

Stakeholders' Perceptions about Causes of Students' Poor Performance in Secondary Schools in the Lower Gweru Circuit in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine stakeholders' perceptions about causes of students' poor performance in the secondary schools of the Lower Gweru Circuit in Zimbabwe. The major question that guided the research was how stakeholders perceived causes of students' poor performance in the secondary schools of the Lower Gweru circuit in Zimbabwe. Consistent with the post modern research paradigm that underlined this study, both qualitative and quantitative designs were used. Schools were randomly selected and respondents were purposively sampled. Questionnaires and interviews were the main tools for data collection. The study found out that all odds in the Lower Gweru circuit were against students' achievement. As a consequence of low remuneration and lack of incentives, teachers had given up attending fully to their classes. Teachers' motivation was at its lowest ebb. Students were, as a result, left to their own devices. Strained relationships between students and teachers as well as between teachers and community left the students at an academic disadvantage. Poor parental support in terms of material and financial resources galvanized the students' disadvantage and further eroded their academic achievement. On instructional supervision, data gathered pointed to a laissez-faire approach that started from the region and cascaded down to school heads and to teachers. In the light of these findings it was suggested that improving the nation's lowest performing schools should be a national priority. There is need for schools with a track record of chronic failure to be transformed and turned around.

Key Words: Students Performance, Academic Achievement, Stakeholders' Perceptions

Introduction

Education is the legacy a nation can give to its citizens especially the young. This is because the development of any nation or community depends largely on the quality of education of such a nation. It is generally believed that the basis for any true development should commence with the development of human resources. To this end, education remains the vehicle for socio-economic development and social mobilization in any society. If students are not performing to the expectations

of the stakeholders the area may lag behind in terms of socio-economic development and social mobilization. And yet the same holds true for secondary school students in the Lower Gweru circuit in Zimbabwe. Official documentary evidence for the years 2008-2010 proved beyond doubt that secondary school students in the Lower Gweru circuit in Zimbabwe are performing poorly. Gweru District, of which Lower Gweru circuit is part, has a total of 71 secondary schools. Of these secondary schools 16 fall within the Lower Gweru circuit. Of the 19 secondary schools in the Gweru District, that earned a zero percent pass rate during the period in question, 8 schools were from Lower Gweru circuit, i.e. half of the secondary schools in the Lower Gweru Circuit were not performing well at all. It was further established that the other half of the schools were performing below 50% pass rate. In light of the foregoing, the discussion coming up next focuses on some of the important variables in students' performance. These include: teacher quality and characteristics, student factor, parental involvement, school leadership roles and socioeconomic status.

Professional Characteristics of a teacher

Mowrer-Reynolds (2008:223) points out that there dwells a large body of literature that suggests that while subject matter knowledge is important, teachers' characteristics matter more when students' achievement is at stake. Researchers (Berliner 2005; Fenstermacher and Richardson 2005) have focussed on the multidimensional nature of teaching and have defined teacher quality as encompassing two parts:

- a) Good teaching, meaning that the teacher meets the expectations for the role (for example, upholding the standards of a field of study and other attributes and practices); and
- b) Effective or successful teaching, meaning the results of the teachers' actions on student learning and achievement.

Though good teaching has been defined and operationalised in many ways (for example, student satisfaction ratings, peer observation judgments, self reflective portfolios), good teaching is that which promotes student learning and other desired student outcomes (McKinney, 2004:14).

In researching about teacher characteristic vis-à-vis student performance, Krishnaveni and Anitha (2007) posit that teachers should be characterised by a concern for others. They are of the opinion that this concern for others consists of among other factors, teacher-student relationship. They argue that as far as teacher-student relationship is concerned the teacher is a powerful source of either satisfaction or frustration in students. The teacher's enthusiasm, competence and

interpersonal and communication skills should make a classroom practitioner, a role model. The teacher ought to afford time and space by being available for students. Koutsoulis (2003:57) mentions that students demand a humanistic approach, effective communication skills of the teacher and understanding. The teacher should also be a trusted adviser or mentor to the students. Teacher attitude may enhance or adversely affect students' achievement and behaviour. Teacher - student relationship develops a sense of responsibility and self discipline.

Writing further, Krishnaveni and Anitha (2007) echo the sentiment that teachers should also be characterised by concern for self. Among the components they raise under concern for self is the contentious issue of remuneration. Giroux (1992:27) argues that the proletarianization of the teaching profession has made teachers too dependent and powerless. As teachers are among the major determinants in curriculum development the foregoing sentiment could thwart teachers' creativity in developing learning experiences for their students as well as erode their decision making within the classrooms. Rivkin, Hanushek and John (1999:47) allude to the fact that teachers are the most important determinants of educational output in the sense that they mediate between learning content on the one hand and students on the other. Buchberger et al (2000:36) reiterate that the status of teachers affects the development towards professionalization of the teaching force. Raising teachers' salaries raises teacher quality, reduces dropout rates, improves quality of education (Loeb and Page, 2000) and improves student outcomes (Lavy, 2002:45). A professional work life not encroached on by disturbances, demands a suitable and appropriate pay which is an extrinsic motivating factor that contributes to the retention of more academically talented teachers.

Finally, Krishnaveni and Anitha (2007:156) argue that ethical conduct is both the most fundamental tenet of professionalism and the most challenging and should be the foundation for the broad areas they have termed concern for others and concern for self. Ethical standards should be treated as welcome moral principles guiding a vibrant profession. Teaching should be dedicated to student learning and upholding high standards for professional performance.

Parent involvement in student's education in relation to academic performance

The earlier in a child's educational process parent involvement begins, the more powerful the effects (Michigan Department of Education, 2001). Williams and Chavkin (1989) hold the view that the most effective forms of parent involvement are those which engage parents in working directly with their children on learning

activities at home. The most consistent predictors of children's academic achievement and social adjustment are parent expectations of the child's academic attainment and satisfaction with their child's education at school. Parents of high-achieving students set higher standards for their children's educational activities than parents of low-achieving students (Michigan Department of Education, 2001).

According to the Michigan Department of Education (2001) three major factors of parental involvement in the education of their children include; a) parents' beliefs about what is important, necessary and permissible for them to do with and on behalf of their children; b) the extent to which parents believe that they can have a positive influence on their children's education; and c) parents' perceptions that their children and school want them to be involved. Where parents participate in their children's education it leads to better school attendance; increased motivation, better self-esteem; lower rates of suspension and decreased use of drugs and alcohol and fewer instances of violent behaviour. In other words the more intensely parents are involved, the more beneficial the achievement effects.

Fan and Chen (2001) observe that although most parents do not know how to help their children with their education, with guidance and support, they may become increasingly involved in home learning activities and find themselves with opportunities to teach, to be models for and to guide their children. For instance when a) schools encourage children to practice reading at home with parents, the children make significant gains in reading achievement compared to those who only practice at school, b) parents, who read to their children, have books available, take trips, guide TV watching, and provide stimulating experiences contribute to student achievement.

Student factor

Noguera (2011) is of the conviction that if teachers believe that student performance cannot be improved then it will not be done. In this light, Noguera argues that low performance is not about students but how teachers treat them. There are certain student behaviours that result from the foregoing student-teacher relationship. It is to some of these student factors that the following discussion turns.

Alienation

Weak student-teacher relationships result in alienation. Weak relationships more often than not result in weak engagement in school work. In most cases if students are not satisfied with their school work they usually turn to other activities outside the school. Alienated students are those who create crises in schools through delinquent activities such as taking to drugs.

Boredom

Weak teaching results in boredom. Because of what Fullan (1991) terms teacher burn out there is a tendency for teachers to resort to monotonous teaching which ushers in a disconnect between teaching and learning. Student boredom results where teaching is not directly linked to their learning. Boredom also leads to student socio-emotional as well as psychological withdrawal from learning.

Lack of clear academic focus

There is usually little or no articulation between and/ or among classes in schools. This absence of focus gives students the impression that everything is random in schools and nothing is connected.

School leader's role in influencing student achievement

In the contemporary world, improvements in student achievements are recognized as the foremost objective of school reforms and restructuring efforts. Many scholars have acknowledged that the role of school leadership is the most significant in enhancing school performance and student achievements (Hallinger and Hack, 1998; Fisher and Fray, 2009a).

Effective leaders develop school climates and cultures that help motivate both the students and teachers leading to the creation of better teaching and learning environments which are more conducive to higher levels of student achievements. Such leaders should create collaborative working environments with higher levels of commitment, motivation, ownership, developing trusting and healthier school cultures, facilitating higher productivity and increased student achievements (Harris, 2004; Gamage, 2009).

On the other hand, Cotton (2003) argues that school leaders who are knowledgeable and actively involved with their school instructional programmes had higher numbers of high achieving students than those who managed only the non-instructional aspects of their schools.

Gamage (2009) goes further to urge school leaders of the 21st century to encourage, motivate and energize the teachers and students towards the creation of effective teaching and learning environments leading to continuous improvements in school and student performance.

Socioeconomic variable

Noguera and Wells (2011) argue that poverty matters where students' achievement is concerned. They echo the sentiment that poverty and the variety of the social

issues that frequently accompany it has an impact on student achievement and the character of schools. Numerous studies have shown that family income and parental education are two of the strongest predictors of student achievement and attainment (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks, 1972; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). There is substantial evidence that concentrated poverty and the adverse social and economic conditions that typically accompany them, impact the performance of a school in at least three important ways: (a) students' academic and social supports outside of school; (b) conditions that influence students' health, safety, and well-being; and (c) conditions that influence the ability of parents and schools to develop social capital.

Poverty influences the amount and quality of academic and social support students receive outside of school, at home from parents and other relatives, or elsewhere. Continued failure in schools has effects upon the staff and the normalization of failure can be seen in: (a) high absentee rates among staff; (b) tolerance for student absenteeism and tardiness; and (c) lack of attention to quality control in the implementation of programs (Noguera and Wells 2011). Conditioned by years of failure, low expectations, a high degree of disorder and dysfunction, and a lack of internal or external accountability, failure in many schools is normalized. Writing along the same lines Payne (1984) argues that schools with a track record of failure often lose any incentive to improve because they rationalize failure as the inevitable consequence of serving impoverished children. However Noguera and Wells (2011) indicate that there are several theorists who advance the idea that poverty is not an obstacle to student achievement but rather that a combination of hard work, good teaching and accountability are all that are needed to produce a greater degree of educational success.

In light of the foregoing discussion the major purpose of the study was to determine stakeholder perceptions about causes of students' poor performance in the secondary schools of the Lower Gweru Circuit in Zimbabwe. The major question that guided the research was: How do stakeholders perceive causes of students' poor performance in the secondary schools of the Lower Gweru circuit in Zimbabwe?

Methodology

Consistent with the postmodern research paradigm that underlined our research, we used both the qualitative and quantitative design. Whilst we lean more on the qualitative design, the quantitative design was also used in an effort to get an overview of participants' views about the causes of students' poor performance in the secondary schools in the Lower Gweru Circuit in Zimbabwe. The main

epistemological assumption we held was that the way of knowing reality was through exploring the experiences of others regarding a specific phenomenon, in this case causes of students' poor performance in the secondary schools in the Lower Gweru Circuit in Zimbabwe. To this end the stories, experiences and voices of the respondents were the medium through which we explored and understood students' performance in the secondary schools in the Lower Gweru Circuit in Zimbabwe (Richards and Morse 2007).

Population and Sampling

The population comprised all the students in secondary schools, teachers and school heads in the Lower Gweru Circuit of Gweru District as well as parents. Random sampling was used to select six secondary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select the 54 students and 42 teachers. The criterion for inclusion was the level of study at which the students were. Consistent with the focus of our study, classes preparing to write their school leaving examinations, i.e. 'O' and 'A' level classes were chosen. Teachers of the foregoing classes and school heads were automatically included. The major reason for the preferred sample was the experience the students had had at school and as a result it was assumed that they were in a better position to give informed comments on how they had been taught and learnt. It was also assumed that teachers for these groups of students and the school heads were in a better position to discuss classroom practice. Parents who were part of the School Development Committee (SDC) members of the selected school also participated in the study. Choice of SDC members was based on the assumption that these were well informed as far as running of schools was concerned. Sampling decisions were therefore made for the explicit purpose of obtaining the richest possible source of information to cover the research question.

Instrumentation

Questionnaires and interviews were the main tools for data collection. The questionnaire allowed us to gather more information from a sizeable number (42) of secondary school teachers within a short time. Questionnaire items focused on teacher perceptions: about students' learning; teachers' teaching; learning resources; and parental support, among other issues as these were considered critical in influencing student performance.

On the other hand the interviews allowed us to tap into the rich personal and subjective experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). This enabled us to have a meaningful analysis of the collected data. Both face to face and focus group interviews were used for data collection. Face to face interviews were used with six

school heads, 15 teachers, and eight SDC members. Focus group interviews were held with nine secondary groups with six respondents in each group making a total of 54 students. Interviews were preferred as a tool for data collection because they allowed the researchers to tap into the experiences of teachers, students, school heads and SDC members. Interviews provided rich data that gave solid material for building a significant analysis as participants' views, feelings, intentions, actions as well as the context were revealed (Charmaz, 2006). The main themes to be elaborated on were school leadership, teachers teaching, students learning and parental support.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed inductively and the main purpose was to allow the frequent, dominant or significant themes that were inherent in the raw data to emerge. As we proceeded with data analysis we relied heavily on Holliday's (2007) thematic analysis as a means of organizing data. Holliday (2007:93) argues that "taking a purely thematic approach, in which data is taken holistically and rearranged under themes which emerge as running through its totality, is the classic way to maintain the principle of emergence." The quantitative data with its statistical analysis in tables came in handy to support the qualitative findings.

Issues of Validity and Reliability

Maxwell's (2002) realist approach to validity was used as a guide in monitoring issues of validity. We used the first two of Maxwell's typology of validity categories as discussed below.

- a). Descriptive validity was achieved through the use of a digital recorder. In addition to providing an accurate record of what interviewees expressed, the digital recordings were a proof that determined if the interviewees had made particular statements during the interview. To overcome descriptive validity threats like omission, we used observer comments to note non-verbal cues and as a result captured the whole meaning of interview information;
- b). Interpretive validity was gained through seeking to understand information from the interviewees' perspective in their contexts. An effort was made to maintain the interpretations experience-near (Maxwell, 2002), that is, based on the immediate concepts employed by interviewees through employing two verification techniques. Through respondent validation, that is, member checks, we solicited feedback about collected data in order to verify the accuracy of interpretations and conclusions from participants. To enhance credibility of findings we collected information from a diverse range of individuals (Maxwell,

2005). This improved on the dependability and trustworthiness of findings, by holding interviews with students, parents and heads of schools. In addition, a comprehensive literature search fulfilled the intended purpose of data collection.

Results

(a) Results about students learning

N= 42

Teachers' rating of students in terms of:	Excellent	Very good	Good	Poor
Reading	0	2	15	25
Writing	1	5	17	19
Comprehension of instruction	0	2	16	24
Being self starters	1	2	12	27
Self discipline	2	4	25	11
Completion of home	0	3	16	23
Independent learning	0	2	10	30
Cooperative learning	0	3	13	26
Overall classroom performance	0	1	12	29
Daily attendance	0	4	16	22

The above picture emerged from the analysis of the questionnaire responses. Most responses about students' performance tilted towards the negative.

Secondary school students and SDCs' perceptions about students' performance

Reading through the interview data it was apparent that both the secondary school students and the SDC expressed disappointment pertaining to student performance in class. The common sentiment from the secondary school students was *"we are not performing well. We are not happy with our performance. We still need help."* Nearly 95% of the SDC expressed deep sentiments that, *"We are pained by the low pass rate of our children,"*

Common sentiments voiced by secondary school students as causes of poor performance included;

- We are forced to study subjects that we do not want. This affects our level of attention and concentration. You will find that in some lessons we are rowdy and in others we are quite attentive.
- There are no text books
- The source of knowledge is limited as we do not have a library and text books are inadequate.
- We are not given class exercises regularly and if we happen to write one it is never marked on time.
- Without feedback it is difficult to know how we are performing.
- We have lost hope in passes in Ndebele subject in our schools.

Probed further to suggest improvements in students' classroom performance the following were common responses from:

a) Secondary school students

- We need to be given home work – guided home work because sometimes we are required to read ahead for upcoming lessons with little guidance and no text books.
- We need background knowledge – we are made to go and research and we really don't know how to go about it.
- While there has been donor intervention in the provision of text books we still need some more text books.
- Holiday lessons could help us.
- Our preference in subject choices should be honoured.

b) SDC

- To have adequate text books and exercises books so that teachers don't complain.
- Ministry should follow up because there is no inspection – there is lack of supervision.

(b) Results about teachers teaching

Table 2: Teacher perceptions about supervision of teachers teaching

N= 42

Classroom visits by:	Often	Rarely	Not at all
School Head	29	10	3
Head of department	24	16	2
Teacher in charge	20	14	8
District Education Officer	18	21	3

Table 3: Teacher perceptions about teaching and learning resources

N= 42

	Adequate	Inadequate	None
Teaching learning resources	5	35	2
Parental support	5	25	12
Teacher support (staff development)	9	29	4

- Teacher fluency in the language of the community :
N= 42 Yes = 24 No=18
- Students conversant in English as a language of learning:
N= 42 Yes = 12 No = 30

Challenges impacting negatively on students' performance as viewed by teachers:

- Lack of teaching and learning resources (stationery & ICT)
- Poor teacher parent relationship
- Negative attitudes by parents and teachers
- Language barriers – (Shona teacher cannot clarify difficult concepts in Ndebele)
- Pupil/student absenteeism from school

Effects of conditions of service on teachers and their work:

- Very much stressed
- Focussing on survival instead of their co-business of teaching

Secondary school students and SDC members' perceptions about teacher teaching

Reading through the interview data, the secondary school students and SDC raised some concerns pertaining to teacher teaching. The following are common sentiments that were raised by secondary school students:

- Teachers over relying on text books without providing explanations.
- Level of seriousness is low.
- Teacher attendance is not good – the day the teacher is present you are made to take down notes without explanation. There is no revision of concepts.
- Teachers teaching same level subjects resort to making other classes copy from others and there is a problem of spellings and also making meaning of what others have written.
- We experience delayed hiring of subject teachers. Sometimes we go for months without teachers in some subjects.
- Some teachers teach well but we have among us unruly students who disturb others – these are older students compared to the normal class and they sometimes absent themselves from school doing gold panning.
- Having a school head as a class teacher poses problems in attendance – maybe he can come to teach once a week – and this causes failure on our part.
- We are not happy with some of the teachers and if students have a negative attitude towards a teacher they don't pass the subject.
- Teacher attendance is poor especially in mathematics and science. They take up extra lessons during class time and some of us without money are left behind.
- Teachers lack skills in making us pass.

On the other hand the SDC held the following views about teacher teaching.

- Teacher attitude has gone down and this has dampened students' motivation. It's like wrong tools (referring to teachers) being used.

- Most of the teachers are outsiders, they come from town and their commitment is very poor. On Monday, for instance, they arrive about lunch time and they usually stop teaching on Thursday and they go back into town on Friday morning.
- There is the issue of incentives – this is dragging school development to levels where parents can't afford.
- Teachers are not doing their work due to lack of incentives. They sometimes engage in strikes for incentives. Parents' relationship with the school has been tarnished by the issue of incentives. Teachers feel that they are not paid incentives because they are Shona speaking which is not true. In a School Development Committee meeting held the previous week, teachers openly voiced that, 'no incentives no passing'. Incentives have spoiled teachers.
- Several teachers go for beer drinking at the nearby shopping centre during school hours – teacher behaviour leaves a lot to be desired. It's like the government has relaxed regulations. Teachers are after money only.
- Students go without lessons most of the time because teachers will be in the beer halls
- Teachers engage in teaching private lessons during school hours. These teachers usually get a zero percentage pass rate in their normal classes but get a high pass rate with private students on extra lessons.

Asked how teacher teaching could be improved, the following sentiments were voiced by:

a) *Teachers*

- Teachers' salaries should be improved
- Educating the community to value the education of their children and consequently supporting their children' learning
- Providing adequate teaching and learning resources
- Deploying teachers conversant in Pupils' L1

b) *Secondary school students*

- Teachers should have compassion towards school children.
- Teacher attendance should be encouraged. Teachers should attend all lessons.
- Revision is very important.
- Teachers should ensure that all students understand and not to go by the fast learners.

- We need adequate and guided home work.
 - We need to have subject teachers on time.
- c) *SDC members*
- Government should intervene – the Ministry should follow up – there should be supervision of teachers. Children have turned deviant after dropping out of school. A learned child is better behaved.
 - School heads should be empowered to impose sanctions on teachers.
 - Teacher dress conduct should be improved. Teachers should act as models in class. They should not smoke in class, nor send children to go and buy beer.
 - There should be adequate books so that teachers don't complain.

Section C: Parental support

Commenting about parental support in the education of students the following views were made by,

a) *Teachers*

- Parents have not paid fees with arrears dating back to 2010.
- Some parents are helpful with homework whilst others do not help at all.
- Very few parents come to see the performance of their students.

b) *Secondary school students*

- Our parents are struggling to send us to school. The good thing is that the school has made arrangement for parents to pay our fees over a stipulated time.
- Teachers and parents are in conflict due to the issue of incentives.

c) *SDC members*

- Some of us tend to overwork children after school.
- Some mothers usually leave children to look after the home when they go to South Africa to order goods. This reflects bad attitude toward schooling.
- Parents support the school especially where labour is requested for. Look at the bricks that were moulded by parents (showing the researcher). But we have problems when it comes to financial support. We don't have money.

Asked to comment about student discipline both secondary students and SDC held the same view that most students show lack of discipline. Some students

expressed the sentiment that *'our discipline is not pleasing there are a few of us who are well behaved.'* The SDC also echoed the same sentiment that *'student discipline is poor. It looks like teachers have let children loose.'*

Findings from School Heads

The following are the pertinent observations made by school heads during the study:

- All school heads in the sample concurred that the pass rates were very low in their schools and something had to be done to improve the situation.
- School heads for secondary schools bemoaned the poor attitude of students towards school work and they attributed this negative attitude to the cross boarder "Egoli" phenomenon and gold panning, "Chikorokoza". Most of the students involved in these activities do not see any value in formal education and view the school as a place of growing up (physically) and then go to South Africa!
- Teachers' commitment to their work was at its worst from 2007 to 2008. However, the situation improved slightly in 2009 after dollarization.
- School heads noted that most teachers are not getting incentives from the school/parents like most of their counterparts in urban schools and as a result they are demoralized resulting in some teachers not executing their duties to the best of their ability.
- School heads alleged that about half of the parents were not paying school levies timeously (even though most of these parents had the capacity to do so) and this tended to derail school projects. This action by parents was interpreted to mean that they did not value their children's education.
- All the School heads were satisfied with the textbook situation in their schools after getting a boost from UNICEF who donated a number of core textbooks in subjects such as Science, Mathematics, English, Ndebele, Shona, History and Geography.
- It was noted by the researchers that practical subjects such as science and home economics were getting a raw deal since there are no proper laboratories. In fact in all the schools visited except one, science lessons were being conducted in ordinary classrooms with no apparatus or

chemicals. Science was being taught theoretically just like any other non-practical subject. Obviously, students learning under such conditions are greatly disadvantaged because they do not get an opportunity to develop the much needed scientific process skills and attitudes.

- School heads lamented that the schools could not afford to buy the expensive materials needed for the effective teaching and learning of science and other practical subjects because of the poor financial base of the schools.

Libraries were almost non-existent in all the schools visited. This means that students do not have an opportunity to widen their knowledge.

Discussion of findings

The study had, as its major purpose, the unearthing of stakeholder perceptions about causes of students' poor performance in the secondary schools in the Lower Gweru circuit in Zimbabwe. The above results culminated in the following emergent themes which framed our understanding of what the data portrayed in terms of stakeholder perceptions about causes of students' poor performance in the secondary schools in the Lower Gweru circuit in Zimbabwe.

School Heads' perceptions about causes of poor performance in the secondary schools in the Lower Gweru circuit.

Data revealed that all School Heads concurred that students' performance was very low and that something needed to be done to improve the situation. Causes cited included, poor student's attitude, socio-economic factors and poor conditions of service. Observably it appeared that in their comments the School Heads lacked introspection about their own roles because going through the teachers responses pertaining to supervision 52% (Table 2) indicated that they were rarely or not supervised at all. On the other hand SDC members felt that School Heads had no control over teachers. To them it appeared *"like the government has relaxed regulations because students go without lessons most of the time because teachers will be in the beer halls."* That is why many scholars like Fisher and Fray (2009) argue that the role of leadership is the most significant in enhancing school performance and student achievement. As noted earlier on effective leaders develop school climates and cultures that help motivate both the students and teachers leading to creation of better teaching and learning environments which lead to high student performance.

Teachers' perceptions about secondary school students' performance

Data from teachers (Table 1) portrayed a negative picture about students' classroom performance, for instance 57% of the respondents indicated that students had poor comprehension of instruction, while 60% revealed that students were poor in reading ability and that they were not independent learners (71%). Reading through data some causal factors could be isolated, e.g. student-teacher relationship; conditions of service; teaching learning resources and parental support.

Most students manifested lack of trust in their teachers. This was evidenced by such utterances as *'We are not happy with some of the teachers and if students have negative attitudes towards a teacher they don't pass the subject.'* Data suggested that teacher attitudes had negatively affected students' achievement and behaviour. This was mainly a result of what was perceived as poor conditions of service. Contrary to Koutsoulis (2003) sentiment that teacher-student relationship develops a sense of responsibility and self discipline in this context the opposite was true. Teachers were no longer good models for their students. It was apparent that in their desperation students developed a sense of helplessness. It was no surprise to learn from the school heads that some students had turned to gold panning; at least there, they could experience success. This is supported by Noguera (2006) who is of the opinion that if students are not satisfied with their school work they usually turn to other activities outside the school. Ethical standards were no longer treated as moral principles guiding teachers as professionals in the sense that teachers were no longer dedicated to students learning and they were no longer upholding high standards for quality teaching (Krishnaveni and Anitha 2007). The foregoing situation was compounded by inadequate learning resources as indicated by 88% of the respondents. Indeed the viability of any curriculum is indicated by the level of resources, i.e. the higher the level of resources the higher is the viability of the curriculum and vice versa.

The already challenging teacher role in schools was compounded by poor remuneration and non payment of teacher incentives. All the teachers indicated that they were really stressed by poor conditions of service. Instead of focussing on their co-business of teaching teachers attended to issues of their own survival and this meant engaging in other money generating activities during school hours for instance conducting extra classes or merely withdrawing themselves from classrooms and going for beer drinking at the nearby shopping centre as indicated by some parents that *'several teachers go for beer drinking at the nearby shopping centre.'* In this light good teaching as suggested by Mowrer-Reynolds (2008) was not realized because teachers were no longer meeting the expectation of their roles as their success and teaching effectiveness was compromised. The foregoing discussion emphasized

the need to raise teachers' status. Teachers are the most important determinant of educational output so there is need to raise teachers' salaries in order to improve the quality of education. Unfortunately teachers were not characterized by what Krishnaveni and Anitha (2007) term concern for others. In this light teacher-student relationship was a source of frustration to students as supported by some students who indicated that *'level of seriousness among teachers is low,'* others indicated that, *'teacher attendance is not goodthe day the teacher is present you are made to take down notes without explanation.'* The foregoing is supported by Noguera and Willis (2011) who observe that schools with low achieving students are characterized with both teacher and student absenteeism. It was concluded that teachers had lost sense of moral purpose, that is, the basic reason of their presence in schools. In other words most teachers had, as a result, developed negative attitudes towards their work. In support, one parent indicated that in a School Development Committee meeting one teacher openly voiced that, *'no incentives no passing.'* Such categorical exposure of negative attitudes had serious repercussions on students' behaviour.

Secondary school students' perceptions about causes of their poor school performance

Reading through data it was apparent that secondary school students had a negative picture about their own performance. Sentiments expressed included such perceptions as *"we are not performing well. We are not happy with our performance. We still need help."* Observably while School Heads aligned poor student performance to poor students' attitudes this was quite in contrast to how students perceived their causal factors to their poor performance to be. For instance students were of the opinion that their poor performance was a result of non performance by teachers as well as inadequate learning resources – *"The source of knowledge is limited as we do not have a library and text books are inadequate."* In another situation students expressed the sentiment that, *"We are not given class exercises regularly and if we happen to write one it is never marked on time."* Such teacher behaviours convey negative messages to students in as far as achievement motivation is concerned. Students get demoralized and could withdraw from the learning process.

Poor socio-economic background

Apparently all the participants were of the same voice that economic circumstances were challenging and that the situation had negative impact on students' learning.

Noguera and Wells (2011) argue that poverty matters where students' achievement is concerned. They echo the sentiment that poverty and the variety of the social issues that frequently accompany it has an impact on student achievement and the character of schools. Poverty influences the amount and quality of academic and social support students receive outside of school, at home from parents and other relatives, or elsewhere (Jencks and Phillips 1998).

Limitations

The study concentrated on the Lower Gweru circuit schools out of the Gweru District schools in Zimbabwe making generalizability of findings to the Gweru District schools, let alone to the Zimbabwean schools problematic. However in the light of Zientek's (2007:962) argument, some insight could be yielded when sample characteristics reasonably well matched those of a targeted population. Writing along the same lines Richards and Morse (2007:194) are of the opinion that "while generalizability is problematic in qualitative research, readers are able to extract from a well-written report those elements of the findings that they find to be transferable and that may be extended to other settings." In other words other schools could learn from the findings and improve on their practices.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary it could be pointed out that all odds in the Lower Gweru circuit were against students' achievement, for instance, meagre resources, inadequate instructional supervision and poverty. As a consequence of low remuneration and lack of incentives teachers had given up attending fully to their classes. Teachers' motivation was at its lowest ebb. Students were as a result left to their own devices. Strained relationships between students and teachers and between teachers and community left the students at an academic disadvantage. Poor parental support in terms of both material and financial resources galvanized the students' disadvantage and further eroded their academic achievement. As far as instructional supervision was concerned data suggested that there was laissez-faire approach that started from the region and cascaded down to school heads and to teachers

In the light of the findings it was suggested that improving the nation's lowest performing schools should be a national priority. There is need for schools with a track record of chronic failure to be transformed, turned around and if the school

continues to fail its students year after year, then there should be a sense of accountability or as last resort replacement of staff. As pointed out by Darling-Hammond (2010) unless the desire to raise academic standards is combined with willingness to ensure that optimal learning standards are in place for the academically disadvantaged students, a change in school or student performance would be unlikely.

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