

## Stakeholders' perceptions regarding the extent to which work experience prepares senior teachers for school leadership

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### Abstract

*This study sought to examine stakeholders' perceptions regarding the extent to which work experience at the level of senior teacher effectively prepared aspiring incumbents for school leadership. The study employed the qualitative research design. A total of 30 participants, comprising school heads, deputy heads and senior teachers who were drawn from selected secondary schools from a district in south eastern Zimbabwe, constituted the sample. Focus group interviews were used to collect data from the participants. The findings indicated that participation in school leadership provided senior teachers with an opportunity to develop a conception of headship role through participation and observation. The study also highlighted the challenges that inhibited the capacity of senior teachers to develop the necessary skills that could provide them with adequate professional grounding for their transition into positions of school leadership upon promotion. The study established that such factors as the leadership style of the school head, micro-politics within the school, gender discrimination and lack of in-service leadership training for senior teachers were cited as the major challenges that affected the leadership development of senior teachers. The study recommends the need for education authorities to develop a formal school-based professional development plan that commits school heads to provide on-the-job training for senior teachers.*

**Keywords:** *challenges; experience; preparation; senior teachers; school leadership.*

### Introduction and background to the study

Senior teachers are an important part of the hierarchy framework of any school system (Rutherford, 2006). This is largely because the position of senior teacher has become crucial to the question of leadership succession within the school system. Studies indicate that school

leaders are appointed from among the ranks of senior teachers (Bush, 2008; Mapolisa & Tshabalala, 2013; Shava, 2015). The decentralisation of the school management system to the school site, a development which clustered leadership responsibilities around the school head, has intensified the participation of senior teachers in school leadership as overburdened school heads resort to delegating certain roles to deputy heads and senior teachers (Caldwell, 2008; Nobile, 2018). Their involvement in the administration of schools naturally develops in them a sense of aspiration to become school leaders, as they are often delegated duties to lead the school in the absence of the school head and deputy head. Bennet (1995) confirms the crucial role senior teachers play in providing administrative and instructional leadership within the school system. Empirical evidence suggests that in most education systems in Africa, teachers do not receive any formal preparation before they are promoted to positions of school headship (Eacott & Asuga, 2014). In view of the absence of a formal leadership preparation programme, this study sought to examine stakeholders' perceptions regarding the extent to which work experience at the level of senior teacher effectively prepares aspiring incumbents for school leadership in secondary schools.

For the purpose of this study, stakeholders are those professionals in the education sector who could have a direct interest in school headship, such as senior teachers (aspiring to be school heads), deputy school heads and school heads (both newly promoted and already practising). It is important to begin by delineating the scope of the term 'senior teacher' as used in this study. In this study, the term is used in line with Gurr and Drysdale's (2013) conception of senior teachers. Gurr and Drysdale (2013) refer to senior teachers as middle-level school leaders, ranked between the senior school leadership and the general teaching staff, that are delegated specific responsibilities and duties within the school. such leaders include senior

masters, senior women, heads of department, subject and sports co-ordinators and teachers-in-charge.

The bulk of research on school leadership in Zimbabwe has largely focused on school heads (Shava, 2015; Samkange, 2013) while very little research has been carried out on the leadership experiences of senior teachers. This is despite the critical importance that this middle position has to the notion of leadership succession in the school system. This current study seeks to address this gap by investigating stakeholders' views regarding the extent to which work experience at the level of senior teacher could effectively prepare incumbents for school leadership. An understanding of the opportunities and challenges underlying work experience at the level of senior teacher could help to provide insights into how the notion of delegation can be used to prepare senior teachers for their future roles in school headship. The study might also help stakeholders to understand how work experience could be used to prepare senior teachers for school leadership, especially under circumstances where those appointed to positions of headship do not receive formal training before promotion (Ashu, 2014; Bush, 2008).

### **Context of the Study**

The leadership functions that senior teachers play within the school could best be understood within the context of distributed leadership (Dampson, Havor & Laryea, 2018). According to Harris (2008), distributed leadership is based on the idea that leadership is not the preserve of a single individual; it is a shared practice that is achieved through the interaction of members within the school. The distribution of leadership, vertically and laterally, within the school hierarchy and the general membership of the organisation, implies a devolved school structure in which leadership is shared within the bureaucratic structures of the school so as to improve

school effectiveness (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). The practice enables wider participation in decision-making and problem-solving as members exercise leadership within the various sub-sectors and activities of the school that they are delegated to lead. Literature on distributed leadership avers that the practice provides members with an opportunity to learn through the interactions that happen within the network of the organisation, its departments and groupings (Harris, 2008). Although distributed leadership had received wide acclaim as a democratic practice of leadership, studies indicate that the practice has its own challenges. Dampson et al. (2018) assert that the distribution of tasks is a reflection of leadership power; hence tasks are delegated according to the interests of the leader. This implies that the leader may be selective in determining those tasks that can be executed in a collaborative manner while reserving critical tasks for individual execution, thereby restricting the scope of collaboration and experiential learning for super ordinates.

The role of the senior teacher entails added administrative responsibilities to those of the typical classroom teacher across school systems worldwide. Senior teachers are expected to carry out a wide range of activities that are critical to the attainment of school goals (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher & Turner, 2007). According to Razzak (2015) senior teachers play a predominant role of providing instructional leadership as they are often delegated to supervise the process of teaching and learning within the school. As middle management, senior teachers are also responsible for implementing the vision of the school as set by the senior school management. In order to achieve this, senior teachers coordinate the implementation of the curriculum and also ensure that the right conditions for optimum teaching and learning prevail within the school. Senior teachers also function as heads of departments (HODs) wherein they are expected to set visions for their respective departments which dovetail into the broad school

vision. Besides, senior teachers also undertake management tasks that are related to the maintenance, development or improvement of aspects of the school organisation such as teacher supervision, student welfare, student discipline, timetables and duty rosters (De Nobile, 2018). The mix of classroom teaching and administrative roles has presented both opportunities and challenges relating to leadership development for senior teachers. The leadership structure within secondary schools in Zimbabwe, in which senior teachers play an administrative role in such aspects as student discipline, supervision, instructional leadership and academic planning, presents them with an opportunity to develop the necessary leadership experience (Chigudu, 2016; Chikwature, Oyedele & Ganyani, 2016; Wadesango, 2010).

According to Razzak (2015), the participation of senior teachers in leadership roles provides them with the opportunity to construct their own professional identity as school leaders. Crow (2006) also asserts that senior teachers develop a conception of the role of headship experientially, through participation and observation, thereby attaining the basic professional grounding required in school leadership. Senior teachers gain this experience by observing the incumbent head at work and by performing certain administrative tasks as and when they are delegated to them. Given the fact that the role of senior teachers dovetails into the overall responsibilities of school heads (Vacancy Announcement Number 32 of 2014; Bush, 2008), it is quite apparent that the position provides an opportunity for the incumbent to undergo experiential learning of different situations, thereby developing a repertoire of skills that are critical in making leadership decisions (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). Bush (2008) refers to the notion of emergent leadership to describe that stage at which senior teachers begin to undertake leadership and administrative responsibilities within the school system. Research indicates that the professional guidance of subordinates, through a process of mentoring, expedites the

transition of emergent leaders (such as senior teachers) to higher levels of skills acquisition (Carraccio, Benson, Nixon & Derstine, 2008).

There are, however, contrasting research studies that have highlighted numerous challenges that inhibit the capacity of senior teachers to develop optimum leadership experience within the school system. Razzak (2015), for instance, contends that the post of senior teacher is too demanding to afford the teacher time to learn leadership skills. This is because it entails added leadership and management responsibilities to the already existing classroom load. Research also indicates that the challenges encountered by senior teachers emanate from the fact that their role is ambiguous as it overlaps between that of the teacher and the senior leadership team (Irvine et al., 2016). This has resulted in senior teachers incurring a heavy workload and, thus, failing to strike a balance between the expectations of senior management and the entire school. The other challenge associated with senior teachers is that they are simply appointed to the post, without formal training and, thus, are left to learn the demands of the job experientially.

Literature indicates that the problem of gender discrimination also affects the capacity of senior teachers to receive optimum professional guidance from their male superordinates. Irvine et al. (2016) affirm the rampant problem of gender discrimination in leadership development in Africa.

The problem of lack of formal training for school leaders has been cited as rampant in most countries in Africa (Bush, 2008). As a result of lack of training and in view of the complexity of school management, the capacity of senior teachers to attain effective experiential learning has been affected by a lack of time and lack of professional guidance from their superordinates

(Razzak, 2015). Flessa (2009) argues that in certain instances, school heads do not provide professional guidance to their subordinates because the micro politics at play within the schools do not often provide an enabling environment for collaboration between the two parties. Power relations within the school are often of a mutually suspicious and antagonistic nature to the extent that it could be difficult for senior teachers to be mentored by the school head. A study by Webb (2018) on educational micro politics insinuates that power shapes people's interests and influences how they make decisions in relation to their sub-ordinates. Salahuddin (2012) also corroborates this view by stating that the traditional hierarchy of leadership in schools entails that power is centred within the school head. In this regard, school heads often pursue a heroic form of leadership that compels them to want to work alone. Resultantly, the involvement of senior teachers in decision-making, let alone in the overall management of the school, is very limited, to the extent that they learn very little during their formative tour of duty (De Nobile, 2018). The sentiments of the above authors imply that the school head's perception of power and choice of leadership style are major determinants of the extent to which school heads can provide professional support to subordinates. Research indicates that autocratic leadership styles inhibit effective mentoring, while participatory leadership styles create the right conditions for effective mentoring (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was premised on the distributed leadership theory and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. The two theories were considered to be appropriate for this study because they provided the researcher with an understanding of the notion of task distribution within the school system and how senior teachers can conceptualise roles of headship and develop the knowledge, experiences and skills that are required to prepare them

for school leadership. The notion of distributed leadership is an age-old phenomenon that views leadership as a shared practice that entails distribution and execution of tasks to enable staff to work together and develop each other's capacity (Bolden, 2011; Dampson et al., 2018). The experiential learning theory postulates that learning occurs in the form of a cycle. An individual experiences a problem in its concrete form. Knowledge is then gathered and carefully analysed upon reflection on the problem, leading to the reconceptualisation and internalisation of new ideas that could help solve similar problems in future. The new ideas are finally put to test to determine if they can solve problems in new situations.

In respect of this study, Kolb's (1984) theory avers that previous experience provides the necessary grounding for learners to interpret new meaning and develop the capacity to solve problems on the basis of observation and reflection. A study by Cox (2005) supports Kolb's idea by stating that individuals are capable of learning from experience, without pedagogic interventions, and gain the necessary knowledge and skills relating to specific work processes. This implies that experiential learning is associated with on-the-job training, in which learners increase self-awareness of work tasks through observation, reflection and conceptualisation. Kolb's (1984) theory is quite relevant to this study as it affirms the importance of experiential learning as the basis of skill acquisition in professional development. The practice of experiential learning provides participants with an opportunity to learn the requisite skills through interaction, observation and support from their experienced peers. Irvine et al. (2016) state that the experiences that novices attain out of different situations enable them to develop a repertoire of skills from which they can draw in their future leadership roles.

## **Methodology**



The study used an interpretive paradigm to examine the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the extent to which work experience at the level of senior teacher prepared incumbents for school headship. Interpretive research is a research paradigm that is based on the thinking that social reality is a function of human experiences as they happen within specific social contexts (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The study employed the qualitative research approach and used the case study design as the framework for the empirical study of the phenomenon. This was deemed appropriate as it enabled the researcher to interrogate the phenomenon within a bounded case (Ylikoski, 2019) from which the researcher collected data from selected secondary schools in one district in south-eastern Zimbabwe. Participants were purposively selected from 10 secondary schools. The study sample comprised 30 participants, namely 10 school heads, 10 deputy heads and 10 senior teachers. The sample deliberately drew participants from the three sub-categories of the school leadership continuum (senior teacher, deputy heads and school heads) who had attained professional experience as senior teachers.

Focus group discussions were used to elicit for a solid understanding of the extent to which work experience provided senior teachers with the requisite professional grounding for school leadership. In this regard, three separate focus groups were conducted for school heads, deputy heads and senior teachers. The group interviews helped to set the stage for social interaction in a manner that was reflective of the way individuals form opinions in the real world through interacting and conversing (Dilshad & Latif, 2013:192; Boateng, 2012).

Participants were allocated identification codes as a way of maintaining their anonymity. School heads, deputy heads and senior teachers were identified by the codes A, B and C, respectively. A number was allocated to participants in the three categories, according to the

order of schools. Participants participated in respective focus groups according to their ranks. Permission to conduct the research study and access schools was sought from the education authorities. Before the field study was conducted, the researcher made efforts to inform the participants about the purpose of the study. The consent of participants was obtained first before their participation in focus groups.

The collected data were first transcribed from audio recordings into written text. Data were then arranged through a process of coding. Themes were then generated as the data were analysed.

### **Presentation, analysis and discussion of findings**

This study sought to establish the perceptions of participants on whether work experience at the level of senior teacher provided adequate professional grounding for the transition of senior teachers from classroom practice to positions of school leadership upon promotion. As previously indicated, in Zimbabwe, like in other education systems in Africa, school heads are promoted from the ranks of senior teachers on the basis of a good teaching record (Bush & Oduro, 2006). In this regard, it was pertinent to elicit participants' views regarding the extent to which experience gained prior to promotion could equip beginning school heads with the necessary skills that are required in school leadership. Two themes that emerged from the study were participants' perceptions regarding the extent to which work experience effectively prepared aspiring incumbents for school leadership, and leadership style as a determinant of effective experiential learning of senior teachers.

### **The extent to which work experience prepares aspiring incumbents for school leadership**

There were mixed feelings among participants that were interviewed regarding the extent to which teaching experience at the level of senior teacher was essential in preparing incumbents for the supervisory role that they were expected to perform. However, most participants agreed that the experience gained in the classroom was quite helpful as it enabled incumbents to develop a clear understanding of the instructional approaches as well as the needs and concerns of subordinates. According to this view, teaching experience was a critical determinant of sound instructional leadership. This finding is typified by the participants' responses in the statements below:

*Definitely, definitely, I think this is where I got most of the experience because when you are teaching you really understand what must be done by a teacher, by a classroom teacher so that you can implement it in your supervision (A1).*

Another participant, H6, viewed the array of responsibilities at the level of senior teacher as a source of valuable experience:

*Definitely, my teaching experience was very handy in my new task as deputy head because definitely you need to rely on the past in order to move on...Even though you are a teacher but you are already involved in administration. As teachers on duty, you supervise students. I was at one time senior lady so I was part of the administration. At another time, I was teacher librarian running the school library as well as teaching; yet at another time also I was the school counsellor. So all those posts,*

*definitely, are part and parcel of the administration. Even the day to day duties of the teacher are encompassed in administration although at a smaller scale (A6).*

Participant A5 also acknowledged the importance of experience as a critical factor for sound leadership:

*In my role as a senior teacher before promotion, I had to deal with issues to do with examination management, disciplinary issues...I was a member of the disciplinary committee, managing sporting activities and tours to various centres for learning purposes and various such other responsibilities as delegated by the head. But, all those duties had to do with school administration. So as a senior teacher I gained a lot of experience because my headmaster exposed me to various situations that made me experience those necessary activities that would enable me to be an efficient leader if I were to be given a chance to lead a school (A5).*

The findings above indicate that teaching experience, particularly at the level of senior teacher, provides aspiring incumbents with an insight into school management. Participant B3 corroborates this by stating that some of the senior teachers would be at the level of head of department and “...that gives them the opportunity to learn how to lead”. According to him, senior teachers are promoted to “...the post of head” from that of head of department, hence they are in “...a better position unlike someone who is just from the classroom, who has never been an HOD”. This implies that “...the experience they gain when they lead a department is

of assistance to the higher post". Crow (2006) supports this view by stating that the conceptualisation of headship roles by subordinates largely depends on the experiences that they gain through observations and when certain duties are delegated to them. It is quite evident, from the above findings, that most participants revered the importance of teaching experience as a precursor to sound leadership.

One participant, however, stated that teaching experience added little value to school leadership. The participant had the following to say:

*Not very much, there is quite a difference between the leadership I am playing right now and the teaching role I played before promotion (A10).*

The participant's response potentially implies that the post of headship requires a different set of skills, to the extent that work experience at the level of senior teacher cannot suffice for the skills required for effective school leadership. This view corroborates Bush's (2008) assertion that headship is almost a second career that is different from the teaching profession, hence, it is necessary to provide formal training to school heads.

Participant B9 indicated that education authorities take it for granted that teaching experience provides the necessary preparation for school leadership. The sentiments below help to illustrate this thinking:

*I was saying usually the main assumption is that by having been within the system or in the system for so many years one should have gained the experience to be able to*

*lead a school. They make it an assumption but it depends on conditions and the environment in which one would have been... (B9).*

### **Leadership style as a determinant of effective experiential learning**

A sizeable number of participants felt that the capacity for senior teachers to gain experience before promotion was largely dependent upon the leadership style of the school head. Participants stated that the leadership style of the school head was a critical factor in determining whether or not an aspiring incumbent could be groomed into leadership. It was stated that some school heads were participatory in terms of their leadership disposition, to the extent that they involved subordinates in administration through delegation, which provided the latter with a chance to learn. On the contrary, other school heads were so autocratic that they hardly involved subordinates in the affairs of the school. Under such circumstances, it would be difficult for senior teachers to gain any meaningful leadership experience. According to participant B10, the experience that senior teachers get in schools “...depends on the institution one will be working”. This implies that a teacher’s work ethics were likely to be modelled on the basis of that of the school head within a particular school. This view is reflected in the following statements:

*There are some types of leaders who are prepared to groom others into leadership positions. Now if you have such a leader, then I think the people in the school will have the opportunity to grow as leaders but if the system is closed to an extent that people are not delegated some leadership responsibilities then it may mean that people in the school may never know about leadership (B8).*

Participant C2 also had the following to say:

*Yeah really, especially if you are at a school where you are delegated some duties. You will be seeing quite a lot of things; you will be exercising certain duties that are supposed to be exercised by the head or some, part of them. It depends on the school that you are. If you are under an autocrat head, when you go to head a new school, it may become difficult for you because you will have theoretical knowledge without any practice. But if you were at a school where you are delegated a duty as a senior teacher, because normally senior teachers work together with the head and the deputy head, so most of the administrative issues, you will know them. So being at a school and having a lot of experience might help in the quick assimilation of execution of duties when you are head (C2).*

Participant C7 also remarked:

*I think it depends with stations because some heads are so democratic that you can even be given keys when he is out and we can handle visitors, log them in and sometimes we attend some of the meetings like financial meetings. We are informed in everything (C7).*

Besides the issue of school heads' leadership styles cited above, some school heads were also regarded as not having been keen to groom subordinates due to politics at play within the school. Flessa (2009) contends that the power relations emanating from the micro-politics within the school environment might not enable the school head to collaborate with the

teachers. Salahuddin (2012) also states that the traditional hierarchy of leadership, in which power was centralised in the school head, militated against the practice of delegating administrative duties to subordinates. It is quite evident that senior teachers who work in these types of schools might not realise optimum professional growth.

Participant C10 also explained some of the problems inhibiting the proper grooming of aspiring incumbents in schools. The participant had the following to say:

*But now the problem that we have is, let me say, the problem that we have is power distribution at schools, it is the major problem that we have. Somebody is appointed senior teacher but the headmaster might not be quite confident, quite sure to give all the trust to that person as a senior teacher. There are some limitations that are given on you, some barriers. You are not supposed to know something; you are not supposed to be well versed in something. You have got your own ends and actually that's where the problem comes from. When you are promoted, you are half backed and when you get your post then you meet problems (C10).*

Participant C1 also raised concerns about the exclusion of senior teachers from participating in “...some of the issues of management especially the financial management”. The participant stated that senior teachers did not have a say in financial matters which “...means you cannot be a leader because you don't know how the school funds are run”. The above view was corroborated by respondent C2, who stated that the involvement of senior teachers and deputy heads in school management “...will make them prepare for the future job which they will be aspiring to do” when they got promoted. It is quite clear that if senior teachers did not



participate in such matters as financial management, then they might not develop the requisite skills to handle these matters once they are promoted into headship.

Participant C2 also lamented the plight of female senior teachers within schools. She was able to share the experience at her school by stating that she had never been accorded the opportunity to participate in administration. The following statement represents her views on the plight of female senior teachers:

*For us women, just working, just the experience we get when we are just teachers it's very different from the experience we will get when we go or when we are promoted as heads. I am talking from experience. Most of the administrative issues or what, you are excluded. You are just given an office, yes, because that's supposed to be the organogram of the school. There should be a senior lady in the school. But you don't know anything that happens in the school. You are only called when there is a girl who needs your help, full stop. So when you are promoted to being a head, you know nothing. You are more like, I don't know...more like a student. You are now doing everything using that trial and error, you know (C2).*

It is quite clear, from the foregoing submission that the problem of gender intolerance in schools is one of the factors that inhibit the capacity of senior teachers to acquire the basic administrative skills through the guidance of the school head. Irvine et al. (2016) confirm that issues of gender are a major hindrance to the leadership development of female school leaders.

The findings from this study indicate that the position of senior teacher provides incumbents with an opportunity to conceptualise the role of headship and gain the knowledge, skills and experience required for school leadership. The study, however, also established that despite the opportunity for professional growth, senior teachers encountered an array of challenges that affected their capacity for experiential learning. Issues of gender, leadership style, lack of formal training, role ambiguity and lack of willingness by school heads to mentor senior teachers were some of the challenges that were found to affect them.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Basing on the above, it can be concluded that work experience at the level of senior teacher is very essential as it prepares the former for school leadership. It is quite apparent that such experience provides considerable professional grounding for the transition of senior teachers into positions of school leadership once they assume positions of school leadership.

In view of the crucial importance of the role of senior teachers in leadership succession, the study recommends that education authorities should develop a formal school based professional development plan that commits school heads to provide on-the-job training to the former. This is critically important if consideration is given to the fact that school heads are promoted from the ranks of senior teachers without formal training, hence, there is a need to effectively prepare them before they are promoted. It is also recommended that school heads be provided with leadership training that can effectively prepare them to embrace leadership approaches that are participatory and gender-friendly, so that senior teachers can be accorded a chance for experimental learning.

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