

## Teachers' Perceptions of Lesson Observations by School Heads in Zimbabwean Primary Schools

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**ABSTRACT** The study investigated primary school teachers' perceptions on the way school heads undertake lesson observations in selected Zimbabwean primary schools. A qualitative survey design was used. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect the data. Sixty-five purposefully selected qualified teachers participated in the study. Content analysis was used in analysing the data. The study revealed that perceptions of teachers about lesson observations by their heads were largely negative as heads tended to base their lesson observations on the dominant models of supervision. There were few exceptions where teachers' perceptions revealed clinical and collaborative supervisory practices in lesson observation. The study concluded that school heads could be lagging behind in embracing collaborative and democratic approaches in supervision. Recommendations were made to improve on the effectiveness of lesson observation by school heads.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important functions of a school head in any school is that of being an instructional leader (Olivia 1993; Glickman et al. 2007). The school head oversees teaching and learning in the school to ensure that quality instruction takes place. The school head should be a distinguished teacher so as to be able to offer appropriate instructional leadership. Effective instructional leadership affects the quality of teaching and student learning (Leithwood et al. 2004). Ngware et al. (2010) contend that teachers may be qualified and trained but still no effective learning may take place in the classroom. They further advocate for the institutionalisation of lesson observation, feedback and professional guidance in schools. Hoerr (2008) observes that despite theoretical shifts over time on the role of the school principal he or she still needs to be an educational visionary, offering direction and expertise to ensure that students learn effectively.

A number of studies have been carried out on instructional leadership of school heads, for example in South Africa (Kruger 2003), Kenya

(Musungu and Nasongo 2003), Malaysia (Sidhu and Fook 2010) and Israel (Gaziel 2007). In almost all the studies the researchers are agreed on the indispensable nature of lesson observation in schools and some of the reasons forwarded for the necessity of lesson observation in schools include;

- Accountability
- Quality assurance by way of monitoring the quality of teaching.
- Curriculum trouble shooting
- Providing guidance to novice teachers.
- Recognising and reinforcing good practice
- Identifying ways of improving teaching and learning.
- Highlighting teaching and learning practices to be shared.
- Improving the quality of students' learning and experience in the school

It shows that there are a number of factors that make lesson observation necessary in a school system. In Zimbabwe, there is an apparent dearth of studies on how teachers perceive lesson observation practices by school heads hence the importance of the current study.

**Supervisory Practices Underpinning Lesson Observation:** Sidhu and Fook (2010:590) observe that the word "supervise" brings along with it various connotations such as to 'watch over', 'oversee' and 'direct'. Such connotations may negatively affect the very purpose of lesson ob-

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supervision. Komoski (1997) contends that supervision is a leadership act whose ultimate purpose is to improve classroom instruction. If supervision is seen in this light it would be beneficial to supervisors, teachers and students. Acheson and Gail (2003) stress that supervision should not be an autocratic exercise but collaborative and interactive. In instances where school heads act as autocrats in their supervision, they are bound to face challenges such as resistance from teachers and the whole purpose of supervising for curriculum improvement is defeated. Instances of too much nervousness, anxiety, heart attack or even death occur because of the impact of the activity on some teachers (Reff 2011). In principle, class observation is a prescribed requirement in the teaching profession for school heads and superiors to undertake to help improve teacher's performance in the classroom.

The following functions generally characterize instructional leadership:

- *Defining and Communicating a Clear Mission, Goals and Objectives:* Setting, together with staff members, a mission, goals and objectives to realise effective teaching and learning.
- *Managing Curriculum and Instruction:* Managing and coordinating the curriculum in such a way that teaching time can be used optimally. Principals need to support the teaching programme and provide resources that teachers need to carry out their task.
- *Supervising Teaching:* Ensuring that teachers receive guidance and support to enable them to teach as effectively as possible. The focus of the instructional leader should be more orientated to staff development than to performance appraisal. This implies implementing programmes that may enrich the teaching experiences of teachers or motivating them to attend such programmes.
- *Monitoring Learner Progress:* Monitoring and evaluating the learners' progress by means of tests and examinations. Using the results to provide support to both teachers and students to improve as well as to help parents understand where and why improvement is needed.
- *Promoting Instructional Climate:* Creating a positive school climate in which teaching and learning can take place. In a situation where learning is made exciting, where teachers and learners are supported and where

there is a shared sense of purpose, learning will not be difficult. (Parker and Day 1997: 87 cited in Kruger 2003: 207).

If instructional leadership is based on the above stated underpinnings, the school heads and teachers would share a common vision and mission and the execution of any aspect of supervision, lesson observation included would be seen as means to achieve the consultatively laid out vision and mission.

Sergiovanni and Starrat (2006) posit that effective supervision is embedded in formative clinical supervision which is a "people-centred approach" based on continuous improvement. Cogan (1973: 9) cited in Zepeda (2007) defines clinical supervision as "...the rationale and practice designed to improve the teacher's classroom performance. It takes its principal data from events of the classroom. The analysis of these data and the relationship between supervisor and the supervisee form the basis of the programme, procedures and strategies designed to improve students learning by improving the teacher's classroom behaviour." Of importance in clinical supervision is the high level of collegiality that exists between the supervisor and the supervisee. Negative perceptions of supervisees about their supervisors are normally associated with the nature of relationships that exist between them.

**The Zimbabwean Context:** Primary school education in Zimbabwe ordinarily starts from Grade one to Grade seven. Each school normally operates with an appointed substantive school head, normally a senior teacher who is appointed on the basis of seniority. In the absence of a substantive head a senior teacher in the school may be appointed as an acting school head. One of the managerial duties of the school head is to oversee teaching and learning in the school and this involves inspecting teachers' professional documents such as schemes of work, lesson plans, lesson notes, records of marks and observing lessons while teachers teach. Lesson observations are carried out for different purposes ranging from the need to assist new teachers, ensuring quality teaching in the school and for performance appraisal.

### Goal of the Study

The study aimed at establishing teachers' perceptions of lesson observations by their school heads in selected schools in Karoi district in the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe by

answering the question: What are the teachers' perceptions of lesson observations by school heads?

### Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned on the clinical model of supervision. A prerequisite for clinical supervision is a positive school climate in which a norm of supportiveness is sensed by all those participants working in it (Sergiovanni and Starrat 2006). In general, the school is found to have a supportive context that nurtures close working relations among teachers. These closed working relations can be found on committee, subject and class levels. It is a necessary condition that both supervisor and teacher understand and accept their respective roles in clinical supervision. These roles will be interactive during the whole supervisory process. In order to take positive roles, it is essential for the participants to understand and accept the purposes of clinical supervision. Supervisors will identify those areas for improvement in teaching methods, mastery of subject matter, teaching skills or individual concerns for the teachers. Teachers admit that improvement leads to their professional growth. The clinical supervision model is also based on the three phases namely the pre-observation phase, the observation and the post observation phase.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design

A qualitative survey design was used in this study. Qualitative designs are normally appropriate for studies that seek to gain insight about the nature of a particular phenomenon (Babbie and Mouton 2001). The use of the qualitative approach enabled the researchers to develop an understanding of individuals and events in their natural settings, taking into account the relevant context (Henning 2005). This is in line with the observation that rich and reliable data is only solicited from the participants' themselves (Creswell 2002; Henning 2005). This study sought to establish teachers' perceptions on lesson observation by school heads.

### Sample

Sixty-five qualified primary school teachers participated in the study. The sample was pur-

posefully selected to target information-rich sources.

### Instrumentation

A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to the participants. They were requested to list positive and negative issues about the way the school head conducted lesson observation by looking at the pre-observation period, observation period and the post-observation period. The use of semi-structured questionnaires to collect qualitative data has been successfully used in previous studies by Maphosa and Mubika (2008) on clusters' influence on educators' curriculum practice used a semi-structured questionnaire as the main data collection instrument and the questionnaire managed to gather the data quickly and in a cost effective manner. Chireshe (2006) also confirms the usefulness of the semi-structured questionnaire as the main data collection instrument which was useful in gathering educators' and learners' views on effectiveness of school guidance and counselling programmes.

### Trustworthiness

Whilst quantitative studies thrive on validity and reliability, qualitative studies' credibility hinges on trustworthiness (Patton 2002). To ensure trustworthiness the following strategies were followed to minimise researcher bias:

- *Use of participants' language of choice:* The questionnaires were in both English and Shona (the participants' home language) and participants were free to choose a language they were more comfortable with.
- The questionnaire was pilot-tested to ensure suitability before data collection.
- *Verbatim accounts:* Direct quotations were captured from open ended sections of the questionnaire and later summarised.

### Procedure

Permission to conduct research in schools was sought and granted by relevant authorities. Fifteen schools were identified in Karoi district and five teachers from each school were purposefully selected to complete the questionnaires. The purpose of the study was explained to participants. Participants were free to withdraw from the study or not to respond to particular issues on the questionnaire. A total of 65 usable questionnaires were collected for analysis.

**Data Analysis Procedure**

Content analysis was used in data analysis. Responses were first analysed by listing all the attributes identified by the participants. Participants’ responses were then put into attribute categories on positive and negative perceptions on pre-observation, observation, observation report and post observation.

**RESULTS**

The observation phases were used to classify data and data on each phase was further classified into positive and negative perceptions. The headings are: Positive and negative perceptions on pre-observation, observation, the observation report and post- observation.

**Perceptions of Pre-observation Period**

Table 1 shows a summary of the positive and negative perceptions held by teachers on the pre-observation period. The negative perceptions range from school heads not giving any notification for visits to giving very short notices which did not allow teacher adequate time to prepare

**Table 1: Perceptions of the pre-observation period**

<i>Pre-observation</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>
	No prior notice is given	Supervision timetable drawn together with teachers
	Prior notice leaves no room for preparation	Supervision timetable drawn at the beginning of the term and made available to teachers.
	No pre-observation discussions are done.	Supervisor asks to be briefed on learners’ progress before observation.
	Supervisor never talks to supervisee Does not demonstrate effective teaching Expectations in observation not clarified to supervisees Supervisor only talked observation when he was angry	

for lessons. Some of the comments given in open ended section of the questionnaires included:

**Teacher X**

*The Head often embarks on lesson observation at any time. He can just approach you early in the morning and tell you he is coming to your lesson for observation.*

**Teacher Y**

*The head has constant lesson observation to teachers he suspects not to be doing their work. If he suspects you for being lazy you are in trouble. He will always visit you in classes even twice a week.*

The perceptions summarised on Table 1 and some of the comments on open ended sections of the questionnaire show teachers’ perceptions of the pre-observation period.

**Perceptions of Actual Lesson Observation**

Table 2 gives a summary of teachers’ perceptions of the actual observation period and these included the head just sitting quietly at the back and writing notes, the head being unfriendly and serious and identifying faults during observation. One teacher made this comment:

*The time when the head comes to observe*

**Table 2: Perceptions of the actual observation period**

<i>During observation</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>
	Too many supervision visits Sits at the back and writes notes while observing Unfriendly Too serious Takes note of mainly faults Atmosphere very tense during observation Never focused on improving teaching and learning Hated being observed Felt very nervous The supervisor was too strict The supervisor made disturbing comments during observation	Supervisor is a participant observer. Encourages learners to participate in lesson

*me I feel very nervous in front of the pupils because I know she will be busy looking for the faults I make when teaching. It's really terrifying.*

**Perceptions of the Observation Report**

Table 3 summarises teachers' positive and negative perceptions on the observation report and they included that school heads never made the observation report available to teachers, the observation reports were released long after the visit; observation reports were negative and judgemental. Two teachers made the following comments on reports;

**Table 3: Perceptions of the observation reports**

Observation reports	Negative	Positive
	Never make available observation reports Reports largely negative Reports take too long to be made available to supervisee Did not learn anything from the observation exercise Discussion done focused on weaknesses of the teacher Reports were mainly judgemental In report head criticises the teacher's methods	Quick release of reports

**Teacher A**

*I really don't know why the head observes the lessons because soon after the lesson he disappears and we never have sight of the observation reports.*

**Teacher B**

*We don't learn anything from these biased reports which only highlight weaknesses of the teacher.*

**Perceptions of the Post-observation Period**

Table 4 summarises teachers' positive and negative perceptions on post-observation and

these included school heads not discussing lessons with teachers after the visit. In instances where discussions are done they were dominated by the supervisors with no input from the teachers. In some cases heads were only interested in teachers signing the reports to acknowledge sight of the reports especially on negative reports.

**Table 4: Perceptions of the post observation period**

Post observation	Negative	Positive
	Produces a report and simply asks teachers to sign Supervisor talks about lesson without teacher's input Rarely highlights strengths No discussions are done	Discussions are done after the lesson. Teacher asked to evaluate own lesson – strengths and weaknesses

**DISCUSSION**

What emerged from the study was that perceptions held by teachers of lesson observation by school heads were largely negative. This revelation confirms findings by Jackson (2001) that one of the most difficult jobs of the school administrator is supervision of staff. It is when teachers in a school hold largely negative perceptions about the school head's supervisory role that the task becomes a real challenge. Southworth (2002) observes that hostility between supervisors and supervisees results from situations where the school fails to be a hospitable environment for the exercise of instructional leadership. This is seen as a product of a professional culture that lacks openness, trust and security in which teachers feel confident to become learners.

Holland and Adams (2002) contend that teachers' negative views about the supervisor's supervision tasks are normally caused by wrong supervision. Wrong supervision is autocratic in nature and it is evidenced by the supervisor assuming an all-knowing role and always has something to teach to the supervisee. The supervisor gives himself no room to learn from the supervisee. However, right supervision support teaching and professional development (Holland and Adams, 2002). Acheson and Gail (2003) call for supervision that is collaborative and interactive.

Teachers' perceptions of the pre-observation period show that most heads were autocratic in their approach. The realization that some school heads simply walked into classes for observation without prior notification is indicative of this wrong approach to supervision as observed by Holland and Adams (2002). Even in instances where notices are given but no time is given for teachers to prepare for the head's visit there is confirmation of authoritative supervisor-centred activities insofar as supervision is concerned (Acheson and Gail 2003). It also emerged from the study that no pre-observation discussions were conducted by some school heads. This is contrary to the ingredients of clinical supervision as the pre-observation discussions are critical in the supervisor obtaining vital information on learner progress and challenges the teacher encounters in the class (Sergiovanni and Starratt 2006). Pre-observation discussions also allow the supervisor to outline expectations in the supervision task with the teacher's input being sought. However, there were positive perceptions from teachers as some of them confirmed that a supervision itinerary was designed through consultations and put in place at the beginning of each term. Such an approach is a good starting point of collaborative supervision which helps stem out teachers' feelings of hostility and resentment (Sidhu and Fook 2010).

It emerged from teachers' narrations on actual lesson observation that in some lessons during observation the atmosphere was very tense. This further confirms the existence of autocratic supervisors in schools (Acheson and Gail 2003). However, such autocratic approaches fall short of providing knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to lead schools and enhance students' learning (Elmore 2000; Peterson 2002). The need for school heads to adopt and use supervisory approaches that necessitate teachers' professional growth cannot be overemphasised. Effective nurturing of a teacher's professional growth is almost impossible in tense environments where the supervisor is unfriendly and 'just too serious'. It is also a problem where the school head quietly sits at the back and writes a report as he or she observes the lesson. Holland and Adams (2002) contend that school heads should be very much aware of the main purpose of lesson observation, which has to take a more supportive role of the teacher than simply being a summative evaluation of teaching. Both the supervisor and

the teacher should learn something after the supervision exercise and teaching and learning should be positively impacted after such visits.

However, there were a few positive views from observation as some school heads were noted to be active participant observers and to encourage learners to participate in lesson during observation. This finding confirms assertions by Randall and Thornton (2001) who argue that supervisors should not always be non-participant one who only make notes during observation and do not participate in the learning process. Randall and Thornton (2001) further observe that a participant supervisor during lesson observation is seen by working with students during group work, monitoring group work, acting as a co-teacher or talking to students about their learning. The issue of varying supervisory approaches depending on the purpose of supervision is very important.

It emerged from the study that teachers largely held negative perceptions of the observation report produced by heads after lesson observation. The revelation that heads could produce largely negative and judgemental reports negates the purpose and spirit of instructional leadership. Siens (1996) argues that the ultimate goal of supervision is to increase teachers' abilities and their teaching potential. Therefore, it is imperative that observation reports help to mould the teachers by highlighting their strengths and offering ways of improvement in a professional manner. The revelation in the study that some of the observation reports took long to be made available to teachers or that they were never made available shows serious deficiencies in a complete role of supervision. Evaluation feedback should not only be immediate but beneficial for a teacher's professional development.

The study found that in some instances heads held no post-observation discussion with teachers. They simply produced a report which they asked teachers to sign. Such supervisory practices confirm Veir's (1990) view of school heads who operate with a dominant model of supervision. The way such heads operate is characterised by either giving no feedback to teachers or giving no suggestions for improvement. Cengolosi (1991: 47) also observes that unless supervisors adopt latest and supportive approaches of supervision classrooms "will continue to be dominated by malpractice that produces invalid results". In clinical supervision, for ex-

ample, the post observation phase allows teachers to reflect on their own practice and identify own strengths and weaknesses and ways to improve. Such approaches are empowering and the teacher will always thrive to perform better. This is in contrast to an approach where the teacher is assessed negatively and solutions for improvement are dictated upon the teacher.

### CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there could be challenges in school insofar as lesson observation is concerned. Challenges seem to emanate from the supervisory styles adopted by school heads that fail to make them adequately perform their role as instructional leaders. Lesson supervision fails to play a meaningful role in teacher professional development in instances where teacher hold largely negative perceptions of the supervisory capabilities of their supervisors.

The study further concludes that teachers reported that they did not benefit from lesson observations by school heads as these were largely fault-finding exercises. The role of the school head as an instructional leader was often defeated because of wrong motives of supervision. There are instances where no post observation discussions were held suggesting that teachers were not assisted to improve on their teaching. The head's input after lesson observation is very useful for such improvement.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings from the study the following recommendations are made:

- School heads should be staff developed continually on their role as instructional leaders.
- Short courses on supervision and management styles should also be offered to school heads in schools.
- Teachers in schools should be staff developed on supervision so that they understand and appreciate the school head's role in supervision.
- Democratic and collegial approaches should be nurtured in school so that cooperative approaches are embedded in school culture.
- Heads should always clarify the purpose of any supervision visit to the concerned teacher and also seek teacher input in the supervision process.

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