Full Length Research

Describing attributes of competent school headmasters: A case study of ten school headmasters in Metropolitan Bulawayo Region-Zimbabwe

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The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify and describe specific leadership attributes related to outstanding SI leadership in Zimbabwean schools. The question that guided this study was; how do teachers name and describe the attributes of exceptional school leaders in Zimbabwe? Ten (10) school headmasters, 52-teachers, 81-parents and 82-students participated in this study. Literature reveals that most reported effective school leadership qualities were studied in contexts of developed countries but no study has specifically discussed results related to outstanding leadership in Zimbabwe. For this study we used questionnaires and interviews to collect data related to known cases from participants in Zimbabwean school contexts. Key findings revealed that the participants for this study reported that efficient school heads exhibit the following specific leadership attributes that enhance school improvement that they lead—(a) show clear knowledge, and understanding of cultures of people they lead, (b) exhibit outstanding communication skills and use of current forms of technology; (c) create healthy school climates; (d) create teacher-leadership teams; and (e) they encourage collective ethical decisions making strategies among others. We concluded that school leaders who influence improved learning outcomes and improvement of the schools foster communication skills that enhance workplace relationships that in turn help to uplift educational standards in their schools.

Key words: School Improvement, Leadership practices; Standards for school improvement; Effective leadership qualities; Leadership characteristics/attributes.

INTRODUCTION

Schools, as social organizations have the chief purpose of transforming the lives of school children in addition to the general outlook of the economy of the country. Today’s schools require transformational leadership or reformers who understand that knowledge is always in constant movement around the world and schools need to develop graduates who fit into that new world. Effective school headmasters foster dispositions that demonstrate interest to learn more about the people they lead, and to ensure that they too love the work that they do (Madhlangobe and Madhlangobe, 2014). Such leaders identify and use strategies that continuously motivate their subordinates to efficiently perform their work; and they help teachers to ensure that the students they teach learn from quality teaching approaches (Madhlangobe, Johnson and Gordon, 2008; Green, 2010). Successful school leaders therefore foster commitment and hope to their teachers and students, and whatever they do with the teachers and parents provides answers to the following questions that define effective teaching; “What is the meaning of our work?” and what is the purpose of our being at this institution? (Green, 2010, p. x).
Outstanding headmasters as moral educators “are often presented with [and always look at] situations [as those] that require them to think through several ethical dimensions before making decisions” (Seijts and Kilgour, 2007). Moral leadership, or ethical decision making leadership is based on understanding the values and vision of the school organization. According to Green (2010), it is clear that the purposes of headmastership in schools is to ensure that all School-related programs, and activities should be student achievement related, providing focus, and offering directions to a faculty. [This is because] People in the [school as an] organization need to know and understand the purpose of their work. With knowledge of the purpose, all individuals can set priorities, focus on the desired outcomes, and reflect on their behaviors en route to those outcomes. It provides meaning and establishes directions for action. (p. x)

Once the shared vision of the school has been articulated and all programs have been set in motion, the school headmasters need to persistently influence how their subordinates’ workplace behaviours are consistent in ensuring that program goals are achieved. It is those characteristics, behaviors and capabilities that the outstanding headmasters exhibit to help their subordinates to incessantly reminded to focus on the desired purposes—and in this case enhanced student learning outcomes through a shared vision.

Research Question

In this study, we were guided by the question, how do participants for this study name and describe the leadership attributes of effective school headmasters at their schools?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to collect data that helped identify and describe the attributes of outstanding headmasters of schools that are known to effectively achieve shared educational visions in Bulawayo Metropolitan geographical area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What Theorists say about Leadership?

A number of models are used to guide peoples’ understanding of how leadership impacts goal achievement at school levels in general. For the purposes of this study, we embraced the Transformational leadership theory; Contingency theories; and Motivation theories to understand how effective leadership is viewed by those who experience it. We believe in the philosophy that school organizational leadership set-up depends on the understanding that the human resources in the school bring diverse ideas to the table with the purpose of guiding decisions and direct organizational behaviors that lead to goal achievement. Other such key foci of such behaviors include how decisions are made, structuring of lines of communications, and standards of levels of collaboration. One such theory that speaks to this focus is the transformational leadership model.

Transformational Leadership Theory

According to the transformational theory of leadership, the impact of educational leaders’ dispositions on schools as organizations’ performance is viewed by literature as critical to all aspects that describe and define school success (DuBrin, 1996; Collins, 2001; Marzano, Walters, and McNulty, 2005; Nahavandi, 2006). Specifically, and according to Madhlangobe (2009) Leadership [and in this case, culturally responsive leadership] is often regarded as the single most critical factor that determines the success or failure of [schools as] organizations. Histories of nations, international organizations, and institutions show that events may be altered drastically by a sudden change in leadership. One important function of leadership is that it provides support for development of values, norms, organizational cultures, diversity and beliefs that enable the success of organizational development. (p. 21)

A number of pointers to the importance and effectiveness of leadership emerge from this citation—including that, (a) not all school heads are successful leaders, but others may need to be replaced (fired) in order for schools to succeed; (b) schools lead by headmasters who get the job done differ from those that are led by headmasters who do not exhibit productive leadership qualities; (c) outstanding school headmasters are transformational leaders who bring about desired transformation and innovation to struggling schools; and (d) transformational school headmasters provide support for development ideas, high standards, success cultures, and embrace ideas of all their subordinates to foster organizational development. In short, school heads who get their job done exhibit supervision attributes and potentials that motivate others to succeed (Glickman et al., 2004; Nahavandi, 2006). For decades, theorists, researchers and education experts also value the distinguished attributes of educational leadership as a main source for the accomplishment of education programs, objectives and achievement of schools goals (Bass, 1967; Kouzes and Posner, 1988; Bass, 1990; Koestenbaum, 2002; Patterson, Patterson, and Collins, 2002; Guerra and Nelson, 2007; Glickman et al., 2010). In Zimbabwe, the question that needs answers is; What are the shared characteristics and attributes of local school heads known to provide successful leadership to
schools within their context? Answers to this question will help to develop a powerful credential for school headmasters and education officers who will be able to take the Zimbabwean schools into the 21st Century.

Contingency Theory

According to the contingency theory, situational leaders as transformational leaders study the situation they are operating in and that context will determine whether or not to make any decisions for school improvement. This refers to understanding the people they work with, and ensuring the availability of resources that support best practices of instructional leadership. Understanding leadership from the contingency perspective in conjunction with the transformational leadership helps researchers to understand how current leadership is poised to meet the national education needs of the 21st Century, and for Zimbabwe in particular, those who will help ensure the effective implementation of the Zim Asset agenda.

What does Literature say are the Characteristics of Outstanding School Headmasters?

Literature identifies a number of attributes of outstanding school leaders among which include that: they are—active listeners, effective communicators, foster commitment to the success of others, build positive institutional relationships; and able to engage in leadership best practices (Heap, 2005; Madhlangobe, 2009). However, are these consistent with the attributes of effective school headmasters in Zimbabwe? This study will discover answers to this question.

Active Listeners

According to Heap (2005), listening is a prerequisite for understanding—which in turn is essential for outstanding headmasters or school leaders to be able to motivate and influence others to succeed. Active listening skills (ALS) help the school headmaster to access issues that may cause subordinates to work at minimum levels; and the headmaster may use that information-access-point as an opportunity for suggesting possible solutions that help subordinates to improve their current performance (Glickman et al., 2010). In this case, ALSs involve paying attention and using effective facial expressions, body language, humor, and other acceptable behavioral tendencies that encourage others (Green, 2010). Specific behaviors that encompass active listening include (a) showing the teachers that the school administration cares. When the school leader shows care for all subordinates, they will be motivated to exceed set performance standards; (b) headmaster connecting with employee needs—meaning that the school head emotionally stays in the moment of all issues by responding to subordinate questions when asked in relation to their opinions about work. For example, the head may take time to encourage subordinates to share more about a topic by providing their perspectives; (c) the ALS skills allow headmasters to make follow-ups to teachers’ problems—and that may help teachers realize that the school head is paying attention; (d) showing empathy—sometimes subordinates may be going through some depressing moments in their lives, and these may be causing them to experience many forms of anxiety and pressures that may impair their performance. Therefore, school heads as empathizing experts, with a display of active listening skills will strengthen the head’s influence and authority over their subordinates as education leaders who care (Noddings, 2009). Empathy, as a relationship building strategy demands that school headmasters promote uninterrupted flow of conversations to ensure complete leader-subordinate engagement; and (e) it involves headmasters showing respect in order to earn respect from their subordinates.

They are Effective Communicators

This refers to abilities by the headmaster to foster effective communication processes as a school precondition for building positive workplace relationships that impact the entire school climate (Brickman, 2002; Green, 2010). Therefore, School leaders must consider both verbal and non-verbal communication cues, as the most effective communication [that only] occurs when school leaders remove the surprise factor [towards their subordinates], and there is synergy, which is created by verbal and non-verbal messages. (Green, 2010, p. 142)

Research related to understanding the role of effective active listening skills on teaching and learning shows that active listening helps to create productive school relationships by establishing rapport between teachers and students. In both cases when active listening school leaders acquire feedback information, they will display empathetic behaviors and they will purposefully work to enhance morals, morale and commitment through the positive workplace conversations. The healthy conversations are known to help create higher levels of workplace relationships and including strengthening them (Miller, 2005; Green, 2010)

They Foster Commitment to the Success of Others

Literature shows that successful schools are led by headmasters who view the success of all members as a product of support, continuous engagement and sharing of results based on ideas that aim to assist everyone to
achieve collectively identified educational goals (Heap, 2001; Noddings, 2009). Theorists as well as researchers commonly agree that, when the school heads pursue and encourage the colleagueship agenda in the school through supporting others, their main goal will be to ensure that such behaviors will enhance relationships among teachers, students, parents and support staff (Brewster and Railsback, 2003; Glickman et al., 2004; Green, 2005; Greenberg and Baron, 2003; Madhlangobe and Madhlangobe, 2014). It is only through supporting and pursuing common goals that subordinates will able to develop deep relationships and closer understanding of each other. Additionally, when staff members and even students accept and work towards a common goal, they will always achieve complete care and support for each other.

They Build Healthy Institutional Relationships

Success in most organizations, and in this case, schools as social organizations, is usually attributed to the leader's ability to establish trust, collaboration, productive communication and foster rapport that brings everyone together through quality relationships that contribute to effective leadership (Birth, 1990; Madhlangobe, 2009). Specific benefits derived from establishing positive workplace relationships include that teachers, students and even parents will avoid working with disguised agendas and they will choose to collaborate with others—team building. When everyone works with commitment to a shared vision, they focus at transforming the school by; (a) closing the gaps between and among all groups, (b) working with a shared vision and (c) avoiding the spirit of competing against each other. All these important school climate building variables can only be achieved when leadership deliberately activates productive and creative school relationships among staff (Covey, 2001; Brewster and Railsback, 2003; Madhlangobe and Gordon, 2012).

They use Leadership Best Practices

Effective leaders, when guided by the transformational leadership philosophy identify the situation in the schools and they work towards achieving best practices that help introduce educational reforms that benefit all students in the school (Marzano, Walters and McNulty, 2005; Guerra and Nelson, 2007). Because those best practices require strategies that work, school leaders continuously make quality decisions based on well researched data collected to generate decisions and effective communication channels that help to move the new practices agenda to effectively work. The activities include collaborating, recruiting and inducting quality teaching staff, creating professional teams, creating learning communities and changing management through use of shared visionary leadership for the organization and in this case, the school as an organization (Marzano, Walters and McNulty, 2005; Nahavandi, 2006). Using shared best practices at all levels of the school helps to create a uniform leadership and subordinate culture that have a powerful impact on both the school leadership and the subordinates work outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Theories Guiding the Study

Interpretivism and Grounded paradigms guided the methodology for collecting and analyzing data. Grounded theory when used together with the Interpretivism theory to guide research complement each other to ensure that data collected will produce findings that are grounded in the lived experiences of the participants (Strauss and Corbin, 1988; Creswell, 2014). Specifically, grounded theory suggests that the final understandings of phenomenon should be derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Therefore, in this study, when guided by the grounded theory, all “data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 12). In seeking guidance from the Interpretivist philosophy to research, we wanted to know the attributes participants viewed in successful school leaders; and how they describe them. Therefore, from an Interpretivism perspective, to ground our findings in the lived experiences of the participants, we triangulated our data interpretation by asking the participants questions related to how they interpreted our observations and what we heard during the conversations—did we interpret you accurately if we say this___; in relation to what you said in this context? What do some of these behaviors that we observed mean to successful leadership?

Research Design

This study was a qualitative research design in which the participants were interviewed and observed in addition to review of institutional artifacts.

Sample Selection

A total of 185 participants from 10 schools composed of 10 headmasters, 52 teachers, 31 parents and 82 students who participated in the study. All the outstanding headmasters had over six years experience working at the same schools. Teachers were selected on the criteria that they had worked at the same school for a minimum of six years especially for those that participated in group
interviews from each participating school.

Research Instruments

Open Ended Questionnaires

The main instrument that we used for this study is the questionnaire with open ended questions that was complemented by the interview guide. In the questionnaire, in addition to the basic questions regarding demographics of participants, participants responded to two themed open ended questions;

i. Describe to us the attributes of the principal in your school that make him effective;
ii. Suggest in your own way, how each attribute helps to make your school better than the rest of the schools?

Interview Guide

In the interview guide, we compiled follow-up questions that we used with a further reduced but purposely selected participants of 15 teachers and students from each school of the original sample of 185 and from each group of sampled volunteering participants for this study. All ten headmasters participated in individual face-to-face interviews. Because no study has been published to identify and describe the attributes of outstanding education leaders in Zimbabwe, we ensured these attributes emerged naturally from our research interactions with participants who described their lived experiences with the phenomenon.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

According to the findings of this study, outstanding School Improvement (SI) outcomes depend mostly on their attributes and quality leadership that emerges from the attributes in the school. According to the participants, generally, outstanding headmasters may be defined through what those that work with them say impacts theirs and the work of others in the school. Therefore, educational leadership was defined in this study as the ability of the headmaster to foster behaviors that lead to the accomplishment of the desired mission and vision of the school. Successful headmasters were also viewed as transformational leaders, who understand the situation (contingent leadership) first and go into the school to identify a suitable collective vision and then they model followership behaviors for achieving the goals that add up to the mission and vision of the school. In this study, a total of eighteen (18) attributes were reported by the participants, including that outstanding transformational educational leaders exhibit the following specific attributes (a) posses outstanding communication skills including—being persuasive, listening effectively, asking hard questions, and possessing high technological skills; (b) delegate leadership responsibilities; (c) are devoted to working with children and teachers; (d) are always ready to learn from others; (e) they are consistent; (f) they are outstanding resource supervisors—time, finances, human, technological and material; (g) are dependable and responsible; (h) cautious decision makers—effective decision makers, inclusive, encourage from subordinates; efficient negotiators; (i) are powerful visionaries; (j) are confident risk takers; (k) are highly visible on campus the school and in the community; (k) are creative and encourage institutional relationships—charismatic or humorous, increase student learning outcomes, support and motivate staff, ensuring safety for everyone; (l) are persistent active listeners; (m) focus on continuous school transformation—interest in improvement of instruction, and improvement of workplace relationships; (n) exhibit or show superior problem solving skills; (o) they care; (p) build healthy school-climates; (q) are principled or ethical—role modeling, and they walk the talk; (r) are highly skilled mentors—advising, guiding, counseling and providing tutoring; (s) highly focused—pay attention to situations for lessons from positive and negative events, read current literature about SI; review quality of school facilities, attend to academic reports; and (t) they are empathetic. This study has confirmed findings from earlier researches carried out elsewhere—Luo and Najjar, (2007); and Lee, Walker, and Bodycott, (2000). However, findings for this study add that the attributes include teachers and students’ responses who commonly agreed that if schools are led by headmasters who exude those outstanding qualities, they will impact in the way subordinates respond to the leadership.

IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES DISCUSSED

Posses High Levels of Communication Skills

Participants commonly agreed that efficient leaders whose leadership skills bring innovation and transformation of attitudes and the way school activities are carried out. They are honest in the ways they communicate and they do not keep grudges with anyone in the school. Specific attributes included that the leaders who participated in this study use effective persuasive communication skills to ensure buy-ins from their subordinates.

Persuasive: They use language that invites their subordinates to embrace the benefits of doing things in creative or innovative ways. Contrary to the autocratic beliefs when viewed from the local context, persuasiveness was not viewed by participants as a sign of weakness but a strength as a leadership attribute in
that it helps students, parents and teachers to realize that they are not being coerced to accept the leader’s ways of doing things, but they are encouraged to see value, and to volunteer to participate in supportive ways.

Demonstrate Superior Listening Skills: One way for leaders to understand how subordinates view and understand a situation is through effective listening, also called active listening in literature. Communication through active listening is demonstrated when leaders show that workplace issues help them to influence others to achieve goals that are related to school improvement. Therefore, active listening enhances leadership power and helps to focus energies on goal achievement.

Ask questions: Normally when leaders exhibit active listening skills and clear communication skills, they frequently ask subordinates questions that help them to clarify issues and place all parties involved on the same page for purposes of operationalising education policies.

High technological skills: Leaders capable of smoothly moving schools into the 21st Century use all forms of communication to send important information to groups. For example, one participant explained

(Male Teacher Participant) She’s [our headmaster] good with e-mails, texting (SMS)—even with this new whaatsapp thing, and any form of written communication... that's how effective her standards of communication are... She even knows how to form discussion forum groups on wahtsapp... and that is how she thinks. So you can see she doesn’t leave any space for errors. She wants to be heard, read but above all she wants us to communicate—not only her friends but with everyone in the same group.

According to this finding, new technological outputs like social networking and blogging have now found their role to enhance how effective education leadership conduct school business, and indeed continue to influence successful teaching-and-learning. For the Zimbabwean context, this study reveals that technology when used strategically, has the potential to transform ways school headmasters influence instructional outcomes, but only by making communication part of a broad and successful education school vision. Therefore, we concluded that school heads who remain stagnant in terms of using technology and related skills acquisition continue to limit the impact of technology in modern schools.

They Share Leadership Responsibilities

In this study, participants suggested that when headmasters delegate duties, they help to empower teacher-leadership through introducing technology and responsibility to mid-level leadership. This way, sharing leadership with all levels of teachers ensures development of effective leadership at all levels and encourages teachers to collaborate (buy-ins) in all issues that need quality output—from students, parents and teachers. According to one participant who shared this view with many others in the study, it leads to “Creative school improvement vision that will become existent in the minds of all but accountability rests with him and the rest of the administration…” (Participant).

Dedicated to Working with Children, Parents and Teachers

Regardless of where the teachers and students come from, effective school leaders show inclusive leadership qualities and they are dedicated to helping all children achieve learning through making the school environment a happy one.

Participant: The head, Mr. Gudo (Pseudonym) enjoys working with all teachers and students. As you can tell from the classes you observed, we have many dialects spoken in this school—Shona, Ndebele, Kalanga, Ndau and Nyanja just to name a few. We also now have children born in different diasporas coming in to study and the Headamster makes sure all students and even teachers are welcome to participate in decision making in this school. In some schools you would feel unwelcome if you were not Ndebele. This is Bulawayo Region and the majority of the people speak Ndebele.

Similar to the contingency leadership theories, from the citation and the context, successful headmasters understand the situation they are operating from and they adjust their leadership styles to ensure that all members are accommodated. When headmasters show commitment to working with children and all adults around those children, all issues of discipline and misdirected agendas become reduced through increased levels of headmaster-subordinate engagement and commitment to the school goals. To succeed with children from different ages, they show patience, respect for diversity of cultures of students and teachers, show humour, build teams that agree, and should be persuasive (Madhlangobe and Gordon, 2012).

They are Always Ready to Learn from Others

Because this study looked at successful leadership qualities, we also concluded that school improvement strategies—such as innovation, improved student learning all rely heavily on quality headship. When a school head is ready to learn from his followers, such...
leadership reveals more sub-characteristics like, *tolerance, flexibility, and being proactive*. An interest of learning from everyone else is important for understanding each subordinate as an individual since school leadership is about making a difference in the lives of the children and the teachers (Fullan, 2002). According to the participants of this study, leading a school has enormous challenges that require high levels of patience and understanding of other people. From this view, outstanding headmasters achieve higher levels of individual participation and input to the school improvement agenda by their staff. As one participant summarized this view,

Participant: For example, when my headmistress comes down to try and understand how at my level I do things, and demonstrates that she wants to learn from me, you know she is human after all. It draws me closer to her as a person because I know and feel that she feels I am important to the school too. In my case I have noticed that our headmistress is highly respected by staff and students as well as by everyone… you know it’s all about trusting her and allowing her to earn that respect as a human being too…

**They are Consistent**

In order to share a school vision with others, the including mission, goals and their objectives, findings of this study revealed that consistency is a crucial leadership strategy. Similar to findings elsewhere, consistency, (Greenberg and Baron, 2003) is important to show that leaders can set and maintain uniform standards in the way they apply the standards on everyone—because it helps subordinates to be able to predict expected standards for success. Usually, school heads that are consistent in their leadership style are considered trustworthy, honorable or dependable by teachers and parents especially on critical education issues related to the application of discipline standards. Specific aspects of leading a school that become achieved through consistency include, team motivation and accountability to set-goals.

Participant: The headmaster and the deputy are consistent in my own view… you are sure of what will transpire if you commit the same mistake several times or of the mistake is carried out by a different person. For me, I think consistence is one mark of an outstanding school head… [which] helps me to be critical and reflective on my own professional behaviours.

**They are Effective Resources Managers**

Schools as social organizations also require diverse resources to be effective, including *time, finances, human, technological and material*. Most conflicts in schools centre around distribution of resources among teachers and students. According to participants, because such leaders are fair in the way they distribute and use resources of the school, all members understand that they are all equals in the school and hence they work for the common good of the students. Such leaders as fully accountable for anything that they do—how they use money and time.

Participant: My headmaster is dependable should I say—we are all treated the same and we have equal access to all resources. I have not come to school and gone home disappointed because I have been denied access to anything that could promote my teaching and the learning of my students. So I am tuned to do well… because those resources help me to achieve development of skills in the children and to deliver on the instructional project.

Some of the qualities that successful leaders display include that they are good at *hiring quality teachers and to support staff* to ensure that the human resources department is manned by efficient and effective staff. This may include replacing those who do not perform, but only as a last resort if staff development does not work. However, in Zimbabwe staffing depends on other offices higher than those of effective headmasters. Once hired, new teachers are exposed to continuous school improvement staff development practices focused on aligning skills with high standards. Successful headmasters pay attention to complaints by students in order to mediate between teachers, students, parents and ancillary staff. Generally, this motivates the entire school community. The leaders’ have influential ways of communicating their *supervisory skills findings*. For example on participant whose response summarized the common view of most participants said,

Participant: One of her outstanding characteristic is, she is fair, firm but consistent too… She supervises us in ways that are not vindictive… I mean you will really learn something new from the headmistress whenever she observes a lesson or any behaviour that affect the school in general.

**Dependable and Responsible**

According to the findings of this study, one benefit to the school, brought by a leader accepted and labeled as outstandingly dependable in this study is that as a leadership attribute of a school headmaster, it builds credibility and trust between the head and the teachers. Besides, this characteristic communicates a standard of professionalism since possessing knowledge of it helps to create positive relationships between leaders and their subordinates.
Effective Decision Makers

Only decisions that bring positive outcomes to the school in general are always used when leaders possess such skills. For example, participants accepted that most decisions are arrived at through defined, and inclusive cautious decision making processes. Other sub-themes that emerged under this broad theme include that the leader uses inclusiveness, ensures positive relationships are maintained, and show effective negotiating skills. Using cautious ways to arrive at final decisions by involving teachers and parents ensures achievement of acceptance of decisions from interested parties. Once there is a buy-in from interested parties, the implementation process of agreed decisions becomes a responsibility of the entire school community. We concluded that inclusiveness helps school headmasters to learn from others, and it motivates others. Ensuring positive institutional relationships is an important school improvement leadership attribute because schools will operate as family and teachers will “feel for each other” [Participant]. Inclusiveness leads to development of relationships based on trustworthiness and collegialship. When the headmaster negotiates decision outcomes, the process ensures that the final agreement is fully acceptable. When teachers accept the negotiated settlement, the leader is assured of total buy-in and creative implementation of the proposed decision.

Successful Headmasters are Visionaries

According to Nahavandi, (2006) visionary leaders are transformational leaders who create a school-wide acceptable vision, and they allow the whole school to fully understand the strategies for getting to that agreed vision. A well-articulated vision, negotiated and with the approval of all teachers, parents and students will empower everyone to know how they will get there, and the effective and efficient approaches that do not force the team to experiment with non-productive instructional strategies. Leaders show understanding of the context and they use the available information to be creative in ways of achieving goals of school improvement (SI). School community members will continuously communicate that vision and the leaders will continuously model how to get to the vision. From the teachers’ students and parents’ inputs during data collection we constantly encountered data that lead us to conclude that a school vision where all teachers and students have an input acts like the leader with a bumper-sticker that says, “We will get there together through—improving—how we do things.” One participant from this study posits

Participant: What I have seen from our headmaster Mr. Chipindu [pseudonym] is that he models how to get to the Promised Land as he calls it. In my years as a teacher I have heard many say, visions are sometimes written for all to see them, others say they are drawn on walls—but here, our headmaster does all these things through the ways that he communicates, acts, and even models the vision for us to see it through all our senses—walk-the-talk, smell it, writes it all over the school, and we feel it through how we are treated. So when you see that vision communicated by the head, in different ways, it takes less energy for the others to understand where they are going, what they need to do and how they should achieve those goals... isn’t they say, ‘An outstanding sportsman is as good as the instrument that he uses?’ Our headmaster uses all these possible ways to help us understand...

They are Confident Risk takers

Literature is awash with information that suggests that successful leaders are known risk-takers (Green, 2005; Ivy, 2007; Madhlangobe and Madhlangobe, 2014). Similarly, data collected from the participants in this study revealed that most of the school leaders who participated in this study took risks ensuring that the school produces outstanding results. This involved exposing larger numbers of teachers to PDs that considered important for the schools’ to outpace others, but most of all to increase student achievement. Leaving students with skeleton staff is an unacceptable risk decision to the Ministry of Education and Culture but most of the teachers reported that they were highly motivated to compensate the days or hours lost in order to ensure that students benefitted.

Highly Visible in the School and Community

Students and teachers should see the headmaster in the classrooms allowing the headmaster, teachers and the students chance to focus attention and energies on key result areas (Madhlangobe, 2009). Visible headmasters are always sending clear messages to the rest of the school—that they are watching how instructional methods are taking place. Such headmasters are also visible at all co-curricular activities, community activities, funerals and important institutions that work together with the school. This is how the leader will know the context in which the school is operating from, build relationships, continuously send positive messages that the school belongs to the community and is there to serve the community. The school then will be viewed as a credible institution within the community. During these visible leadership behaviours, leaders showed all or some of the following behaviours;

They use Charisma to Create powerful institutional Relationships

Schools that have leadership with charismatic attributes
at the help show that the heads attract larger external followership from parents, business communities and students by inspiring them to focus on a vision that that makes the school different from others. Charisma includes sub-attributes such as being humorous, and supporting new staff and motivating them. According to literature, (Brewster and Railsback, 2003) and also confirmed in this study, such leadership in the schools help to increase student learning outcomes and ensuring safety for everyone.

Charismatic school heads therefore have the potential to enrich the school culture through including, inspiring and motivating others. Charisma is known as an attribute that tends to ignite an almost magnetic hold on subordinates because they are known for naturally initiating high energy to influence others to achieve better. One participant confirmed this finding this way, “As I said earlier, he inspires us to emulate what he does because of the trust we have in him. I feel he speaks more through actions than through words… also he is approachable…”

They are Transformational

According to the findings of this study, outstanding leaders aim to make a difference in the lives of the students and even teachers by trying new ideas and combinations to ensure creativity. One common goal that participants revealed they benefitted from the transformational attributes of the participating leaders was that they generally focused on improvement of instruction, relationships and the school climate. For example, school curriculum issues take most of their concerns and they spend more time speaking to teachers and students to understand how they are feeling.

Participant: The question that he always asks us as teachers and even to the parents is what can we do to improve the way we do things in this school? The idea is not to test our knowledge but we can see clearly that he is telling us to be creative in our own different ways; and to help learning processes to be better than in other schools…. That is how we are motivated to be innovative and to ensure these children learn higher skills as compared to others.

They Possess Superior Problem Solving Skills

In the schools that participated in this study, participants reported that their leaders possessed superior problem solving skills that always ensure that their schools operate towards the core business of the schools. One participant said,

Participant: The way she solves problems helps me to understand how we as parents and even teachers can help to reduce conflicts here in our school. Students and teachers experience harmony although, yes... there are still a few corners that need sweeping... we are OK and we continue to improve... no organization is perfect.

Modeling problem solving skills as an attribute of outstanding leadership is vital to leadership especially when the skills are emulated by teachers and parents as leaders. Generally it draws the attention of others to the acceptable standards and helps to reduce persistent recurrence of problems around the school. A reduction in the level of problems increases the quality of the school climate through promoting positive relationships, creating workplace coalitions, both conditions that create rich ground for improved learning outcomes.

Caring for others

The aspect of care is a learned attribute that all headmasters should know and embrace in primary schools especially the ECD sections where embracing the leadership philosophy of care is crucial. In the school contexts, sometimes certain pupils do not have anyone to represent their own ways of knowing especially when parents tend to view the school as a no-go-area only meant for academics. Specifically, schools led by headmasters and headmistresses who care experience less student discipline problems that are normally characterized by aggressive, violent behaviours, punishments and suspensions. These are replaced by high levels of positive relationships that promote high achievements.

Maintain Healthy School Climates Through Shared Vision

Recent literature also shows that shared school vision leadership style is a way for empowering others and it is based on ownership of the vision as the basis for motivating others to keep focused (Marzano et al., 2005). One participant summarized this view this way,

Participant: I think it’s important to know that laughter is a universal language that replaces Ndebele, Zezuru, Kalanga, or Shona whatever.... We all need that little-bit of humour or even a free working environment in the school to keep us together. In the previous school where I was, we used to feel imprisoned—no jokes at all. I never heard the headmaster making jokes... no tea breaks together and it was always serious business. You build a successful school through creating relationships by joking and making people come together...
remember a school is a social organization so people need to behave like people. Here, our head understands that at the end of the day it’s us the teachers who provide those interesting learning experiences for our pupils in this school... yes, we execute the plan that leads us to those goals. Some headmasters do not want to see teachers talking to each other, but not here... she want to see everyone happy. That’s how I see it...

Similarly, a positive school climate is one of those important variables that influences genuine school reforms and causes improvement of learning outcomes among students (Marzano, et al., 2005). Healthy school climates fostered and shared through school visions identified by the education leaders in this study was defined by participants as characterized by respect and complete engagement. Healthy school climate creation involves ensuring that norms, values and expectations that support student learning outcomes and also for everyone to develop a sense of belonging to the school. The sense of belonging is created through the leader’s charisma and the positive inter-personal relationships among students, teachers, and parents.

According to participants, and also confirmed by literature, a positive school climate may benefit teachers and support staff (Bradshaw et al., 2010). For example, in this study when teachers and students experienced support provided to them by the headmasters, they report that they commonly “feel obliged to demonstrate increased levels of commitment to their different assignments.” During lesson observations, they also exhibited more collegiality among themselves and including with administration. We concluded that teaching staff that work with headmasters who openly show support and commitment towards faculty, will also emulate that support towards their peers and leadership. This may lead to establishment of strong students-to-teachers relationships also developing. Such relationships lead to improved student learning and behavioral outcomes.

Maintain High Principled/Ethical Standards

Successful headmasters are known for maintaining high ethical standards and they role model acceptable professional behaviors. In short, they walk-the-talk as opposed to talk-the-talk and no action. Those who walk-the-talk normally get the attention of their faculty and students and they earn respect—a relationship that may naturally lead to goal achievement.

Are Highly Skilled Mentors

Outstanding school leaders who demonstrate high mentorship skills related to advising, guiding others, counseling and providing personalized tutoring to create greater opportunities for improving the professional skills of their teachers. During mentoring processes, closer relationships between the headmaster and the teachers are developed and cemented.

They are Highly Focused on Goal Achievement

There sub-themes emerged from this attribute, including that they;

i. Focus means constantly paying attention to lessons learned, from any situation, sometimes internal or external negative events help such headmasters to draw lessons for teaching others or groups about school improvement. One question that they are always asking and trying to answer is what do we learn from the events around us and how can we incorporate or prevent similar situations from happening in our institution?

ii. Pay attention to improving school facilities. They continually ensure that school facilities continually receive facelift to match developments elsewhere, or to meet teaching and learning needs of teachers and their students respectively increases the power of the environment to meet standards for improving comfortable school standards

iii. Pay attention to academic results. They regularly review students’ performance records and create room for carrying out strategic management conversations with teachers and their students regarding how to improve or how to maintain high standards. From each conversation, the leader will draw lessons for teaching others or groups about school improvement.

They Empathize

Literature shows that all headmasters do empathize (Murphy and Hallinger, 1992; Covey, 2001; Fullan, 2002; Madhlangobe and Madhlangobe, 2014), but outstanding headmasters go further by inviting teachers and students to help the head understand their situations and also to be able to personalize their help and suggest ways for providing solutions to the problems faced by others. The successful school heads in this study are known to foster the creation of quality relationships especially with staff, parents and students. One school headmaster summarized this common view this way,

Headmaster: Teachers, parents and even the pupils here need to be respected for who they are... That
will help to improve the quality of the time and attention each of them provides to the pupils and that is what makes a difference in the learning processes and lives of the students in our school. So I do try to empathize with their contexts but my philosophy is—they need to suggest the solutions to those problems and I will model those suggestions for everyone to also empathize with them.

Summary and Conclusions

From the findings of this qualitative study supports a closer look at the attributes of the outstanding school leaders studied has revealed that a broader theme that these stated attributes impact are the school relationships. The attributes have at their heart, the power to create and use sound relationships that motivate others to focus on the mission, vision, goals and objectives of the schools. While most of the attributes of the outstanding educational leaders have been reported by earlier research, their role as relationship building have not been reported and this study has added this important component to literature. The cultural values and the social contexts have also been understood to have a direct relationship and role in the way the leadership attributes become more pronounced. Throughout the study, certain attributes were reported to be more outstanding in some schools than in others. We recommend that further studies be carried out to compare the levels of pronouncements in either female leaders or male leaders as reported by teachers, students and parents. The question therefore would be, How do the leadership attributes between male and female educational leaders impact student and teachers’ work?

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