



Influence of Headteachers' Leadership Styles on Learners' Academic Performance: Examining Teaching Instruments of Catholic Grant-Aided Secondary Schools

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Abstract: The study focused on the influence of the congregation of the religious sisters' head teachers' leadership styles on learners' academic performance: examining teaching instruments of Catholic grant-aided schools in Lusaka and Central Province at the Grade 12 level. It interrogated the influence of the religious sisters' head teachers' leadership styles on learners' academic performance in selected Catholic grant-aided secondary schools of Lusaka and Central Provinces in Zambia. The focus was on grade 12 results from 2019 to 2023 in the selected schools where the study was conducted. The target population consisted of 513 individuals, and the sample size was 143, comprising three head teachers, 10 teachers, 25 parents, and 105 learners from the selected schools. In-depth interviews were conducted with the head teachers, teachers, and parents, and focus group discussions and class observations were conducted with the learners. Document review was employed to understand learners' previous academic performance. Data was collected and analysed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Method. Data revealed the famous and infamous leadership styles utilised by the head teachers of the Handmaid Sisters. These findings suggest that employing multiple leadership styles and using teaching instruments are necessary to contribute to the institute's full growth, particularly in terms of learner academic performance.

Keywords: Leadership styles, Teaching Instruments, Catholic grant-aided, Learner academic performance, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1. The Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary (HBVM)

The congregation of the religious sisters of the HBVM was founded by Cardinal Adam Kozłowiecki, a member of the Society of Jesus (S.J.), also known as the Jesuits, in 1961 within the Archdiocese of Lusaka. The founder realised that women were not involved in any activity in society at that time. For this reason, he had to establish a congregation of the HBVM, whose mission is to bring Christ to the people through teaching and nursing. The congregation of the religious sisters was founded by Cardinal Adam Kozłowiecki, a member of the Society of Jesus (S.J.), also known as the Jesuits, in 1961 within the Archdiocese of Lusaka. The Constitution (1991, Article 69, P. 24) stated, "We understand the importance of education in schools for the future of the church and society at large." They work in various grant-aided, government, private, and community schools. MOE (1996) stated that a grant-aided institution is an institution that receives from the government a grant of 75% of the capital costs of approved projects, as well as an annual grant to support its running costs. According to Kelly (2015), missionary schools are called grant-aided, where the government provides funding for salaries and operational expenses.

The study examined the influence of head teachers' leadership styles on learners' academic performance in selected Catholic grant-aided secondary schools over five years at the grade 12 level. According to Kochhar (2015), successful management enables the achievement of desired educational objectives within a particular community. The researcher examined the teaching instruments utilised by the head teachers in these grant-aided secondary schools where the study was done. Hambulo (2016) stated that in Zambia, almost everyone associates high standard and quality education with Catholic education because of aspects such as high teacher motivation, good leadership, high-quality students, high

learning achievement, desired curriculum, good infrastructure, total development of the learners (intellectual, moral and spiritual), good learning environment and other evidence in Catholic schools. Nsubuga (2008) argued that even if an institution has all the financial resources to excel, it may fail if the leadership does not motivate others to accomplish their tasks effectively.

Table 1 presents the five-year results of the National Examinations, where the study was conducted from 2019 to 2023.

Table 1:

Schools	Years				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Mwandi Secondary School	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Chona Secondary School	99%	100%	98.9%	100%	100%
Lubono Secondary School	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

ECZ Extract G12 results (2024)

The researcher analysed the influence of the religious sisters' head teachers' leadership styles on learners' academic performance for five years. The table confirmed the good performance in these schools, although this does not come without leadership challenges. The researcher identified the factors behind the sustained excellent performance in the schools. University of Zambia (2022) stated that teachers from grant-aided schools attributed their schools' good learners' academic performance to their head teachers' leadership styles, by using the teaching instrument which are exhibited through rewarding performing teachers and pupils, supervising teachers' activities, interacting freely with teachers and prioritising the buying of teaching and learning material for the school. Therefore, the researcher outlined the leadership styles of head teachers that influence learners' academic performance at the grade 12 level, coupled with their lacunae.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant contributions of religious sisters of the HBVM head teachers to education in Zambia, there is a lack of literature on the influence of their leadership styles on learners' academic performance in selected Catholic grant-aided secondary schools in Lusaka and Central Provinces. However, the head teachers' leadership styles have generally been documented as significantly impacting student achievement in national examinations (University of Zambia, 2022). However, most studies on the influence of head teachers' leadership styles on learners' academic performance have been comparative studies.

Many leadership styles have advantages and disadvantages. However, compelled motivation can significantly contribute to achieving positive results. According to Monte Carlo Analysis (2024), a leader's job is to ensure that everyone in the team and the organisation is motivated and inspired to perform better than their best. At the same time, Monte Carlo Analysis (2024) argued that this is neither quick nor easy, but in the long term, the gains derived from happy employees far outweigh the time and effort spent in motivating them.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the motivation theory of behavioural learning, specifically operant and classical conditioning. According to Monte Carlo Analysis (2024), motivation is the state of mind that drives all human beings to perform to their highest potential, with a positive attitude and good spirits. Reeve *et al.* (2016) suggested that theories are typically employed to inform the design of a research question, guide the selection of relevant data, facilitate data interpretation, and propose explanations for the underlying causes or influences of observed phenomena. Qualitative researchers also rely heavily on social and humanities theories to guide their research process and illuminate their findings (Ibid). There are two important types of motivation theories: content and process. According to Martin and Fellenz (2010) content models of motivation focus on what people need in their lives (i.e., what motivates them), and they comprise Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, Clayton Alderfer's existence, relatedness, and growth (ERG) theory, and Frederick Herzberg's two-factor theory. Process theories that examine psychological and behavioural processes affecting an individual's motivation include Skinner's operant conditioning, expectancy, equity, and goal-setting theories (Sands, 2023). Athina (2023) mentioned that by studying this,

you can learn what actions motivate people to work harder or care more about something, whether through a reward or another factor. The researcher utilised operant conditioning (Skinner) and classical conditioning (Ivan Pavlov) theories to examine how learning occurs. Brau, Fox and Robinson (2020) stated that classical conditioning stimuli cause responses and that the brain can associate stimuli to learn new responses.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

The research design employed in this study was a phenomenological design, which describes particular phenomena or the appearance of things as they are, as experienced by the participants. According to Prime (2024), the phenomenological research design is a qualitative approach that focuses on exploring and describing the lived experiences of individuals to a specific phenomenon. In this research, the qualitative research method aims to uncover the importance of the participants' experiences by examining their perceptions, feelings, and interpretations. Lester (2024) stated that the phenomenological approach seeks to illuminate the specific and identify phenomena through how the actors perceive them. In the human sphere, this typically translates into gathering 'deep' information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods, such as interviews, discussions, and participant observation, and representing them from the perspective of the research participant(s) (Ibid). Prime (2024) confirmed that, rooted in philosophy, phenomenological research design seeks to set aside preconceptions and biases to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who have directly experienced it, thereby adopting a qualitative approach. Therefore, the qualitative approach was critical to this study because it was necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the leadership styles of the religious sisters' head teachers that influence learners' academic performance. The target population of 513 and the sample size of 143 consisted of the three head teachers, 10 teachers, 25 parents, and 105 learners from the sampled Girls' Secondary Schools.

2.2. Sampling Procedures

This study established the sample size using purposive sampling of the three heads and a quota sample of 10 teachers teaching grade 12 learners, 25 parents, and 105 learners selected from the sampled schools. They responded to the in-depth interview guide to analyse the influence of the religious head teachers' leadership style on learners' academic performance in selected Catholic grant-aided secondary schools in Lusaka and Central Provinces.

Table 2

No	Schools	Head Teachers	Teachers	Parents	Class Observation	Total
1	Mwandi Secondary School	1	4	10	40	55
2	Chona Secondary School	1	3	8	35	47
3	Lubono Secondary School	1	3	7	30	41
	Total	3	10	25	105	143

2.2.1. Sampling Techniques

Selvam (2017) discussed the research sampling approach, involving selecting respondents to form a study sample. The researcher in this study utilised non-probability sampling procedures. Walliman (2018) stated that non-probability is based on selection by non-random means. Non-probability sampling encompasses various techniques, including accidental, quota, and snowball sampling. For this study, purposive sampling and quota sampling were utilised to select the respondents to gather in-depth information on issues related to the head teachers, teachers, parents and learners' experiences in analysing the influence of the religious sisters' head teachers' leadership styles on learners' academic performance in selected Catholic grant-aided secondary schools in Lusaka and Central Provinces at grade 12 level.

2.3. Data Collection Method

The study comprises 38 semi-structured interviews of the three head teachers, 10 teachers, 25 parents, three focus group interviews consisting of 6 participants each, 3 class observations coupled with documentary analysis of each school's students' record of assessment known as mark schedules, schemes and records of work, as well as school policies of learner academic performance. The

researcher employed systematic procedures in phenomenology, including semi-structured and focus group interviews, supplemented by documentary analysis. This process, known as triangulation of methods, enabled the collection of individual participants' views in their language (Noble & Heale, 2019). Triangulation of methods involves using multiple data collection instruments to use the strengths of particular approaches to explore a phenomenon from several viewpoints (Haamoonga, 2018).

2.4. Reliability of the Study Findings

The researcher decided to triangulate the data collection methods and sources, including those from head teachers, teachers, parents, and learners, to enhance the credibility of the findings. To ensure the validity and reliability of this study, the researcher employed methodological triangulation, which enabled the collection of data through interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDS), class observations, and document analysis. Focus Group Discussions and document analysis enhanced the confidence in the data. Bhandari (2022) stated that methodological triangulation is essential for validating, corroborating, and ascertaining the truthfulness of certain statements from different sources of evidence consulted. Therefore, the researcher employed methodological triangulation to mitigate the flaws and biases of relying on a single research technique.

2.5. Document analysis

According to Lumivero (2023), document analysis is the systematic review or evaluation of printed and electronic documents. Like many other qualitative research methods, it involves examining and interpreting data to uncover meaning, gain insight, and draw conclusions. The researcher employed triangulation to validate claims about the phenomenon being studied, utilising document analysis that drew on multiple sources and other research-gathering methods.

The schemes of work, work records for teachers, Mark schedules that revealed learners' academic performance, a programme on continuing professional development (CPD), and a policy on learner performance, as analysed in this study, allowed the researcher to capture various human behaviours. They gained insight into learners' academic performance in the selected sites. Lumivero (2023) posited that document analysis helped researchers analyse and interpret recorded information to comprehend human behaviour. Haamoonga (2017) argued that documents are created by a specific group of people seeking to convey their perspective, and they typically provide a defence or explanation regarding a particular situation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Regarding the pass rate, two schools have maintained a 100% rate for the past five years, while the pass rates of the other schools have fluctuated between 98% and 100%. To maintain the pass rate, learners were encouraged to attend extra lessons, and teachers provided additional work, including a homework policy established by the three schools.

In the interviews with Mwandi and Chona schools, the head teachers stated that learners are busy with mid- and end-of-term tests. Each test carries 50% of the marks, so the learners work hard to achieve high marks.

The schools have an annual academic and sports awards policy, which is presented on Awards Day and Sports Day to encourage academic class competition and sports participation. To maintain high standards in learners' academic performance, head teachers regularly monitor learners' progress, and teacher performance is evaluated using monitoring instruments designed by the province. Registers track learners' attendance and prevent absenteeism and missing lessons.

The Lubono School head teacher reported that regarding absenteeism, when a learner is absent for two days, the deputy head reports to the head teacher. The parents or guardians are summoned to explain their child's absence. The head teacher encourages learners to attend school without fail and explains why absenteeism is detrimental. If it continues, the parents will be summoned to clarify the assertion.

Teacher observation: The head teachers use snap checking to ensure teaching is done in the school. Physical class observations are conducted regularly by observing teachers around the school. The teachers write lesson plans daily, and no teacher teaches without a lesson plan approved by the HODS. Teaching files are reviewed at the start and throughout the term.

The head teachers used mark schedules to monitor learner performance. When a parent is summoned to the school for any reason, the head teacher also discusses the learner's academic performance for accountability. In poor academic performance among learners, the head teacher works with the parent to identify the reason, and together, a solution is reached. If there is a need for guidance and counselling, the guidance teacher is informed and takes charge of the situation to aid the learner.

The Chona School teacher stated that I use the mark schedules for the middle of the term, the end of the term, and the end of the year to assess learners' academic performance. The mark schedules determine learners' progression over five years. I also use them to encourage learners to work hard and avoid repeating a grade. The homework policy encompasses various activities, including midterm, end-of-term tests, and mock examinations. It also stipulates when the mid-term and end-of-term tests are to be administered.

The motivation policy of awarding deserving learners on graduation day encourages them to maintain academic performance. Each learner looks forward to being awarded, instilling a sense of competition and hard work in teachers and learners. Teachers are also motivated by monthly incentives and verbal and written encouragement.

Mwandi School stated that we monitor learners through attendance registers, midterm and end-of-term/year tests, and mark schedules, which we maintain and refer to assess their academic progress. We are also monitored through teaching files, which include schemes, work records, class observations, and adherence to homework policies. The head teacher, the deputy head, and the HODS review our teaching files twice a term.

Parents testified in the interviews that the instruments utilised by the head teachers' leadership styles influenced learners' academic performance through continuous assessment that included homework policies, classwork, and tests such as mid-term, end-of-term, and mock examinations. Schools also have an awards and incentives policy to recognise learners and teachers who excel. Parents stated that the selection of learners is based on merit, and only those who reach the school's cut-off points are admitted. Learners are also monitored through remedial work as tuition throughout the term and during holidays. To discourage laziness, parents noted that a repeat-a-grade policy was in place and has been made known to everyone in the school through the acceptance form. Parents, learners and teachers are all aware of the repeat-a-grade policy immediately after admission to the school. The parents stated that when learners' achievements are recognised, it creates a sense of accomplishment and fosters healthy learning behaviour. Henceforth, the school has an award system for deserving learners and teachers. All the teachers receive an incentive as a way to motivate hard work. School rules also enhance discipline for learners who attend grant-aided schools, to which they must adhere religiously.

In an interview, the parents stated that they reward their children because they believe that rewarding an effort in a particular situation makes it more likely to occur again. In contrast, responses that produce a discomforting effect make it less likely.

At Lubono School, a parent stated that learners are motivated by the monthly, mid-term, and end-of-term tests and mock examinations. Learners who perform well are awarded on the ward's day, which occurs once a year. Those with poor grades must repeat a grade or transfer to another school; therefore, there is intense competition in academic performance. At the same time, non-performing learners are counselled, and a discussion is held about the way forward.

Another parent from Lubono School mentioned that I should follow up on my child's performance through the grade teachers on the open day set by the school, or on any other day, to assist my child's academic progress. I also review my child's books and rehearse with the deputy head teacher if there are any concerns in any subject or behaviour.

A parent from Mwandi School mentioned that the head teacher encouraged us during the annual general meeting (AGM) to monitor our children by reviewing their books to determine their daily learning. We encourage them to attend classes, tuition, and any school activities, even on Saturdays, by dropping them off at school. Monitoring was done by tracking performance by keeping mark schedules every term and during the child's time in school.

A parent from Chona School stated that when a child is admitted to the school, they are inducted into the dos and don'ts of the school. School rules are in place, and we sign them in agreement with the school authority.

The end-of-topic, mid-term, and end-of-year mock-inclusive tests help learners measure their academic performance and progress from one grade to the next.

Learners from the three schools stated that tests help us assess our progress over what we have learnt over a specific period. This allows us to prepare for our final examinations (in grades 9 and 12), testing whether we have understood what we were taught. We are also encouraged to consult with teachers on what we did not grasp in class outside of learning time, and we are free to interact with them.

In FGD, learners mentioned that tuition was held after class and during holidays until the examinations were written. Only revisions were done during tuition to help learners understand what they had already learnt.

A Chona School learner stated that the school offers tuition after classes, which is very helpful. The teachers are available for one-on-one discussions to assist learners who have challenges. The guidance and counselling office was equally available to all who needed help with any obstacles.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The head teachers and teachers stated that the instruments used to influence learners' academic performance were the registers and homework policy, which stipulates that homework has to be given to learners every Friday. A test should be written at the end of each topic, and a holiday assignment should be provided at the end of each term. They mentioned that mid-term and end-of-term tests start on Wednesday and run through Friday in the sixth week of each term. The end of the term and the end of the year are conducted two weeks before the close of school every term. The head teachers and the teachers resonate with McLeod (2018), who stated that classical conditioning depends on developing associations between events, while operant conditioning involves learning from the consequences of our behaviour. Learners associate the stipulated homework policy with the guidance given and its importance. Learners prepare themselves by knowing the activities in a term without being reminded.

The head teachers and the teachers confirmed that they used the mark schedules kept in the office and teaching files to monitor each learner's progress in the school. This aligns with Brau, Fox, and Robinson (2020), who stated that behaviour is observable to confirm that learning is taking place. According to their perspective, learning occurs within the environment, specifically the classroom, and all behaviours are a product of the stimulus-response formula. The results in the mark schedules confirm that learning was taking place, and those performing poorly underwent the repeat-a-grade policy, which was a rare case, stated the head teacher. The head teachers said they review the teaching files twice per term to assess the teachers' preparedness in their teaching. The head teacher reiterated that the HODS, as supervisors, mark the lesson plan daily before the lesson is delivered. The head teachers resonate with Ayany (2024), who stated that when teachers have a clear lesson plan, they are more likely to offer it engagingly and effectively, leading to better student outcomes.

The parents agreed with Brooks (2023) that the behaviourist pedagogy relies on reinforcement to facilitate learning – learners receive constant feedback about their performance through graded homework, test scores, etc. The repeat-a-grade policy was implemented to shun laziness, which is made known to everyone in the school. Parents, learners and teachers are all aware of the repeat-a-grade policy immediately after admission to the school. The parents are in tandem with Movchan (2024), who stated that when learners' achievements are recognised and shared by the instructors with other learners, it creates a sense of accomplishment and fosters healthy learning behaviour. The parents concur with Brau, Fox, and Robinson (2020), who stated that rewarded behaviours are more likely to be repeated, while punished behaviours are less likely to be repeated. Therefore, parents encourage their children to achieve good results. Parents award their children because they believe that, as McLead (2018) stated, awarded behaviour is more likely to produce a satisfying effect in a particular situation and become more likely to occur again. Responses that produce a discomforting effect become less likely to happen again in that situation.

The learners in the focus group discussion stated that there is an open day every term on which we receive our report forms. Our parents are invited to join us in accepting and supporting our academic journey on this special day. Tuition is held after class and during holidays until the examinations are written. Revisions are conducted during tuition to help us identify areas where we have challenges.

NAQEZ (2018) revealed that many reports suggest that promotions in the teaching profession are not based on merit. These matters demotivate teachers, and the ministry must address them critically. This was contrary to what was done in grant-aided schools, where teachers were recommended for promotion on merit to the Ministry of Education and were motivated through various incentives by the school and the Parent-Teachers' Committee (PTC). Therefore, when teachers are qualified, motivated and well-supported, their work leads to better learning for the children in their classrooms (NAQEZ, 2018). That is why support for teachers and quality teaching is a priority for the Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that teaching instruments significantly contribute to learners' academic performance. Therefore, the leadership styles of the religious sisters' head teachers regarding learners' educational performance should be maintained and reviewed to improve their performance in the schools they run.

It has been observed that a leader's role is to ensure that everyone in the team and the organisation is motivated and inspired to perform at their best, thereby carrying out the school's teaching objectives. This is neither quick nor easy, but the benefits of having happy employees far outweigh the time and effort spent motivating them in the long term.

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