Transforming Performance Management in Zimbabwean Public Secondary Schools: Pathways for Sustainable Education Reform

Fortunate Mugwaze
University of Johannesburg (Almazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies)
B Ring 2, Kingsway Street, Auckland Park, Johannesburg, 2008, South Africa
Corresponding email: fortunatem@uj.ac.za

Abstract

Performance management is instrumental in improving teacher effectiveness and academic outcomes in schools. In Zimbabwe, the implementation of performance management systems, while promising, faces major challenges emanating from inadequate training and resource disparities. Moreover, many teachers view performance management as a punitive exercise rather than a developmental opportunity. These challenges undermine efforts to achieve sustainable education reform, creating an urgent need for transformative pathways that align performance management systems with education goals. This study explored pathways for transforming performance management in Zimbabwean public secondary schools to foster lasting academic reform. Grounded in Goal-Setting, Systems, and Transformation theories, this qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews and document analysis to gather data. The study found that there was a need for comprehensive training programs, improved stakeholder engagement, and tailored appraisal systems that accommodate the diverse realities of various schools. Leveraging digital tools and implementing supportive evaluation practices were cited as vital to cultivating a culture of continuous learning and accountability. The study concluded that context-sensitive reforms can align performance management with strategic goals to improve teacher motivation and the quality of instruction. These measures hold the potential to create a more equitable and effective education system, contributing to the field of education management, specifically in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords: performance management, teacher development, sustainable education reform, stakeholder engagement, Zimbabwe public secondary schools

Introduction

Performance management is a vital component of any human capital system. In education, it serves as a structured mechanism for assessing and improving teacher performance to ensure alignment with the strategic learning objectives. In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education introduced performance management frameworks that encompass appraisal mechanisms, periodic reviews, and teacher evaluations conducted by school heads and district education officers to improve accountability and academic outcomes (Dzimiri & Mkosana, 2017). However, implementing these systems has faced major challenges emanating from resource limitations, inconsistent policy enforcement, and resistance from teachers. Hence, there

is a need for transformative approaches that address existing barriers while fostering equity and alignment with the socio-economic realities of the education sector.

The implementation of performance management systems (PMS) in Zimbabwean public secondary schools has been met with resistance and criticism from teachers. Dzimiri and Mkosana (2017) found that teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the assessment processes, citing a lack of clarity as they felt ill-prepared to engage with performance management instruments due to a lack of training. Moreover, studies have shown that the existing instruments used in PMS do not align with actual teaching practice as they focus on quantifiable metrics, leading to superficial evaluations that fail to capture the complexities of teaching and learning (Machingambi, 2013). Additionally, disparities between urban and rural schools complicate the implementation of uniform strategies, creating inequitable environments that undermine the effectiveness of these systems (Nkoma & Shoshone, 2023). Mugwaze (2022) contends that the challenges in implementing PMS are compounded by extensive social and economic challenges that have strained the education sector's capacity to sustain effective performance management practices.

Despite these challenges, research underscores the potential of well-structured performance management systems to improve teacher motivation, professional development, and overall school performance (Rai, 2024). Effective systems in countries like Finland and Singapore emphasise teacher development over punitive evaluation, leading to improved educational outcomes and higher job satisfaction (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Armstrong, 2021). However, current literature lacks an in-depth exploration of context-specific strategies for transforming performance management in Zimbabwean public secondary schools, considering the unique socio-economic and systemic barriers present. The study explores the current state of performance management in schools. It proposes sustainable, innovative pathways for improvement that prioritise teacher development, emphasises equity and aligns with the socio-economic realities of the Zimbabwean education sector. By focusing on these pathways, this research contributes to meaningful advancements in education quality within resource-constrained environments.

Theoretical Framework

Transforming performance management systems (PMS) is viewed through the lens of Goal Setting, Systems, and Transformation theories. Goal Setting theory assumes that specific and challenging goals lead to higher performance (Locke & Latham, 2002). The theory emphasises key principles for effective goal setting. Systems theory provides a holistic perspective on organisations by highlighting the interconnectedness of various components within a system (Senge, 1990). By adopting a systems approach, schools can ensure that their PMS is aligned with strategic goals and be responsive to the dynamic educational environment (WBCSD, 2024). Transformation theory focuses on the processes of change within organisations and the importance of leadership in guiding transformative efforts and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Incorporating transformation theory into PMS allows schools to navigate change effectively while maintaining teacher engagement (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Research Objectives

To propose transformative pathways and future directions for improving performance management systems in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

How can Performance Management Systems (PMS) be improved to improve education outcomes in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe?

Methods

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the effectiveness of performance management systems (PMS) in Zimbabwean public secondary schools. Qualitative research was suited for this study as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by educators and administrators within the context of PMS implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Design

The interpretivist paradigm guided the study. The interpretive paradigm emphasises understanding human experiences from the participants' perspectives, offering deep insights into social phenomena within natural contexts (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).The study employed a case study design, which provided an in-depth examination of contemporary phenomena within real-life settings (Yin, 2018). The case study approach facilitated the collection of rich, contextual data, capturing the unique complexities of the schools under investigation.

Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which is appropriate for qualitative research as it focuses on individuals who have specific knowledge and experience related to the research topic. The study was conducted in four public secondary schools in Harare and Mashonaland West provinces, representing urban and rural settings. The sample included 20 participants, comprising four school heads (one from each selected school), four heads of departments (HODs), and twelve classroom teachers (three from each school).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school heads, teachers, and HODs. The interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences, challenges, and views on current PM systems. Document analysis reviewed official PM tools and frameworks, including performance appraisal forms, teacher evaluation reports, and relevant policy documents. Performance management meetings and evaluation sessions were observed to provide contextual data on how PMS was conducted within schools. Data gathered through interviews and document reviews was

analysed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying recurring themes and patterns related to PMS's effectiveness and challenges. This method allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the data while remaining flexible enough to accommodate emerging insights throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant institutional review boards to ensure compliance with research ethics guidelines. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The study adhered to principles of voluntary participation, beneficence, and respect for human dignity.

Results

The results of the study reveal several key themes related to the challenges and opportunities for transforming performance management systems (PMS) in Zimbabwean secondary schools. The participant felt that there was a need to reform PMS to address existing barriers and foster a more supportive environment for teachers.

Comprehensive Training Programs

Participants advocated for the development and implementation of comprehensive training programs for teachers and leadership. Teacher B3 noted that *there is a need for more training to ensure that professional growth is prioritised within the performance management framewor*k. Participants felt the training programs would equip teachers and principals with the necessary skills to navigate PMS effectively. HOD A1 said that *we need training on setting performance goals, understanding evaluation criteria, and utilising feedback for professional development*. In addition, principals indicated that the department needed to prepare them to implement the appraisal process adequately, as principal B noted that *the successful execution of a performance management system depends on district officials' ability to monitor schools to offer guidance and training in using the instrument.*

Stakeholder Engagement

Participants felt that there was a need for engagement on the PMS as they perceived the current PMS as imposed on them. They also felt the instruments were inappropriate for schools, as they were derived from industrial frameworks that did not reflect the realities of teaching and learning. Teacher C2 stated that *there is a need* to involve *teachers, school leaders, and education authorities in the design and implementation of PMS to foster a sense of ownership and commitment.*

In addition, teacher participants called for collaborative approaches to planning performance management initiatives to ensure that the systems were responsive to all stakeholder's needs. Teacher D3 noted that *there is a need for regular meetings and forums where we can discuss our experiences and suggest improvements to increase the relevance and acceptance of PMS*. In addition, participants felt that establishing

clear communication channels regarding PMS objectives, processes, and expectations was essential for reducing confusion and resistance among teachers. Teacher A2 stated that *school leaders should ensure all of us are well-informed about the purpose of PMS and how it aligns with our professional growth, as transparent communication can help build trust in the system and encourage greater engagement.*

Improve the efficiency of PMS.

Respondents criticised the uniform application of the appraisal system across all schools, regardless of location and available resources. Participants also felt that PMS must be context-specific and based on the resources and environment in which the schools are located. Head D pointed out that *the appraisal instrument is used in all schools, irrespective of their settings. The tool needs to consider other factors influencing teaching, learning and pass rates.* Participants also called for the use of technology to reduce the manipulation of the system by school heads and to leverage technology to streamline performance assessments and facilitate data collection, which can improve PMS effectiveness. C4 stated that *digital tools can provide real-time feedback, track performance metrics, and support data-driven decision-making. Implementing these platforms for managing evaluations can help reduce teacher administrative burdens while promoting a culture of continuous improvement.*

Improve Supervision

Participants felt the need to improve school supervision by establishing supportive evaluation practices focusing on constructive feedback rather than punitive measures for improving teacher morale and motivation. D3 noted that *the absence of supervision mechanisms in Zimbabwean schools highlights the need for reforms prioritising leadership training and resource allocation to improve supervisory capacity.* As B4 noted, *performance evaluations should be framed as opportunities for growth that identify strengths and areas for development. Leaders should act as mentors who provide guidance and support throughout the evaluation process.*

Incentives for Performance

Participants felt that clear performance criteria linked to appraisal results and financial rewards were needed. Teacher A3 said that *meaningful rewards that recognise high-performing teachers are required to improve motivation and engagement with PMS. Incentives such as professional development opportunities, recognition programs, and financial bonuses can encourage teachers to strive for excellence in their teaching practices.*

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study underscore the need for reform and change in implementing performance management (PM) systems within Zimbabwean public secondary schools to alleviate the disconnect between policy intentions and practical outcomes.

Comprehensive Training Programs to Build Capacity for Effective PMS

Participants emphasised the need for comprehensive training programs to equip teachers and school leaders with the skills necessary to navigate PMS effectively. The finding aligns with Human capital theory, which posits that investment in training and development improves individual and organisational performance (Becker, 1964).Teachers and HODs expressed a lack of understanding of how to set performance goals, interpret evaluation criteria, and use feedback for professional development. Such a knowledge gap undermines the effectiveness of PMS as it limits its potential to drive improvement and highlights the need for professional development. This challenge is corroborated by Mugwaze (2022), who found that training programs are necessary for equipping teachers with the skills needed to implement PMS successfully. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) emphasise that professional development initiatives are vital for improving teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. Beyond technical skills, participants highlighted the role of school leaders as mentors and guides in the PMS process. Training programs should empower leaders to adopt transformational leadership practices, fostering a culture of continuous improvement where PMS serves as a tool for professional growth rather than a bureaucratic exercise.

Fostering Ownership and Commitment

Participants called for greater stakeholder engagement in the design and implementation of PMS. The finding is consistent with the Systems theory that emphasises the interconnectedness of various stakeholders within an organisation (Senge, 1990). By actively involving teachers, school leaders, and education authorities in PMS development, schools can cultivate a sense of ownership and commitment, fostering trust and accountability (Abu-Doleh & Weir, 2017). This principle is supported by Chikoko and Maphosa's (2020) study, which demonstrated that involving stakeholders in the design of PMS increases its relevance and acceptance. Accordingly, teachers and school leaders should be actively involved in setting performance goals and evaluating outcomes to create a PMS that is more aligned with the needs and realities of the education sector, increasing its relevance and acceptance among teachers.

Tailoring PMS to Local Realities

Participants criticised the uniform application of PMS across all schools, regardless of location and resources and advocated for context-specific performance management systems that consider the unique challenges faced by different schools. This critique aligns with Contingency Theory, which assumes that management practices must be adapted to organisational contexts rather than adhering to a universal approach (Fiedler, 1964; Aguinis, 2019). In education, this theory underscores the necessity of designing PMS that reflect disparities in infrastructure, student demographics, and teacher training, where urban schools often have better resources compared to rural counterparts. Similarly, Chaddha et al. (2020) argue that performance expectations must be set based on teaching standards and the context of each school. The study highlights how rigid, standardised PMS can fail to account for variable conditions such as overcrowded classrooms, limited technology access and socio-economic barriers

faced by students. Therefore, PMS should be designed to account for the resource disparities between urban and rural schools. By adopting a context-specific approach, Zimbabwean schools can ensure that PMS is fair, relevant, and effective, regardless of the school's setting and resource limitations.

Technology Integration to Streamline Performance Assessments

Participants called for the use of technology to streamline performance assessments and reduce administrative burdens. Mandinach and Gummer (2016) found that digital tools can improve data-driven decision-making processes in school settings. Similarly, studies by Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) highlight the potential of technology to provide real-time feedback and track performance metrics and compatibility with existing practices. Integrating technology into PMS can improve its efficiency and effectiveness by reducing the administrative burden on teachers while also improving the accuracy and reliability of performance assessments.

Supportive Supervision

Participants emphasised the importance of supportive supervision practices centred on constructive feedback and regular reviews to maintain their relevance and effectiveness rather than punitive measures. This finding aligns with Muzenda's (2022) study, which underscores how collaborative, growth-oriented supervision fosters professional development and empowers teachers to refine their instructional practices. Such an approach is crucial in education, where punitive evaluations often demoralise teachers and stifle innovation. The value of constructive feedback is further supported by Stronge (2006), who found that targeted, actionable feedback considerably improves teacher performance by identifying strengths and addressing areas for improvement in a non-threatening manner. This aligns with Systems Theory, which emphasises the role of continuous feedback loops in promoting organisational adaptability and sustained growth (Senge, 1990). When school leaders adopt supportive supervision practices such as peer observations, reflective coaching, and data-informed dialogues, they create a culture of continuous learning that benefits both teachers and students. By prioritising mentorship over criticism, schools can improve teacher morale, motivation, and retention while fostering environments where educators feel valued and equipped to meet student needs.

Linking Appraisal to Rewards

Participants called for clear performance criteria linked to appraisal results and financial rewards. Linking performance appraisal results to rewards can improve teacher motivation and commitment. Vroom's (1964) Expectancy theory posits that motivation is driven by the belief that effort will lead to performance and that performance will lead to desired rewards. In education, this theory underscores the importance of aligning appraisal outcomes with tangible incentives to sustain teacher motivation. Supporting this, Michaelowa (2002) emphasise that linking performance evaluations to rewards such as financial bonuses, career advancement, and professional development opportunities improves teacher commitment and effectiveness.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The findings underscore the need to improve PMS in Zimbabwean public secondary schools to address the existing barriers and foster a more supportive and effective learning environment. The findings provide a comprehensive roadmap for transforming PMS in Zimbabwean public secondary schools. Policymakers should prioritise the development of targeted training initiatives, improved stakeholder engagement, improved supervision practices, linked incentives, and regular reviews of performance management systems in Zimbabwean public secondary schools.

The findings emphasise the need for context-specific approaches that consider local conditions and available resources. Policymakers need to design flexible PMS national guidelines that allow schools to adapt performance metrics to local settings. There is also a need to mandate regular reviews by institutionalising annual evaluations of PMS effectiveness and involving stakeholders. Schools need to integrate technology into National Education Strategies by investing in digital platforms for real-time data tracking, performance dashboards, and automated reporting. In addition, there is a need to strengthen professional development policies through ongoing training for teachers and leaders in PMS implementation, data literacy, and feedback practices. By implementing these recommendations, education authorities can create a more effective and sustainable performance management system that is supportive of professional growth among teachers.

Limitations of the Study

The study primarily employed qualitative methods that allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions, which can be subjective. Future research could incorporate quantitative methods to provide a more comprehensive analysis. The findings are specific to Zimbabwean public secondary schools and may not be generalised to other systems and countries. The study was conducted within a specific timeframe, which may limit the ability to capture changes in perceptions and practices related to PMS over time as education settings are dynamic, and ongoing developments in policy and practice can influence stakeholders' experiences with PMS.

Conclusion

The study explored the challenges and opportunities for transforming PMS in Zimbabwean public secondary schools with the aim of fostering sustainable education reform. By integrating insights from Systems and Transformational Leadership theory, the study highlighted key strategies for meaningful change. The study found that addressing the existing implementation gaps through targeted training, stakeholder engagement, improving supervision, and the integration of technology is crucial for creating a responsive and context-specific PMS. Moreso, the success of these reforms hinges on the commitment of policymakers, school leaders, and teachers to foster a culture of collaboration, innovation, and inclusivity.

While the study acknowledged resource and implementation constraints, reimagining performance management as a tool for empowerment rather than compliance provides a strong foundation for future research and policy action. The proposed reforms resonate strongly with SDG 4 (Quality Education**)**, which calls for inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all. Thus, these reforms hold the potential to improve the quality of education, promote professional growth among educators, and contribute to the socio-economic development of the country, as a well-functioning PMS can ensure that every child in Zimbabwe has access to quality education and the opportunity to succeed.

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