leaders who capacitate and develop others. However, this position must be interpreted with caution. Spillane, Diamond and Jita (2003:534) observe that the "…successful implementation of recent instructional reforms … at the school level" may be impossible for the SIs, saddled with resource limitations "and distance from classrooms." Thus premised, we assist practitioners to understand further how the SIs enact practices that provide instructional leadership support to schools in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

We adopted the qualitative research approach that is useful to explore and understand an issue and develop a comprehensive understanding thereof (Creswell, 2012). The resultant qualitative research data on people largely describe, account, and show their views and feelings in words rather than in numbers (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016; Walliman, 2011). Therefore, qualitative research allows researchers to closely examine respondents in their real world (Hammarberg et al., 2016; Hossain, 2011).

We employed the interpretive paradigm to investigate the SIs' practices of instructional leadership at the district office. This paradigm allows researchers to look at the world through the participants' perceptions and experiences, and to use them for constructing and interpreting their understanding of the collected data (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). As such, the interpretivist paradigm exploits the diverse phenomenon interpretations of the participants to enhance a better understanding of the issues under study.

The collective case study research design focused on six SIs at Gutu and Zaka districts in the Masvingo province of Zimbabwe. The collective case study research – a number of cases that are studied to get insights into an issue – was adopted to enhance a better understanding of the phenomenon (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Lucas, Fleming & Bhosale, 2018). Mason (2002) and Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe and Young (2018) believe that generally, sampling is the intentional selection of respondents to provide relevant and adequate data to answer the research questions. Convenience sampling was used to select the two districts because they geographically share a common boundary. This minimised transport and other logistical costs during data collection. Purposive sampling was used to select six SIs, three from each district. The SIs were selected because they had extensive experience in offering leadership guidance to schools. They had the potential to provide deep and rich descriptions that answered the research questions guiding this study.

Hossain (2011) states that to increase credibility and trustworthiness, qualitative researchers often engage more than one strategy of data collection. Taking this into consideration, documents focusing on policy and programme implementation and that provided valuable supporting data were collected from some of the participants soon after the interviews (Creswell, 2012; Dalglish, Khalid & McMahon, 2020). The documents assisted us to confirm or find inconsistencies when comparing the data from the interviews with those from the documents.

The semi-structured individual interviews, guided by open-ended questions to allow interviewees to give as much detail as possible (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012), were mainly used to collect data from the six SIs to gain deep insights into the function of district offices in providing instructional leadership support to schools (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2012). While the semi-structured individual interview protocol provided

participants a greater opportunity for dialogue and allowed the interviewers to directly interact with the participants as the interviews progressed (Fairbrother, 2007:43), it also allowed the interviewers and participants room for free expression as they could probe participants for full responses (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2012).

In our document analysis, we ensured document content and research question fit for "authenticity, credibility, accuracy, and representativeness" of the selected documents (Bowen, 2009:33). After identifying the relevant sections of the selected documents, we coded, categorised and fused similar data with verbatim evidence emerging from interview data to generate themes that guide the presentation of research results. Although the document analyses supported the semi-structured interviews to explain how SIs made sense of instructional leadership as they worked with schools, we acknowledge the limitation of no observation data in our study since we did not use that technique. It is true that our research results could have been enriched by observation data. However, we are convinced that our study's thick and rich descriptions from the interviews, supported by the detailed document analysis compensated for the absence of observation data.

Researcher Positionality

The first author of this paper is an SI with extensive experience in school management. The second author is a seasoned instructional leader who leads a prolific research hub as a university professor, and the third author is an emerging scholar under the mentorship of the aforementioned professor. Because the three authors of this article are seasoned educationists and instructional leaders, a potential threat to the credibility of this study was that they could transfer their personal biases to the data collection and analysis processes, thereby influencing the resultant findings. To ensure that the research instruments remained credible and the research findings trustworthy, we prolonged our stay in the field to authenticate the data collected. During data analysis we triangulated evidence from the interviews and the documents to identify inconsistencies and paradoxes. As a team, we engaged in regular discussions to ensure that the study reflected the perspectives of the study participants. This enhanced the study's trustworthiness and transferability to similar research contexts.

Results

In this section we present findings on how SIs provide (or fail to provide) instructional leadership support to schools in Zimbabwe. Our data presentation combines the findings from the two districts for the purposes of presenting a holistic picture as opposed to a fragmented one. The themes that emerged from the data analysis guide the presentation of the research results. These themes are: 1. school inspectors' perceived practices of instructional leadership; and 2. the effectiveness of the SIs' instructional leadership support to schools.

Theme 1: School Inspectors' Perceived Practices of Instructional Leadership

School development

Defining a school's mission, framing school goals and making them visible were premised on school development efforts and staffing in this study. SI 6 noted, "*I think that all school operations are driven by a school development plan*." On the constituents of the SDPs, SI 2 prioritised "*... modern, dignified, comfortable, and standard teacher accommodation*." However, SI 5 settled for "*child-friendly schools with safe and clean drinking water*." SI 1 would rather "*... check that each school has enough textbooks for its learners ... from the UNICEF* [United Nations Children's Fund] *School Improvement Grant*." Divergently, SI 3 prioritised information communication technology (ICT): "*... we insist on the procurement of digital technology which enhances learning improvement*." It was clear, though, that these district leaders valued infrastructure development and the availability of textbooks and ICT in SDPs as critical aspects that make schools visible.

SI 6 seemed to applaud the proper management of schools that roped in inclusive quality education in all primary and secondary schools for "*... the diversified needs of learners, including special needs education learners*." However, the teaching and learning process had to be monitored as SI 1 indicated: "*... supervision is meant to improve the academic performance of learners ... and provide heads and teachers with ... what is being done right and what needs to be improved*." Further focus appeared to be on the low performing schools in public examinations to enhance school visibility. SI 2 said: "*... for our schools to perform better than the national public examinations pass rate, underperforming schools ... should ... submit marked and evaluated fortnightly tests to the district*." In addition, SI 6 claimed that they "*... insist that each school subscribes to classroom-based tests, cluster tests, National Association of Primary Heads (NAPH)/NASH district tests, and national tests*." To improve the learners' academic performance, the participants valued the use of various learner testing sources. However, in sporting activities, SI 5 advocated for "*varied sporting activities for total learner development*", and SI 2 called for "*... schools to shift from the generic soccer and netball fields and adopt the multi-purpose pitch to conserve space and money*." The participants suggested that while schools catered for the

learners' physical development in sports, the current trend of establishing multi-purpose sporting infrastructure not only kept schools abreast with the latest sport developments but also embraced instructional leaderships' insistence on an orderly learning environment. Finally, SI 4 emphasised that discipline in managing school finances enhanced the availability of critical learning resources that significantly contributed to school development: "*… sound school financial management was fertile ground for appropriate utilisation of funds without abuse.…*"

Staffing schools

For a school to be highly visible, it should be adequately staffed with teachers, a deputy head, and a head. The district school inspector (DSI) and the district recruitment committee that was composed of "*the public service commission assisted by … other ministries*" (SI 3) recruited and appointed teachers. However, the participant suspected inconsistencies as these other ministries "*… are not informed on how the education sector operates*." The participant seemed to find inadequacies in the exclusion of the SIs versus the inclusion of uninformed actors from other ministries in recruiting and appointing teachers. To recruit heads and deputy heads, SI 2 mused that "[t]*he district office is just the interview venue for the head office, provincial office and the public service commission representatives who conduct the … recruitment interviews*." However, SI 4 pronounced their indirect contribution: "*we guide the human resources people by making reference to the results-based personnel performance system to determine the applicant suitability for a given promotion post*." The participants claimed to have been sidelined and unsettled by this arrangement as they, instructional leaders, were supposed to be central players.

Supervision

With regard to managing the instructional programme, we examined school supervision. SI 2 elaborated the role of clusters: "*Cluster needs assessments guide SIs at joint or separate school supervision workshops. The national training of trainers supervision workshops for teachers reach the provincial, district, cluster and school levels.*" Sometimes, the training of trainers (ToTs) intervention at the national level strengthened other supervision workshops. Also, visits to schools were prioritised. SI 2 explained: "*We visit every school… at least once per year … However, because there are currently three instead of eight SIs here, schools may go for 2 years unvisited but spot checked.*" The implied acute shortage of SIs seems to have adversely affected the frequency and effectiveness of the SI visits, thus falling short of improving teaching and learning. This could explain why SI 4 indicated that their approach to school visits took a twist as they "*… supervise schools through visits and phone calls to heads to feel the atmosphere at the schools*." In addition, SI 5 claimed that they "*… supervise schools to monitor progress in … their general outlook … public examination administration, and learner results so that schools with red flags are assisted to improve*." The SIs implied that they had to employ varied school supervision approaches to account for, among others, the low performing schools, perhaps a fractured approach to monitoring learner progress.

Performance management focuses on heads only since the teachers were the heads' responsibility. SI 5 stated: "[w]*e … sign a work plan agreement on staff supervision, infrastructural development, and school governance. Then four performance reviews monitor implementation progress and workshops focus on improvement.*" The suggested key features of the results-based personnel performance system (RBPPS), which culminates in the final performance rating interview, hint on instructional support. Other approaches to school supervision were accommodated, as SI 2 said: "*I first of all do a needs assessment on skills development in learners guided by the updated curriculum … for compliance to ensure that teachers are … making learners discover*." Supervision effectiveness appeared to depend on SIs' monitoring of teacher compliance with the demands of the updated curriculum relating to learner skills development through discovery learning, a fit with instructional leadership's function of coordinating the curriculum. In the same vein, SI 4 claimed: "*I use funding from the National Association of Secondary Heads to fund subject panel meetings for secondary teachers. My termly schedules assist the low performing schools in the national exams*." SI 4 was grateful of the National Association of Secondary Heads' (NASH) funding of subject panel meetings for teachers and her visits to the underperforming schools, a highlight on stakeholders' critical intervention. Breathtaking was SI 4's appreciation of ICT when she claimed: "*I also receive school activity whatsapp videos and photographs of school end of term reports on my cell phone*." The participant suggested that she adopted diverse ICT supervision strategies. This aligned with the instructional leadership practice of engaging strategies that affect what happens in classrooms to impact on learner achievement.

Professional development

Our focus here was on professional development stakeholder and partner engagement in the context of promoting a positive school learning climate. The SIs stated that they provided significant professional development for teachers, heads and

deputy heads. SI 4 pointed out a government intervention in teachers' instructional practice as "*... the teacher capacity building programme where we recruit potential candidates from teachers for university studies; the government funds the studies and provides study leave*." For that programme, teachers were recruited at workshops and meetings. In addition, SI 4 remarked that "*after a ... health needs assessment, two health masters per school are trained at the district level for their schools to have proper use of toilets, clean and safe drinking water, and waste management*." It is implied that the SIs prioritised water and waste management in schools, a clear demonstration of their instructional leadership practice focusing on the development of a safe learning environment. SI 6 also presented evidence of the involvement of stakeholders for their valuable input and ideas in the district professional development programmes: "*The PSC* [Public Service Commission] *and the ministry sometimes train heads and deputy heads in accounting, Unicef ... develops heads' accounting skills to supervise and monitor the UNICEF-funded programmes*."

The SIs implemented the RBPPS where "*... by 15 January, we and heads agree on their work plans, by 7 July, and 7 October, together we review the heads' performance, and the final rating interview is in November and December*" (SI 6). The time frames of the RBPPS cycle seemed to focus on the heads' continuous instructional leadership improvement that was in tandem with instructional leadership's focus on the promotion of quality instruction through supervision.

Stakeholder and partner engagement

With particular focus on the Better Schools Programme in Zimbabwe (BSPZ), and going by the SIs' perceptions, SI 3 stated that "*the district BSPZ management committee was put in place to manage the funds from schools for supporting teaching and learning programmes in the district. It also recruits and supervises BSPZ staff.*" Key to note were the BSPZ's mandate to manage funds from schools, and the committee's powers to recruit and supervise staff. SI 4 ventured: "*... there's a custodian of the BSPZ funds – more like a school development committee – but without executive powers. The body is governed by government policy.*" Although its operations were directed by government policy, the committee had no executive powers. Still on the committee's operations, SI 6 said that "*before payments for services, the committee overseas transparency, fosters teamwork to enhance a high degree of ownership of the district programmes; makes a needs assessment; and meets to make decisions on procurement procedures*." Transparency and teamwork seemed to enshrine the BSPZ district management committee's operations, a positive step towards district support for the establishment of a conducive learning environment in schools.

In SI 2, 4 and 6's views, it could be deduced that the BSPZ district management committee at both districts was made up of the DSI, an SI, district accountant, NAPH and NASH representatives, primary and secondary male and female teacher representatives, the school development committee (SDC) representative, and the business community representative. SI 1 specified the committee's functions: "*They meet to assess the district ancillary staff needs, to agree on school levies, and to ensure that there are adequate materials and equipment*." This confirms that the scope of the committees' activities focuses on the district operations. SI 3 was, however, critical of the committee's meetings: "*In their termly meetings to approve budgets and related expenditure, the committee seems to ... fail to resist influential figures, thereby making themselves mere rubber stamps*." The transparency and effectiveness of the committee's critical meetings seemed to be in doubt although this does not rule out the fact that instructional leadership can be practiced by players outside the school environment.

Theme 2: The Effectiveness of the SIs' Instructional Leadership Support to Schools

The school inspectors' impact on school improvement

SI 5 regarded the poor payment of school fees and levies as disrupting: "*... our production of supervision reports since money trickles into the district BSPZ coffers*." To SI 4, the outcome was "*... a demotivated and incapacitated teacher work force lacking the required teaching and learning materials that should be procured by the learners' fees and levies*." Adversely, the slow cash flow into the schools' and the BSPZ's accounts seemed to have grounded both the schools' and the district's operations. Furthermore, SI 5 bemoaned the "*... very few staff development workshops organised for teachers by heads at the school level*." Such heads appeared to defy their professional expectation of leading their teachers professionally. On motivation, SI 4 did not mince her words: "*As long as there's no attractive package and benefits, the SI position will have no takers*." The repercussions, in SI 2's view was "*... an acute shortage of SIs with school supervision being overlooked*." SI 6 concurred: "*Government's delay to appoint me, an acting SI for example, to the position of substantive SI isn't helping much*." SI 4 echoed the sentiment: "... [the] *lack of work consistency due to lack of financial and material resources*...." In SI 1's words, "*... the persistent and prolonged electricity load shedding*" were blamed for limiting their report production time. The highlighted challenges regarding human and

material resources seemed to not only disrupt the district leaders' operations but also accounted for their low motivation, contravening requirement for districts to align their resources to the instructional needs of the SIs.

On transport and communication, SI 2 indicated how "*... it has proved to be costly to move district officers to and from schools for supervision purposes*." SI 5 also added that "*... fuel's scarce against an array of activities*." SI 1 complained that she often failed "*... to go to schools needing psycho-social support because of ... shortage of fuel for the district motor vehicle*." In addition, SI 4 remarked: "*We don't have a department specific motor vehicle but a district pool vehicle that is controlled by the DSI*." Furthermore, SI 5 stated that "*some of the road networks are in a poor state, making some schools inaccessible for supervision*." Similarly, SI 2 observed that "*... some schools aren't accessible by road and by phone during the rainy season*." From the above is seems as though the service delivery and the management of the district instructional program was questionable.

Discussion of Findings

Focused Teacher, Head and Deputy Head Engagement, Turnover and Support

To recruit heads and deputy heads, the SIs frowned on why they were only allowed to guide the selection committee in the outcomes of the RBPPS and the database to determine the suitability of the applicants. Furthermore, the SIs blamed inconsistencies in how teachers were selected by uninformed members of the selection committee from other ministries.

The SIs seemed to arrange need-driven cluster, circuit and district-level professional development workshops for heads, deputy heads, teachers in charge/heads of department, and teachers once or twice per year. Sometimes national ToT workshops prepared teachers to cascade the training to the provincial, district, cluster and school levels. However, De Clercq and Phiri (2013), Kennedy (2014), and Levine and Marcus (2010) claim that one-time workshops, seminars and/or conferences fail to effectively improve teachers' instructional practices since information distortion or misinterpretation is inevitable as the information precipitates to the recipient teachers (Bett, 2016; Dichaba & Mokhele, 2012). In our opinion, the workshop facilitators' inadequate training or incompetence in leadership and content mastery or presentation, and the recipients' misconception might not be ignored. Finally, the district leaders appeared to encourage heads, district officials and teachers to join the government-funded teacher capacity development programme and improve their instructional practice. It appeared that only the secondary school teachers benefited from subject panels. Since the primary school teachers teach all the prescribed subjects, they should actually undergo similar professional development. Rosen and Parise (2017) stress that district initiated professional development should not only have a direct alignment with both teaching and learning, but should also focus on heads' and teachers' identified needs. Instructional leadership, indeed, insists on fair and supportive treatment of teachers for overall instructional improvement.

Support for Quality Education

The SIs indicated that they supervised all schools after needs assessments. Goldring et al. (2018:60) confirm that districts should continuously "… clarify, adopt, and specify standards for instructional leadership … implement supervisor training … with a clear definition of instructional leadership so that supervisors can support … principal leadership." The SIs also seemed to prioritise annual visits to each school. Nkambule and Amsterdam (2018:1) indicate that South African school district education officials are obliged to visit every school in the district "at least once per term, with more frequent visits to schools requiring stronger support." Similarly, an internal Zimbabwean education policy mandates SIs to visit each school "at least once every year for institutional assessment" (Chiri, 2020:iv). However, the SIs criticised their use of spot checks instead when they had failed to visit some schools for 2 years owing significantly to the acute shortage of SIs in both districts under study. Spot checks seem to be rushed, unplanned and shallow. Unfortunately, the resultant damage to the unsupervised schools might be irreparable as the SIs have no evidence of how such schools are progressing.

In addition, the SIs implemented the RBPPS targeting infrastructural development, supervision, governance and non-formal education since every school in Zimbabwe is mandated to implement non-formal education (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe, 2015). In agreement, Brown-Sims (2010) proposes that the district office staff conduct an annual assessment of every head to determine their effectiveness. While the scope of this performance appraisal system appears to be highly professional, if everyone concerned did not hoodwink it by cutting corners, then the outcomes would be valid and reliable. In addition, funding from NAPH and NASH seemingly enabled the SIs to arrange subject panel meetings for secondary teachers and heads, and design termly schedules to assist low performing schools in the national school examinations. In that regard, Suaka and Kuranchie (2018) advocate for the professional development of principals through district principal supervisors that visit schools, meet with principals and teachers to improve

instruction, and also conduct very productive principal instructional leadership development sessions. However, the subject panels exclude primary school teachers that ought to equally benefit from this intervention, contrary to instructional leadership requirements for instructional leaders to inform all teachers on instructional methods and current educational trends regarding effective teaching.

Although the SIs monitored schools' budgets and development plans (SDPs), Farley-Ripple (2012:794) criticises a SDP that is "meant for compliance purposes only" and that gathers dust in the office as it may not effectively "drive … or … improve instruction." While the SIs encouraged heads to adopt ICT, the Permanent Secretary's Circular of 19 February 2018 directs the district leaders to ensure that every school has adequate textbooks for the learners through the school improvement grant (SIG). In our view, establishing a library and science laboratory in all schools despite the prevailing harsh economic environment could strengthen these seemingly critical school development practices. Aptly, Avidov-Ungar and Nagar (2015) emphasise that the district office leaders should ensure that all schools have modern technological infrastructure to significantly improve teaching and learning. Furthermore, the districts were expected to strategically engage the most suitable teachers and heads for the available positions (Heller, 2018). Although Campbell, Heyward and Jochim (2018) concur, targeted in-service training and continuous professional development programmes could strengthen this human resource. Furthermore, fortnightly tests were instituted to assist underperforming schools. Indeed, Campbell et al. (2018) agree that district leaders should directly provide technical support to underperforming schools. However, we argue that these tests might not be the panacea to school underperformance since other strategies might counter the schools' diverse and unique challenges. In addition, we are convinced that the SIs, as instructional leaders, should adopt new technology to refurbish their work kit and for overseeing schools.

The Early Reading Initiative (ERI) focused on improving teaching and learning (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe, 2014a), and the Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) focused on learners' literacy and numeracy skills development with the SIs closely monitoring the primary schools (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe, 2014b). However, failure to implement the programmes and attitudinal factors might be the stumbling blocks. Despite these suspected drawbacks, those primary schools that have seriously embraced the ERI and the PLAP might significantly improve their learners' reading, literacy and numeracy skills. Finally, school leadership practices that were responsive to the diversified needs of learners including special education learners were highlighted. To boost teaching and learning in this regard, a strategic plan was instituted (Secretary's Circular Minute No. P36 of 1990), although this inclusive education reform strategy could have been adopted even before inclusive education became a topical issue. Instructional leadership insists on an improved school culture that embraces a school environment that is responsive to the dynamic needs of the society.

The Quest for Effectiveness

It appeared that a state audited BSPZ district management committee had taken over most of central government's responsibilities of funding the district office operations through funds from schools. In that regard, Aldaihani (2017) states that district officials help in problem resolution through, among others, developing partnerships and educational stakeholder relationships. Although influential members of the BSPZ district management committee might need restraint here and there, their contributions to critical decisions in the termly meetings seemed pivotal in resultant district offices' transparent operational and developmental strategies that fostered teamwork. Hitt et al. (2018:11) agree that it is the district's responsibility to explicitly clarify each individual's role in supporting school development and learner progress, while creating room for "the school community to come together to discuss, explore, and reflect on student learning." This demonstrates instructional leaders appreciating parent's valuable input and ideas since they improve their children's learning environment and learning outcomes.

Adversely, the slow cash flow into the schools' and the BSPZ's accounts seemed to have grounded the district operations. Przybylski, Chen and Hu (2018) stress that despite the increasing demand for district offices to meet annual learner achievement targets, a significant number of district offices are exposed to obstacles such as inadequate and inappropriate human, material, and financial resources. However, the SIs could consider other strategies to motivate parents to pay school fees and levies since all viable educational institutions depend on adequate financing.

The hint on heads' negligence did not resonate with instructional leadership and such indiscipline mirrors the ineffective SI instructional leadership support to schools. While it might seem reasonable to deal with errant heads accordingly, Campbell et al. (2018) prefer systematic support from the district office as opposed to punishment. Such seemingly misguided practice, they are convinced, might intimidate and threaten heads in the schools leading to a ripple effect on student

learning. On the contrary, instructional leaders are reminded to articulate specific goals for the district, and clearly communicate this common set of values to the heads, teachers and stakeholders.

The highlighted drawbacks in human and material resources might stall key district operations and hinder effective teaching and learning in schools. In that regard, Fisher (2003:1) strongly advises districts to engage "expertise and resources that the districts themselves often do not possess" to improve and maintain learner achievement through "developing, implementing, and sustaining systemic reform" that transcends the mediatory advocacy, technical assistance and fund-raising.

Conclusion

Considering practice, it can be concluded that there was limited SI support regarding school development. Therefore, the ministry should consider promptly appointing adequate substantive SIs to normalise their workloads and enhance the quality of their instructional leadership support to schools. Furthermore, diverse strategies for material resource mobilisation and utilisation are fodder for quality teaching and learning. Finally, policymakers should consider selflessly engaging experts, consultants, and other renowned think tanks on instructional leadership to engage in further research that would provide more insight into efficient and effective district instructional leadership support to schools.

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Notes

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