

Perceived influence of instructional leadership practices on students' academic outcomes in Namibian secondary schools

Joyce Masiye¹
Harrison Daka²
Mukuka Lydia Mulenga-Hagane³

¹joycempule73@gmail.com

^{1,2,3}International University of Management, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the perceived influence of instructional leadership practices on students' academic outcomes through the perceptions of Heads of Departments [HODs] and Principals in secondary schools. The study employed a qualitative research design. The distributed and instructional theories guided the study. The sample of 6 schools was selected from 12 senior secondary schools in the region of study, from which the total sample of 12 participants, including principals and HODs, were purposefully selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews alongside document reviews and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that instructional leadership is key in enhancing learner success, especially when principals and HODs supervise curriculum delivery, mentor teachers, and instill accountability. Intervention practices such as professional development, collaborative planning, and data-driven decision-making enhance the quality of instruction and responsiveness, which improve learner achievement. New findings include innovations of a WhatsApp-mediated peer mentoring network for teacher collaboration with external expertise, inclusion of a monitoring period for school leaders, and inclusion of learners' lesson reflection. Nonetheless, limitations, including limited resources and heavy administrative demands, restrict effectiveness and call for greater leadership capacity and a supportive environment that improves learner academic outcomes. Further study to determine how the instructional technology-mediated support system responds to the needs of limited teacher capacity, particularly those offering vocational subjects, needs to be carried out in secondary schools. This study recommends that school leaders consider the inclusion of learners' lesson reflection data for teaching decision-making, teacher mentorship plans, and capacity-building interventions.

Keywords: Distributive Leadership, Heads of Department, Instructional Leadership, Namibia, Secondary Education, Teacher Support

I. INTRODUCTION

Instructional leadership has become one of the main drivers for performance enhancement for secondary school students. In contrast to high level administrative leadership, instructional leadership provides specific focus on improving instruction and learning through curriculum monitoring, teacher support, classroom observation and data-driven decision support (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Principals of schools hold the key position of instructional leaders; they shape teachers, set academic expectations, and nurture a school environment conducive to learning.

Furthermore, Heads of Departments (HODs) on the other hand, monitor specific subjects, curriculum implementation, mentoring teachers, and ensuring teaching consistency in all classrooms. However, there is considerable practice variation that exists between different principals, with many using self-leadership, laissez-faire or autocratic practices, often without formal training on leadership (Hangula et al., 2019; Katewa, 2016).

Instructional leadership shapes learner performance through: direct support for teachers in teaching and implementing their practice; professional development for teachers; and monitoring of classroom activities (Kavera & Heystek, 2019). Some evidence from secondary schools indicates consistent slight improvement in performance but still low pass rate especially in Grade 11 exams of Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary level (NSSCO).

Such trends, despite the newly adopted curriculum and examination reforms (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MOEAC], 2023), underscore the demand for good instructional leadership to overcome disparities in learner achievement. There is a gap for lack of clear leadership styles and practices that highly improves students' academic outcomes. Existing studies, Kamati and Amuthenu (2023), So-Oabeb and Du Plessis, (2023), and So-Oabeb (2023), focused on leaders' training, accountability and resources, and use of different leadership styles, while the effective leadership styles integration remain unspecified. This article is designed to explore the perceived influence of instructional leadership practices, observed by principals and HODs, have on learner achievement. Through an exploration of leadership styles, monitoring techniques, teacher support practices, and utilization of learner performance

data, the study aimed to determine the perceptions of Principals and HODs regarding instructional leadership approaches which could enhance academic outcomes, with particular focus in NSSCO.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Learner performance in secondary schools is still one of the concerns in Namibia, especially in NSSCO, as pass rates have consistently been less than ministerial projections (MOEAC, 2024). Despite the introduction of the new Basic Education Act of 2020 that promotes shared leadership and responsibility in management of schools, learners in many schools still achieve low success in Grade 11. As reported, school principals' leadership styles can contribute significantly to learners' learning outcomes through their influence on teacher motivation, instructional quality, and classroom management (Andrews & Soder, 1987; Silume, 2014).

Yet many principals depend on self-directed leadership or laissez-faire leadership models often without formal leadership training that can hamper their capacity to be effective instructional leaders (Hangula et al., 2019; Katewa, 2016). Heads of Departments who are key leaders for curriculum supervision and teacher mentoring are under-supported in instructional leadership, contributing to variation in classroom practice and disparities for learners in school outcomes across subject areas (Kavera & Heystek, 2019). The lack of a defined instructional leadership model for secondary schools leads to poor leadership practices, lack of teacher support, and poor monitoring of learner progress. Hence, the goal of the study was to investigate how instructional leadership styles and practices, as perceived by principals and HODs, influence the learner performance in secondary schools.

1.2 Research Objective

To explore how school leadership styles and practices are perceived by school principals and HODs to influence learners' pass rates in senior secondary schools.

1.3 Research Question

How are school leadership styles and practices perceived to influence learners' pass rates in secondary schools?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in instructional leadership theory by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), and supported by distributed leadership theory by Spillane (2005), both of which provided conceptual foundation for understanding how Principals and Heads of Departments influence learners' performance in secondary schools. Instructional leadership emphasizes the role of school leaders in directly influencing teaching and learning. This theory posits that effective school leaders focus on three functions that include determining academic vision through setting clear goals for curriculum delivery and learner achievement; managing the instructional program through supervising classroom instruction, coordinating curriculum activities, and ensuring adherence to educational standards; and promoting a positive learning climate through creating a supportive, disciplined, and collaborative environment that fosters teacher commitment and learner engagement.

On the other hand, distributed leadership theory complements instructional leadership theory by emphasizing the shared nature of leadership in schools through enhancing accountability across different levels of school management; strengthens instructional coherence by aligning departmental practices with school-wide goals; and encourages collaboration and professional dialogue among staff (Spillane, 2005). These theoretical frameworks underpinned the study's exploration on how Principals and HODs perceive, enact, and monitor instructional leadership practices to enhance learner pass rates in secondary schools. Instructional and distributed leadership intersect each other in the sense that instructional leadership focus mainly on teaching and learning while distributed leadership explains how the roles are shared at leadership level and both aiming at improving student performance. This framework is called distributed instructional leadership grounded in Spillane (2005) framework.

The two theories guided the formulation of research questions by identification of instructional key activities in the school such as supervision of teaching and learning, monitoring student progress, curriculum coordination, setting academic goals, supporting teacher professional development and by identifying participants for data collection through analysis of who performs major roles in instructional leadership tasks (Principals and HODs), and how such performance influences students' academic outcomes.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Instructional Leadership and Its Influence on Learner Performance in Secondary Schools

The term instructional leadership has been adopted by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) to describe the processes of school leaders as providing direction, overseeing teaching and learning, and creating the conditions that are conducive

to the achievement of students. Hallinger and Murphy add that instructional leadership directly involves classroom practice, curriculum implementation, and teacher development.

Various Namibian scholars conducted studies that explored school leadership style' influence on student academic outcomes in secondary schools. Shikongo (2021) explored the influence of school leadership on Grade 10 learners' academic pass rate in //Karas region of Namibia and reveal that school leaders' instructional supervision significantly influences student pass rate. Shikongo further indicates that active school leaders who focus on monitoring teaching, tracking learner progress and maintain school discipline, experienced improved student pass rate in examination. Another study carried out in the same region by Kaukewahulo and Nkengbeza (2023) on school principal and teachers' roles in improving learners' pass rates supports Shikongo that maintaining discipline, supervision, monitoring and decision-making influences improvement for student outcomes.

Moreover, a Namibian study by Chombo et al. (2025) on exploring the roles of the principals in school governance in Zambezi region, establish that principals are responsible to everyday activities making sure that that curriculum and policies are well implemented with discipline being maintained to enhance teaching and learning for improving learners' performance. Similarly, Ralebese et al. (2025) discovered that achieving school goals is carried out by principals and HODs who encourage collaborative instruction that include enhancement of positive behaviors of teachers and learners. This supported Leithwood et al. (2008) who postulate that good instructional leadership is central to school leaders as being able to: establish the vision of the school and the level of achievement, set the academically challenging objectives and role model instructional expectations for the teachers and learners. Although Leithwood et al. view the principal as a pivotal aspect of instructional leadership, Chebotibin (2024) states that the instructional leadership activities of the principal influence students' academic success.

2.2.2 Challenges faced by Principals and HODs in implementing instructional leadership

According to Chebotibin, the primary command of the principals was outdated in that it places less emphasis on the vital components when it comes to inspection, class visit, approving lesson plans, checking of lesson plans, inspecting lesson notes of the learners and class visits. Though the outline of instructional leadership practices between principals and HODs is not entirely clear, Kubheka et al. (2025) mentions that HODs are constantly monitoring classrooms, mentoring teachers, and planning curriculum, but they are also challenged by curriculum changes, increased administrative workload, little autonomy, and lack of formal leadership training that create discrepancies in action versus policy expectations.

Although Robinson et al. (2008) indicates that the strong instructional leadership of both principal and HOD correlates with improved students' outcomes, Kubheka et al. (2025) contends that HODs continue to be under-supported with ever-increasing workload but are nevertheless instrumental to improving instruction. On contrary, Aden et al. (2024) found that academic performance is perceived as critical to school leaders but fails to provide clarity regarding vision, training and the involvement of stakeholders. Aden et al. further adds that such deficiencies have a downside for student outcomes and leave space for indiscipline. On the other hand, Mawela and Msimeki (2025) said that when it comes to discipline, principals perceive rewards, sanctions, monitoring, and short-term performance goal achievement as structure driven or compliance oriented and more focused approaches with positive impact on student learning with improved performance. Similarly, Siwogedi (2025) found that principals provide teachers with teaching and learning materials to motivate teachers and enhance students' pass rates.

2.2.3 Instructional Leadership on Student Outcomes in African context

In the Namibian context, the Basic Education Act 3 of 2020 forms a regulatory guide that promotes distributed leadership, with the school management teams responsible for learners' outcomes; yet autonomy through the Act allows for the development of teaching and learning processes which underpins the importance of shared accountability between principals, HODs, teachers, learners and parents. The role of instructional leadership has been increasingly highlighted in Namibia (MOEAC, 2023). Silume (2014) indicates that Grade 11 and 12 final examination results are linked to the leadership of principals. According to Silume, principals who engage in active instructional supervision and in providing teacher mentoring are more capable of closing performance gaps and helping struggling learners. Moreover, it was seen that HODs in secondary schools frequently contribute to principals' instructional leadership by monitoring teachers, analysing student performance data and enabling remedial action (Kavera & Heystek, 2019). According to Kavera and Heystek, well-engaged HODs contribute to stronger instructional coherence among schools, and in turn, high learner pass rates. This is consistent with the investigation of Day et al. (2016) who emphasize that leaders who support teachers and act as guides, provide teachers with constructive feedback, and stimulates continuous professional development that contributes indirectly to learner academic success.

Similarly, Mandinach and Gummer (2016) highlight that a key aspect of teaching-based leadership is systemic review of how the teaching and learning process is organized such as classroom observation, moderation of assessment and analysis of learner data. So-Oabeb (2023) found in a local study that principals who utilize different leadership strategies, such as instructional leadership, develop an environment where teachers feel supported, motivated, and

responsible for learner outcomes. Principals exercise flexible leadership styles to supervise the instruction, support teacher professional development, oversee the coverage of any curriculum, and conduct the schools.

Moreover, Mawela and Msimeki (2025) explains that while the policy-driven nature of these practices can yield some success, their impact is limited by resources and administrative burden. In contrast, in cases where teacher development is neglected (*laissez-faire* or autocratic) teaching quality is inconsistent and performance level suffers, and learners achieve worse outcomes (Hangula et al., 2019). Although critical, instructional leadership for secondary schools is characterised by several difficulties such as lack of training with principals and HODs, lack of inter-service collaboration, insufficient resources and resistance to accountability in this regard (Kamati & Amuthenu, 2023; Katrodia & Kamonde, 2013). At first, inexperienced principals are inclined towards self-induction and trial and error (Mushaandja, 2013) that may threaten instructional supervision, as well as the performance of the learners.

So-Oabeb and Du Plessis (2023) note that multiple competencies, including subject matter, digital and administrative competencies, good communication, good interpersonal relations, listening skills and accountability are necessary for leaders to enhance and advance professionally prepared teachers. The evidence is clear that instructional leadership is linked to better learner outcomes. Leaders who take an active role in teaching supervision, overseeing curriculum needs, and supporting teachers do not only promote the academic achievement of learners, but they also directly influence learners' performance (Cole, 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). Low pass rates in NSSCO examinations show that principals and HODs need to implement instructional leadership practices to influence positive shifts in classroom instruction and improve the students' learning (MOEAC, 2024).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Method

The study used a qualitative methodology because the primary purpose was to gain an in-depth understanding of school leadership styles and practices and how leadership practices were perceived by school leaders to influence students' pass rates, rather than to measure or test relationships statistically. This study adopted an interpretivism paradigm, which emphasizes the in-depth understanding of the participants' perceptions and lived experiences. The paradigm is appropriate for exploring instructional leadership because it allows for in-depth examination of how principals and HODs perceive and enact leadership practices that influence learner performance.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative single case embedded study design. Yin (2003) explains that embedded case study involves analysis of more than one sub-unit. Moreover, Yin (2018) emphasizes that an embedded case study design is appropriate when a single case contains multiple units of analysis that require detailed examination. In this study, the case was bounded by the selected secondary schools, while units included principals and Heads of Departments (HODs), where leadership styles and practices related to teaching and learning were examined. This design was considered appropriate for this study to develop in-depth, contextualized understanding of leadership practices as they are enacted within real school settings, rather than to test hypotheses or establish statistical relationships (Merriam, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018)

3.3 Study Context

The study was conducted in Namibia, particularly in Erongo region. All 12 schools are public senior secondary offering of Grade 8 to 12, located in urban areas and characterised with two boarding and four non-boarding schools.

3.4 Target Population, Sample and Sample Size

The target population was 48, combination of Principals and Heads of Departments (HODs) from twelve schools in the region of study. Each school has one principal and maximum of three HODs (Science, Commercial subjects and Languages) making a total of 12 Principals and 36 HODs. The sampling process involved the following: firstly, the schools were selected purposefully on basis of offering grade 11 and 12 and being government owned. This was because they are supported by the same source in terms of human capital, policies and provision of resources. Secondly, 50% of the schools was used to determine the sample. Six schools were selected through lottery strategy to allow all schools to have opportunity to be selected for the study. Thirdly, principals of the selected six schools automatically became participants. While the Science HOD per selected school became part of the study on purpose that pass rate in science subjects is consistently low, making a total of six HODs. The sample size consisted of combination of Principal and one HOD per school making total sample size of 12 participants. Five selected schools are in urban areas with performance between 50 and below 60 % and one with performance consistently above 80 %. All sampled schools have mixed socio-economic contexts. School A, D, and E are non-boarding schools, School B and F are full boarding schools, and School C is a boarding school which shares with learners from other local schools. Participants' demographic information are as in Table 1 below.

Table 1*Participants Details*

Participant	Gender	Years of experience	Qualification
School A Principal	Male	32 years	B. Science English and Applied
School A HOD	Male	6 years	Masters in Education
School B Principal	Male	12 years	M.A. Masters in linguistics
School B HOD	Female	9 years	Masters in Education
School C Principal	Male	13 years	M.A. Segregation of learners
School C HOD	Male	11 years	B. ED Honours Education
School D Principal	Female	5 years	M.A. Education
School D HOD	Female	16 years	B. ED
School E Principal	Male	5 years	Degree in Education
School E HOD	Female	16 years	M. A. Education
School F Principal	Male	1 year	Master's degree in science
School F HOD	Male	6 years	B. ED Honours Education

3.5 Data Collection

Data was collected by Joyce Masiye from September to November 2025 through semi-structured interviews alongside document review on one-to-one interview with selected HODs and Principals for duration of 45 minutes each. The interview was made possible after authorization by the Ministry of Education was granted and upon appointment with the participants. All ethical procedures were strictly observed by the researcher and participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their identity in the study. The semi structured questions for the interview were 19 in total, and reviewed documents during interviews included result analysis reports, departmental meeting minutes, lesson plan monitoring records, classroom observation instrument (COI), class observation timetables (verification of administration period), training schedules and mentoring support tools, and internal policy documents on discipline and school culture. Verbatim transcription of participants' responses was carefully done without omissions with additional notes of clarification from document review.

3.6 Data Analysis

Using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, this analysis enabled a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data that worked for thematically shaped and data-rich analysis. The researcher read through interview transcripts and documents notes to get detailed knowledge and account of respondents' perspectives, and to familiarize with the data in the first step. Initial notes were made to reflect impressions of emerging ideas regarding instructional leadership practices. Initial codes were generated based on the second phase in a systematic way on the full dataset.

Data that was related to the research question was found and named. Coding was aimed at and focused on important elements of curriculum monitoring, classroom observations, assessment moderation, school discipline, data analysis practices, mentoring, and professional development activities. In the third phase, we looked for themes by grouping related codes under larger names, which represent patterns that are meaningful to the context of the study. Codes pertaining to departmental supervision were clustered under distributed instructional leadership through HODs. Discipline, respect, collaboration, and school achievement codes were outlined in the context of the school climate as a foundation for academic achievement.

Codes related to classroom observations and monitoring tools were also grouped into the theme structured monitoring of teaching and learning, and codes associated with assessment analysis and performance interventions formed performance data usage. Codes for mentoring, coaching, capacity building, teacher empowerment, and professional development were grouped together. The initial themes were reviewed and revised in the fourth phase to ensure internal sound coherence and clear distinctions between themes. The researcher retraced the data to ensure that the themes clearly recorded participants' accounts across all the participating schools and that no relevant data had been forgotten.

The fifth phase referred to revising and renaming of themes. Each theme was explicitly described to convey what it meant and how it helped inform our understanding of instructional leadership practices in the schools. Detailed descriptions were derived that focused and emphasized the range of coverage for each theme. In the sixth phase, a report was compiled combining thematic analysis with illustrative quotations from respondents.

Integration of data was done, not at a specific place/period but as part of the analysis. Both the interview transcripts and document notes were read in tandem in the familiarization step. While coding, interview extracts and sections of document notes were coded in the same coding style. Interview responses on questions about monitoring of curriculum activities were coded together with lesson plan reviews and classroom observation instrument (COI) reports. All responses on data-driven decision-making questions were cross-checked with performance reports and results

analysis documents. Similarly, responses of professional development were coded alongside mentoring records and schedules. Document notes were used as evidence and clarification of responses from participants.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

The researcher made a request to the regional director for permission to allow the researcher to collect data in secondary schools on the 24th March 2025. Data was only collected after receipt of permission letter dated 1 April 2025 with reference of 13/2/9/1. The researcher gave informed consent to participants. Participants' participation was voluntarily. Participants' identities were kept confidential, views and opinions were respected and interpreted without bias. Credibility was achieved during data collection though seeking clarity on responses and reviewing relevant document to verify the said statements. Same instrument was used across all participating schools.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The analysis of interview and document review data generated five themes as discussed below.

Theme 1: Distributed instructional leadership through Heads of Departments (HODs)

The findings reveal that HODs execute instructional leadership through direct monitoring of curriculum implementation, instructional supervision, and planning and guiding assessment practices. In addition, HODs are positioned to be primary drivers of curriculum teaching and learning. Across all schools, participants described that HODs undertake assessment and monitoring of teaching and learning, some participants expressed that HODs are "engine rooms."

One Principal stated that:

"The Heads of Departments are engine room of teaching quality and learning outcomes responsible for departmental leadership and budget" (Principal, School C on 13th October, 2025).

Similarly, the Head of Department of School E explained that

The work of the HODs is to take care of the execution of instructional activities and instructional administration in the school because they are subject specialists, and principals support mainly in areas of concern. Our roles include monitoring teaching and learning and assessment to ensure curriculum coverage" (Head of Department, 13th October, 2025).

The study findings show that there are strong collaboration and more specific roles among leaders in the execution of instructional leadership across all participating schools. Reflecting a well distributed leadership structure than just hierarchical control. All schools indicated that the office of the HOD is specific that makes instructional leadership more effective with heavy reliance on subject expertise and delegated authority. Majority of participants expressed that instructional leadership is task oriented, highlighting that operation and accountability are done at departmental level. Additionally, findings show that principals' roles are overall, while HODs are responsible for execution of core instructional functions. Participants reported that the principal and HODs roles in the school balances authority with operational responsibility.

Findings revealed that the level of principal engagement in instructional leadership varies in schools. Some schools, principals do not directly get involved in monitoring teaching and learning but HODs take control of instructional control instead. In some schools, there is a shared responsibility, while some are heavily relying on HODs. This revealed that there is inconsistency in role delegation or duties of both HOD and Principals are not well prescribed, which may affect commonalities of instructional practices in schools.

Theme 2: School climate as a foundation for academic success

Findings from both interviews and document reviews indicate that school leaders consistently foster a collaborative and disciplined school environment. While maintaining respect among teachers and learners, ensuring punctuality, and promoting teamwork were identified as critical practices that support effective teaching and learning which leads to higher student performance. One participant noted,

"I emphasize discipline and punctuality because they directly affect teaching and learning." (Principal, School C. 15th October 2025)

Similarly, HOD for School A and Principal for School D emphasized that

"Promoting respect, discipline and collaboration between teachers, parents, and learners creates a good school climate that is conducive to teaching and learning, and improves pass rates especially in secondary schools" (Principal, School D on 15th October 2025).

The HOD for school F also indicated that:

"Leadership should promote good discipline among teachers and learners." (HOD, school F on 15th October 2025)

Additionally, HOD for School B explained that discipline of learners and teachers is also the determinant for pass rate in the school. Further emphasized that:

“Strong leadership improves learner behavior bringing high performance. Weak discipline directly lowers the pass rate” (HOD, School B on 17th October, 2025)

The findings revealed that instructional leadership goes beyond classroom supervision to establish organizational and relational norms, routines, and values. The principal of School A argued that conditions such as manageable class size and teacher focus are necessary for improving learner pass rates. It underscores the view that effective leadership in secondary schools requires attention to both human and structural conditions to optimize learners’ outcomes. Although simultaneously, schools highlighted discipline as essential for learners’ performance, heavy focus on discipline may create a control-oriented approach.

Theme 3: Structured monitoring of teaching and learning

Structured monitoring of classroom instruction emerged as a central instructional leadership practice across participated schools. Moreover, Principals and HODs reported using classroom observations, lesson plan reviews, assessment moderation to ensure curriculum coverage and teaching quality which is achieved using learner performance data to guide instructional decisions.

School C highlighted that:

“When using the COI tool, sometimes we do uninformed class visits and silently observe lessons, give feedback and the teachers based on the observation outcome” (HOD, School C on 19th October, 2025)

Additionally, School D, HOD said that:

“The COI tool uses a multilayered approach followed by a scheduled approach from which feedback is given in areas that need attention and result analysis is done. Teachers whose ratings fall below 50% are met and supported individually” (HOD, School D on 19th October, 2025).

School F monitoring system differs from other schools in that they have an administration period in the day timetable which is meant for principal and HODs. School F leadership monitoring system includes learners' lesson reflection of teacher presentation.

School F, Principal stated that:

“The Principal and HODs are allocated second period free lessons as an administration period. HODs and the Principal use the period for moving around to check the routines. Lesson plans and tests are submitted to the HODs in advance for approval, in case of identified errors, the teacher concerned is called for correction before administering to learners. Learners and teachers both reflect on the lessons using evaluation forms. A learner who has a complaint puts it in writing and submits it to HOD, if he fails to attend it, the learner submits it directly to the principal” (Principal, School F, on 20th October, 2025).

These practices reveal instructional leadership as systematic, evidence-informed, and process-driven. The leadership here is preventive but also corrective; leaders engage in structured monitoring which not only guarantees the fidelity of the curriculum but also the quality of teaching and the accountability they retain to their students. Instructional leadership is active and iterative; it is about becoming directly present without just monitoring and overseeing; it is about responding to the classroom practices.

Although all schools use organized tools to monitor lessons and assess teachers and their teaching, there are differences in monitoring methods. Some schools have applied standardized approaches, other schools are flexible and local, adaptive, contextualized in their systems for monitoring, such as allowing for learners’ reflection while custom administration period (School F). These findings reflect the instructional leadership practices that are inconsistent in terms of quality assurance across schools, even though adaptive, it may affect comparability of outcomes.

Theme 4: Performance data usage

Furthermore, strong culture of data use was evident across schools. Both Principals and HODs reported regular analysis of learners’ performance data to guide instructional planning, set targets, and implement interventions.

School C principal emphasized that:

“Monthly analysis of data with HODs helps to identify struggling learners and plan targeted interventions to improve pass rates.” (School C principal, 23rd October, 2025)

Similarly, School A, B, D and E also stated that they do regular assessment data reviews for student performance to inform leadership decisions which help them to motivate teachers and learners towards their set targets which are set based on test results.

Additionally, School F HOD highlighted that:

“When results are analyzed, learners who perform poorly are identified, and their class advisors provide guidance and additional support.” (School F HOD, 23rd October, 2025)

Similarly, Principal of School C stated that:

“We analyze data monthly with HODs to identify struggling learners and plan interventions.” (Principal of School C, 23rd October, 2025)

School B emphasized instructional data-based decision making, combined with motivation and democratic consultation. This school perceives that leadership becomes effective when decisions are evidence-based and collaboratively enacted.

These findings reveal that instructional leadership is increasingly evidence-driven and outcome-oriented, with data serving as both a diagnostic and motivational tool. Findings indicate that leadership practices are diagnostic, not merely procedural, emphasizing strategic decision-making, targeted support, and accountability. Moreover, data use also show that leadership is transparent and collaborative, with decisions often discussed with HODs and staff to align practice with evidence.

Theme 5: Teacher empowerment and professional development

Both Principals and HODs reported that motivation and well supported teachers were more effective in delivering quality instruction that resulted in improved learner performance. Additionally, teacher empowerment through mentoring, feedback, and professional development was perceived as key factor in enhancing learner performance.

Furthermore, School E highlighted capacity building for school leaders through training and in-service support. The HOD of school E perceives leadership effectiveness as depending on the continuous development of leadership competencies. Moreover, instructional leadership quality in this school is perceived as a learned and evolving practice, rather than fixed attribute.

Another point is that strategies to improve performance differ from school to school. Common practice is seen in School A, C and F who mentioned the use of experts in the subject area to coach both teachers and learners where skills and knowledge improvement is required.

The Principal of School C said:

“We invite experts to coach teachers and learners where improvement is required.” (Principal of School C on 25th October, 2025)

Additionally, HOD of School C elaborated that

“The weaknesses identified through the instrument are targeted and addressed by pairing the teacher with well-performing teachers within the school and sometimes attached to experts outside the school” (HOD of School C, 25th October, 2025)

School B made a gesture and said:

“I remember, there was a lack of skill in computer usage, and I took teachers to IT for a skill link to train teachers for computer literacy” (HOD, School B on 25th October, 2025)

School A indicated the act of inviting former learners to motivate learners. Contrarily, school C indicated that, is faced with a challenge of accessing and retaining skilled teachers for vocational subjects and unavailability of advisory teachers at regional level. However, the school was strategized by forming a WhatsApp group for vocational teachers that includes stakeholders (NIMT and NIED experts) that allows teachers to get support in areas of their specialization to provide quality education and in return improve performance of learners. The findings show that leadership is developmental and dynamic and requires ongoing professional growth. Findings further revealed that leaders concentrate on human capacity building, ensuring that teacher competence influence learner.

This evidence demonstrates that leadership is viewed as developmental and dynamic, needing continuous professional development, not merely positional power. Results also suggest that leaders are concerned with decreasing human capital, in line with the idea that educator competency is linked to student achievement. Additionally, the insights also state that leaders are not constant, but rather willing to share knowledge and skills in areas of expertise which are vital for teacher professional growth. This reveals that instructional leadership in these schools is both adaptive and formative, responding to evolving school demands and teachers' needs.

Moreover, these findings reflect that Principals and HODs are not only enforcers of curriculum standards, but learning environment facilitators, developers of teacher capacity, and architects of school culture. The study reveals that effectiveness of leadership depends on both positional authority and active engagement with teachers, learners and data, emphasizing that instructional leadership is practical, collaborative, and adaptive rather than only hierarchical.

Some schools invite subjects' experts to coach teachers and learners (School C and School A), while others do not have access to advisory teacher services, particularly vocational subjects (school C). This indicate that leadership strategies are not equally feasible in all schools due to resource disparities. This reveals that schools with better access to resources can implement more robust teacher development programs, revealing inequalities in leadership effectiveness. Although simultaneously, teacher empowerment and professional development was mentioned across all schools as essential for learners' performance, teacher empowerment requires autonomy and collaborative decision-making.

Table 2*Cross-School Comparison of Instructional Leadership Practices*

Theme	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Distributed leadership through HODs	HODs supervise curriculum and monitor learning while principal provide support when needed.	HODs lead teaching and learning while principals intervene in problem areas	HODs are described as “engine room” of teaching quality while principal has strong autonomy	HODs carry departmental responsibility while principal moderately involved.	HODs handle instructional administration while principal intervene only in areas of concern	HODs lead but principal actively participate in monitoring during administration periods
School climate	Emphasis is on respect, collaboration, punctuality	Discipline and learner/teacher behaviour linked to pass rate	Focus on discipline, respect and positive culture for teaching and learning	Promotes collaboration between teachers, learners and parents	Similar emphasis on collaborative and respectful school culture	Leadership promotes discipline among teachers and learners
Structured Monitoring of teaching and learning	Routine lesson plan checks and classroom visits	Assessment moderation and teacher support for low performers	COI tool, silent observations and feedback based on performance	COI tool with scheduled approach, and individual support for teachers performing below 50 % learner pass rate	HODs approve lesson plans and monitor teaching	Administration period allocated for joint monitoring by HODs and principal, and learner lesson reflection included
Performance data usage	Regular review of assessment data, target setting, and teacher motivation	Evidence-based decision-making, and democratic consultation	Monthly analysis with HODs, and targeted intervention	Regular assessment data review and intervention for struggling learners	Data informs leadership decisions, and motivates teacher	Learner performance analysed, and class advisors provide additional support
Teacher empowerment and professional development	Use of external experts, motivational strategies, and peer mentoring	ICT skill development for teachers, and targeted training	Pairing teachers with high performing colleague And experts	Focus on teacher support based on observed weaknesses	Capacity building for leadership and continuous Professional development	Use of reflective tools, and external support through WhatsApp groups

4.1.1 Cross School Interpretation

All schools recognize HODs as key instructional leaders, but the principal involvement varies. Leadership is distributed but context- dependent, with some schools emphasizing HOD autonomy and others principal oversight. Across schools, a positive climate is consistently seen as critical for academic achievement, but strategies vary. Some focus heavily on discipline (School, B and School, F), others on collaboration and relational norms (School, A, C, D, and E). All schools engage in structured monitoring, but methods differ. Some use standardized tools (COI), others incorporate reflective processes (School F). This shows that instructional leadership adapts to school context. Data driven leadership is a common practice across all schools. However, school B combines with collaborative decision making, while others emphasize individualized interventions, this demonstrates a shared commitment to evidence-based leadership but differently enactment styles. Teachers’ development is a central leadership practice in all schools. Differences exist in strategies: some rely on experts (School A and C), others on structured in-service support (School, E), and School F with some innovate technology mediated peer support (School F). Leadership is developmental and adaptive.

The cross- school comparison shows that while core elements of instructional leadership such as distributed roles, school climate, monitoring, data use, and teacher empowerment are consistently valued, the implementation differs based on resources, school context, principal leadership style, and teacher capacity. These findings reveal that instructional leadership in these schools is multi-dimensional, flexible, and adaptively responsive rather than rigid. The

findings show that there is school leadership differences which illustrates a conceptualized leadership style, revealing that local school conditions, capacity of staff, and innovation shape school leadership.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Distributed Instructional Leadership through HODs

The findings revealed that HODs are the main leaders of instructional curriculum across participating schools and that instructional leadership is widely distributed into subject expertise who execute, assess and monitor the process of teaching and learning. This aligns with Hallinger and Murphy (1985), whose framework emphasize leadership behaviours that influence teaching and learning. The findings further support the perspectives of distributed leadership advanced by Spillane (2005), who argues that leadership practice is shared to multiple leaders within the school. These findings carry the theoretical contribution of shared leadership and instructional responsibilities between the principals and HODS which appear to strengthen the level of accountability and instructional coherence, contributing to improved learner performance. Therefore, leadership is conceptualized as collective and centred in practice rather than only position and hierarchical.

4.2.2 School Climate as a Foundation for Academic Achievement

The results also reinforce school climate's impact on academic achievement. Principals and HODs uniformly believe that enhancing discipline, respect, punctuality, and collaboration positively contribute to learners' pass rates. A positive school climate was not considered a peripheral feature but was made a basic prerequisite for good teaching and learning. Indeed, this is congruent with Leithwood and Jantzi (2008), such that leadership practices that promote a supportive and orderly environment facilitate increased teacher commitment and student engagement. When teachers and learners work in such a disciplined and respectful culture, instructional time is optimized and academic attention is maximized. The theoretical contribution of such findings therefore is that instructional leadership extends beyond managing classroom instruction, to influencing the relational and organizational culture in which learner performance is embedded. One observation of this discovery is that the focus on discipline may be at odds with development, empowerment, and focused practices in professional development. This tension suggests that instructional leadership that provides legitimacy must find a balance between authority and autonomy and between order and agency.

4.2.3 Structured Monitoring of Teaching and Learning

While the principal is overall overseer of the school leadership, structured observation and monitoring of instruction perceived as a fundamental leadership role of HODs across the schools. This supports Chebotibin (2024) who found that principal's leadership on instructional level placed less emphasis on class visits and observations, approval and checking of lesson plans, and inspection of class notes. The study found that HODs carry out continuous classroom observations and review lesson plans and performance data, critique lessons, moderate assessments to ensure that instructional practices meet curriculum standards, and that instruction quality is maintained in schools. These practices are aligned with the instructional leadership model by Hallinger (2011) that sees supervising and evaluating instruction as high-level leadership functions.

Moreover, systematic monitoring reflects that leadership is enacted through routines designed for teaching and learning in the formal structures of each school. This curriculum coordination and assessment oversight by HODs and Principals is perceived to improve learners' performance, supporting Kavera and Heystek (2019) who noted that HODs complement Principals' instructional leadership and when actively engaged, instructional practice enhances coherence of schools that contribute to higher pass rates. Similarly, Bush and Glover (2014) also emphasize that curriculum coordination improves academic performance. These findings also support Kubheka et al. (2025) who outlined that HODs engage in curriculum planning, classroom monitoring and empowering teachers despite that HODs remain under-supported with more workload, yet their roles are crucial for improved learners' academic outcomes. The findings further reveal that alignment of classroom practice and school goals are met through structured monitoring system that reflects formalized, evidence-informed leadership.

The study insight here is that schools vary in the use of monitoring strategies despite the use of common monitoring tools, for instance, some schools rely heavily on the use of classroom observation instruments (COI), while others incorporate lesson reflection feedback from learners. This variation reveals that leadership at instructional level is structured and adaptive and aligned to the needs of the context and resources of the school.

4.2.4 Performance Data Usage

Findings show that there is a predominant use of learner performance data to inform interventions across all schools. It was found that Principals and HODs analyze test and exam results for learners to inform teaching and learning, identifying struggling learners, setting targets and implementing intervention to improve performance towards the subject targets. This finding supports Kavera and Heystek (2019) found that analyzing performance data and facilitating remedial intervention improves learners' performance. Similarly, the findings also support Mandinach and

Gummer (2016), indicating that effective leaders improve instructional performance through systematic use of learner performance data.

By grounding decisions in evidence rather than intuition, leadership becomes more strategic and responsive to learners' needs (Robinson, 2011). The integration of data analysis into routine leadership practices demonstrates a shift towards evidence-based accountability, where performance information serves both diagnostic and motivational purposes reflecting Bryk et al (2010), who argue that systematic use of evidence guide continuous school improvement. This is also consistent with the literature, leadership influence appears strongest when instructional priorities are clearly defined and collectively enacted (Hallinger, 2011; Spillane, 2005).

The theoretical contribution of the findings is that integration of data reflects strategic, evidence-based leadership that enhances instructional focus and accountability. Moreover, use of performance data also strengthens instructional focus and enhances the likelihood of improved academic outcomes. The findings give insight that leadership style influence how data informs action, revealing validity in how instructional leadership is operationalized across contexts.

4.2.5 Teacher Empowerment and Professional Development

The findings further reveal that instructional leadership is developmental in nature, emphasizing teacher support, mentoring, and professional growth. These practices support Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) who underscore that sustained, job-embedded professional development such as coaching and mentoring contribute meaningfully to instructional improvement and teacher confidence. HODs and Principals provide peer mentoring, induction for novice teachers, coaching, and access to internal and external experts to strengthen instructional competence. These findings support Day et al. (2016) highlighting mentoring and continuous professional development (CPD) as important for improving and sustaining school improvement and supports Hallinger (2011) who sees CPD as a central strategy for enhancing teaching quality.

Similarly, supports Robinson et al. (2008) that leaders who promote teacher training and development have greater impact on learners' outcomes. This finding also supports Fullan (2014) who argue that leaders investing in teacher development, enhances instructional quality that contributes to improved learner performance. The findings' theoretical contribution lies in the dynamic and growth oriented instructional leadership that operated through empowerment, collaboration and shared responsibility. The study found that some schools struggle to get expert teachers especially in Vocational subjects, innovated by engaging external experts through WhatsApp network.

The insights given by these findings is that schools that struggle with lack of skills among teachers can access experts through innovative solutions such as WhatsApp network for peer collaboration. This practice indicates a theoretical contribution that instructional leadership is responsive to contextual challenges and demonstrates creativity approaches to capacity building when formal resources are limited

4.2.6 Integration of Themes

Cross-themes, distributed leadership, school climate, structured monitoring, data use, and teacher empowerment are interconnected. For instance, HODs' distributed roles depend on strong school climate and structured monitoring, while data-informed interventions support both teacher development and student achievement. The findings show that use of performance data help leaders to identify a need for teacher support and empowerment in area of needy. The findings indicate variability in principal engagement, monitoring approaches, and access to external support reveal contextual dependency.

New insights, the findings revealed some schools are faced with challenges of expertise especially in vocational subjects, and lead to the effective innovation of solving lack of vocational skills among staff using external experts in the same field connecting through WhatsApp media. The findings also revealed the use of grade guardians/ advisors in two schools as an innovation of learner control in terms of discipline and performance, as part of the school structure placed between HODs and class teacher which does not exist in the standard structure of other schools. Another uncommon practice done by one of the schools, is the provision of specific 40 minutes period on the time-table for principal and HODs for monitoring and supervising teaching and learning.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

In connecting theoretical concepts with practice, the study contributes to the knowledge of instructional leadership. The study demonstrates that leadership through success is not about positional authority alone, rather distributed leaders who engage in dialogue with each other to mold the institutional tone, build teacher capacity and develop an enabler learning climate. The study found that adding new grade guardians/advisors as actors in the leadership structure of the school is a great example of how distributed leadership responsibilities can be expanded through bringing on new actors with specific roles for the institutionalization of instructional leadership practices. The

other important new research discovery by this study is that learners are reflectors of teaching and learning to guide pedagogical reform.

This broadens the understandings of instructional leadership that it can extend the scope of monitoring structure to include the voice of learners within the instruction or input based on data, using analysis of learners' lesson reflection to guide teachers' professional development and mentorship intervention. Besides that, the study also identified the specification of time allocation for instructional monitoring provided for the Principals and HODs, this expands the scope to include more consistent monitoring and control of teaching and learning work than random monitoring. Results in summary, demonstrate that instructional leadership practices by the Principals and HODs are perceived to have a strong positive influence on learner outcomes in terms of an enhanced quality of teaching and learning, responsibility, decentralization of roles and responsibilities, preservation of the climate in the school, and targeted support towards the academic achievement of students.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that: School leaders should consider inclusion of learner's lesson reflection data for teaching decision-making, teacher mentorship plans and capacity building interventions. The Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture (MEIYSAC) should also extend school structures to include the participation of the grade guardians between HOD and teachers, who work closely with the teachers for moral and academic support to the learners, especially in discipline, moral, and the socio-economic aspects. Teacher training schools should create partnership with schools through the MEIYSAC to offer training on teacher shortage skills to raise the content knowledge and skill level in teachers to enhance instructional performance.

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