

Active Go-Betweens or Passive Observers? Examining the Instructional Leadership Role of Districts in the Implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus Reform in Zimbabwe

Walter Sengai

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4817-5649>

National University of Lesotho

Free State University, South Africa

waltersengai@gmail.com

Abstract

The tendency among most scholars over the years is to underestimate the instructional leadership role of districts, especially in the implementation of curriculum reforms, while over-emphasising the role played by other stakeholders such as schools, teachers, pressure groups, examination boards, and industries. This qualitative study draws on historical data from primary and secondary documents coupled with transcripts of in-depth interviews with 11 key informants to explore the instructional leadership role of districts in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus. The present account uses instructional leadership to provide an alternative dimension in explaining the participation of districts in the implementation of curriculum reforms, especially in developing countries. The key finding in this study was that the omission of districts from active participation in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus was not really deliberate and malicious but rather a result of the hurried manner used during the process. The article concludes that in order for curriculum reforms to succeed, districts should be at the cutting edge of the implementation process due to their intermediary role between the schools and the provincial and national instructional leadership. Districts should therefore actively participate as go-betweens rather than being demoted to passive observers such as what happened during the History 2166 Syllabus reform. I recommend that curriculum planners should thoroughly involve and consult the responsible school districts so as to harness all necessary ideas in order to facilitate the smooth implementation of curriculum reforms.

Keywords: curriculum reform; instructional leadership; curriculum implementation; district; History 2166 Syllabus



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Introduction and Background

The independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 marked a watershed in the teaching of History at secondary school since it heralded an astonishing urgency to institute curriculum reforms to replace the old colonial History curriculum (Chitate 2010; Ndebele and Tshuma 2014). The revision of the History curriculum culminated in the introduction of the History 2166 Syllabus in 1990 (Chitate 2010; Sengai and Mokhele 2020). However, the reform of the secondary school History curriculum in Zimbabwe since independence has been plagued by a plethora of controversies, resulting in the failure of several syllabuses with monotonous regularity. One such controversy is viewed as disregarding the leadership of district education officers (DEOs), now known as district schools inspectors (DSIs) in Zimbabwe. The instructional leadership role of the responsible districts in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus is therefore the major thrust of this study since schools may not experience significant academic improvement without meaningful involvement by their district leadership (Honig et al. 2010).

Investigations into the role of districts in curriculum implementation over the past have been few and discontinuous, in contrast to studies on the role played by schools as the epicentre of curriculum reform (Finn 1991). Nevertheless, some scholars have come to appreciate the pivotal role played by districts and their potential to facilitate curriculum reform efforts initiated both from within and from outside (Anderson 2006). Spillane's (1996, 1998) case studies of school district and school responses to state education reforms in Michigan reaffirmed the active policy-shaping role of districts described previously by Fuhrman and Elmore (1990). The analysis given offered convincing evidence that school district personnel can exert a powerful influence on the kinds of instructional practices favoured and supported in the entire district, and the degree of coherence in instructional guidance provided to teachers. When the district begins to reassert its role in providing innovation, capacity building, and accountability support to schools, wholesale improvements in learning begin to emerge (Fullan 2006). Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) also carried out a study with a view to show the integral role of districts in educational reform and transition, and bridging the gap in information regarding the key role played by district leaders in institutionalising reforms in schools. This present study offers a new dimension to earlier research since the main purpose here is to examine the instructional leadership role of the district in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reform.

Related Literature

Renowned proponent of the role of schools as the epicentre of curriculum reform, Finn (1991, 246) indignantly shrugged off districts as inconsequential in the change matrix, categorically declaring that "the school is the vital delivery system, the state is the policy setter (and chief paymaster), and nothing in between is very important." Smith and O'Day (1990, 235) view schools as the "basic unit of change, and school educators [as] not only the agents, but also the initiators, designers, and directors of change efforts."

Smith and O'Day (1990) came up with three waves of educational reform in the United States of America (USA). The first wave of educational reform associated with the top-down approach sought to improve inputs into education as well as ensuring competent execution of basic skills, while the second wave adopted a bottom-up approach that emphasised professionalism and the decentralisation of decision-making in issues of instruction. A third wave of reform combined the top-down and bottom-up approaches with the intention of addressing the limitations of both while reinforcing the strengths in order to come up with a coherent systematic strategy that could cater for the majority of schools (Silavwe 2016). Interestingly, all three reform efforts conspicuously downplayed the role played by local districts in curriculum reform while over-emphasising the role played by other stakeholders such as schools, teachers, pressure groups, industries, as well as state and federal think-tanks.

On the relegation of districts to “context” while acknowledging schools as the hub of curriculum reform, Elmore (2000) points out that states should abdicate the responsibility of setting goals, demarcation of curriculum requirements, as well as staff development programmes to meet the set goals and requirements, together with monitoring the delivery of content in individual schools to the district. Leithwood et al. (2004) also investigated the role of the district in educational change whereby they identified the challenges faced by districts in introducing change, strategies used to improve student learning and gathered evidence on the extent to which districts improve student learning.

Daresh et al. (2000) acknowledge those districts generating a will to reform as demonstrating proactive administrative behaviour sufficient to improve teaching and learning. McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) observe that previous research has shown that instructional leaders at district level generate will through observable involvement in all activities of instruction and instruction-related reform, as well as setting up the goals, vision, and focus to facilitate instruction. In the USA, research by Spillane and Thompson (1997) into nine Michigan districts exposed the significance of acquiring knowledge from districts on reforms earmarked for the teaching of science and mathematics. This reflected the description by Firestone (1989), and identification by Spillane and Thompson (1997) of three variations linked to capacity building, namely human, social, and physical. This was supported by findings from a study by Honig (2012) on the role of a district central office administrator in the operationalisation of the partnership between school and community. Based on the findings from updated research on districts, Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) conclude that capacity building is facilitated by district instructional leadership through coordinating and aligning others' work. This can be achieved by communication, planning, and collaboration (Massell 1998); improving instruction by monitoring goals and instruction and increasing the accessibility of data, availability, and transparency (Johnson and Fuller 2014); and securing human capital resources by acquiring and targeting support for instruction (Bredeson 1996).

An important finding of the research by Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) was confirmation of the perceived tendency by schools to claim sole responsibility for changes within their confines. School principals and teachers claim to have spearheaded most if not all innovations within their schools, thereby relegating districts to inactive spectators. Districts shed light on what they wish to be done by making policies that are consistent with one another and prescriptive of particular content to be taught (Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich 2008).

Successively corresponding studies have recommended that districts abdicate their traditional and unpopular role of policing schools in favour of a modern one of networking and linking schools to beneficial national programmes (Blase and Blase 2000). Apart from nourishing the concept of instructional leadership this will cultivate cordial relations between districts and schools under their jurisdiction, thereby positively affecting the systemic education reform process. Districts should be seen playing an intermediary role between schools and the national authorities by helping to unpack national programmes and make them more compatible and relevant to their local schools (Desimone 2002). Districts can even play a leading role by helping to coordinate schools within their locality through the establishment of shared visions, achievable through organising district events such as cultural and educational cooperation and competitions. Eventually, schools will cooperate as they compete, thereby fostering better relations amongst themselves. This would also help to improve conditions and results within schools, since they would strive to outdo one another, whilst districts would reap rewards for themselves through improved relations with the schools

A study by Firestone and Martinez (2007) explored the interactions between districts and teacher leaders in instructional leadership. The purpose of the study was to further pursue the extent of distributed leadership by examining the distribution of leadership in schools and districts in an effort to strengthen earlier research that tended to restrict itself to distributed leadership within schools. This was accomplished by the analysis of the role of districts and teacher leaders in the classroom as well as how they relate to the thrust to transform education. Importantly, the researchers chose to pursue a new area of study and did not repeat areas already covered since they covered distributed leadership beyond schools and within districts as opposed to earlier studies that had focused on such leadership within schools. Among the major findings was the complementary role between districts and teacher leaders because the two complement each other in purchasing and sharing materials, supervising achievement of set targets, and staff professional upgrading. However, the two centres of authority operate differently: teacher leaders coordinate on the ground through personal relationships with their subordinates while districts operate through delegation of authority that is remotely linked to teachers. The study found that the three districts directly and indirectly monitored schools through lesson observations and use of tests, respectively. All three districts kept an eye on the test scores in their schools to determine the extent to which they were addressing the district benchmarks (Firestone and Martinez 2007).

Through their description of how leadership is spread between districts and teacher leaders, Firestone and Martinez (2007) offered important insights. Distributed leadership opened the eyes of scholars as to how large-scale district transformation can involve teacher leaders since the efforts of the two centres of power are complementary in the quest to improve educational performance. This demonstrates that districts and teacher leaders need not be rivals in education but rather work together to support each other in ensuring effective delivery of education to students. Teacher leaders bridged the boundaries between the schools and the district since they toiled in between the two parties in an attempt to ensure a harmonious relationship (Jackson and Temperley 2007). Commendably, the authors' exploration of important aspects characterising the relationship between districts and teacher leaders failed to satisfy them since they conceded that they could have delved deeper into other leadership responsibilities of key stakeholders in classroom instruction and applied them to their study. The researchers also admitted that they could have broadened the scope of their study to cover more districts than the four on which they chose to concentrate. This could have made it plausible to generalise their findings to other areas outside their geographical delimitation. However, according to Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002), attachments to the status quo should not be misinterpreted as deliberate attempts to undermine novel policies or lack of capacity to conform since there may be complex reasons for this stance. On the other hand, Leithwood et al. (2004, 34) argue that "in order to develop policies that successfully change practice, it is essential to begin by examining the implementer's cognitive perspective." This is supported by a study by Gold (2007), which discovered that cognitive limitations within individuals were primarily the cause of resistance to change—a situation exacerbated as the curriculum and instruction are realigned to address the examination requirements of the new policy.

In order to bring about the understanding of a policy, Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) argue that what a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), together with their condition, and the policy signals. The failure of implementation is often due to the inability of school heads to frame clear policy outcomes or to effectively oversee the implementation (Okoth 2016). Harris and Spillane (2013) used a cognitive lens to explore the response of districts to mathematics reforms. The study is grounded on data from the second phase of a five-year research, conducted between 1992 and 1996 to examine state-local government relations regarding instructional policymaking and the teaching of mathematics and science in Michigan. Whereas district leaders in the study understood mathematics reforms as representing change for their mathematics policies and programmes, they appeared to lack appreciation of the full implications of the reforms (Okoth 2016). Focusing on the forms of mathematics reforms rather than their instructional functions, district leaders tended to focus on spasmodic changes that often sidestepped the disciplinary thrust of the reforms. Harris and Spillane (2013) used their analysis to argue for the active participation of stakeholders in interpreting the reform message.

A study by 'Nei (2024) in Lesotho focused on the collaborative leadership practices of the district-based education inspectors in supporting teacher professional development. Data was generated from four district-based education inspectors, four principals, four heads of department (HODs), and six teachers from each of the four schools which were selected for the study. The findings revealed that the teacher professional development activities that were provided to the teachers were mainly workshops, which were school-initiated while others were district-office-initiated. This confirmed the findings by Mapetere (2015) in Zimbabwe. The study also found that the district-based inspectors' collaborative leadership practices were partially effective since there were some practices that were not happening as anticipated according to the principles of collaborative leadership. The study further highlighted the lack of resources, work overload, fear of inspectors' intimidating approach, lack of feedback, lack of support for private schools, lack of exposure to a variety of teacher professional development activities, no tapping of available knowledge, and lack of exposure to advanced technology as some of the factors affecting the collaborative leadership practices of the district-based inspectors. Therefore, the study recommended the establishment of structures that would provide district-based education inspectors support from different stakeholders.

A study by Mapetere (2015) looked at the interactions between district and school-based instructional leadership practices for the subject of History in a rural district in Zimbabwe. The study aimed to establish the nature of the relationships between district and school-based instructional leadership in pursuit of instructional improvement in History, what policies and structures guide the interactions, and what practices define the interactions. Conducted against the backdrop of separate and isolated studies of district instructional leadership on the one hand and of school instructional leadership on the other, the study sought to examine instructional leadership structures and practices at the intersection of the schools and districts. The study established that most instructional leadership practices for History in Zimbabwe are often limited to workshops and that these practices are often narrow in scope and circumscribed in terms of duration. It emerged from the study that the most unresolved issue for district and school-based instructional leadership interactions for the improvement of History teaching and learning lies in the coordination and control of the leadership activities for supporting teachers. There was a clear contestation between the "bottom-up" approach which most teacher leaders advocated, versus the dominant and current practice of the "top-down" district leadership approach. The study concluded that instructional leadership interactions at the intersection of schools and districts have great potential for improving classroom practice, especially if they are initiated and coordinated from below going up. The success of instructional leadership at the interface of districts and schools is strongly dependent on the level of involvement by all leaders at both levels, where leaders can become followers, interchangeably, at different times. On the structures of leadership, the study established that districts are rather ill-prepared to lead on instructional leadership, in part because of the lack of subject specialists at that level to provide expert knowledge and skills for subject-based instructional leadership and

guidance. A key recommendation was the relocation of collaborative instructional leadership activities to the school level, in order to improve both capacity and commitment by the practitioners. The study further recommended that the district inspectorate should be reconstituted in terms of its composition in order to enhance its instructional leadership role.

Some researchers, for instance Driscoll, Halcoussis, and Svorny (2003), have demonstrated that the size of the district and its configuration are crucial in its capacity-building efforts for the improvement of instruction. They showed that progress on the implementation and understanding of curriculum reform increased proportionally with the size of the district, with Hannaway and Kimball (1997, 18) declaring that “districts are major players in standards based reform. Moreover, larger districts may not be part of the education problem, they may in fact, be part of the solution.” Contrary to this view, after studying the relationship between the size of the district and student achievement in California, Driscoll, Halcoussis, and Svorny (2003) discovered that the achievement declined as the size of the district increased according to the Academic Performance Index (API). This is the case in Zimbabwe, since larger districts, such as the one used in this study, require more instructional resources, which the economically unstable central government cannot address, thereby leading to poor academic results. Current trends in the country have shown that districts sometimes reward communities with incentives to encourage the success of curriculum reforms in different settings. In Zimbabwe, incentives are offered to outstanding schools at all levels, with the Secretary’s Bell Merit Award being awarded to high-achieving schools in respective provinces.

Theoretical Framework

Districts have historically been viewed as playing an insignificant role in the instructional leadership matrix of schools (Bantwini and Diko 2011). Research, however, suggests that districts have become more involved in school improvement efforts (Honig et al. 2010). This study employed the theoretical lens of Rorrer, Skrla, and Sheurich (2008) of districts as institutional actors in systemic reform in order to appreciate the role of districts in curriculum implementation. Apart from insisting that the tide against the role of districts appeared to be sweeping all in its wake due to widespread acceptance in policy, research, and practitioner circles, Rorrer, Skrla, and Sheurich (2008) disagreed with this assertion and defended the role of districts as institutional actors in the facilitation of systematic educational reform. They explored the intricately interdependent web of district responsibilities and how this eventually leads to systematic educational reform, without which the curriculum change locomotives would inevitably derail (Snead 2018). Their reflection was premised on their own research into trends in specific districts with proven progress in adequately addressing educational reform efforts, consideration of other scholars’ findings on the role of districts as well as the overwhelming evidence of tangible district-level initiatives on systematic educational reform.

This article proposes a theoretical framework that acknowledges the crucial instructional leadership role districts play in local governance and systematic educational reform through the mobilisation of limited resources, legitimising reforms, and linking schools with central offices. Most notably, Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) established that districts are major players in educational reform, as testified by their instructional leadership roles in framing policies and regulations, the pursuance and achievement of the institutional goals, fostering and ensuring equal opportunities and fairness as well as the demonstration of effective instruction.

Firstly, districts facilitate the provision of instructional leadership to the schools. Instructional leadership, as an educational concept, is a pivotal function of districts, as illustrated by Cuban (2008) who extended its function from schools to districts. In spite of contrasting views on the concept, at the district level, generating the will to reform and building the capacity to do so are two essential elements that researchers consistently consider as important for curriculum reform (Finnigan, Daly, and Che 2013; Firestone and Martinez 2007). Curriculum reforms instituted by the state are most likely to fail to yield systematic reform without the schools' will to comply, and the district is very instrumental in generating this will (McLaughlin 1990). The districts' ability to generate the will to reform may be sufficient to advance instructional practice (Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich 2008). Districts are a key element in the leadership matrix since they facilitate close relations with other national stakeholders in educational reform (Firestone and Martinez 2007). Case studies by Spillane (1998) of how districts and schools reacted to state educational reforms in Michigan reaffirm the role of districts in actively shaping instructional policies. The analysis offers evidence that district employees wield an influential control on the kinds of instructional practices that are preferred and supported locally. This current study affirms that when the district begins to reassert its role in providing innovation, capacity building, and accountability support to schools, wholesale improvements in learning will emerge.

Secondly, districts are also responsible for the reorientation of the organisation. According to Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008), it is the obligation of districts to improve the organisational structures and processes and realign district culture with their educational reform targets so as to improve teaching and learning. A study by Peterson, Murphy, and Hallinger (1987) of 12 California districts, among the first into refining structures in districts' support of instruction, demonstrated how locally developed mechanisms were applied by the districts that were investigated to coordinate, control, and assess their technical core functions, such as setting goals, instruction, selecting principals, evaluation, curriculum, and funding. This crucially facilitates the success or failure of curriculum reforms.

Thirdly, districts facilitate the establishing of policy coherence among schools. Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) demonstrate this in their fusion of different literature on the role of the district in reform. They proved this to be another key function of the district in educational reform, achieved through linking national and local policy and aligning

resources (Desimone et al. 2002). District leaders are also instrumental in linking policy to the needs and expected outcomes, thereby leading to policy coherence. The Secretary's Circular Minute No. 2 of 2001 (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture 2001) on the curriculum policy for both primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe was a classic example of the state's desire to establish policy coherence within the schools through district involvement. The circular outlined the relevance of the curriculum as being based on the extent to which it met "individual attributes, the national economy, the needs of the society and the future challenges of the country." This was in line with the new-found thrust towards the propagation of patriotic history among secondary school pupils (Nyakudya 2011; Tendi 2010).

Lastly, districts also crucially facilitate the maintenance of an equity focus within and among schools. Despite the institutionalisation of inequalities in society, recent studies have shown that districts are willing to disrupt and displace the culture of perpetual inequalities of academic achievement between students (Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson 2001). In the course of their role in educational reform, two attributes of districts surfaced, namely, taking note of past inequalities and foregrounding equality (Rorrer 2006). In pursuance of these two attributes, districts appear focused towards the equitable improvement of academic performance for all students.

Within them, the instructional leadership roles of districts discussed above contain pertinent aspects such as district leadership, governance, management, operation, as well as values and norms. This present study explored how two districts in the Harare Metropolitan Province exercised instructional leadership practices during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reform, which was eventually withdrawn in 2000.

Methodology

The failure of the History 2166 Syllabus reform efforts by the government of Zimbabwe presents a unique opportunity to study the roles played by districts in the implementation of the syllabus. The following research question was used to guide this study: What instructional leadership roles did the district play in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus? The qualitative approach was particularly suitable for this study since it facilitated the generation of thick volumes of data due to the numerous views and comments by participants (Lewis 2015; Maree 2012). Specifically, this study used the case studies of two districts which sought to understand the past through meticulously studying their activities as well as documents (Chawla and Sondhi 2014), and conducting interviews with key participants. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) observe that a case study design is appropriate for use during the examination of a delimited system or a case over time as it makes use of numerous sources of data found in the setting. Case study research proved more appropriate since it "is more varied than phenomenology, which focuses on individuals' experience of some phenomenon; ethnography, which focuses on some aspects of culture; or grounded theory, which focuses on developing an explanatory theory" (Johnson and Christensen 2014, 50–51).

Above all, case study research is holistic (Kumar 2018). This approach facilitated the understanding of instructional leadership roles of the district outlined in the theoretical framework and thus uncovered any other roles not captured by the framework. Involvement in the study was voluntary, and the respondents were assured of confidentiality.

This study used a purposive sample consisting of key stakeholders instrumental in instructional leadership and curriculum reform in the Glen View-Mufakose and Warren Park-Marbelreign districts in Harare Metropolitan Province. One provincial education officer (PEO), two district education officers (DEOs), as well as four school heads (also referred to as principals in other contexts) and four heads of department were purposively sampled for the interviews. Purposive sampling had the advantage of recruiting the most appropriate participants for the study (Creswell 2015; Lewis 2015) since those chosen were key stakeholders in instructional leadership at different levels in the province. This enabled me to strengthen the data as well as triangulate the findings (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011).

Data sources included semi-structured interviews and archival data. Data from interviews which ranged from 60–90 minutes were coded through a combination of both *a priori* and open coding (Merriam 2015). Field notes from document analyses of archival data, curriculum documents, policy papers as well as journal and newspaper articles on the History 2166 Syllabus reforms were triangulated with interview data to substantiate the findings (Birks and Mills 2014). My insights, gained through first-hand experience from over 15 years as a secondary school History teacher, determined the selection of participants.

Thematic analysis was used to sort out key themes and to group phenomena associated with research objectives (Creswell 2015). This facilitated ascertaining salient concepts from participants' individual interview transcripts and the policy documents.

Findings and Discussion

Evidence presented in this section shows the diminished role of districts in the instructional leadership matrix during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reforms. According to the provincial education officer (PEO) who was instrumental in the reform process:

Everything possible was done to ensure the active involvement of all key stakeholders in the design and implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus.

When probed to elaborate on the specific role played by districts in the implementation of the syllabus, the PEO, however, had this to say:

The whole process had to be fast-tracked so as to expeditiously introduce a socialist-oriented History syllabus in line with the new government's ideological thrust, so some

players might feel that they were left out from key decision-making forums but in reality, there was a committed effort to get everybody on board during this crucial phase in the country's educational transformation.

The impression one gets from the above explanation is that the education ministry was aware that they had to include all key stakeholders in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus. However, on the ground, the urgency given to the implementation of the new syllabus led to overlooking the role of some key stakeholders such as districts. According to a senior DEO in the Glen View-Mufakose district (DEO1):

The normal process during the roll-out of new syllabuses is that after all the deliberations associated with the design and development of the syllabus, the curriculum planners carefully follow the hierarchy from the ministry's head office, the provincial leadership, district leadership, schools, subject leadership in schools all the way to the classroom teacher. This was not the case with the History 2166 Syllabus since the curriculum designers appeared to be in a hurry to implement it.

The hurry associated with the design and implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus was blamed for the overlooking of key stakeholders such as districts' involvement in the implementation of the syllabus. This disregard for districts was noted as an error by the PEO:

It was never a policy position to deliberately ignore contributions from the districts. However, the hurried manner of the design and implementation process made other officials overlook key stakeholders such as districts. Such a blunder was very regrettable due to the ripple-effects it produced.

The above interview shows that the districts were not deliberately left out of the design and implementation stages of the History 2166 Syllabus. Nonetheless, the blunder almost strained relations between the district and their superiors at the provincial level. A school head (H1) at one of the leading secondary schools in the Glen View-Mufakose district had this to say:

When the History 2166 Syllabus was introduced, I was still a history HOD and together with other members of my department, we were surprised that most information about the implementation of the syllabus came to schools either straight from the regional offices or from the head office.

This all but confirms the fears that the dissemination of information was not conducted in the best way possible. A history HOD (HOD1) added that:

The problem with getting information from the region and beyond was that school heads and HODs were not very free to ask for clarification of some sticking issues due to the professional distance between them and the ministry officials from these higher offices.

One school head (H2) confirmed thus:

Imagine school heads overlooking the district to go and receive instructions from the regional officials. It was rather not procedural, especially considering our cordial working relationship with the district office.

Most school heads feared victimisation, so they complied. Another school head (H3) was more direct:

School heads and their HODs were afraid of being labelled as lacking enough enthusiasm and zeal towards the socialist thrust in the new syllabus so they set off to implement the syllabus in their schools straight away.

This was supported by HOD2:

Despite the glaring challenges, the syllabus was swiftly implemented within the schools.

DEO1 voiced her disappointment about the relegation of districts to mere observers during the History 2166 Syllabus reform process. She argued that:

As a district, we were actually stunned to receive complaints from individual schools about the lack of resources to enable the effective teaching of the History 2166 Syllabus because we had been left out during the design process. Unfortunately, we could not refuse to address the issues raised by the school heads.

The instructional resources that were in short supply in the schools included key texts, media, and finances for use in undertaking field trips. This was corroborated by DEO2 from the Warren Park-Marbelreign district:

As the district leadership we did not know how to solve the issues of concern so we ended up just referring them to our superiors at the province who also could not offer much help.

A school head (H4) also felt hard done by:

Imagine having to deal directly with the regional office in issues such as the procurement of instructional materials, specimen question papers as well as other necessary logistical issues.

The districts, which are key centres for linking the schools with the provincial and national stakeholders, had not been canvassed sufficiently into the process of reform. In by-passing the district, the reformers seem to give credence to the argument by Finn (1991) that no other institution besides the state and the school is important in the curriculum reform matrix. However, in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus, the districts in the Zimbabwean context needed to play an integral role in facilitating the provision of instructional materials to the schools to complement the efforts of the school heads (Mapetere 2015). According to DEO2:

Under normal instructional leadership practice, it is the responsibility of the district to source for instructional materials for use in the schools then distribute them accordingly. However, in the case of the History 2166 Syllabus, the process was rushed such that districts were skipped. We therefore faced challenges in sourcing for the instructional resources since we were not very familiar with the new syllabus requirements.

A school head (H2) added her sentiments thus:

The heavy socialist thrust of the syllabus did not make things any better since it provoked mixed feelings from both teachers and administrators alike.

The view of the school head shows that both teachers and administrators might have faced challenges in interpreting and implementing the History 2166 Syllabus due to its socialist orientation, which some regarded as not being scholarly. An HOD (HOD3) added:

Teachers faced serious challenges in trying to unpack and interpret the key themes of the syllabus.

The omission of districts from the reform process may thus have been unwise and partly explains the challenges in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus. Paradoxically, when the implementation of the syllabus failed, the schools took their grievances to the districts who hastily organised district subject workshops to facilitate staff development for history teachers. According to HOD4:

Teachers only benefited from the rare district workshops organised to help teachers share experiences especially with their colleagues who were examiners in external History examinations.

The districts' role in providing teachers with a collaborative platform to share ideas (Jita and Mokhele 2014) about their difficulties was therefore one glaringly missing feature of the History 2166 Syllabus implementation. Previous research on the History 2166 Syllabus has not adequately acknowledged this policy inconsistency by the government with respect to the inclusion of districts as sites for instructional guidance and leadership for the schools.

The provincial education officer (PEO) in charge of History described their dilemma as follows:

Schools were really lukewarm when it came to the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus. They accused us [provincial education officers] of trying to force a curriculum reform upon them using political coercion. As PEOs, we felt that the implementation of the new syllabus could have received better cooperation from the schools if districts had been left to play their usual mediation role.

The views expressed above show that the districts were quite supportive of the History 2166 Syllabus reform despite being sidelined in the design of the syllabus (Sengai and Mokhele 2020). However, they lacked the capacity to provide financial and intellectual guidance and resources to enable the smooth implementation of the new syllabus, as highlighted in studies by Firestone and Martinez (2007) and Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008). The argument highlighted in this present study, therefore, is that the failure to harness instructional leadership functions of the districts in generating the required will, and in providing curriculum and instructional support to the schools, may be an important part of the explanation of the failure of the History 2166 Syllabus reform. Interestingly, this observation seems to have been overlooked by many researchers in their accounts of the failure of the History 2166 Syllabus reform process.

However, some HODs still felt justified to try and support the peripheral district involvement in the History 2166 Syllabus reforms, as shown by HOD4, who claimed that:

If the district had been roped into the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus, it could have added to the already lengthy bureaucratic chain which in turn stalled most reform efforts.

Conceptually, the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reform process was riddled with irregularities, thereby leading to a form of “tissue-rejection.” Particularly evident in this study was the sidelining of responsible districts in the implementation of the new syllabus. This could have compromised the smooth implementation of the syllabus, since the pivotal role of districts in facilitating systematic curriculum reform (Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich 2008), together with their associated responsibilities, such as in-service training for staff, pilot-testing of the new syllabus, and providing material resources, appeared to be the missing instructional leadership components that led to the failure of the History 2166 Syllabus (‘Nei 2024; Sengai and Mokhele 2020).

The key finding from this study is that the omission of districts from active participation in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus was not really deliberate and malicious. However, data presented in this study show that key participants regard districts as integral in curriculum reform and implementation due to their close relationship with the school-based instructional leaders. It appears, therefore, that their omission from key processes in the implementation of the syllabus was a side effect of the hurry in which the syllabus was implemented rather than by design. To this extent, there appears to be no sour grapes between the district-based instructional leaders and provincial and national leaders over the gaffe.

This study also established that districts play a key instructional leadership role in the successful implementation of curriculum reform in schools. Their omission from active involvement in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus predictably led to its failure. The key practices of instructional leadership can only be successfully

implemented in schools if the instructional leaders work closely with districts. According to Cordeiro and Cunningham (2013, 121),

Instructional leadership is focused on curriculum and instructional development; staff development; instructional supervision; program, teacher, and student evaluation; research and experimentation; provision of resources; and the continuous improvement of teaching and learning.

All these key instructional leadership practices were absent during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus due to the limited involvement of districts in the process, hence its failure to make significant progress.

The present study also established that the decision to overlook the role of districts in the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus was catastrophic since school-based instructional leaders were not very free to work directly with the provincial and national leaders without the involvement of the districts. This break in the communication hierarchy eventually proved to be the Achilles' heel in the implementation of the new syllabus since the school-based instructional leaders were sometimes not very enthusiastic in meeting their side of the bargain in the implementation of the new syllabus. This inevitably led to the failure of the History 2166 Syllabus (Sengai and Mokhele 2020).

The research established that districts are crucial to the systemic educational change and reform process, so they should be accorded the respect they deserve. Authorities should strive to foster complementary relations between districts and schools instead of fanning flames of animosity and resentment; they should urge them to join forces to work towards improving the school environment so that learners would reap the rewards in the form of improved educational standards and facilities (Elmore and Burney 2002). Nonetheless, rubber-stamping decisions is synonymous with the "top-down" approach and should be avoided so as to make all stakeholders complement each other in all programmes of systemic educational reform (Okoth 2016). This, in turn, would foster the ownership of programmes by both parties.

In view of the above findings, I therefore support the contention by McLaughlin (1990) that, in order for curriculum reforms to succeed, all key stakeholders should work harmoniously so as to cultivate appropriate instructional leadership practices. Conceptually, the failure of the History 2166 Syllabus reform should therefore be viewed as having been deeply premised on disregarding appropriate instructional leadership due to the demotion of the contributions of key stakeholders such as districts, churches, school heads, HODs, and teachers in the reform process, which led to the so-called "tissue-rejection." It is my contention that these people are actually at the chalkface, and their input is critical in the success of any curriculum reform which they are required to implement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The main conclusion drawn from this research is that districts play an integral role as sites of instructional leadership since their omission in the implementation of curriculum reforms is disastrous, as illustrated by the History 2166 Syllabus debacle in Zimbabwe. The syllabus reform failed to yield the desired results because of the failure by those at the forefront to follow proper instructional leadership practices by disregarding key stakeholders such as districts in the reform process. In the end, people rushed to prematurely blame political contestations for the failure of the reforms. This study contends that if curriculum reforms are to succeed in the schools, then proper instructional leadership practices need to be strictly adhered to so as to address the concerns of key stakeholders such as districts. Districts should therefore be engaged as active go-betweens rather than be demoted to passive observers such as what happened during the History 2166 Syllabus reform.

I recommend that at the national level, the curriculum planners should thoroughly involve and consult the entire stakeholder fraternity so as to ensure the harnessing of all the necessary ideas in order to facilitate smooth implementation of curriculum reforms. Particularly important is the involvement of districts since they oversee the implementation of the curriculum reforms.

Although the scope of this study was limited due to the concentration on only two districts out of the seven in the province, the article contributes significantly to growing scholarly interest on the pertinent phenomenon of instructional leadership, especially with regard to the role of districts in curriculum reforms. Notwithstanding its limitations, the practical implication of this study is that educationalists are gradually beginning to appreciate the key role districts play as sites of instructional leadership in most facets of education. Further research may include the views and perceptions of other key stakeholders in education such as teachers in the curriculum reform matrix.

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