

An evaluation of teachers' effectiveness in the implementation of the strategic plan aimed at improving learner's academic performance in selected secondary schools of Mwense District, Luapula Province, Zambia

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Abstract

Findings from research studies have consistently shown that there has been poor academic performance in most government secondary schools and learning institutions in Mwense District are not an exception. In order to curb the increasing poor academic performance of learners, the Government of the Republic of Zambia through the Ministry of General Education implemented a Strategic Plan aimed at improving the academic performance of learners. The success of any strategic plan lies in how effective it is implemented (Kaufman, 1992)^[9]. Buchanan (2000)^[4] further argues that the effectiveness of those who are tasked to implement a strategic plan determine the extent to which the strategic plan gets implemented. In this regard, teachers are among the key personnel in implementing the strategic plan in schools in Mwense District. Therefore, the study sought to establish the effectiveness of teachers in selected schools in Mwense District in implementing the strategic plan. The sample comprised of 101 participants from 8 secondary schools. Of these, 92 were teachers, 8 were head teachers and 1 was the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS). Thematic analysis was employed while the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and excel were used to analyse quantitative data. The study established that teachers were effective in implementing the strategic plan due to their qualifications and vast experience in teaching. However, they met the challenges of lack of incentives and sufficient teaching and learning materials. It further emerged that there was need for the government to be conducting periodic review of the strategic plan and to involve all stakeholders in the strategic plan implementation process. Based on the findings, the following recommendations, among others, emerged: 1. Teachers were to continue to play a pivotal role in the implementation process through practicing learner-centred approach to teaching. 2: teachers should not resort to punishing pupils who show little or no interest in some subjects. 3: teachers should closely collaborate with head teachers, District Education Board Secretaries (DEBs) and the community in implementing the strategic plan.

Keywords: Strategic Plan, Academic performance.

1. Introduction

This article first presents the background to the study followed by the statement of the problem, study site literature review and methodology. Thereafter, data presentation and discussion of the findings will be presented as well. The point of departure for this paper will be conclusion and recommendations.

1.1 Background of the Study

Mwense is a rural district that has eight (8) government-owned secondary schools. These schools just like other institutions face numerous challenges which to a larger extent contribute to the poor academic performance of pupils. Taking a glance at these schools, one is greeted with lack of adequate reading materials, understaffing and the majority of pupils are those from economically marginalised families. A classic example is Mwense High School which is a government owned co-education boarding school. The school has a total number of 1,047 pupils comprised of 813 boys and 234 girls. Of these 514 boys and 86 girls are borders while 13 are visually impaired (MoGE, 2012)^[16]. The school is located in a rural area hence the majority of the pupils come from rural areas with only few coming from urban areas. The school has a total of 28 classes with a visually impaired section. Of the 13 visually impaired pupils, 1 is a girl and the rest are boys. The passing rate in examination classes has been below 75%. For

example in the year 2006, the passing rate was 42.3%, while in 2007 it was 61.5%, in 2008 it was 65.3% and 2009 had 73.6% (Grade 12 Luapula Province Results Analysis Report 2008-2011)^[16]. Though there was a percentage increase of 8.3% from 2008 to 2009, this was insignificant. The situation at Mwense High School is a replica of what is happening in the rest of the schools in the district.

The performance of pupils is of great importance to any school particularly those that are located in rural areas. The government of the Republic of Zambia through the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) came up with a Strategic Plan to improve on the academic performance of the pupils. This plan was aimed at improving the performance of pupils in order to improve the passing rate of pupils who sit for examinations. One of the targets of the Strategic Plan was to improve the percentage passing rate. The Strategic Plan has eight (8) components that include Curriculum, Induction of new staff, Decision Making Assessment, Learner Preparation for Examination, Monitoring, Incentives and Records Management. In order to effectively implement the Strategic Plan, each of the eight components have been given a situational analysis, vision, policy statement, goal, strategic objectives, strategies, priority activities, an operation plan and a compliance plan. The effectiveness of this plan would contribute to an improved academic performance of pupils.

According to Warner (1984) ^[20], a strategic plan is the direction and scope of an organization over the long term. A Strategic Plan is thus direction or control mechanism for allocating resources in order to meet certain objectives. It is a way of determining how organizational resources, skills and competencies should be combined to create competitive advantage. It is a plan that is intended to achieve a particular purpose.

The value of Strategic Planning to any organization is that it determines the organisation's success or failure (Bryson, 1988) ^[3]. According to Wernham (2004) ^[21], in the process of strategic planning, resources such as people, skills, facilities and money to implement the strategy must be adequate. Strategic Planning identifies where an organisation wants to be at some point in the future and how it is going to get there. It is the process of defining the direction of the institution and allocating resources to pursue this strategy (Mutuku & Mutuku, 2009) ^[17]. This being the status quo, there was need to evaluate the role of key stakeholders such as teachers in the effective implementation of the strategic plan, hence this study.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

There has been an overwhelming evidence of poor academic performance among pupils in Mwense District (Provincial Results report-2010-2013) ^[16]. The trend of pupils in schools performing poorly has continued even in recent years. In view of this, the government through the Ministry of General Education instituted an implementation of a Strategic Plan to curb the academic underperformance of pupils. Since the government started implementing the Strategic Plan, little has been done to evaluate its effectiveness in improving pupils' academic performance. There was need therefore to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers as the main implementers of the strategic plan, hence the study.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study is helpful in assessing whether the Strategic Plan being implemented in schools in Mwense District is helping pupils improve their performance as well as whether teachers who are the main implementers stakeholders were effective. The result of the study would also be helpful to the government in determining whether to continue implementing the Strategic Plan or to consider revising it. The recommendations of the study, in addition, will equally be helpful to policy makers in the education sector to be able to come up with strategies for improving learner performance. The study is also helpful to all those who would want to carry out a similar research as part of their literature review thereby positively contributing to the body of knowledge.

1.4 Study Site

The Study was conducted on 8 selected secondary schools in Mwense District of Luapula Province of Zambia. Mwense was chosen because it is one of the districts where the strategic plan is being implemented with the aim helping learners improve in their academic performance.

1.5 Literature Review

The successful implementation of a strategic plan depends on the quality and commitment of its human resource to implement the strategy (Bitange, *et al.* 2010) ^[1]. This therefore

means that no matter how well formulated a Strategic Plan is, if people are not committed to the implementation process, its success would remain a pipe dream for the Ministry of General Education and later on the whole education system. According to Mashhadi, *et al.* (2008) ^[14], among the factors that negatively affect the successful implementation of a Strategic Plan include organizational structure, organizational culture, information and communication technology, reporting systems, motivation and reward systems, the availability of adequate resources, decision making process, effective communication, education, capabilities and skills. The extent to which the human resource personnel affect the successful implementation of a strategic plan has however not been brought out in these studies.

Bratton (1999) ^[2] explains that the human resource personnel are the most important component of any institution. Kelly (1999) ^[11] is of the view that in achieving school efficiency, the educational inputs are teachers together with their prior knowledge as well as pupils. Hence teachers' qualifications and their skills are vital in the successful implementation of any educational strategic plan. Pupils being the focal point of an educational Strategic Plan need to exhibit a high level of commitment. The importance of this study to the effectiveness of a Strategic Plan lies in the fact that teachers are part of the formulation of a Strategic Plan and are also the implementers. Their qualifications and experience have a bearing on the extent to which the Strategic Plan gets implemented. Further, pupils are the ones the Strategic Plan is meant for so they also form a cardinal component of the entire strategic planning process (Mwamwenda, 1987) ^[18].

Formulating and implementing a Strategic Plan is one thing. Attaining desired results is another. According to Kaufman (1992) ^[9], the impact of the Strategic Plan on an institution will be felt if it is formulated in line with the mission. Keller (1983) ^[10] further adds that the level of centralization or decentralization with which the formulation process of the Strategic Plan was done will affect its impact. According to Dubois & Fattore (2009) ^[6] decentralization is the process of redistributing or dispersing functions, powers, people or things away from a central location or authority to the branches or the local level (Haug, 2009; Hanson, 1998) ^[8, 7]. In this regard the advantages of decentralization in the formulation of a Strategic Plan among which are improved efficiency in decision-making; better co-ordination of activities at the local level; greater equity and effectiveness in the allocation of resources; better responsiveness from central authority to the needs of marginalized groups; enhanced participation in development; improved transparency and accountability; and more effective mobilization of resources.

When the formulation of a Strategic Plan is decentralised, it means that people who will be affected by the plan where fully involved in all the stages of formulating the Strategic Plan. When those will implement the Strategic Plan are fully involved in its formulation, they feel part of the process (World Bank, 2008; Di Grapello, 2004) ^[23, 5]. Otherwise, they feel that the Strategic Plan was imposed on them. On the other hand, Dubois & Fattore (2009) ^[6] explains the weaknesses of decentralising the formulation process of a Strategic Plan among these are inefficiency because local administration is weak and lacks the technical capacity to properly manage affairs and implement the Strategic Plan. In many developing countries, there is a constant problem of qualified manpower

at all levels of governance. When governance is brought down to the local level, the problem of well-trained human resource gets even worse. Further, there is a problem of inadequate financial resources available for all the decentralized projects. These studies have brought out the need for the full involvement of people in the strategic planning process. While much has not been brought out on the demerits of such involvement, decentralization in the strategic planning process has been emphasised to be a key feature of successful Strategic Plans.

Various studies have been conducted on how teachers can affect the academic performance of learners. A study in Uganda found that lack of text books and other learning materials, teachers’ guide and charts were the main contributing factors to poor performance of pupils (Liddell, 1984) [13]. Oluka and Opolot Okulut (2008) [19] found that performance of students was adversely affected compared to other regions were mainly attributed to teacher factors, large classes, poor school facilities, lack of homework, lack of a reading culture among teachers and pupils, lack of sound leadership in the school, administration and inadequate amount of time allocated to teaching and learning.

Lack of teacher dedication to duty has also been found to contribute to poor learner performance. Some schools performed poorly because of teacher related factors such as, inadequate teacher preparation and teacher’s lack of dedication to duty. High school teachers were expected to prepare what they taught in schools. These preparations could be in form of schemes of work, records of work, and lesson plans to guide the teaching process (MOE, 2001). [15]

While these studies have well elaborated on factors that affect learner’s performers, they have not addressed on how these factors can be tackled towards the formulation and implantation of a strategic plan to improve pupils’ academic performance. They have however proved useful in understanding how various aspects of the Strategic Plan are important in improving the performance of pupils. Therefore, there was need to conduct a study of this magnitude in order to address the above identified knowledge gaps.

2. Methodology

This study used a triangulated methodology approach which involved both qualitative and quantitative methods of collecting data.

2.1 Research Design

A descriptive sample survey design was used in the study. The design was chosen because the study involved a relatively larger sample which sought respondent’s opinions, attitudes and views. White (2005) [22] correctly observed that a survey is a method of collecting information by interviewing or administering a questionnaire to a sample of individuals. Additionally and as pointed out by Kombo and Tromp (2006), [12] this design was equally used in order to solicit the desired descriptive information.

2.2 Population

The study comprised of teachers, head teachers and a District Educational Board Secretary (DEBS) in Mwense District.

2.3 Sample Size

The total sample was 101 participants. This sample consisted of 92 teachers, 8 head teachers and 1 District Education Board Secretary (DEBS), all of them from Mwense District.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Category	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Teachers	52	40	92	91.1%
Head teachers	5	3	8	7.9%
DEBS	1	0	1	1%
Total	58	43	101	100%

2.4 Sampling Procedure

The research used purposive sampling or judgemental sampling to select head teachers and District Education Board Secretary (DEBS). This was because the information obtained from such respondents was appropriate to the study. While the 92 teachers, they were selected using simple random sampling which was conducted as follows: numbers were written on pieces of paper and were assigned to all teachers at a school and put in a box. The box was then shaken thoroughly to mix the contents. Numbers of teachers who participated in the study were picked from the boxes by hand.

2.5 Instruments for Data Collection

The primary research instruments were structured questionnaires. Other instruments were interviews, observations and primary sources from assessment reports that have been done on the pupils’ academic performance and implementation of Strategic Plans.

2.6 Data Analysis

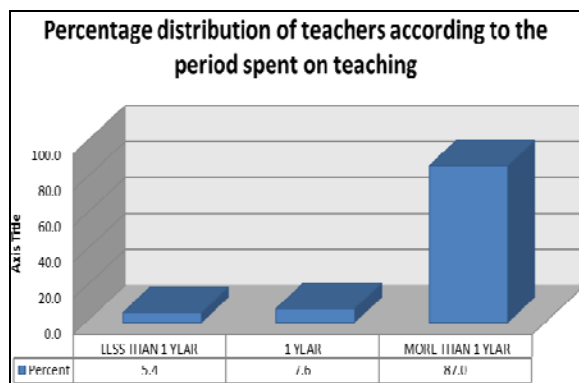
Qualitative data was analysed thematically while the Microsoft-Excel and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) were employed to analyse quantitative data. The analysis produced frequency tables, cross tabulations, graphs and some important descriptive statistics.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings from the study were presented and discussed according to the research objectives as unearthed hereunder:

3.1 Findings

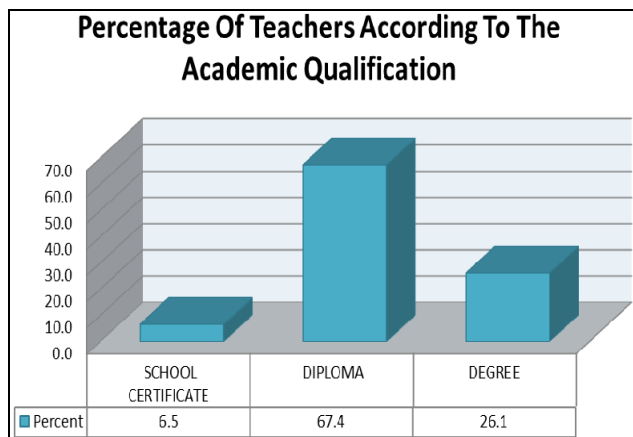
In order to establish weather teachers were effective in implementing the strategic plan, the study first established teachers’ experiences and their qualifications. The responses are presented in the figure 1 below:



Source: Field Data (2016)

Fig 1: Distribution of Teachers according to Period of Service.

The findings from the graph above, indicates that most (87%) of the teachers spent more than one year in the teaching service. Those who spent 1 year of service in teaching were represented by 7.6% of the total population sampled. The least of the teachers (5.4%) spent less than 1 year in the teaching service.



Source: Field Data (2015)

Fig 2: Distribution of Teachers according to Academic Qualifications.

The figure above reveals that the highest number of teachers 62 (67.4%) were diploma holders while those with Bachelor degrees at the time of study were 24 representing (26.1%). The least 6 (6.5%) were those teachers who had school certificates.

Other than views which were presented quantitatively, qualitative responses were also obtained. For example, one head teacher had this to say:

“We have very experienced and qualified teachers at this school though they are few. Many of them are diploma holders though we have few degree holders. But all of them are qualified.”

On whether there were subjects that pupils shunned and what was being done to help such learners, various responses were solicited and one of the teachers narrated:

“There are some subjects which some pupils avoid such as Mathematics and science subjects. This is because they think that they do not need these subjects to find employment or are too difficult to understand. I personally sit them down to make them understand that every subject is necessary. For those who think that science is difficult and is for boys, I explain to them opportunities that are available to them if they pursued science subjects whether they were boys or girls”.

Another teacher however expressed the following views:

“Some pupils are indiscipline so I personally employ some punishment so that they are forced to attend all lessons.”

On the role of teachers in improving the academic performance of pupils, one respondent explained:

“It is the role of teachers to ensure that they are patient with pupils and give them the individual attention that they deserve. For me I ensure that every pupil in my class understands a lesson before moving on to the next lesson. All my pupils have improved in their academic performance.”

On whether teachers are being effective in implementing the Strategic Plan in order to improve pupils’ academic performance, one head teacher voiced out as follows:

“Improving the academic performance of pupils mostly rests with the teachers and teachers at our school are doing their best despite working under difficult circumstances. They are a great source of encouragement to each and every pupil as they practice a learner-centred approach to teaching.”

3.2 Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that teachers were qualified and experienced enough to successfully implement the Strategic plan. The demographic information further indicates that 87% had been teaching for more than a year. Further they were academically qualified. While 67.4% were diploma holders, 26.1% were degree holders. This is in agreement with the outcome of the study conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2001) [15] which showed a strong positive correlation between teacher qualifications and academic performance of pupils.

One of the problems which came out of the study was pupils shunning certain subjects such as Mathematics and science subjects that were considered to be tough and to be for boys. This attitude of pupils towards these subjects negatively impacted on their performance. Despite such setbacks, teachers continued applying their professional skills of helping learner improve in their academic performance as outlined in the implementation strategic plan. According to the findings, most teachers encouraged pupils to attend all the classes including those subjects pupils would want to avoid. For example, some pupils avoided attending classes for Bemba lessons because they thought that learning such a subject had no meaningful career benefits whilst others especially girls avoid attending science and Mathematics classes. However, teachers encouraged such pupils on the importance of each subject they avoided. These findings are similar with those that came out of the study conducted by Oluka and Opolot Okulut (2008) [19]. The study was indicated that effective schools emphasize on high intellectual expectations of teachers, a professional attitude towards school and staff development, the use of rewards rather than punishments, an emphasis on teacher involvement in development. According to his study, the encouragement to pupils is more beneficial than punishment as modern educationists believe in rewards rather than punishment.

The findings of this study further revealed that despite working under difficult conditions, teachers were dedicated to their work. Moreover, Mwense district is a rural district where there are many challenges. As pointed out earlier, the successful implementation of any strategic plan lies in the dedication, effectiveness and efficiency of implementers of which teachers are not excluded. This is in line with Bitange, et al. (2010) [1] who argued that the successful implementation

of a strategic plan depends on the quality and commitment of its human resource to implement the strategy. He further noted despite the strategic plan being well formulated, the success at the implementation phase is influenced by the level of commitment from stake holders.

The study further showed that the success of a strategic plan also depended on the support it receives in terms of resources. One such key resource is human resource. While the human resource in the schools under review showed their commitments towards effective implementation of the strategic plan, other factors however, were equally at play. For example, inadequate teaching and learning materials contributed to the poor academic performance of pupils. Despite the strategic plan has been put in place, as noted by one respondent, teachers who are implementing it are working under difficult conditions thereby impacting negatively on the implementation process. Other factors affecting the smooth implementation included but not limited to having adequate teaching and learning materials. This is one of the problems facing most schools in developing countries and Zambia inclusive (i.e. they do not have adequate learning materials). Therefore and as argued by Keller (1983) ^[10] having a good strategic plan without necessary teaching and learning materials would yield little results.

The involvement of all key stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of any strategic plan is vital for it to succeed. In the study, it has been established that teachers and their heads were fully involved in the formulation and implementation of the strategic plan. This is in line with what Dubois & Fattore (2009) ^[6] noted on the value of involving all stakeholders. They argue, that was the essence of decentralising the strategic plan process. It would have been more effective had the whole strategic plan been formulated and implemented by the teachers and the head teachers in the selected schools under review. However, they were unable to do so because, as pointed out by Dubois & Fattore (2009), ^[6] one of the challenges of decentralization in the implementation of strategic plans was the inefficiency because local administration is weak and lacks the technical capacity to properly manage and implement the Strategic Plan. In many developing countries, there has been a constant problem of qualified manpower at all levels of governance. In this regard, when governance is entrusted to the local community, the problem of well-trained human resource gets even worse.

The study furthermore revealed that teachers had the ability to fully implement the strategic plan owing to their qualifications and experience. This presents an opportunity for teachers to practice School Based Management (SBM) in schools of Mwense district. The School Based Management involves the devolution of power from the central government to the school level (Haug, 2009; Hanson, 1990).^[8, 7] In this process, individual schools become the focus of the decision making process thereby enhancing pupils academic performance not only to improvement but also stimulated and sustained. SBM ensures that authority is vested in the parents and communities that enables schools to reap social and economic benefits hence reflecting the needs and values of the local community (Haug, 2009; World Bank, 2008).^[8, 23] SBM however does not totally eliminate the role of the government. There are various frameworks for the implementation of the SBM. According to Di Grapello (2004) ^[5] there are four concepts for analysing the provision of education through SBM. The first is the voice.

This denotes how well citizens can hold politicians and other policy makers accountable for the way they perform in discharging their responsibilities of providing the education system. The other one is the compact. This is how well and how clearly the responsibilities and objectives of public education policy are communicated. Thirdly is management that includes the actions that create effective frontline providers within an organization. Finally, there is client power which is about how citizens as clients can increase the accountability of schools and the school system. Therefore, the point of departure for the study was that the application of SBM highly increased the chances of the successful, efficient and effective implementation of strategic plans both at school and district level.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

It was evident from the study that teachers from Mwense District every effort in the management and implementation of the Strategic Plan. This was witnessed by teacher's actions such as encouraging the pupils to be attending classes and in some cases applying some punitive measures for those who were fond missing classes. It is therefore clear that the strategic plan positively impacted and changed the way teachers handle pupils thereby becoming more focused on improving the academic performance of learners. Further, despite numerous challenges such as lack of teaching and learning materials, teachers from Mwense District demonstrated commitment and resilience to effectively implementing the Strategic Plan.

The following recommendations emerged from the study:

1. Teachers should more times than often continuously employ learner-centred approach to teaching as that would enable them play a pivotal role in the implementation process of the strategic plan
- 2: Teachers should avoid resorting to punishment as a way of correcting pupils who show little or no interest in some subjects such as Mathematics and Sciences. They should instead lay bare to such pupils the value of those subjects.
- 3: teachers should closely work with head teachers, parents and other stakeholders in implementing the strategic plan instead of working in isolation as that would enhance the sense of ownership of the programme among community members.

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