SCHOOL HEADS AND RESEARCH

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Abstract
This article discusses the role of school heads in research towards school improvement and uses the constructivist framework by applying an interpretive/hermeneutic design. This approach is motivated by the authors' belief that school improvement is 'context based'. The discussion draws arguments from a desk-study in which documentary analysis on school heads and research was conducted. In-school studies and studies by out-of-school researchers in Botswana were also analyzed. International literature was also examined. Literature was explored with the purpose of eliciting the role that school heads play in research as a critical activity in school improvement. The findings of the study reveal that very little in-school studies led by school heads exist in Botswana. Minimal engagement of school heads in these in-school research activities shows that research in Botswana is still more of a rhetoric than practice. Findings in international literature show that schools that engage in research activities generally do better than those that do not. This also apply to school leaders who engage in research.

Keywords: School heads, research, constructivist framework, educational leadership, Botswana

1.0 Introduction

Research for purposes of achieving school improvement is inevitable in educational leadership. This article adopts a qualitative/interpretive approach to explore the functionality of educational research in educational leadership. The function of educational leadership is carried out by school heads, deputy school heads, heads of departments and senior teachers. These portfolio responsibilities require holders to account for learner achievement and school improvement. They are therefore called instructional leaders. They support teachers to improve their professional instructional practice. The desire to improve instructional leadership practice is, therefore, on demand, hence the need for these practitioners to engage with educational research. Instructional leaders, especially school heads, could be viewed at in two levels. Firstly, their role in facilitating a knowledge-based society and secondly their perception about research activities.

The Government of Botswana recognises the importance of research and innovation in assisting to produce citizens who can function effectively. School heads play a pivotal role in shaping not only the culture and results of a school but also in shaping the economy of any given

country. While school heads may have the desired experience and training to lead schools, systematic school-based research is required to fully elucidate seemingly negating factors of quality school results and deteriorating students' behaviour. Contrary to the foregoing, research in Botswana is not considered a requisite function for school heads. Therefore, the fundamental reason for this study is to address the participation of school heads in research. Research capacity among school heads is needed to influence the much-sought educational transformation and skills development needed to upscale Botswana into a knowledge driven economy.

2.0 Background

There are 821 primary schools in Botswana, 746 (90.9%) of which are government schools, 10 (1.2%) are government aided and 65 (7.9%) are privately owned. There are 291 secondary schools 81.4% of which are government schools while 1.4% and 17% are government aided and private schools respectively (Statistics Botswana, 2019) The disparities in performance between these public, government aided and private schools in Botswana is problematic and a subject of further enquiry. However, all these schools are led at institutional level by school heads. These men and women are mandated with a mammoth task of overseeing effective implementation of the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994 and Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP) 2015-2020. These two are critical blueprints meant to guide in transforming Botswana from where it is to where it wants to be. Inevitably school heads play a critical leadership role in determining the direction to which the school and the country should go. Conley and Goldman in Copland (2003) states that school leadership plays a facilitative role and suggest that "the capacity to lead is not principal – centric by necessity, but rather embedded in various organisational contexts" (p.5). It is therefore imperative to mention that for the purpose of this study, leadership will be looked at in regard to school heads only. This does not take away the significance of others within the school setting such as the deputies, heads department and others in the leadership structure of a school.

Fundamental to sustainable development is education which has been found by many countries worldwide as an investment into human resource development which subsequently drives countries' economies. Various countries in the world explore different ways of reducing poverty and enhancing their economic well-being by minimally relying on natural resources. Bakokonyane (2022) asserts that school heads' proficiencies are an essential element towards school improvement. This assertion, which is informed by Hargreaves' capital theory that places much emphasis on intellectual capital of leaders towards school effectiveness and improvement, resonates with the transformational theory that informs this study. Botswana is not an exception to this emerging phenomenon. One common strategy is that countries work to strengthen Human Resource Development Plans geared towards facilitating empowerment of leadership at all levels for improved students and school results (National Human Resource Development Strategy, 2009). However, there is no single definition for school leadership because leadership issues are multifaceted and should be addressed at several fronts. For instance, the attainment of excellence

awards based on a once off exam mark is a good which may not be a sufficient measure of good leadership. Muijs, Harris, Chapman. Stoll and Russ (2004, p.167) observed that, "While many schools can make short-term improvements, sustaining improvement is a big challenge, particularly for schools in economically underprivileged communities. Most of these communities are the rural ethnic minority dominated areas. The areas experience several factors that call for continuous enquiry to investigate and improve sustained classroom instruction and learner performance. Sustainability issues are paramount towards a knowledge driven economy. However, the amount of literature on such issues is very limited despite the research privilege that school heads enjoy in schools. Subsequently, the researchers challenge the view that educational research needs funding for it to inform practice.

School heads in Botswana meet time and again to ponder on how effectively they could improve declining school performances and counter challenges they face in schools. Education conferences and Pitso have come and gone, strategies shared, research findings disseminated and a lot more other things have been done to no avail! The increasing challenges in schools, despite the continued conferences and consultation forums, raises questions like, "Are our school identical?" Johnson (2011, p. 78) argues that "one way a school administrator can address the challenges that education faces today is through the knowledge and application of Action Research." Marumo and Pansiri (2016) agree with Johnson as they suggest that research is required to ethnographically appreciate the challenges that public schools experience, with a view to reduce attitudes and practices of moral indifference and the culture of silent exclusion. The educational reform strategy in Botswana as articulated in both the RNPE (1994) and ETSSP (2015-2020) expresses renewed interest in improving the quality of the teachers in the quest for quality outcomes of the teaching and learning process. Central to this is the critical role of the school heads who themselves are teachers in the lead. Both the RNPE and ETSSP are development blueprints aimed at transforming Botswana from its current natural resource-based economy to a knowledge driven economy.

3.0 Literature review

Leadership is quite an interesting concept because of its dynamism. Early and Weindling (2004) argue that more differentiated accounts of leaders working in different ways and contexts and over time need to be considered. Several leadership issues need to be investigated critically across schools. We also know too little about how leaders and leadership changes over time as individuals mature and grow in experience. It is in this light that school leadership discussed in this article will be based on head teachers'/school heads or school principals. Leadership changes with time and situation. It is therefore befitting to describe it as a social construct. While new theories are emerging, the world currently functions in the realm of transformational leadership theories. Proponents of this theory suggest that intellectual stimulation allows a leader to promote new ideas and challenge the old ways of operating within an organisation hence the need for action research in schools as transformation starts with the self.

Since leadership occurs in some kind of group and the leader functions in relationship to the members of the groups, it is necessary that a leader possesses and practicalizes skills such as research so that they can withstand the challenges that come with group dynamics in a more informed way. Leadership in 21st century schools is not easy basically because of the digitalized education. Sergiovanni (2007) asserts that educational organizations are much too complex for effectiveness to be attributed to any single dimension. A concept of leadership based mainly on speculation and research effort is that there are people with certain traits that automatically qualify them for leadership roles. While that could be the case, leadership may be determined by situations that one finds themselves in. The most important thing about leadership is that it provides direction on doing or meeting a planned goal. As researchers we argue here that leadership can be undertaken by anyone because it is trainable if not innate. Leaders differ in style or approach to leadership from one organization to the other.

4.0 Effective leadership and its impact

Leadership is a primary role for all heads of schools. Being a leader in any context means getting things done through other people. An informed leader is very crucial in any context because without it effective administration would be in vain. A passive leader who acts as receptacle of information is more likely to face a lot of challenges physically and emotionally in his/her duties than the one who is equally active and concerned about his staff and the tasks they perform. Heads of schools and the senior management teams have authority by virtue of the office they hold. However, their effectiveness to run schools will depend a great deal on their personal experience and indeed on their abilities. Based on the challenging work of school heads, it is critical that as leaders they are not only able to respond to routine problems with value-based and well-established practices, but also have the capacity to construct their own knowledge of practice based on approaches that are better suited to the specific circumstances of their own situation (Cunningham, VanGronigen, Tucker & Young, 2019). This therefore implies that if a person has been an excellent classroom teacher, it does not necessarily follow that he or she will be an excellent school head. His/her skills in the classroom may not be suitable for leading people and as such s/he has to acquire those requisite skills. Effective leadership in schools is not exercised in abstract, but in continually seeking new knowledge in practical ways that are context relevant. Effective leadership is therefore to some extent contextual.

Various researchers have put forward explanations on the nature of effective leadership. They differ from each other over whether the effective leader is one who is autocratic or someone who delegates, consults, and invites full participation. It is of great importance for all school heads to practice participative leadership because it creates trust and rapport between them and their followers. Teachers will know that they are not just receptors or mere implementers of pre-determined decisions, but they are also active decision-makers. A school where the school head or the Senior Management Team enables followers to participate in leadership activities usually excels in most of its activities. Active teachers are motivating agent to the learners. A school where

the school head uses more of the authority vested upon him has been found to be characterized by factions in the school, low morale on teachers and poor results in its activities. David and Ellison (1996, p.1) opine that "there is now a good deal of evidence to confirm the view that in any school the leadership determines the quality of what happens." Thus, leadership should be tactfully dealt with by calling for team effort to avoid the factions, chaos, and low morale that might characterize the school.

5.0 Leadership and research

School leadership is a fundamental construct for sustainable development. Ineffective school leadership in most schools in Botswana seems to have existed as an educational problem for many years now. Debate continues about leadership approaches particularly in rural schools where underperformance is rife. Most studies on school leadership have only been carried out in a small number of areas. The generality of much of these published studies is problematic. Much uncertainty still exists about the relationship between school heads and research. There is very little scientific understanding of school heads and research. Apart from Copland (2003), cited in Johnson (2011), there is a general lack of research on school heads and research. This is despite strong contentions like those of Day, Sammons, and Gorgen (2020) who contend that school heads occupy an influential position in society and shape the teaching profession. They are lead professionals and significant role models within the communities they serve. The values and ambitions of school leaders determine the achievements of schools. They are accountable for the education of current and future generations of children. Their leadership has a decisive impact on the quality of teaching and pupils' achievements in the nation's classrooms.

Petty (2006) suggests that schools should be led less by custom and practice, or current fashion, and more by research. Despite the government's efforts of upgrading the majority of school heads' qualifications to degree level and some to masters' level, available literature attests that very few of them play a leading role in research activities. It is here that we argue that research should not be made as a mere requirement to fulfil at higher education to attain a qualification; it should rather be emphasised as continuous skill that one should utilise when they are on the job.

We argue here that lack of context-based research activities in schools and their documentation thereof has overtime contributed to the inconsistent academic performance in schools in Botswana. These inconsistencies are more profound when leaders change schools, when learners change teachers, when different cohorts reach their transition standards to other levels and many other instances. These transitions can either cause the results to soar or to drop hence causing stress and frustration to both the school heads and the teachers. It is against this backdrop that a situational analysis can be helpful. Copland (2003) raised the issue of sustainability as he concludes in her study that reforming schools face the challenge of sustaining the culture changes that support inquiry as she claims that becoming sustainable meant schools needed to find ways to embed their reform work, and especially their inquiry process, into the culture of the school.

6.0 Theoretical framework

The current investigation adopts a Behavioural theorist which proposes that the behaviour of a leader is the key indicator of how well he/she will influence the result of an institution. It argues against the assumption that leadership is congenital to the point that anyone can be made a leader by teaching them the most appropriate behavioural response for any situation. This assumption is problematic in that it assumes people as objects that can be manipulated. Contingency theorists on the other hand claim the optimal course of action is dependent upon the internal and external situation. Muijs et al. (2004, p.151) says that "what makes an organisation effective is dependent on situational factors (contingency factors)." As an enhanced version of the contingency theory is the Transactional Theory that focuses mainly on institutional performance, leadership and how all the internal process are organised. These theorists promote compliance by followers through both rewards and punishments. It is more concerned with the tasks and the results thereof.

Proponents of transformational leadership suggest that intellectual stimulation allows a leader to promote new ideas and challenge the old ways of operating within an organisation. It focuses on enhancing the motivation and engagement of followers by directing their behaviour towards a shared vision. A leader who puts this theory into practice works with subordinates to identify the needed change, creating a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executing the change in tandem with committed members of the group, an approach that causes change in individuals and social systems. In its ideal form, it creates valuable and positive change in the followers with the end goal of developing followers into leaders. Proponents of transformational leadership entertain new ideas. It is against this backdrop that this study is informed by the transformational theory of leadership.

7.0. The statement of the problem

School heads as leaders have a critical role to help teachers and learners to increase or revise current knowledge by discovering new meanings and facts. However, a casual interaction with many school heads tends to reveal a worrying phenomenon. School heads function as the uncritical consumers and uniformed implementers of research findings from external researchers, consultants, and commissions. Schools operate as common guinea pigs, that is, laboratories of scientific experimentation, or any experiment or test in modern times for educational researchers; and school heads function as guinea pig's laboratory assistants. This trend cannot be allowed in the 21ˢᵗ century school leadership.

8.0 Research questions

This desk-based study draws from literature and policy frameworks around the world and seeks to answer the following questions.

a) Have school leaders engaged action research in their professional practice?

b) What are the characteristics of effective school leaders?
c) How should school heads become action researchers and not lead assistants of guinea pigs laboratories?

9.0 Methodology

Qualitative interpretive approach was used in this study. While quantitative approaches alone would have saved time, they would not have given the 'human feel' of emotions and non-verbal cues and depth that qualitative approaches would otherwise provide. Quantitative approaches are good at quantifying while qualitative approaches present lived experiences in much deeper sense. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, (2009, p. 21) who describe experience as "a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings…unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world".

A qualitative/interpretive research design was employed as opposed to quantitative/positivist and mixed-method design because the assumption is that reality is a social construction. This assumption has been influenced by our combination of experiences as active researchers, school head, educational leaders and educational lecturers who have worked in varied school and educational leadership contexts, from rural to the remotest area of Botswana and from education offices to university levels where the areas' inhabitants are varied and in contexts that are predominantly socio-economically challenged. We have learnt that the reality of learners, teachers, parents in all sorts of schools (urban, remote, primary, secondary, college, university) varies significantly. Such a difference calls for a research approach that is ethnographically grounded and qualitative in nature which school heads have the privilege to embark on by virtue of their presence in those contexts.

Qualitative design synergizes the natural and social world and values people as individuals who are able to give meaning to their world not only explicitly but also implicitly. Sue (2004, p.766) guided by "The fourth-century Chinese sage Chang-Tsu" claims that "how we view the world is not only about what we see, but about what we do not see." Therefore, what cannot be seen is reached through the hermeneutic process which Badiou (2014, p. 34) says it "assigns philosophy the aim of deciphering the meaning of Being, the meaning of Being – in – the – world, and its central concept is that of interpretation".

We believe we are an active part of the world we are studying which is in no way static nor identical to any. As Alvesson (2003, p.168) puts it, "Qualitative research is often seen in geographical terms as a movement when a researcher, initially at a distance, is coming closer and closer to the lived realities of other people" to try and understand the meanings they attach to the world. As stated earlier, the ontology of leadership is embedded and embodied in human relationships. Therefore, investigating such a phenomenon requires an approach that takes into cognizance that human beings continually construct their own reality. Thus, the

qualitative/interpretive design is ideal for the search of meaning and for making sense of the data. This is lacking from the quantitative research design as they "rely exclusively on formalized, quantitative inferences which have been found to be inadequate for social research" (Hos, 2009, p.430). Frankham and Howes (2006) claim that although surveys hold the distinction of being able to produce a large amount of data in a short time, the responses are often devoid of the personal and social context in which attitudes and beliefs are formed. Furthermore, by using a qualitative approach, we believe that a deeper insight has been gained because as human beings we construct meanings and interpret things differently based on the context we are in (Crotty, 2003).

10.0 Findings and discussion of findings

Responding to research question a), one of the findings of the current research is that despite the government of Botswana's efforts of upgrading the majority of school heads' qualifications to degree level and some to masters' level, available literature indicates that very few of them play a leading role in research activities. It is here that we argue that research should not be made as a mere requirement to fulfil at higher education in order to attain a degree; rather it should be emphasised as continued skill that one should utilise when they are on the job to revise and discover new meanings.

Responding to research question b) the literature shows that the inevitable challenge in the global development agenda is to have in place effective school leaderships, that is, men and women that are able to drive an education system that is transforming a country as espoused in the Botswana education blueprints, ETSSP and RNPE. Day, Gu, and Sammons (2016) indicate that there are some behavioral features that describe effective and successful school leaders. Some of these are (a) they have consistent, high expectations and are very ambitious for the success of their pupils, (b) they constantly demonstrate that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement, (c) they focus relentlessly on improving teaching and learning with very effective professional development of all staff, (d) they are expert at assessment and the tracking of pupil progress with appropriate support and intervention based upon a detailed knowledge of individual pupils, (d) they are highly inclusive, having complete regard for the progress and personal development of every pupil, (d) they develop individual students through promoting rich opportunities for learning both within and out of the classroom, (e) they cultivate a range of partnerships particularly with parents, business, and the community to support pupil learning and progress, and (f) they are robust and rigorous in terms of self-evaluation and data analysis with clear strategies for improvement

A closer look at these characteristics would make one agree that an effective school leader is one who has the ability to determine and identify an area of focus for improving learner achievements; one who is able to collect and important data, analyze and interpret it in order to generate informed and evidence based strategies and develop an action plan to drive practicable implementation to solve teaching and learning problems in his or her school. This is learning leadership, an improved version of instructional leadership (Johnson, 2011).

In regard to research question c), a cross sectional look at available literature reveals that the vast amount in-school issues such as early school withdrawal/ dropout, exclusion, absenteeism, teacher self-efficacy and a lot more others have been conducted by people who are foreign to schools. This should not be misconstrued to mean research in schools can only be done by those within institutions. This applies in varying rates even in more developed countries like the UK. However, in recent years, such countries have strengthened the area of research on in-school practices for school leaders. Comparatively Botswana school leaders are still way behind on the issue of in- school research. We emphasise in-school research basically because school leaders are in a privileged position to undertake research and facilitate such in their institutions. In this way action or in-school research is spot-on, focused, responsive and solves realistic problem in a clear specific context.

The school itself is an establishment that came into being as an outcome of research. The curriculum and all the activities that makes a school what it is are all social constructs that were transformed into what we see visually. All the constructs are continually being revised and renewed to meet the ever-changing social constructions and demands. Inevitably, research is central to all these revisions and renewals journey. Research consistently shows that school heads are less involved in these journeys of revisions and renewals of the institutions that they are leading. School heads who are not involved in any educational research activity in their schools may not be effective and transformative. It is not wrong for outsiders to do studies in schools, but it isn't as reliable as if it would have been the insiders conducting research to improve their practice. School heads should get involved in action research and where possible they must take the lead.

Action research is an effective tool in solving problems that do not have easy answers. Such problems would relate among others to evaluating program effectiveness, improving professional practices, and enhancing student learning and achievement. Ferrance (2000) argues that "it is not problem solving in the sense of trying to find out what is wrong, but rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve' (p. 2). She goes on to say "it involves people working to improve their skills, techniques, and strategies. It is not about learning why we do certain things, but rather how we can do things better" (p. 3). However, lumping schools into one category usually leads to institutional practices and national policies to be misguided. Action research or in-school research is one significant approach which could be used to prevent this problem.

The repeated use of the term 'head' in school head and head teacher appears to be problematic both in practice and in literature. It denotes an authoritative position that limits the scope of thinking and practice for the school 'heads.' Traditionally it suggests an imposing position where the 'head' teacher or school 'head' carries all the knowledge for the school without being on check. Schmoker (2006), cited in Johnson (2011), suggests that the educational institutions should shift in from the common instructional leader to the more appropriate term of 'learning

leader'. Therefore, our argument is that there is need for a paradigm shift from the use of such a title to a more appropriate title such as 'The school leader' as we believe it supersedes school head/head teacher. Embedded within the title of school leader are the facilitation of teaching and learning process, the growth of the leader and the led, and continuous learning and development of new knowledge as

Botswana's educational blueprints emphasise much on school leaders who are knowledgeable because schools are the basic units where modern education is instilled in learners who in turn become drivers of the economy. Sagor (2000) believes that leaders who engage in action research find the process to be an empowering experience. He states that relevance is guaranteed because the focus of the research is determined by the researcher, who utilises the findings to enhance professional practice. The benefit of conducting action research goes well beyond improving professional practice. Mertler (2009), cited in Johnson (2011), states that 'action research deals with your problems, not someone else's.' As insiders to this study, we agree with Sagor and Mertler that involvement in action research activities is empowering and fulfilling. It helps a leader understand their school situation much better than anyone else because they are ethnographically placed. Engaging in action research as school leader is no longer an option in schools in the United Kingdom (UK). As one of the world's leading economies, the UK sets a good example for countries like Botswana that need to graduate from a resources-based economy to a knowledge driven economy.

11.0 Conclusion

This study has found that there is a predominant lack of context-based research activities in schools and their documentation. This challenge has overtime contributed to the inconsistent leadership performance in schools. These inconsistencies are more profound when leaders change schools on transfers, when learners change teachers, when different cohorts reach their transition standards to other levels and many other instances. These transitions either scale cause the results to soar or drop hence causing stress and frustration to both the school heads and the teachers. It is against this backdrop that we suggest a paradigm shift from seeing school heads enjoying the guinea pig's role in research to actualising their pragmatic role in the 21st century transformational leadership duties.

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