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## **HEADSHIP SCHOOL CLIMATE PROFICIENCY: AGENDA FOR IMPROVING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN BOTSWANA**

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The study examined how headship school climate proficiencies influenced the learner academic achievement of two high and two low performing primary schools of Kweneng region in Botswana. The purpose of the study was to identify the headship school climate proficiencies that influence learner academic achievement and how the proficiencies influenced learner academic achievement in high and low performing rural primary schools of Kweneng Region.

**Methodology:** Qualitative approach, using a multi-cross case study analysis was used. Data were collected through an in-depth, semi-structured and focus group interviews, observations and document analysis. Purposive sampling methods were used and the study drew data from fifty-six (56) participants. These were four school heads, four deputy school heads, four heads of department, eight senior teachers, twelve teachers and twenty-four learners. This study applied the Hargreaves Capital Theory of School Effectiveness and Improvement. The cross-analysis case study findings revealed that high performing rural primary schools had school climate proficiency.

**Findings:** This approach helped them in cultivating a positive academic learning where listening to concerns of learners, teachers and stakeholders was possible. On the contrary, low performing schools paid lip service to 'involvement' approach. The study, therefore, concludes that headship school climate proficiency enabled the school heads to gain trust of collaborators hence improving learner academic achievement.

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** This study recommends that, school heads in rural areas should be trained in school climate proficiencies. This research could assist in the development of future professional development programmes for school heads in rural areas. Any future study that focuses on learner academic achievement in Botswana's rural secondary schools could consolidate or expand on the findings of this research.

**Keywords:** *School Climate, Headship Proficiencies, School Effectiveness, School Improvement, Academic Performance, Learning Environment, Collaborators, Academic Achievement*

## INTRODUCTION

School headship proficiencies according to Bush (2018) are skills, abilities, talents, aptitude, knowledge and competencies are a very significant aspect of influencing learners' academic achievement (Amakyi & Ampah-Mensah, 2020). Therefore greater attention should be given to them as they determine academic growth and performance of learners (Meyers & Murphy, 2017; Hompashe, 2018).

Upholding such, this study examined the headship school climate proficiencies in two high and two low performing rural primary schools of the Kweneng Region in Botswana. School climate according to Harris and Jones (2017) is a social atmosphere in which people interact with others and the school environment. It includes the perception that people have on various aspects of the internal environment such as safety, the expectation on teaching and learning, relationship with teachers, parents, learners, and the administrators. Therefore the study looked at how the school heads in rural primary schools carried out the school climate activities and how those activities influenced academic performance. The study was motivated by the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994 and the Education Training Sector Strategy of 2015-2020 (ETSSP), as well as the expectations of Botswana's Ministry of Basic Education for improved delivery of the curriculum. Despite the fact that the three above are aimed at improving education delivery, they are trailing behind in terms of academic performance in rural primary schools. As a result, this study highlighted headship school climate proficiencies that may improve learner academic performance in Kweneng Region rural primary schools.

In Botswana, rural primary schools provide formal education to learners from poorer ethnic minority and disadvantaged social backgrounds. The majority of these schools struggle with low learners' academic performance which is mostly blamed on school head inadequacies (Pansiri, 2011; Republic of Botswana, 2015 & Moswela & Kgosidialwa, 2017).

In 2002, the Botswana Government, in collaboration with foreign organizations (International Development's Primary Education Improvement Project (PEIP) and the Department of International Development's Primary School Management Development Project (PSMDP) (DfID) launched a number of projects aiming at addressing school leadership and management issues which can increase learners' academic performance. These programmes attempted to intervene by offering school improvement and school effectiveness training activities for primary school leaders (school heads, deputies, department heads, and senior teachers) (Evans & Yoder, 1991; Pansiri, 2011; Pansiri & Majwabe, 2020).

Pansiri (2011) questioned if these projects were successful in achieving their goals. When comparing the findings from Pansiri's (2011) study to the results from 2015 to 2019, it shows that low learner academic achievement has remained stable in rural and remote areas in Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The stagnation shows that academic improvement is minimal in rural and remote district schools, such as those in the Kweneng region, where the research was conducted. According to the World Bank (2019) "Internal examination performance has likewise remained stagnant," (p.21), and the Kweneng region is no exception. As a response to such the ETSSP was established in 2015 as a mechanism to improve rural primary school academic performance (Republic of Botswana, 2015, p.57). World Bank (2019), argues that several of the ETSSP recommendations which were to address ways of improving

academic performance in rural primary schools were not implemented due to lack of funds. As a result, the study purposed at examining headship school climate proficiencies which can influence learner academic achievement in rural primary schools of Kweneng region as a way of bridging the gap.

### **Problem statement**

Kweneng District has 91 primary schools. Out of the 91 primary schools, 51 are classified as rural village or rural to remotest village schools. Between 2015 and 2019, the 91 primary schools in the Kweneng Region had 65% and 51 rural primary schools had 37% average in ABC pass (BEC, 2015; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019). From this 51 rural primary schools, 7 schools scored above 80 percent (the Ministry of Basic Education's target), 19, scored above 50% and 32 schools scored below 50 percent. The 7 schools which scored above 80% are classified as high-performing primary schools and the 32 which scored below 50% are classified as low performing primary schools (BEC, 2015; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019). The aforementioned PSLE academic results demonstrate that many rural primary schools in the Kweneng Region are struggling academically. Despite the poor academic performance of learners in rural areas of Kweneng, some primary schools have satisfactory academic performance. These differences in academic performance in primary schools in rural areas in the Kweneng Region generate interest and motivation for research. This interest is generated by the fact that all primary schools in rural areas of Kweneng Region follow the same school curriculum, calendar, lesson planning, classroom teaching timetable, admission guidelines and language as a medium of instruction; they face the same challenges and are at the same level but they do not perform at the same level academically. This study is critical in understanding and appreciating drivers of good academic performance in high performing schools as compared to those in low performing schools. These drivers in turn will be used to inform policy, practice, and further research accordingly. In Botswana, there have been no research on how headship school climate influences academic achievement, so this study bridged the gap.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to identify the school heads' school climate proficiencies that enhance learner academic achievement. The study then examined how headship school climate proficiencies influence learner academic achievement in high and low performing primary schools of the Kweneng Region.

### **Research question**

1. Which headship school climate proficiencies account for good learners' academic achievement in rural primary schools of the Kweneng Region?
2. How do headship school climate proficiencies influence learner academic achievement in high and low performing rural primary schools of Kweneng Region?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature review focuses on two research questions

## **Headship school climate proficiencies that account for good learners' academic performance in rural primary schools**

Two authors identified different school climate proficiencies that account for good learners' academic performance. Dhuey and Smith (2014) identified cultivating positive academic learning environment and Kaai (2016) identified listening to the concerns of learners, teachers and stakeholders as one of the school climate proficiencies that improve academic performance.

## **How headship school climate and communication proficiencies influence learner academic performance in rural primary schools**

### **International literature**

The school climate is defined by Maxwell et.al (2017) as a "social atmosphere in which people interact with others and the school environment. It includes the perception that people have on various aspects of the internal environment such as safety, the expectation on teaching and learning, relationship with teachers, parents, learners, and the administrators" p. 2. Harris and Jones (2017) contend that the school head who advocates and sustains academic standards can foster the success of all learners by maintaining a positive, and safe school. This is important for this study as the study established whether school heads in Kweneng region create such kinds of schools which make the learner, the teacher and other school administrators as well as stakeholders feel socially, emotionally and physically safe in schools.

Moreover, Almessabi (2021) emphasises that a positive school climate is critically related to school success and can improve attendance, achievement and retention rates. The study then came up with documents which ensured that there was school climate proficiency such as the monthly discipline report, teacher of the year recommendation, annual report of discipline, crime and violence, teacher and staff appreciation, a summary of a survey of staff, learner recognition, learner groups, and clubs, improve academic performance by giving teachers morale to work towards improving their instructional delivery. These documents were very important for this study as they assisted the researcher to determine whether school heads had the documents stipulated which established whether they had school climate proficiency.

Likewise, Dhuey and Smith (2014) in a study in Canada indicate that the school heads need school climate proficiencies to balance the community, social and political interest, with teaching and learning. Dhuey and Smith (2014) further note that school heads in rural areas need to have school climate proficiencies of diverse roles, of having a small number of teachers to lead, which force them to be class teachers, instructional specialist, assessment leaders, parental leaders, change agents and active community volunteers (Cortez-Jiminez; 2012; Renihan & Noonan 2012). Researchers in developed countries have indicated that schools must have a good school climate where everyone is in great cohesion and aims at improving teaching and learning. These studies were relevant to the current study in establishing ways in which school heads in Kweneng region were making school members feel safe, valued, cared, respected, and engaged which then increases learning in schools.

### **Regional Literature**

In developing countries such as Gambia, Ghana, Tanzania, South Africa and Nigeria, studies have proved that school climate can improve academic performance (Imhangbe, 2012). Benson



(2011) indicates that learners who are supported by teachers and people around them are more likely to have ties with the school and develop acceptable social behaviour. Despite Benson's (2011) emphasis on the community leadership role of the effective school head, Kaai (2016) in a study in Tanzania indicated that a good school head is the one who creates a climate of safety to learn and teach. Thus, Kaai (2016) believes that school climate is a very important component of school improvement and deserves to be put at the forefront of schools. These studies generally show that the school head who has school climate proficiencies can create shared values, virtues and attitudes that shape the interaction between the participants in a school community and set the tone for acceptable behaviour (Imhangbe, 2012; Kanana; 2015).

### **Botswana literature**

There have been studies done on school climate by academics in Botswana. Pretorius & Oyetunji (2009) state that in Botswana secondary schools, a positive climate is more of an ideal than a reality, because the type of climate that exists in schools is related to the school head leadership styles. According to Oats (2016), teachers are expected to accept school administrators' rules and regulations without questions, which has left them feeling helpless and dissatisfied. Teachers in junior secondary school are dissatisfied, according to Isaiah and Nenty (2012) because there are not allowed to participate in the decision-making process. Academics in Botswana have conducted studies on school climate. According to Pretorius & Oyetunji (2009), a positive climate in Botswana secondary schools is more of an ideal than a reality, because the type of climate that occurs in schools is tied to the leadership styles of school heads. Teachers are also expected to follow school heads' rules and regulations without inquiry, according to Oats (2016), leaving them feeling powerless and dissatisfied. Furthermore, Isaiah and Nenty (2012), posit that junior secondary school teachers are unsatisfied since they are not allowed to participate in decision-making. In conclusion, the three studies did not examine the influence of headship school climate proficiencies on learner academic performance in rural primary schools but there were more focused on teachers satisfaction hence this study filled the gap.

### **Theoretical framework**

Hargreaves' Capital Theory of School Effectiveness and Improvement, published in 2001, is the foundation for this research. Hargreaves' (2001) theory was picked because it claims that school heads must create interpersonal links with their co-workers, learners, and stakeholders in order to improve academic performance. Furthermore, according to Hargreaves (2001), school heads must enlist the assistance of their teachers, learners, and stakeholders in order to govern and lead their schools. As a result, the theory was used to determine whether school heads in rural primary schools in the Kweneng region had social capital that enabled them to build strong networks and collaborative relationships with their school communities and stakeholders in order to maintain a positive school morale and improve learner academic performance.

According to Hargreaves (2001), the Capital Theory of School Effectiveness and Improvement is based on the core notions of social capital, which are linked to the traditional concept of institutional output. As a result, the Hargreaves (2001) framework was chosen since it aided the study in identifying the headship school climate proficiencies that enabled school heads to collaborate with their teachers, students, and stakeholders to improve student academic achievement.

## **Social capital**

Hargreaves (2001) defines social capital as a combination of cultural and structural factors. The cultural component is largely concerned with the formation of reciprocity standards and the amount of trust between two persons (mutual favours and collaboration). The structural aspect is the networks in which people are buried by strong relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine if school leaders in rural primary schools in the Kweneng region had a cultural component that enabled them to devote their time to cultivating a positive academic learning environment, as well as a structural component that enabled them to listen to teachers, students, and stakeholders.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The headship school climate proficiencies that increase learner academic achievement were investigated using a descriptive multiple case study research methodology (Maree, 2019). The study looked at the differences and similarities between high-performing and low-performing rural elementary schools (Maree, 2019). The multiple case study allowed the researcher to analyse within each setting and across settings (Patton, 2008). The resourceful participants in this study were: 4 school heads, 4 deputy school heads, 4 heads of department, 8 senior teachers, 12 teachers and 24 learners amounting to 56 participants. This population was purposively selected because they are working with the schools heads on daily basis hence have relevant information about their school climate proficiencies (Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Patton, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Polit & Beck, 2012). These participants' submissions opened the possibilities to compare data gathered to determine similarities and dissimilarities in high performing schools and low performing schools (Berg, 2009; Creswell, 2006).

The researcher spent five months in Kweneng Region, collecting data. Research data were obtained through interviews, observations, document analysis and focus groups. Of the 56 participants who took part in the study, 32 teachers were interviewed, and 24 learners participated in the focus group discussions (FGD). There were four Focus Group Discussion (FGD 1, FGD2, FGD, 3 and FGD4) and each (FGD) had 6 learners. All interviews and FGD were digitally recorded and transcribed. Field notes were also taken during interviews and FGD. The daily journaling as well as an analysis of relevant educational documents assisted to supplement and corroborate the data gathered from interviews and focus group meetings. This assisted the researcher to improve triangulation (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). All digital audio recordings of focus group sessions and interviews, as well as journal entries from observers, were transcribed and analyzed at the same time. Themes that arose from data acquired through interviews, focus group sessions, and observation were interrogated using data gathered from document analysis. Data was reduced to manageable information so that the essential could be communicated. This was done because Richie and Lewis (2003) claim that reducing data into intelligent pieces of information makes it easier to communicate with data. Furthermore, the researcher used thematic analysis to identify patterns in seemingly random information across the cases (Evers, 2018; Maree, 2019). The researcher constructed each case according to its data. This process of constructing the case study comprised three key stages (Sohn, 2017; Evers, 2018). First, the raw case data (all information gathered about the school head and the schools)

were assembled; second, the case record was constructed (condensation of raw case data organised, classified and edited into manageable data files); and third, the writing of the case study narrative (readable, descriptive story about the school head and a school) was written (Patton, 2008).

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the researcher went through the following stages in the data processing. After transcribing the audio-record data and recording the data records, all transcripts and documentation were read and re-read. This aided the researcher in identifying important parts of the data, describing emerging themes, and selecting quotes to exemplify themes. The cross-case analysis from which claims were created was informed by the key findings, which reflected the primary emergent notion from a series of cases. The assertions provided the study's conclusions. The gatekeepers and participants were told about the nature of the study, its goal, duration, and benefit in terms of ethical considerations. The protocols for collecting data, risks, and confidentiality was maintained. The following pseudo names for participating schools and schools heads were used to ensure confidentiality; Ms Rula for Morula Primary School; Ms Kgalo for Mokgalo Primary School; Ms Retlwa for Moretlwa Primary School; and Ms Rojwa for Morojwa Primary School.

## FINDINGS

Two primary themes emerged as; cultivating a positive academic learning environment and listening to concerns of learners, teachers and stakeholders.

### Theme 1: Cultivating a positive academic learning environment

Ms Rula's ability to foster a positive academic learning environment was rated ineffective. **Participant 6** verified this by saying, *"She is doing nothing, currently, I have no idea what her expertise in the subject matter are."* A learner from **FGD 1** supported **Participant 6** by saying, *"My school head never pushes us to work hard."* The school had a duty chart, with clubs and committees but were not scheduled according to their responsibilities. Ms Kgalo was found to be unable to cultivate a positive academic learning environment. This was established by **Participant 6** who said, *"I am a long servicing teacher, and hardworking, but when an opportunity for recommendation for post of responsibility comes the school head recommends her friends."* A learner from **FGD 2** said that, *"The school head never gives the best learner present."* The school head did not have building schedules, administrator responsibility chart, and master schedule.

Ms. Retlwa, on the other hand, fostered a good academic learning atmosphere, as **Participant 3** put it: *"She frequently addresses child friendly schools, where learners are not afraid of teachers and feel free to communicate anything they feel when they are with their teachers."* A learner from **FGD 3** supports **Participant 3** by saying, *"Our school head coordinates spelling B."* Ms. Rojwa understands how to foster a healthy learning environment in the classroom. According to **FGD 4**, *"She continually makes sure that she reflects and stimulates us during assembly time by applauding those who have done extremely well in front of the learners and teachers."* **Participant 4** supported **FGD 4** by saying *"The school head gives teachers, parents, and community members presents for having helped us."* The school's administrator had a



responsibility chart with clubs and committees, as well as those who were members of the clubs and committees.

### Discussion

Cortez-Jiminez (2012) backs up the findings, claiming that school leaders who excel at building a pleasant learning environment can keep track of everything that happens in the classroom, department, and school as a whole, resulting in improved student academic performance. Dhuey and Smith (2014) concur with Cortez-Jiminez (2012), arguing that schools with a favourable school atmosphere, including safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the environment, perform well academically. Hargreaves (2001) claims that social capital, in the form of disciplinary and academic climate, as well as cultural norms and values that promote learners, contributes to school achievement.

As a result, it was clear that school heads who foster a positive academic learning environment achieve high academic performance. This was evidenced by Ms. Retlwa and Ms. Rojwa, who cultivated a positive academic learning environment by encouraging learners to study hard at the assembly point, promoting a child-friendly school, supporting teachers, and encouraging learners to do their work by giving them present, had good academic performance. Contrariwise, Ms Rula and Ms Kgalo who did not cultivate a positive academic environment had poor academic performance of learners.

### Theme 2: Listening to the concerns of learners, teachers and stakeholders

Ms Rula was deemed to be unresponsive to the concerns of learners, teachers and other stakeholders. This was confirmed by **Participant 2** who declared that, *“The school head does not listen to teachers and does not allow them to come up with views and these make them furious”* **FGD 1** learner supported **Participant 2**, by saying, *“There is no platform where the learners may go and share their challenges.”* Furthermore, Ms Kgalo did not appear to be listening to concerns of learners, teachers and other stakeholders. *“At times we become disheartened, stated participant 6 especially when you have done something wrong and instead of the school head correcting you she shouts at you.”* Meanwhile, a learner from **FGD 2** said that *“Our school head does not even know our names and that shows that she is not interested in us.”* The school head lacked building schedules, an administrator responsibility chart, and a master schedule though there was a chart for responsibility and no subject compliance.

On the other hand, Ms Retlwa was deemed to listen to the concerns of learners, teachers and other stakeholders, **Participant 4** remarked that, *“The school head is a parent, she listens to everyone. She makes herself available to provide advice, direction, support and where there are crisis she intervenes.”* One learner from **FGD 3** in support said, *“Sometimes, she just gets into our classes and asks one learner to tell her or him what she has read about.”* Moreover, Ms Rojwa said to be attentive to the concerns of teachers, learners and stakeholders. **Participant 4** affirmed that by saying *“She recognises and appreciates learners, teachers and parents by giving them appreciation letters and certificates.”* One learner from **FGD 4** confirmed by saying *“We have SRC meetings and learners’ survey questionnaires, where we discuss school issues.”*

## **Discussion**

Brown (2019) backed up the findings by stating that learners, teachers and stakeholders who are supported by their school heads are more likely to have ties with the school and develop acceptable social behaviour. Moreover, Kaai (2016), reports that a good school head is the one who fosters safety to learning and teaching environment by listening to the concerns of learners, teachers and other stakeholders. Furthermore, Hargreaves (2001) states that a school with high social capital develops strong networks and collaborative partnerships among its members and stakeholders, which then increases learner academic achievement.

Ms. Retlwa and Ms. Rojwa established in this study that listening to the concerns of learners, parents, and instructors increases academic performance. This was due to the fact that the two school heads let everyone to express their thoughts, which aided their schools' performance. Ms. Kgalo and Ms. Rula, on the other hand, did not listen to the concerns of learners, parents, stakeholders, and instructors, and their schools did not do well.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusions**

The conclusions of this study were based on research questions. The study discovered that cultivating positive academic learning environment and listening to the concerns of learners, teachers and stakeholders influence learner academic performance in rural primary schools of Kweneng Region. According to the findings, these proficiencies could be applied to increase learner academic achievement in rural primary schools in Kweneng Region. The study also discovered that school heads who were proficient in school climate, had ways of cultivating positive academic learning environments by listening to the concerns of learners, teachers and stakeholders. These then helped the learners to have trust in their teachers and other stakeholders, which resulted in more positive attitudes toward enhancing learner academic performance than those who lacked school climate proficiencies.

### **Study recommendations**

The implication of this study is that the ability of an excellent school heads with school climate proficiencies can change a low-performing rural primary school into a high-performing rural primary school. Therefore schools heads who have school climate proficiencies can be placed in low performing schools for transformation. Furthermore, the implication for further study is that any future study can consolidate and expand the findings of this research by focusing on Botswana's rural secondary schools. Moreover the social implication is that school heads from low performing schools should benchmark school climate proficiencies from high performing schools.

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