

## Strategies Used by Teachers for High Academic Performance in High Schools: Views from Head Teachers and Teachers

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**Abstract:** This study sought to establish how teachers execute their duties to achieve high performance levels in Eswatini high schools. The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm and followed a qualitative research approach which applied a case study design. Face-to-face interviews with 10 teachers were used to generate data. Data were analysed for content and conclusions were drawn. The findings of the study reveal that it is important to provide the essential resources needed for education in the 21st century classrooms. It was also revealed that involving learners and teachers in decision making was very essential as it motivated teachers towards attaining their goals. The study also found that learner and teacher constant supervision yielded good results. It was revealed from the study that involving parents in school activities as well as decision making was essential for learners' high academic performance. The main conclusions of the study were that high academic performance in schools may be attained when teachers and learners have resources enough for them to achieve their goals. The other conclusion of the study was that collective decision making involving all stakeholders contributing to learners' education was essential. The study also concluded that instructional leaders in schools have a task to supervise all activities that learners and teachers partake in. The study recommends that the Government of ESwatini should allocate adequate resources to schools especially to the least advantaged schools. The study also recommends that school leaders should involve teachers, learners and parents in the decision making processes so that there is ownership of the decisions and thus motivation and achievement of good results.

**Keywords:** Commitment, motivation, sacrifice, Instructional leaders, teachers, learners.

### 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is mandatory for teachers to ensure that learners attain high academic performance in high schools in order for the learners to be able to move to higher education institutes. Instructional leaders in schools have an obligation to ensure that teachers are well motivated for them to perform exceptionally well for the success of the learners. The high school academic performance is considered as a measurement of student achievement and in most cases it is used extensively by most stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, higher education institutions and employers to make decisions on the students' future, such as entrance into higher education or the labour market (Dufaux, 2012). Teachers are the most important school based influence on student academic performance (Whittle, Telford, & Benson, 2018).

The American Institute of stress, (2019) points out that teachers endure job-related strain than most professionals because teaching is one of the most difficult professions though in some case it is considered to be a backup plan for people who don't know what to do after high school or after college or university. The school is the second socialisation agent to the family and it is the most powerful influence on the life of a child. Successful teachers often give many sacrifices that stretch beyond sharing subject matter with your learners (Gatens, 2016). This study will establish the sacrifice for effective teaching in the classroom, offered by teachers in high performing high schools in Eswatini. Horsley (2012) points out that teacher effectiveness in teaching and learning increases student achievement. In a study done by Whittle, Telford, & Benson (2018) in Australia, teachers reported using several different reflective practices to monitor their teaching, collect evidence to develop understanding and inform their teaching for the future.

The best teachers who work for excellence and attain the best results from their learners usually have an inner drive that helps them to sacrifice much from themselves, to gain from their students. Gatens

(2016) points out that teachers work for long hours as a way of sacrifice. Teachers also keep learning to keep abreast with the developing world. In a bid to attain high academic performance teachers practice patience and care deeply for their learners too. Teachers are expected to be working the entire time when they are at school. Anderson, Humlum and Nandrup (2016:1) point out that, *“Increasing instruction time in school is a central element in the attempts of many governments to improve student learning...”* With the exception of a built-in prep period and a lunch hour, a teacher is in the classroom with the children working all the time. Bongco, and Ancho (2019) reveal that teaching is often regarded as a noble profession and time is among the sacrifices they make. It is a common practice that teachers dismiss at school but continue working at home, outside the regular day to complete lesson plans, communicate with students, grade student work and prepare for the next day. This adds up to long hours, no doubt. But it’s time well-spent because the harder they work at their teaching craft, the better things go in the classroom, and that makes the work more enjoyable. Great teachers take extra time to do it right with their learners despite the low salaries they earn (Humlum & Nandrup, 2016). Eggers and Moulthrop (2005) point out that teachers earn low salaries in most countries in the world, especially developing countries.

A good teacher keeps learning and learning never stops for quality teachers. Teachers undergo teacher preparation that equips them with skills and knowledge on how to handle learners. While there may be tried-and-true classroom practitioners that are employable, they have to be open to doing things differently to the different kinds of learners they meet every day. One of the most frustrating aspects of teaching is having a colleague who won’t upgrade their practice because learning and applying is inconvenient or time-consuming. Teachers need to have loads and loads of patience with the children because they are mistake-making machines. Making mistakes with learners is a part of their growing up. Being a high-quality teacher means you know when to correct, when to let something go, and when to take a patient and kind attitude. Teachers in schools have an obligation to take care of their learners while they are at school. Some students require a deeper level of caring. Regardless of your school’s location, socioeconomic status or reputation, they need to be listened to so as to offer advice and care more deeply than you ever have before. The best teachers find a way to care for these learners.

Commitment is a mental bond or identification with something that takes on a special meaning (Chesnut & Cullen, 2014). A committed worker will probably have faith in the organisation’s values and objectives, wish to be affiliated with the object, and apply effort beyond minimal expectations for the object (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Teacher commitment is perceived as the best route to school achievement. Saraswathi (2011) views motivation as the willingness to exert high levels of effort, toward organizational goals, conditioned by the effort’s ability to satisfy some individual need. Therefore, motivated employees are committed, as they dedicate their efforts towards achieving stated goals.

Mart (2013) posits that teachers need to be passionate about their job and their passion is measured by their commitment to the achievement of their students. Commitment is an indispensable component of fruitful teaching. Committed teachers are concerned with the development of their students and they profoundly struggle how to keep students’ learning. They cultivate students’ curiosity and interest in learning. Showing commitment to student learning can be an important factor in motivating students. Committed teachers recognize and endeavour to fulfil their responsibilities to their students. The degree of loyalty of committed teachers have, toward their profession is one of their distinguished characters. Teachers, who are engaged in their profession and committed to students and their learning, play a crucial role in development of students. Behaviour, specifically teacher behaviour, is in turn influenced by individual, social, physical environment and policy level factors (Elder et al., 2007) that impact on the decisions made by the teacher with respect to the pedagogical approach adopted (Whittle, Telford, & Benson, 2018).

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

### **2.1. Objectives of the study**

- Establish the strategies used by teachers for high academic performance in high schools.
- Determine how schools support teachers in ensuring high academic performance in schools.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research Approach**

Qualitative research approach will be the approach used in this study. Qualitative data will be used to investigate how teachers can be professionally developed for student's excellence. This is because according to Mouton (2011), a suitable research approach for a specific research project emerges from the research problem or question. Research approach also considers all possible study outcomes and the kind of evidence that is required in the study to address the research problem. In this regard, the approach works with research methodology that relates to the steps and procedures employed in the study.

The choice of the qualitative approach follows Leedy and Ormro's (2013) assertion that a qualitative approach is a systematic, subjective approach to describe life experiences and give them meaning. Fraenkel and Wallen (2008), in addition, argue that "qualitative researchers want to know what the participants in a study are thinking and why they think what they do". This suggested that the teachers' assumptions, motives, reasons, goals, and values would be of interest as on attempts to answer the research questions.

#### **3.2. Research Design**

A case study research design is chosen for this study. This is because, Case study research design in education is usually carried out so that specific issues and challenges in instructional practice can be identified and explained in terms of the particular research questions (Leedy et al, 2013). This view is supported by Bromley (1990), cited in Maree, (2011), who argues that a "case study is a systematic inquiry into an event or set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest". Furthermore, a case study is a preferred methodology in research when "how" and "why" questions are to be asked (Maree, 2011).

For this study, a multiple-case study design will be used to explore the ways in which teachers can be professionally developed for learners academic excellence. The choice of a multiple-case study method as opposed to single-case design for this study is because the results of multiple case studies are often compelling, and they are more likely to lend themselves to valid generalization". (Fraenkel et al, 2008). In addition to that, Denzin, et al.(2011) states that the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more persuasive and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust in terms of evidence.

#### **3.3. Research Methods Chosen for this Study**

Research methods are generally viewed as a range of approaches employed in educational and other forms of research to collect data which serve as a basis for a study's interpretations and explanations. In this case study one will collect data on individuals, their practices and or schooling events related to the study by using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

##### *3.3.1. Semi-structured interviews*

In this study, semi-structured interviews with teachers will be carried out using an interview guide that requires the participants to answer predetermined questions. Semi-structured interviews will be used for this study following the claim made by Maree (2011) that such interviews allow for probing and clarification of answers from the participants. Semi-structured interviews are sometimes called guided conversations where broad questions around a predetermined topic are asked in an informal way.

The interviews will be used to find out about the ways in which teachers are professionally developed for students' academic excellence. All the individual interviews will be conducted at the teacher's respective schools during non-teaching periods or after school hours.

#### **3.4. Target Population**

Borg et al (1996), define target population as all the members of a real or hypothetical set of people events and objects to which a researcher wishes to generalize the results of study. In order to collect more reliable information there will be interviewing of heads of departments and geography teachers.

The Target population for this study consist of 2 heads of departments from the 2 schools of Lubombo. It also consists of some teachers from 8 schools in the Lubombo Region which is about 72 teachers and learners in the schools which is about 17000 learners.

#### *3.4.1. Sampling*

In this study, the sampling process will follow Leedy et al (2013) who have observed that samples might be purposively chosen for their potential to yield “diverse perspectives on an issue. Professional development take place in many schools in Eswatini, but this research purposively sampled only chosen schools from the Lubombo Region schools. Purposive sampling simply means that participants are selected on the basis of some defining characteristics that suggest that they are the custodians of the data required for the study. Sampling decisions are therefore enacted for the clear purpose of accessing the richest possible source of information for answering the research questions (Maree, 2011). Purposive sampling decisions will not only be restricted to the selection of participants in this study, but also will involve the settings, incidents, and activities to be included for data collection.

The schools to be sampled comprise of one school from Gilgal Inkhundla primary school and one school from secondary school. Using a purposive sample will allow me to draw useful recommendations from the results of this research that may be applicable to other schools in Eswatini.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

This study will use Braun et al’s (2013) thematic analysis, because it fitted well with the qualitative case study approach to be used in the study, to investigate how teachers are professionally developed for students’ academic excellence. This thematic analysis will make it possible for the researcher to derive a “rich but detailed, yet complex account” (Braun et al 2013) of the data collected through interviews and classroom observations involving the teachers. Sometimes the thematic analysis may simply be viewed as a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes existing within data (Braun et al, 2013).

In trying to understand the level of commitment among teachers in the selected schools teachers were asked the HTZ-D how he viewed this among his teachers. He put it thus:

*Teaching is one career which needs commitment, teachers are working long hours here helping learners without any incentive. The results we produce are a testimony of staff dedication to their work.*

I further asked him to explain what they did exactly which shows that they were committed to their work, his explanation was:

*As I said earlier on, teachers here sacrifice their weekends, every Saturday they are here teaching while other teachers from neighbouring schools are enjoying [time] with their families. This shows how committed they are to the success of the learners as well as the school at large.*

I went on to ask HTZ-D if there were any incentives for the efforts especially for coming to school on Saturday. He said there was nothing given, he explained it this way:

*There is nothing given to these teachers really except that we provide transport to and from school, retreats here and there as well as breakfast and lunch. Otherwise there is nothing more, these people have an internal urge for success they want to see learners doing well.*

The HTZ-D also added that it is not only Saturday classes that teachers do, they also work long hours, more than the government-stipulated hours. He put it this way:

*We have study periods in the afternoon which stretch up to the early hours of the evening. Especially during examination preparation, teachers and their learners spend most of their time here.*

The HTZ-D’s sentiments were also echoed by the FGDZ-H who said apart from their professional responsibilities, teachers in their school are pushed by the quest to succeed and see their learners doing well. One participant explained that:

*Teachers here fulfil their professional responsibilities diligently to the learners, colleagues, administration, parents and the community by doing their duties wholeheartedly. They need no push but they demand resources to do their work.*

Another member of the group added that teachers here had the desire to succeed. She explained it this way:

*The zeal displayed by teachers here is to see learners passing, they go to the extent of using their personal resources to get new materials for teaching. They use their airtime for researching, their fuel for coming to teach extra hours and their valuable time.*

I asked the FGDZ-H if there was any reward for committed teachers in their school, one of them responded by saying:

*Rewards for committed teachers are intangible, they include a smile from a learner who has passed, a feeling of having done something good, a sense of achievement when our school is announced as number one nationally in terms of academic performance, an expression of gratitude from parents etc. here is no monetary rewards here except that at the end of the year teachers are taken out for a retreat.*

I discussed commitment and motivation with FGDZ-T asking what motivated them to work so hard, one group member said:

*As teachers, we have an obligation to teach, it is our professional responsibility to give the learners all they need in the quest of developing their lives.*

Another group member added that:

*We have created a name for ourselves as a school and we are under pressure to maintain the standard we cannot afford to slacken the grip.*

Most of the contributions made by the FGDZ-H and the FGDZ-T were similar to statement made by the other participant school. As for commitment and motivation of teachers in his school. The HTL-M said:

*There is nothing much that we do to motivate teachers here other than recognising and appreciating their efforts. During speech and prize giving days for example, the school buys presents for those teachers who would have done well as a token of appreciation.*

When I probed further to find out if that only was enough to motivate such commitment displayed by teachers in the school, and the results the school is known for, his response was:

*Teachers are committed and they work very hard, besides the Ministry promotes teachers from here because they know we have high standards. We recommend teachers for promotion to high positions that is another thing to consider. The major motivator here is the spirit of oneness, teamwork and respect for one-another, I treat everyone as equal and with respect. This is our school not my school and decisions are taken collectively.*

I asked the same question to the FGDZ-H, trying to understand their perspectives on commitment and motivation in their school. One of them said:

*The responsibility placed upon individual teachers by the school, parents, learners and the community at large is enough to push someone to commit. Teachers here do their work voluntarily, we hardly push them.*

Another group member weighed in and said:

*We have created a name for ourselves countrywide because of hard work, teachers here realise that they stand to lose a lot if we drop from the position we hold.*

I asked the FGDZ-H to share with me those things done by teachers to show that they were committed, one of the participants was quick to say:

*Our teachers start work at seven in the morning on their own accord, they leave late in the evening, way after knocking off time. They are here weekends to help learners, this shows how committed they are.*

Regarding commitment and motivation, I asked the FGDL-T if there were any incentives given to motivate them. They said there was none except being taken out for retreat to Durban and other places of interest. One of them put it this way:

*There are no monetary incentives given here, we are only taken out for a retreat at the end of the year. Well we can call that motivation because we de-stress after such hard work.*

Another group member explained that:

*We owe it to learners, parents, and our employer - it is our professional responsibility to work and be productive. Here one has to match the standard if you do not produce good results there is no space for you here.*

Another participant added that:

*The biggest motivation here which results in us committing is the name and reputation we have created for ourselves nationally, everyone wants to be part of this team.*

The responses show that teachers in the two schools were not motivated by material things but by doing their work and producing good results; they were inspired by being role models to learners as a result of dedication and good behaviour. Bieg, Backes, and Mittag (2011) describe such motivation as intrinsic motivation, where educators are internally pushed to do well, not expecting anything in return a characteristic that was shown by the teachers at this school. Teachers confirmed that they were motivated by both the administration as well as by the attitude and learning experiences of their learners. For instance, materially, they indicated that they were rewarded for their hard work by being sent on paid for retreats and holidays. Special school certificates of achievements as well as various prizes were given for outstanding work as well.

Regardless of the above-mentioned retreats, HoDs and teachers expressed that the culture of hard work prevailed in the school, no one pushed them, but they work to maintain the standards of the schools.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The main conclusions of the study were that high academic performance in schools may be attained when teachers and learners have resources enough for them to achieve their goals. The other conclusion of the study was that collective decision making involving all stakeholders contributing to learners' education was essential. The study also concluded that instructional leaders in schools have a task to supervise all activities that learners and teachers partake in.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are put forward:

The Government of ESwatini should allocate adequate resources to schools especially to the least advantaged schools, as this research has shown that the more learners interact with books, computers the more they assimilate new knowledge and thus perform better. The school leaders should involve teachers, learners and parents in the decision making processes so that there is ownership of the decisions and thus motivation and achievement of good results. It is recommended that school leaders must ultimately reshape the work environment of teachers into one that is conducive to reflective and collective dialogue among staff members. Principals, as they work with teachers, should keep in mind the climate of the school, the need for collective dialogue among teachers, and the teachers' involvement in determining the goals and type of results they would like to achieve.

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