

Uncovering Administration Challenges Faced by Female Social Sciences Heads of Department in Selected Secondary Schools of Lusaka Urban District in Zambia

Abstract

Managing a school department should be tilted towards achieving set goals and creating value for the education system. Generally, there seems to be poor performance in social sciences departments that are headed by females when compared to other units within schools [1]. This inefficiency at departmental levels appears to have a negative impact on the overall performance of schools. Therefore, the aim of this study is to unearth issues related to the management of social sciences departments by female heads in some secondary schools in Zambia. The study followed a descriptive research design to generate evidence on the experiences of female-headed social sciences departments in some secondary schools. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews from a total sample of 25 participants. The data was analysed using a thematic approach with elements of comparative analysis [2]. The findings show that subject loads, constrained resources especially teaching aids, managing high numbers of staff in the departments as well as teacher absenteeism were main challenges faced. It was also found that the high rate of permission-seeking behaviours to stay away from work by some teachers compromised teaching thereby testing the leadership of these female heads. Additionally, the limited office space or lack of adequate infrastructure for operations such as lesson plan preparations hampered effective management of the social science department. Therefore, the study concluded that the challenges experienced by female social sciences heads of department are both structural and material. The study recommends that the Ministry of Education should increase funding in social sciences departments as they represent the largest in schools and there is a need for school administrators to organize and offer periodic training to the heads of the departments on their roles so that they are always acquitted with new changes in the school system.

Key words: *Head of department, school, social sciences, teachers, Lusaka*

1. Introduction

The success of any school depends on how effective its leadership is [3]. Thus, those assigned with managerial roles have to bring the concepts of excellence. Their managerial activities are to be tailored on meeting school objectives. However, Alma and colleagues [4] notes that the status of school administrators is very central and very complex. In the execution of their managerial duties, heads of department are faced with a myriad of challenges ranging from, discipline issues amongst the staff and students among others. Management challenges have a potential to undermine performance of the school henceforth strategies have to be put in place [5].

Theoretically, the government of Zambia gives great recognition to women's rights and considers them as an integral part of attaining equity and equality in all spheres of life [6]. However, the existential reality at the grassroots level is that women are discriminated, marginalized and denied their opportunity to be employed and to hold higher positions. This is well-articulated in the Zambia National Gender Policy of 2014 by stating that despite identifying women's participation in decision-making as critical to sustainable development, women are largely under-represented in decision-making at all levels in institutions including in the Education sector [7]. The policy highlights that achieving gender equality requires both men and women to be given equal opportunities at all levels. The purpose of this study was to unearth management challenges in social sciences departments that are headed by females in some secondary schools of Lusaka. The paper is divided into four main parts. The first section gives a brief background around issues of school managerial roles. In the second part, a theoretical account of the school leadership is given. The third part, is a methodology, the fourth section presents main findings supported by emblematic quotes and the fifth gives a discussion. The sixth and final section is a conclusion which gives a final analysis with some recommendations. In the section that follow, we start with a theoretical description of school leadership and management roles within a gendered context.

1.1 Contextualizing gender roles in school management roles

In light of management challenges, it has been observed that women in leadership are faced with the dilemma of balancing the societal expectations of women regarding their family responsibilities with that of the leadership at the workplace [8]. In view of the foregoing, a study

in Zimbabwe on challenges faced by female head of department at primary school established that organisational factors, culture, women's personalities and colonial legacies are obstacles challenging the effectiveness of females in school administration [9].

In reference to management challenges faced by female leaders, a Kenyan study on the problems faced by female head teachers in administration of secondary schools in Thika district [10], indicated that sex role stereotyping, insecurity in schools, role conflicts between traditional and administrative roles as well as personal barriers are major challenges faced by female head teachers in the administration of the secondary schools. Giving a closer examination to the above findings, it can be argued that sex-role stereotyping, cultural traditions, negative perceptions from teachers and stakeholders to female head teachers, dual responsibility of motherhood and school manager are major challenges faced by female principals in the management of secondary schools. Similarly, if these female heads of departments are living with HIV, their identity and roles become complex as leaders living chronic condition [11]. Despite the observation that women face challenges once assigned leadership roles, critiques have commented that in a number of occasions, gender plays a very limited role as far as leadership is concerned. This position was confirmed in comparative study of women in management [12] in South Africa and United Kingdom as well as in a study on political leadership in African countries [2]. The aforementioned study established that apart from lack of mentorship and formal preparation for the position, the women did not experience any major obstacles prior to becoming head of department.

There is a belief that female Heads of Department (HoDs) are not equal to the tasks of leading others in schools' settings [13]. In Zambia, majority of teachers are not grounded on ethics that govern teaching and learning [14]. Despite empirical studies conducted on challenges faced by those assigned with school managerial roles, there was still scanty information in academic literature on gender related challenges on school leadership in secondary schools in Lusaka, Zambia.

Managing a school department should be tilted towards achieving set goals so as to create value for the department and the school at large [4]. To the contrary, there has been poor performance

of female leaders in schools as compared to male counterparts in schools [15]. This appears to have negative impact on the overall performance of schools. The main issue here is that there seems to be a silence by researchers on management strategies used by female heads of social sciences department in secondary schools in Zambia. The issue of gender prejudices in leadership in schools is a problem which, if not addressed, has potential to cause frustration and inefficiency in the management and running of departments and schools.

1.2 School Leadership: A Theoretical View

This study was guided by the “Great Man” Theory by Carlyle [16]. The “great man” theory is a 19th century idea according to which history can be largely explained by the impact of "great men", or heroes who are highly influential individuals who, due to their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom or political skill utilized their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact. The assumption of the great man theory is that, the capacity of leadership is inherent—that is, great leaders are born not made.

Leaders are assumed as born with innate qualities and traits that make them better suited to leadership. This proposition portrays great leaders as heroic, mythic and destined to rise to leadership when needed. This means that, school leaders with charisma motivate subordinates. Subordinates are then willingly to be involved in activities of the schools [17]. Zoning this theory to the current study, social sciences heads of department should be leaders with charisma so that they are confident in handling management challenges as they come. In view of this, it is evident that this theory was suitable for this study in the sense that it is associated with traits that leaders should have like intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability, commitment towards the task, motivating the people and taking a risk in ensuring that departmental and school activities are well performed.

2. Methodology

This was a qualitative research with a descriptive research design. This was targeted at five schools selected purposively. This study design falls within the constraints of constructivist and relativist ontology worldview whose argument paint a picture that knowledge generation and knowing a reality of a particular phenomenon requires social interaction with people. This entails

that the researchers had an opportunity to interact with participants to generate evidence on challenges faced by female social sciences heads of department [18].

The study recruited 25 participants from five selected secondary schools of Lusaka urban district. The sample comprised of teachers of Civic Education and school Administrators and it was arrived at through data saturation in reference to the research objectives. The study focused on generating deeper understanding of the challenges encountered by Social sciences heads of department. To achieve this within the constraints of the study, the participants were carefully selected with a view to the unique information and insights that they can contribute. The researchers used homogenous purposive sampling which focuses on participants with similar characteristics. The study also relied on primary data which was collected through interview guide with semi-structured questions on all the 25 participants. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to gather in-depth information which gave the researchers a complete and detailed understanding of challenges faced by female social sciences heads of department [19]. However, before conducting this study and engaging participants in an interview, ethical issues were followed starting with application for clearance by the University of Zambia ethical clearance committee, later seeking permission from District Education Board Secretaries as well as from gatekeepers such headteachers in selected schools and the actual participants.

3. Findings

This section highlights findings that were collected through face to face interviews with participants. The section gives the identified key themes namely: Subject management, management of overpopulated human resource, Teacher absenteeism and frequent permission, material constraints and limited space for operation. Let us begin with the management of subjects.

3.1 Subject management

In order to establish the challenges faced, 25 participants were interviewed and various oral submissions were made. Twenty (24) participants stated that female HoDs faced a lot of

challenges in the running of departments. It was mentioned that leading a department which comprised more than three subjects was not an easy task as HoDs are not specialist in all the subjects. Some of the views to support this theme are demonstrated in the comment below by an P21:

As I have already mentioned our department is vast which consist of four subjects and I personally Civic Education is my major. I have done Civic Education and RE and for these other subjects am not conversant with them. Too many sections and in those sections each one with their own character and especially that the head of department does not major in all those subjects that are in that department so it becomes somehow a challenge.

Similarly, another participant (P23) confirmed the above assertion by stating that there is need for support in terms of the management of several subject areas: As can be seen in the remarks below:

We need support from everybody. I think teachers should understand the kind of work that we shoulder, the kind of responsibility that we shoulder as HOD because the department is an umbrella of five subjects.

From the above responses, it is clear that multidisciplinary nature of social sciences department with more than two subjects undermines effective performance for most female HoDs in schools that lack adequate material and infrastructure support.

3.2 Management and control of high levels of teaching staff

Management of over-populated staff was another challenge faced by female social sciences HoDs. Out the 25 participants, the majority (20) stated that a social sciences department has teachers with different personalities, work culture and characteristics which make it difficult for the HoDs to manage those working under them most of the times. It was stated that some of these teachers could intimidate HoDs especially those that have higher qualifications. Some of the oral responses from the participants show some contempt in the manner other staff members deal with female HoDs. For instance, P6, a male teacher of Civic Education commented:

Management challenges, think when you look at the social sciences department that is the largest department that we have in school, so one the challenge which is there is human resource, how to manage these people that are so many.

Equally, another participant echoed the above issue by stating that the staffing levels can be overwhelming for HoDs regardless of their gender. P14 remarked:

I think the numbers of teachers in the department they are so many. I think here they have even reached 30 if not more than that is the biggest challenge the HOD faces.

Going by the above quotes, it is can be seen that human resource in terms of high staffing levels in social sciences departments makes it serious challenge to manage by some HoDs.

3.3 Teacher absenteeism and frequent need for out of school permission

Teacher absenteeism and frequent request for permission to be out of school was another challenge faced by the female Sciences HoDs in the running of the department. Sixteen out of 25 participants mentioned that some teachers had a habit of coming for work and seek permission to leave the school much earlier in the day. This was creating a situation which compromised the teaching process as the HoDs often fail to find someone to stand in for out of school teachers at the last minute. To support the above finding, P23 said the following:

Challenges, I think the first one absenteeism. The issue of absenteeism by the teachers. Late coming. Absenteeism number one, late coming and were you are informed abruptly, abruptly notification of absence I think that disturbs the work. Somebody should be in class at 7:20 and they are calling you at 7:25 or 7:30 they will not be in class and you have a class to attend to, you have to stop what you are doing to find somebody to stand in for that other person and things like that (HOD from E School, 2021).

Additionally, P4 acknowledged that dealing with absent teachers was a big challenge for most HoDs. Since the role of HoDs is to ensure that teaching and learning takes

place, having teachers who miss classes and how to deal with them: As can be seen in quote below by P4:

Absenteeism, sometimes we have quite a number of teachers that would be absent so she has [HoD] must make sure that all the classes are attended to sometimes it is a challenge because if you have four, five teachers missing in a day, it is hard to cover for lessons for all absent teachers.

From the above quotes we can see that some teachers under social sciences departments take advantage of the high staffing levels which at times have made some not report for work on the pretext that other teachers will cover their classes.

3.4 Teaching and learning material constraints

Material constraints to run the departments effectively was another challenge faced by female social sciences HoDs. Out of the 25 participants nine mentioned that in as much as the department received material support from the school and the Ministry of Education, teaching aids were not enough to cater for the numbers of pupils in all grades and classes. It was revealed that most of the schools had more than 70 pupils in one class hence the available books could not cater for huge numbers. It was found that some departments had only about three to four text books of Civic Education to cover for three streams of class with minimum of 50 learners in each class. As noted by P6, (male) below:

While, they have provided the materials that are required to teach but not so fully. Why I have said not so fully because certain materials that are required to teach they are not provided. I will give you an example like in Civic Education you need documents like newspapers, you need a copy of the constitution which we do not have, the current copy which we do not have and many others that I cannot manage to mention that are required in the process of teaching and learning those materials if they are not provided they don't make someone to teach more effectively.

To give more evidence that materials in teaching and learning are a challenge in the management of the department by the HoDs, one participant (P13) observed that:

They bought two or three books I think but those books are not enough though helpful but that help is not really enough because at the moment we have to look for our own materials to use. I can give you an example like the class that am teaching, Civic Education grade 10, pupils are 130 and those 130 we only have one book, how do you share, how do you help because sometimes there are certain methods that you can use like a book study, how do you use that book when you are 130. So it is difficult, that is a very big challenge.

It is clear from the above remarks that social sciences departments do not have enough teaching and learning materials as such, this presents a challenge in having meaningful lesson delivery which is a mandatory obligation that HoDs must achieve through the teachers working under their jurisdiction.

3.5 Limited work space for operation

Apart from the above reported challenges, limited space for work was another issue that was encountered by female social sciences heads of departments. From the 25 participants, only 8 stated that since the department had a lot of teachers, it was difficult to be in one place where you could share ideas on for example effective teaching. Results shows that some HoDs of social sciences shared an office with other HoDs a situation which could undermine confidentiality and effective management of the social sciences departments. It was reported that in such circumstances, it was difficult for HoDs to hold departmental meetings which are necessary in discussing how teachers are doing, challenges they are facing and solutions for improvement. Commenting on this issue P12 said the following:

First of all, I think it is infrastructure. We don't have a room where we can interact as a department and know maybe it is because the school has been upgraded, the HOD share one office so you don't have that confidentiality were you can talk one on one with her unless you just make arrangements you meet somewhere with the HOD.

In a similar line of thought, P11 talked about how hard space to even have meetings can be to meet in a small space with all the members of a department:

This office is too small, so it poses a big challenge when you want to meet all the teachers you only meet maybe five from here so you have to look for a different office.

The above quotes represent the majority of participants' views on limited space for work. This challenge is worse for HoDs in schools beyond the social sciences but also other departments. In relation to working space, it was also reported by participants that heads from different departments were sharing offices in some schools.

4. Discussion

The above findings have shown that despite putting some strategies in the running of the department, HODS were faced with systemic challenges on a daily basis. As noted, subject load management was one of the reported challenges HoDs faced in the running of the department. It was revealed that the department had more than three subjects of which the HoD was not a specialist in all. In as much as the departments were decentralized into section as discussed earlier, managing more than three subjects did was too much for some HoDs. This shows that there is need for the technical know-how on how the HoDs can handle departments with several subject areas. That is why some participants suggested that once in a while, HoDs should be taken for refresher courses meant to enhance their performance. Similarly, Muleya [14] reported that some teachers are not well grounded on ethics that govern teaching and learning hence making it difficult to achieve school objectives.

High staffing levels in a single department can make control of the teachers difficult. The high number of teachers represented various working culture among them which can be daunting for some female HoDs. It is for this reason that some participants talked about the Ministry of Education deploying more teachers to already over populated schools.

Teacher absenteeism and request for frequent permission to be out of school by some teachers was another challenge that the HoD faced in the running of the department. Managing teachers in a department who seem not have ethos of being at work can result in poor performance and compromises the teaching process. The above finding is not consistent with the situation in Kenya, where problems faced by female head teachers in administration of secondary schools

included gender role stereotyping, insecurity in schools, role conflicts between traditional and administrative roles as well as personal barriers [10]. This study's results suggest that stereotyping was not a big challenge for the female HoDS in selected secondary schools.

Limited teaching materials in the social sciences department means that female HoDs are restricted in terms of managing fellow teachers who need teaching aids. As noted, the Ministry of Education, teaching aids were not enough to cater for the numbers of pupils in class. This finding is in line with Makura [9] who also found that the many challenges that female heads of departments faced in Zimbabwe was shortage of financial and material resources to run the department effectively.

Another challenge that female HoDs faced in the running of the department was limited space for operation. It was revealed that since the department had a lot of teachers, it was difficult to be in one place where the HoDs and their subordinates could share ideas on how effectively teaching can be done. Limited space also made it difficult for HoDS to hold departmental meetings which are necessary for discussing how teachers are doing, challenges they are facing and solutions for improvement. School facilities can have a profound impact on both teacher and student outcomes. Findings therefore suggest that the sad fact is that most offices and classroom spaces in the selected schools are far from ideal. Perhaps they were originally designed and built with little or no consultation with the teachers who would be working in them. The other assumption could be maybe they were designed for another purpose, or with tight budgetary restrictions. This finding does not resonate well with Great Man" Theory by Carlyle [17] because it prevents HoDs from showing their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom and utilization of their power in a way that have a decisive historical impact on department and school performance.

5. Conclusion and final analysis

The study concluded that challenges such as managing more than four subjects within the same department, over populated human resource, teacher absenteeism, and frequent permission, material constraints and limited space for operations hampered effective running of the social science department. This is vivid case that challenges found had a potential to undermine school deliverables. However, the study also highlights that some of these challenges faced were not

only unique to female social sciences heads but also encountered by their male heads of department in other fields. It was clear that the reported challenges were being addressed at a micro level with temporal measures such as covering up for absent teachers. However, and based on the findings of the study, the following issues need to be addressed if Heads of the departments in the social sciences are to thrive. The Ministry of Education should appoint Heads of the departments based on merit and not gender to avoid job on training. The Ministry of Education should consider deploy new teachers to schools that have low staffing levels. The school administrations working with the Ministry of Education should develop trainings around leadership for Heads of the departments so as to empower them in their day to day roles and adapting to new changes in the education eco-system.

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