Covid-19 Redefining School Leadership Practice in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *The aim of this study was to assess the new leadership practices that school heads in Masvingo urban district have adopted to cope with Covid-19. The population comprised of all the 37 schools in Masvingo urban district with an estimated teacher population of over 700 teachers. The study employed the quantitative research methodology and adopted a descriptive survey design. It utilised random sampling to select a sample of 140 teachers and 10 heads of schools. The study utilised a questionnaire with both open-ended and close-ended questions to gather data. The study revealed that because of COVID-19, school leadership practices have considerably changed. Teaching and learning had become a blend of both face-to-face and e learning thereby necessitating a significant modification of existing leadership practices in schools. The study recommends that schools come up with new leadership programmes that fully and adequately encompass the leadership skills, practices and actions suited for the covid-19 context.*

Keywords: *School leadership, leadership practice, school, district and assessment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwean schools, it is now government policy to keep the learners in schools safe and learning. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) has come up with a covid-19 response strategy to limit exposure to the disease and reduce the probability of its transmission amongst learners, teachers, and staff and school communities, minimize disruptions to learning and proposing measures to build back better and safer school environments.MoPSE has introduced various measures to ensure learners' continued right to education, including alternative learning programmes using radio, digital and online facilities and distribution of supplementary reading materials. This change has witnessed the operating environment in schools shifting suggesting the need for a corresponding shift in school leadership practices. It is because of this information above that this research set out to assess the new leadership practices that school heads in Masvingo urban district have adopted to cope with Covid-19.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review in this study focuses on the leadership practices of school heads in times of Covid-19 as shared by various researchers and thought leaders. Harris and Jones (2020) note that school leadership practices have changed considerably and maybe, irreversibly because of COVID-19. As a result of the pandemic, school leadership has shifted on its axis and is unlikely to return to 'normal' anytime soon, if ever at all. Netolicky (2020) posits that in a time of crisis, leaders must act swiftly and with foresight and with careful consideration of options, consequences and side effects of actions taken. However, no one can predict what might be the best solutions, the best actions, the side effects of any actions taken in this crisis since there are no precedents and no guides to leading schools during Covid19. Despite the current lack of research on how school leaders are responding to the pandemic, there are some emerging insights about leadership within the Covid-19 educational landscape.

Sherwood (2020) emphasises the importance of communication during the Covid-19 pandemic and suggests that school leaders ought to communicate with calm, purpose and positivity with stakeholders. This entails school leaders having to determine the needs, wants and expectations of those they lead to create trust among them. Without mutual trust, there cannot be any transformative

change (Fernandez and Shaw, 2021). They also suggest that choosing communication channels requires that the preferences of stakeholders to be carefully thought. This is because various stakeholders in the schools utilise different communication channels. For example, teachers may prefer the use of e-mails, while students may prefer to receive updates through a variety of social media platforms or text messages. Fernandez and Shaw (2021) report that following Hurricane Katrina, a variety of messaging tools, apps and social media were used to communicate with all stakeholders and this created a sense of community, belonging and trust and helped reduce anxiety.

Time is a major factor when it comes to making decisions using the best information available (Heffernan, Longmir, Bright and Kim (2019). Unlike during the pre-Covid-19 times when school leaders had long periods of consultation, the current context requires that decisions be made quickly and should try to balance the demands of doing the best thing for students, staff and meeting policy and political imperatives and directives. Fernandez and Shaw (2021) highlight three of the leadership best practices for navigating unpredictable adaptive challenges such as the ones posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in schools. These are servant leadership, Distributed leadership and Adaptive leadership. Servant leadership emphasises empowerment, involvement, collaboration, emotional intelligence and emotional stability. Distributed leadership entails distributing leadership responsibilities to a network of teams throughout the school to improve the quality of the decisions made in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, Adaptive leadership entails adopting a leadership style that is flexible, allostatic and capable of learning, evolving in crisis and emerging better able to address future crises.

Harris and Jones (2020) suggest that all school leaders must prioritize self-care and consideration. Leading a school through the changes and challenges that accompany Covid-19 and post Covid-19 will require school leaders who put their own health and wellbeing first, so that they will be able to help others. Increasingly, school leaders are managing the emotional responses of others to this crisis including anxiety, frustration loss, and anger. Consequently, self-care must be a priority for those leading schools at all levels. The phrase 'connect to learn, learn to connect'denotes the daily reality of students and teachers trying to work together during Covid 19. Therefore, school leaders will increasingly need to be technologically well informed. Covid-19 has generated huge commercial resourcefulness with a pressure to buy technological solutions to current problems. School leaders will need to be discerning therefore, about the digital products they choose and to be careful about striking a balance between technology and pedagogy in their school (Hargreaves 2020). Ultimately, pedagogy is the key to effective learning and while technology has a part to play, it is the human dimension of effective teaching that makes the difference.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework guiding this study is the Complexity Leadership theory. Complexity Leadership theory allows for an understanding of how successful organisations thrive in turbulent times (Towler, 2020). It derives its theoretical foundations from the systems theory (ibid, 2020) hence its emphasis on the whole system of an organisation, including its social interactions and ways how to manage complexity. This means that it exudes systems thinking (Senge, 2006) which allows for situations in organisations to be viewed from a broad view. It is therefore a systems theory focused on adaptive outcomes with a focus on context (Witkins, Earnhardt, Pittenger, Roberts, Rietsema and Cosmam-Rey, 2017). This implies that everyone in the system can make decisions after carefully considering their impact on the rest of the system. Because it is a systems theory, leadership is threaded throughout the system (Hunter, 2012) and plays an important role whenever an event takes place and people react and adapt to it (Towler, 2020).It therefore provides a system view to leadership – a complete deviation from traditional leadership theories that focus on the heroics of a single leader (Bush, 2008). This suggests that it advocates for leadership at each level of the system. This implies that leaders at each level of the system act to influence the system and its outcomes. They have to work together to provide each other with direction and purpose so that the system is able to adapt to and respond to change. This explains why the theory places a lot of emphasis on the importance of social interactions within organisations. School heads are therefore an interdependent and interconnected part of the collective called a school (Netlicky, 2020).

The complexity leadership theory is applicable in organisational settings to understand how effective organisations can gain a competitive advantage through leadership, strategy and direction (Towler, 2020). Organisational members interact collaboratively as they change, create innovation and develop

with a focus on complex relationships and interaction rather than controlling, standardising and autocracy (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).Five principles of the Complexity leadership theory are of particular relevance to this study. These are networks, emergence, self-organisations and social coordination, feedback sensitivity and agility (Siemens, Dawson and Eshleman (2018). These are sufficient to provide the school heads with means of observing, understanding and interacting with change.

4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

School heads in Zimbabwe havewitnessed the operating environmentshifting because of Covid-19; suggesting the need for a corresponding shift in school leadership practices. It therefore becomes inevitable that a complete deviation from the traditional leadership practices that focus on the heroics of a single leaderhas taken place in favour ofnew ones that are consistent with Covid 19. The study therefore set out to assess the new leadership practices that school heads have adopted to cope with Covid-19.

Research Questions

1. What are the new leadership practices that school heads have adopted during Covid-19?

2. What is the extent of implementation ofthe new leadership practices by school heads?

3. What challenges are school heads facing when implementing thenew leadership practices?

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to assess the new leadership practices that school heads in Masvingo urban district have adopted to cope with Covid-19. This was in order to identify these practices and determine the extent of their implementation, andthe challenges inhibiting their success.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited to the assessment of the new leadership practices that school heads in Masvingo urban district have adopted to cope with Covid 19. Because the study utilises the descriptive survey method, it concentrates on the new leadership practices in use and not those that could be in use or should be in use.It determines the practices, rather than causes, reasons, meanings or possibilities.The findings in this study are generalisable to schools in Masvingo urban district but may be difficult to generalise elsewhere with accuracy.

7. DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The researchers delimited the study to the assessment of the new leadership practices that school heads have adopted to cope with Covid-19. The study utilised a sample of 140 teachers and 10 school heads from Masvingo urban schools in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. Other school stakeholders such as parents, members of the school development committee or school inspectors were outside the scope of the study and therefore not consulted.

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design focusing on an assessment of the new leadership practices that school headsin Masvingo urban district have adopted during Covid-19 was undertaken. The purpose was to assess them in order to determine their effectiveness, the challenges and the strategies to improve on their success. The quantitative research method was useful because it makes use of statistics,which provides a lot of information Bell (2013). According to Cohen and Manion (2011) this research design allows for large-scaleinvestigations and provides a lot more information as far as value is concerned. However, one major weakness of the quantitative paradigm is that numbers change often (Leedy, 2010). The study's population comprised of 700 teachers and 37 school heads (Both primary and secondary).It employed simple random sampling to arrive at 140 teachers and 10 school heads. This was because this technique permitted every teacher and school head an equal opportunity of participating in the study (Kumar, 2008). Collection of data was by means of a questionnaire. This instrument allows the respondent time to consider questions and responses can be highly structured and easily coded. However, Anderson (2012) observes that the questionnaire attracts a low response rate if not administered face to face.A request for permission to undertake the research from the Secretary of primary and secondary education in Zimbabwe and the Education Director of Masvingo

province sailed through and so was the granting of the permission. Distribution of the questionnaires via e-mailto selected schools followed through. Respondents participated voluntarily and there was an assurance of their anonymity and confidentiality.

9. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study set out to assess the new leadership practices that school heads in Masvingo urban district have adopted during Covid-19. This section is presented in two parts; namely, presentation of data and discussion of the presented data.

Presentation of Data

Table1. *Composition of sample by category (N=150)*

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Heads	10	7
Teachers	140	93
Totals	**150**	**100**

Teachers constituted 93% of the sample and heads were 7% of the respondents. The sample fully represents both categories fairly in the school system as all schools have one head and many teachers.

Table2. *Distribution of respondents by sex (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Male	3	30	30	20	33	22
Female	7	70	110	80	117	78
Totals	**10**	**100**	**140**	**100**	**150**	**100**

There were more female heads and teachers than their male counterparts were (78%: female; 22%: male). The data in this study confirms observationsfound that most schools in urban districts had more females than male ones.

Table3. *Composition of respondents by professional qualifications (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Untrained	0	0	0	0	0	0
Certificate in Education	0	0	5	3	5	4
Diploma in Education	0	0	110	79	110	73
Degreed	10	100	25	18	35	23
Totals	**10**	**100**	**140**	**100**	**150**	**100**

All the respondents in the study were in possession of professional qualifications as indicated in table 3 above with all heads being degreed.

Table4. *Responses to the statement: "Open communication in schools must be a priority during Covid 19 because it is a way of sharing up to date information" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	10	100	140	100	150	100
Agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Strongly Agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	**10**	**100**	**140**	**100**	**150**	**100**

All the heads and teachers appreciated the important role played byopen communication during Covid19 in schools as a way of sharing up to date information (heads: 100%; teachers: 100%) respectively.

Table5. *Responses to the statement: "At our school the school head is communicating clearly and frequently to all stakeholders through a variety of channels" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	10	100	140	100	150	100
Agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Strongly Agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	**10**	**100**	**140**	**100**	**150**	**100**

Both heads and teachers indicated that at their schools the communication was clear and frequent to all stakeholders and was through a variety of channels. (Heads: 100%; teachers: 100%) respectively. This implies that all the respondents are satisfied with the quality of communication in their schools.

Table6. *Responses to the statement: ""The school head is distributing leadership responsibilities to a network of teams throughout the school to improve the quality of decisions made in crisis situations" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	10	100	27	19	37	25
Agree	0	0	13	9	13	9
Disagree	0	0	47	34	47	31
Strongly disagree	0	0	53	38	53	35
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	**10**	**100**	**140**	**100**	**150**	**100**

There is lack of consistency in the responses of heads and teachers on this feedback. Whereas the majority of heads (100%) indicated that they were distributing leadership responsibilities to a network of teams throughout the school to improve the quality of decisions made in crises, the majority of the teachers (74%) indicated otherwise. This suggests that teachers feel that school leaders are not distributing leadership responsibilities.

Table7. *Responses to the question: "At our school, the head is utilising a type of servant leadership that emphasises empowerment involvement and collaboration" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	6	60	15	10	21	14
Agree	2	20	25	18	27	18
Disagree	2	20	60	43	62	41
Strongly disagree	0	0	40	29	40	27
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	**10**	**100**	**140**	**100**	**150**	**100**

There is inconsistency in the responses of both heads and teachers on this issue. Whereas 80% of the school heads agree that, they are utilising a type of servant leadership that emphasises empowerment involvement and collaboration, 68% of the teachers do not agree.

Table8. *Responses to the statement: "Our school head is leveraging expertise and experience from multiple sources from within and outside the school" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	10	100	60	43	70	47
Agree	0	0	40	29	40	26
Disagree	0	0	30	21	30	20
Strongly disagree	0	0	10	7	10	7
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	**10**	**100**	**140**	**100**	**150**	**100**

When asked whether the school heads were leveraging expertise and experience from multiple sources from within and outside the school, 100% of the heads agreed whilst 72% likewise agreed. This implies that the school heads are indeed maximising on the expertise and experience available at their disposal both inside and outside of the school.

Table9. *Responses to the question: "At our school, the head is supporting the wellbeing of their school community while maintaining their health and wellbeing" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	10	100	102	73	112	75
Agree	0	0	38	27	38	25
Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	10	100	140	100	150	100

Responses to table nine above show that 100% of the school heads in this study supported the health and well-being of their school community. A 100% of the teachers who took part in this study confirm the same. Both categories of respondents agree that school heads are supporting the health and well-being of their school communities (Heads 100%, Teachers 73%).

Table10. *Responses to the question: "Do school heads make quick decisions with little or no staff consultation during Covid 19" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	3	30	98	70	101	67
No	7	70	42	30	49	33
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	10	100	140	100	150	100

Seventy percent (70%) of the school heads responded that theydo not make quick decisions withoutconsulting their staff during Covid 19. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of the teachers refuted this and instead agreed to the contrary. Both categories of respondents indicated that school heads did make quick decisions with little or no consultation during Covid 19 (67%, 33%).

Table11. *Responses to the question: "Do school heads face challenges in communicating mandated changes at very short notice is a challenge for school heads and teachers" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	10	100	120	86	130	87
No	0	0	20	14	20	13
Totals	20	100	140	100	150	100

Responses to table eleven above show that 100% of the school heads in this study admitted that there were indeed challenges in communicating mandated changes at very short notice for them and teachers. Eighty percent (86%) of the teachers who took part in this study confirm the same. Both categories of respondents agree that there were indeed challenges in communicating mandated changes at very short notice (87%, 13%).

Table12. *Responses to the question: "Is keeping everyone safe and ensuring that students and teachers are supported as best they can be to find ways to move forward productively into a future that is still really uncertain and changing rapidly as a result of Covid 19 a challenge?" (N=150)*

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	10	100	135	96	145	97
No	0	0	5	4	5	3
Unsure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	10	100	140	100	150	100

One hundred percent(100%) of the school heads in this study admitted that there were indeed challenges inkeeping everyone safe and ensuring that students and teachers are supported as best they can be, to find ways to move forward productively into a future that is still really uncertain and changing rapidly as a result of Covid 19. Ninety-six percent (96%) of the teachers who took part in this study confirm the same. Both categories of respondents agree thatthere were indeed challenges in keeping everyone safe and ensuring that students and teachers are supported as best they can be, to find ways to move forward productively into a future that is still really uncertain and changing rapidly as a result of Covid 19 (97%, 3%).

The questionnaire had two open-ended questions that augmented response from the close-ended questions. The question wanted to find from the respondents the challenges school heads were facing when implementing new leadership practices. The majority of respondents in both categories (heads and teachers) cited the cost of connectivity, lack of access to Wi-Fi and a lack of technical support as the major challenges that hindered communication during Covid 19.

10. DISCUSSION

School heads and teachers in this study all agree that open communication is a priority during Covid 19. Covid 19 has shown the critical need to ensure that there are honest and open communications in place between school heads and their staff, between school heads and their community and between school heads and their students (Henebery, 2020). Clear, simple and frequent communication is imperative to sharing up to date information and maintaining open communication channels (ibid, 2020). Sherwood (2020) also emphasises the importance of communication during Covid-19 and goes on to suggest that school leaders ought to communicate with calm, purpose and positivity with stakeholders. It was therefore pleasing to note that all respondents in this study appreciate the importance of making communication a priority in schools during Covid 19. All respondents (School heads and teachers) are satisfied with the quality of communication in their schools. Both heads and teachers indicated that at their schools the communication was clear and frequent to all stakeholders and was through a variety of channels.When communication with stakeholders is through varieties of channels, this creates a sense of community, belonging and trust and helps to reduce anxiety (Fernandez and Shaw, 2021).

In as much as the majority of school heads maintained that they did not make quick decisions without consulting their staff during Covid 19, the majority of teachers refuted this and instead agreed to the contrary. This is not surprising because a crisis like Covid 19 affects a School heads' usual practices. They have to make difficult decisions quickly, with the best information currently available. They have to think fast and effectively. The usual idea of long periods of consultation are not possible when the government might for example, give a couple of days of notice for schools to switch to remote or face-to-face learning. Henebery (2020) maintains that the sense of crisis and urgency brought by Covid 19 has enabled a suspension of consultation.

Whereas the majority of heads indicated that they were distributing leadership responsibilities to a network of teams throughout the school to improve the quality of decisions made in crises, the majority of the teachers indicated otherwise. The teachers seem to suggest that school heads are not distributing leadership responsibilities. Fernandez and Shaw (2021) are of the view that distributing leadership responsibilities is a leadership best practice for navigating unpredictable adaptive challenges such as the ones posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in schools. School heads are therefore encouraged to distribute leadership responsibilities to improve the quality of decisions that they make during Covid 19.

Whilst the majority of school heads maintain that they were utilising a type of servant leadership that emphasised empowerment, involvement and collaboration, many of the teachers did not agree. What this suggests is that school heads are not empowering the teachers through involvement and collaboration. This could also mean that where that is happening, then it is minimal. This is not surprising because during Covid 19 School heads who usually take a collaborative, considered approach to decision-making have had to change their ways overnight to one of quick judgements with little or no staff consultation, and communicate mandated change, often at very short notice. Besides, it is very difficult to for them to prepare for and respond to the unprecedented challenge currently facing schools because of Covid 19.

Sherwood (2020) is of the view, that cultivating the practice of believing in one's subordinates during Covid 19 will re- motivate, re-enthuse, empower and unshackle them. Servant leadership is therefore a leadership best practice for navigating unpredictable adaptive challenges such as the ones posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in schools (Fernandez and Shaw, 2021). School heads are therefore encouraged to practice servant leadership that emphasises empowerment, involvement and collaboration during Covid 19.

There was agreement in that the school heads in this study were leveraging expertise and experience from multiple sources from within and outside the school during Covid 19. This implies that the school heads are indeed maximising on the expertise and experience available at their disposal.Sherwood (2020) is of the view that being surrounded by some brilliant, some hugely influential experts teaches one to constantly seek out and reflect on opportunities to improve. The lessons they provide are more valuable during Covid 19.

There was unanimity as well that the school heads in this study supported the health and well-being of their school community. This is supported by Heffernan (2021) who acknowledged that school heads were doing their very best to try to balance the demands of doing the best thing for their students, their staff, and meeting political imperatives and directives during Covid 19. They are dealing with real and genuine concerns for people's safety and individual circumstances while trying to find the solution that works best for everyone under pressure from Covid 19. That is why all school heads and the majority of teachers who took part in this study admitted that there were indeed challenges in keeping everyone safe and supported and to find ways to move forward productively into a future that is still really uncertain and changing rapidly as a result of Covid 19. They also admitted to challenges in communicating mandated changes at very short notice for them and teachers. Other challenges cited were the cost of connectivity, lack of access to Wi-Fi and a lack of technical support.

11. CONCLUSIONS

Given the background of the above findings, the researchers make the following conclusions:

- ❖ School heads who use a solution driven approach in managing Covid 19 are able to redefine school leadership practice in Masvingo urban schools. Such an approach includes but is not limited to :
  - Communicating using multiple channels
  - Making quick decisions without consulting staff
  - Leveraging expertise and experience from multiple sources from within and outside the school
  - Distributing leadership responsibilities to improve the quality of decisions made
  - Utilising a type of servant leadership that emphasised empowerment, involvement and collaboration
  - Supporting the health and well-being of their school community
- ❖ School heads who constantly seek out, reflect on opportunities to improve, and are willing to distribute leadership responsibilities to stakeholders are in a position to redefine school leadership practice during Covid 19.
- ❖ School heads who prioritise psychosocial support to address students and teachers' anxieties during Covid 19 are in a position to keep everyone safe and supported.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of the study, the researchers would like to make some recommendations: -

- • School heads must continue to constantly seek out and reflect on opportunities to improve on their leadership practices during Covid 19.
- • School heads must therefore adopt a solution driven approach to managing during Covid 19 Such an approach encompasses prioritising distributing leadership responsibilities and offering psycho social support.
- • The study recommends that schools come up with new leadership programmes that fully and adequately encompass the leadership skills, practices and actions suited for the covid-19 context.

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