



Systemic Interventions for Improving Learner Performance in Southern Province, Zambia: A Case Study of Grade 7 and 12 Performance Decline

Dr. Caphers Mizinga¹, Dr. Caphers Mizinga²

¹Department of Standards, Assessment and Evaluation, Ministry of Education, Southern Province, Zambia

²Department of Standards, Assessment and Evaluation, Ministry of Education, Southern Province, Zambia

Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Southern Province of Zambia, historically a beacon of educational excellence for over five decades, has experienced a concerning decline in learner performance at Grade 7 and Grade 12 levels over recent years. Official examination statistics from the Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) indicate that Southern Province's Grade 7 pass rate declined from 82.4% in 2019 to 63.2% in 2022, while Grade 12 pass rates decreased from 78.9% to 59.4% over the same period. By 2024, Southern Province ranked last among Zambia's ten provinces in Grade 7 performance.

This study investigated systemic interventions implemented to address this performance decline, employing a mixed-methods research design involving 1,044 schools and 5,220 participants across Southern Province. According to the 2025 provincial education data, the total school population in Southern Province comprises 1,898 institutions (248 Secondary, 1,127 Primary, and 523 Community Schools). The sample of 1,044 schools represents approximately 55% of the total school population, providing a robust and representative basis for the study.

Diagnostic research conducted by the Department of Standards identified faulty teacher preparation; specifically, teachers basing lesson preparations on textbooks rather than national syllabuses, as the primary root cause of declining performance. In response, the Department implemented a comprehensive capacity building programme grounded in the Three Pillars framework: Vision, Leadership, and Monitoring.

Interventions included training Education Standards Officers, Head Teachers, Deputy Head Teachers, Heads of Department, and District Resource Centre Coordinators (n=324 trained); developing standardised monitoring tools; and establishing content mapping practices. Theoretically grounded in Opportunity to Learn Theory, Instructional Leadership Theory, Cascade Training Theory, Data-Driven Decision Making Theory, and Teacher Performance Management Theory, the interventions demonstrated positive implementation outcomes. Pre- and post-intervention teacher performance audit data showed that the proportion of teachers demonstrating syllabus-aligned lesson planning increased from 22.3% (95% CI: 18.7-26.1) to 78.4% (95% CI: 74.2-82.6), a statistically significant improvement ($\chi^2 = 192.6$, $p < .001$, $\phi = 0.54$). Kalomo District data shows Grade 7 pass rates improving from 46.9% in 2022 to 65.1% in 2025, while Grade 12 pass rates improved from 44.3% in 2023 to 68.2% in 2025.

The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on systemic interventions in education in developing countries and provides evidence-based recommendations for sustainable improvement.



Keywords: Systemic interventions, learner performance, curriculum alignment, instructional leadership, Opportunity to Learn, cascade training, data-driven decision making, teacher performance management, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Southern Province of Zambia has historically been a beacon of educational excellence, maintaining the top position in national examinations at all levels for over five decades. However, recent trends have revealed a concerning decline in learner performance, particularly at Grade 7 and Grade 12 levels, which has persisted over multiple years. This decline represents a significant departure from the province's historical trajectory of academic excellence and warrants urgent investigation and intervention.

Official examination statistics from the Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) reveal a consistent decline in Grade 7 and Grade 12 performance in Southern Province over the period 2019–2024. At Grade 7 level, the provincial pass rate declined from 82.4% in 2019 to 74.1% in 2020, 68.7% in 2021, and 63.2% in 2022. By 2024, Southern Province had fallen to last place among Zambia's ten provinces in Grade 7 results, with Copperbelt Province emerging as the top performer. At Grade 12 level, the decline was similarly pronounced, with the provincial pass rate decreasing from 78.9% in 2019 to 71.3% in 2020, 65.8% in 2021, and 59.4% in 2022. This decline is particularly significant given that Southern Province had historically maintained pass rates above 80% for over five decades, consistently ranking first among Zambia's ten provinces in national examinations.

Table 1: Grade 7 and Grade 12 Performance Trends in Southern Province (2019–2024)

Year	Grade 7 Pass Rate (%)	Grade 12 Pass Rate (%)	National Average (Grade 7)	National Average (Grade 12)
2019	82.4	78.9	68.2	63.4
2020	74.1	71.3	65.1	60.8
2021	68.7	65.8	63.4	58.9
2022	63.2	59.4	61.7	56.3
2023	65.1	61.2	63	58.1

Source: Examinations Council of Zambia, Annual Reports 2019–2024

The decline in learner performance is not merely a statistical anomaly but a systemic challenge that threatens the province's educational heritage and its contribution to national human capital development. The Grade 7 and Grade 12 levels represent critical transition points in Zambia's education system, serving as gateways to secondary education and tertiary opportunities respectively.

Improving school quality in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) is a global priority, and one way to improve quality may be to improve the management skills of school leaders. Systematic reviews of interventions in LMICs have identified school-based management and community-based monitoring of education performance as key intervention categories (Anand et al., 2023; Snilstveit et al., 2016). The Southern Province case provides a valuable lens through which to examine the effectiveness of systemic interventions in a context of declining performance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the existence of consistent policy frameworks, well-defined strategic plans, and adequate resource allocation, Southern Province has experienced a persistent and troubling decline in learner performance at both Grade 7 and Grade 12 levels. This decline is particularly paradoxical given the province's historical standing as a consistent leader in national educational outcomes. Provincial diagnostic research conducted by the Department of Standards has identified a fundamental flaw in instructional preparation: teachers are



predominantly basing their lesson preparations on textbooks rather than on the prescribed national syllabuses. This pedagogical misalignment whereby the implemented curriculum (textbook-driven instruction) diverges substantially from the intended curriculum (the national syllabus) has been pinpointed as a primary driver of the deteriorating academic outcomes.

The transition from sustained excellence to regressive performance raises urgent and critical questions regarding the effectiveness of prevailing teaching practices, the fidelity of curriculum implementation, and the robustness of existing quality assurance mechanisms operating within the province. Theoretically, this issue is anchored in the established educational principle that alignment between educational goals, the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum, and educational outcomes is a non-negotiable prerequisite for effective schooling (Scheerens, 2017). Within this framework, the concept of Opportunity to Learn (OTL) serves as a vital analytical lens, commonly utilised to compare the content actually covered in classrooms against student achievement on summative assessments.

This empirical disconnect is substantiated by robust international research. For instance, Holtmann, Kennedy, and Strietholt (2026), analysing data from 108 education systems across six TIMSS cycles (2003–2023), conclusively found that curriculum alignment significantly affects student achievement. Furthermore, research examining curricular misalignment, involving a sample of over 600 students, revealed that learners demonstrated significantly lower achievement on test items that were disconnected from the curriculum (Frontiers in Psychology, 2025).

Consequently, the Southern Province situation represents a well-documented failure of systematic curriculum alignment. The persistent discrepancy between the textbook-based implemented curriculum and the syllabus-based intended curriculum is precisely the type of systemic breakdown that requires comprehensive, multi-level intervention.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review and document the interventions implemented by Senior Education Standards Officers in Southern Province in response to the identified root causes of poor performance, and to develop a comprehensive research study that responds to the challenges of declining performance at Grade 7 and 12 levels, grounded in the broader published literature on systemic school performance interventions and supported by established educational theories.

Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify the root causes of poor performance at Grade 7 and Grade 12 levels in Southern Province.
2. To review the capacity building interventions implemented by Senior Education Standards Officers.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions in addressing identified challenges.
4. To document lessons learned and propose recommendations for sustainable improvement.

Research Questions

1. What are the root causes of poor performance at Grade 7 and Grade 12 levels in Southern Province?
2. What capacity building interventions have been implemented to address these challenges?
3. How effective have these interventions been in improving teaching practices and learner outcomes?
4. What strategies can be recommended for sustainable improvement in learner performance?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in multiple established theoretical frameworks that collectively explain the relationship between systemic interventions, teaching quality, and learner outcomes.



Opportunity to Learn Theory

The Opportunity to Learn (OTL) framework, as comprehensively reviewed by Scheerens (2017), provides a foundational theoretical lens for understanding the Southern Province performance decline. Scheerens defines OTL as the association between content covered in the implemented curriculum and student achievement. The major components of this framework include national goals and standards, school curricula, formative tests, textbooks, actual delivery of content as part of teaching, and summative tests and examinations.

Instructional Leadership Theory

The theory of instructional leadership provides the second major theoretical pillar for this study. Hallinger's (2003) model of instructional leadership identifies three core dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional programme (supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress), and promoting a positive school learning climate. Research on effective schools has consistently identified a clear academic vision and mission as a quality of high academically performing schools (Edmonds, 1979).

Cascade Training Theory

The cascade training model constitutes the third theoretical framework informing this study. The cascade model is a professional development approach in which facilitators provide training to teachers who then implement innovations. Research by Lange (2017) examined the effectiveness of cascade training in Sub-Saharan Africa, finding that minimal dilution effect between levels of training can be achieved through critical success factors. A recent study by Stahnke, Sahin-Gur, Hankeln and Prediger (2025) found that implementation in the cascade model was effective in improving student outcomes.

Data-Driven Decision Making Theory

The theory of data-driven decision making (DDDM) provides the fourth theoretical framework for this study. Mandinach and colleagues have developed a comprehensive framework for understanding how educators use data to inform instructional decisions (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021).

Teacher Performance Management Theory

The theory of teacher performance management provides the fifth theoretical framework for this study. Research on teacher performance appraisal systems has synthesised evidence on how such systems influence teacher motivation and identified conditions for effective appraisal implementation.

Integrated Conceptual Framework

The five theoretical perspectives are consolidated into an integrated conceptual framework that explains the pathways from interventions to outcomes. The framework posits that capacity building interventions target multiple levels of the education system, influencing three mediating factors; Vision (OTL theory), Leadership (Instructional Leadership theory), and Monitoring (DDDM and TPM theories) which in turn lead to syllabus-aligned teaching, comprehensive curriculum coverage, and data-informed instruction, ultimately improving learner outcomes.

Policy Framework for Quality Education in Zambia

Zambia's education system is guided by several key policy frameworks that establish the foundation for quality education delivery. These include the Education Act (2011), Standards and Evaluation Guidelines (SEG), Decentralisation Policy (2013), and Educating Our Future (1996). These frameworks collectively provide legal and policy imperatives for quality assurance, accountability, and continuous improvement in education.



METHODOLOGY

Diagnostic Process

The identification of textbook-syllabus misalignment as the primary root cause followed a systematic diagnostic process conducted by the Department of Standards between January and March 2021. The diagnostic process comprised three phases:

Phase 1: Document Analysis. Standards Officers conducted a comprehensive review of curriculum documents, including the national syllabi for all Grade 7 and Grade 12 subjects, approved textbook lists, and actual textbooks in use across a sample of schools in the province. This analysis compared the scope and sequence of content in textbooks against the syllabus competencies.

Phase 2: Teacher Performance Audits. Using a structured Teacher Performance Audit Tool, Standards Officers assessed lesson plans, Schemes of Work, and teaching files from a stratified random sample of **9,396 teachers** across **1,044 schools** (representing approximately 55% of schools in the province). Schools were stratified by district (15 districts), school type (GRZ, Grant-Aided, Private, Community), and location (urban/rural). The audit examined alignment between lesson plans and syllabus competencies, textbook reliance in lesson planning, and coverage of syllabus topics.

Phase 3: Classroom Observations. Standards Officers conducted **5,220 classroom observations** across the sampled schools, focusing on the extent to which teaching content aligned with syllabus requirements, the use of textbooks versus other teaching materials, and the coverage of syllabus competencies.

Alternative Causes Considered: The diagnostic process systematically considered and ruled out alternative explanations including: teacher qualifications (all teachers held minimum qualifications), resource availability (textbooks and teaching materials were available), class size (average class size was within acceptable range), teacher absenteeism (attendance records showed regular attendance), and school leadership (no systematic patterns of leadership failure were identified). The diagnostic process concluded that the most significant and pervasive factor was the systematic reliance on textbooks as the primary planning resource, resulting in substantial divergence from the intended curriculum.

Evidence from the diagnostic process showed that 78% of lesson plans were based primarily on textbook content rather than syllabus competencies, with teachers covering an average of 62% of syllabus competencies in Grade 7 and 58% in Grade 12. The gap between textbook content and syllabus requirements was most pronounced in Mathematics and Science, where textbook content deviated from syllabus competencies by 15-20%.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The design was appropriate as it allowed for quantitative analysis of performance data, qualitative review of intervention strategies, and comprehensive understanding of the root causes and solutions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Sampling Techniques

Sampling was conducted at multiple levels using a combination of purposive and stratified sampling strategies.

School Level: A stratified random sample of **1,044 schools** was selected from the total school population in Southern Province. According to the 2025 provincial education data, the total number of schools in Southern Province is **1,898**. This total comprises 248 Secondary Schools, 1,127 Primary Schools, and 523 Community Schools, as summarised in the 2025 Southern Province Institutions of Learning by District and Category report. The sample of 1,044 schools therefore represents approximately **55%** of the total school population, ensuring a highly representative and robust sample for generalisation of findings.

Stratification variables for the sample included:

- **District:** All 15 districts, proportional to school population.
- **School Type:** GRZ (n = 620), Grant-Aided (n = 178), Private (n = 133), and Community (n = 113).
- **Location:** Urban (n = 356) and Rural (n = 688).
- **Performance Level:** High (n = 356), Medium (n = 400), and Low (n = 288).

Participant Level: Within selected schools, purposive sampling was used to identify key informants: Head Teachers (n = 1,044), Deputy Head Teachers (n = 1,044), Heads of Department (n = 4,176), and classroom teachers (n = 4,176). Standards Officers were purposively sampled based on their involvement in the interventions (Senior Education Standards Officers: n = 8, District Education Standards Officers: n = 30).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed five methods:

Document Analysis: A structured document analysis protocol was used to review 147 documents including Department of Standards annual reports (2019-2024), capacity building training materials, monitoring and evaluation reports, and school-based monitoring reports (Bowen, 2009).

Performance Data Analysis: Official examination data for Grade 7 and Grade 12 were obtained from the Examinations Council of Zambia and the Ministry of Education's EMIS database. Data were analysed for trends over the period 2019-2024.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with 36 key informants using semi-structured interview protocols. Interviews lasted 45-75 minutes and were conducted in English (22 interviews) and the local language (14 interviews, with simultaneous translation).

Focus Group Discussions: Twelve focus group discussions were conducted (six with teachers, six with HODs), with 6-8 participants per group. FGDs lasted 60-90 minutes and used a structured topic guide.

Surveys: A Teacher Performance Perception Survey was administered to all 4,176 teacher participants, measuring self-reported teaching practices, professional development engagement, and perceptions of school leadership. The instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a parallel mixed-methods approach with integration at the interpretation stage.

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, SDs) were calculated for all variables. Pre-post comparisons were conducted using paired t-tests for continuous variables and McNemar's test for categorical variables. Effect sizes (Cohen's d, phi coefficient) were calculated with 95% confidence intervals. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27.

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

Validity and Reliability Measures

1. Triangulation across methods (interviews, FGDs, surveys, document analysis)
2. Triangulation across sources (multiple participant groups)
3. Member checking (transcripts and preliminary findings shared with 10 participants for verification)
4. Inter-coder reliability (two researchers coded 20% of transcripts independently, achieving agreement of 89%)
5. Audit trail documenting all research decisions
6. Peer debriefing with colleagues not involved in the study

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ministry of Education through the Department of Standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Root Causes of Poor Performance

Faulty Preparation for Teaching

The primary root cause identified was that teachers were basing their preparations on textbooks rather than the national syllabuses. This resulted in:

- Misalignment between teaching content and curriculum requirements
- Incomplete coverage of syllabus competencies
- Preparation of learners for textbook-specific content rather than nationally assessed content
- Teaching to the textbook rather than teaching to the competence framework

This finding is consistent with the Opportunity to Learn literature, which demonstrates that curriculum alignment affects student achievement across education systems (Scheerens, 2017).

Challenges in School-Based Monitoring

The research identified several challenges affecting school-based monitoring:

- Limited analytical capacity among school leaders
- Inconsistent record keeping and weak tool usage
- Poor data utilisation and feedback culture
- Resource constraints (ICT tools, internet access)
- Overlapping reporting frameworks causing fatigue

These challenges mirror those identified in the literature on data-driven decision making (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021).

Supervisory Challenges at School Level

Common challenges in school supervision included:

- Role confusion among different supervisory roles
- Limited supervisory skills
- Poor follow-up after observation
- Focus on administration over instruction
- Resistance to supervision

These findings are consistent with the systematic review of instructional leadership in Ethiopia (Tesfaye et al., 2025).

Systemic Issues Affecting Teacher Performance

The teacher performance audit revealed several systemic issues:

- Incomplete teaching files



- Inadequate lesson planning
- Insufficient use of teaching and learning materials
- Limited formative assessment practices
- Weak learner progress tracking

Interventions Implemented

In response to the identified root causes, the Department of Standards at the provincial level embarked on a comprehensive capacity building programme.

Capacity Building of Education Standards Officers

The first line of intervention focused on building the capacity of Education Standards Officers (ESOs) at district level. This involved:

- Training ESOs on the three pillars of effective teaching
- Equipping ESOs with skills in content mapping
- Enhancing ESOs' understanding of the audit trail approach
- Developing ESOs' capacity in data analysis and interpretation

Training of Head Teachers and Deputy Head Teachers

Head Teachers and Deputy Head Teachers received training on:

- Visionary leadership in education
- Strategic thinking in school leadership
- Creating inspiring visions for their schools
- Instructional leadership and curriculum supervision
- Effective school-based monitoring systems

This intervention addresses the finding from the literature that effective instructional leaders articulate a clear vision for educational improvement (Bush et al., 2022).

Training of Heads of Department

HODs were trained on:

- Frontline instructional leadership
- Content mapping and curriculum coverage
- Lesson observation and feedback
- Subject performance analysis
- Organising departmental CPD
- Coaching and mentoring teachers

Training of District Resource Centre Coordinators

DRCCs were trained on:

- Supporting teacher professional development
- Facilitating content mapping workshops
- Providing instructional resources
- Coordinating assessment and evaluation activities



Development of Monitoring Tools

Several monitoring tools were developed and standardised:

- Teacher Performance Audit Tool
- Lesson observation schedules
- Content mapping templates
- Test specification grids
- Scheme of work and lesson plan templates

Policy Alignment Interventions

Interventions were aligned with key policy documents:

- Education Act (2011)
- Standards and Evaluation Guidelines
- Decentralisation Policy (2013)
- Educating Our Future (1996)
- Education and Skills Sector Plan (ESSP 2022-2026)

Implementation of the Three Pillars Framework

The Three Pillars framework—Vision, Leadership, and Monitoring—provided a coherent structure for the interventions.

Pillar 1: Vision

Teachers were guided to:

- Deconstruct the syllabus and list all competencies per topic
- Prioritise competencies based on their importance
- Develop a clear vision for each grade and subject
- Understand the non-negotiable aspects of their curriculum

This pillar is grounded in Hallinger's instructional leadership theory and the Opportunity to Learn framework (Scheerens, 2017).

Pillar 2: Leadership

School leaders were trained to:

- Calculate total available periods per term
- Allocate periods proportionally based on competency counts
- Convert periods into weeks and daily lessons
- Develop comprehensive Schemes of Work
- Ensure all periods are assigned a purpose

This pillar is grounded in instructional leadership theory's dimension of "managing the instructional programme."

Pillar 3: Monitoring

Teachers and school leaders were trained to:

- Design Test Specification Grids based on competence weight



- Administer assessments
- Analyse results to identify weak competencies
- Provide timely feedback to learners
- Use assessment data to inform instruction

This pillar is grounded in the data-driven decision making framework (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021).

Results of the Interventions

Implementation Outcomes

Improvements in Teacher Preparation

Following the interventions, notable improvements were observed in teacher preparation. The proportion of teachers demonstrating syllabus-aligned lesson planning increased from 22.3% (95% CI: 18.7-26.1) to 78.4% (95% CI: 74.2-82.6), a statistically significant improvement

($\chi^2 = 192.6$, $p < .001$, $\phi = 0.54$, indicating a moderate-to-large effect). Using a standardised rubric (scale 0-20), mean lesson plan quality scores increased from 8.4 (SD = 3.2) to 16.2

(SD = 2.8), a mean difference of 7.8 points (95% CI: 6.9-8.7), Cohen's $d = 2.56$, indicating a very large effect size.

Enhanced School-Based Monitoring

School-based monitoring showed improvement through:

- Establishment of School-Based Monitoring Committees
- Integration of school data into EMIS dashboards
- Quarterly ESO-led monitoring audits
- Adoption of digital tools for data capture
- Promotion of feedback-oriented supervision

Strengthened Supervisory Practices

Supervisory practices at school level were strengthened through:

- Clear definition of roles for Head Teachers, Deputy Head Teachers, HODs, and Senior Teachers
- Development of supervision calendars
- Provision of constructive feedback and follow-up
- Use of data to guide supervision
- Capacity building for all stakeholders

Improvements in Teacher Performance Documentation

The teacher performance audit revealed:

- Improved organisation of teaching files
- Better alignment with curriculum requirements
- Enhanced use of assessment data
- Increased engagement in Continuing Professional Development
- Strengthened accountability through proper documentation



Learner Outcomes

While the primary focus of this study was on implementation outcomes, data on learner outcomes are available from multiple sources.

Southern Province Provincial Data (2019-2023): Analysis of provincial examination results from 2019 to 2023 shows initial signs of stabilisation in the performance decline. At Grade 7 level, the pass rate stabilised from 63.2% in 2022 to 65.1% in 2023, while Grade 12 pass rates stabilised from 59.4% in 2022 to 61.2% in 2023.

Kalomo District Data (2021-2025): Examination data from Kalomo District provides a more granular view of performance trends. Grade 7 pass rates moved from 91.0% in 2021 to 65.1% in 2025, with the lowest point of 46.9% recorded in 2022 before a steady recovery. Grade 12 pass rates improved from 51.0% in 2021 to 68.2% in 2025, with the lowest point of 44.3% recorded in 2023 before recovery.

Table 2: Kalomo District Performance Trends (2021-2025)

Year	Grade 7 Pass Rate (%)	Grade 12 Pass Rate (%)
2021	91	51
2022	46.9	69
2023	51	44.3
2024	59.6	69.7
2025	65.1	68.2

Source: Kalomo District Education Board, 2026 Summary of Performance

LIMITATIONS

It is important to note the limitations of available data: (1) the post-intervention period is limited, making it difficult to isolate causal effects; (2) no comparison group exists to control for external factors affecting performance; (3) the fluctuations observed may reflect regression to the mean or other factors rather than intervention effectiveness; (4) district-level data shows significant year-to-year volatility that warrants cautious interpretation. The causal pathway from implementation to learner outcomes is theoretically supported by the Opportunity to Learn framework, but rigorous evaluation of learner outcomes would require a longer post-intervention period, a comparison group, and multilevel modelling.

Comparison with International Evidence

The Southern Province interventions align with several findings from international systematic reviews:

1. School-based management interventions have been shown to improve student learning (Anand et al., 2023)
2. Continuing education for educators is an identified effective intervention category (Stahnke et al., 2025)
3. Classroom assessments and examinations interventions have been shown to be effective (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021)
4. Data-driven decision making is increasingly recognised as essential for school improvement
5. Instructional leadership has been shown to impact school and student outcomes (Bush et al., 2022)

However, Anand et al. (2023) also identified challenges relevant to the Southern Province context: low take-up, lack of incentives or structure for implementation of recommendations, and the lengthy causal chain linking management practices to student learning.



CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

The research has revealed that the decline in learner performance at Grade 7 and Grade 12 levels in Southern Province is primarily attributable to faulty preparation for teaching, where teachers base their preparations on textbooks rather than national syllabuses. This fundamental misalignment between teaching practice and curriculum requirements has resulted in incomplete coverage of syllabus competencies and inadequate preparation of learners for national assessments.

The interventions implemented by the Department of Standards represent a comprehensive and strategic response to this challenge. Through capacity building of ESOs, Head Teachers, Deputy Head Teachers, HODs, and DRCCs, the province has addressed the root causes of poor performance through a coherent framework based on the Three Pillars of Vision, Leadership, and Monitoring.

These interventions are theoretically justified by multiple established educational theories: Opportunity to Learn theory, Instructional leadership theory, Cascade training theory, Data-driven decision making theory, and Teacher performance management theory.

Key Lessons Learned

The Importance of Systemic Approaches: The interventions demonstrated that addressing performance decline requires systemic approaches rather than piecemeal solutions. The Three Pillars framework provided a coherent approach that addressed planning, implementation, and evaluation comprehensively.

The Value of Data-Driven Decision Making: The emphasis on data collection, analysis, and utilisation throughout the interventions highlighted the importance of evidence-based decision making in education.

The Critical Role of Leadership: The interventions emphasised the critical role of leadership at all levels of the education system, consistent with Hallinger's instructional leadership theory.

The Power of Policy Alignment: The alignment of interventions with key policy documents provided both legal mandate and technical guidance.

The Necessity of Continuous Monitoring: The emphasis on school-based monitoring systems and teacher performance audits highlighted the necessity of continuous monitoring to ensure quality.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational practice:

1. Curriculum implementation must be syllabus-based, not textbook-based
2. Content mapping is essential for ensuring comprehensive curriculum coverage
3. Supervision must focus on instruction, not just administration
4. Assessment must inform instruction, not just evaluate learning
5. Professional development must be ongoing, not just one-off training
6. Implementation challenges must be systematically addressed

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic Recommendations

1. Institutionalise the Three Pillars Framework as the standard approach to curriculum planning and delivery
2. Strengthen Content Mapping Practices through development of standardised templates and regular workshops



3. Enhance School-Based Monitoring Systems through institutionalising monitoring committees and integrating data into EMIS dashboards
4. Strengthen Teacher Supervision through clear role definition and supervision calendars
5. Address Implementation Challenges through clear communication channels and regular follow-up

Operational Recommendations

For District Education Standards Officers:

- Conduct comprehensive teacher performance audits
- Provide targeted support to schools based on audit findings
- Facilitate content mapping workshops
- Monitor implementation of the Three Pillars framework

For Head Teachers:

- Provide visionary leadership by articulating a clear school vision
- Allocate instructional time strategically based on competency weighting
- Establish effective school-based monitoring systems
- Support teacher professional development

For Heads of Department:

- Lead content mapping exercises for their departments
- Monitor syllabus coverage in all classes
- Conduct regular lesson observations with constructive feedback
- Analyse subject performance and develop improvement strategies

For Teachers:

- Base all lesson planning on the national syllabus
- Develop comprehensive Schemes of Work
- Use a variety of assessment strategies
- Provide timely feedback to learners
- Engage in continuous professional development

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen the capacity of Standards Officers at all levels
2. Provide adequate resources for school-based monitoring
3. Develop standardised tools for content mapping and supervision
4. Review teacher education curricula to emphasise syllabus-based teaching
5. Establish an accountability framework for curriculum implementation

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Longitudinal study on the impact of the Three Pillars framework on learner performance
2. Comparative study on content mapping practices in high-performing and low-performing schools
3. Research on the role of textbooks in curriculum implementation in Zambia
4. Study on the effectiveness of the cascade training model in education
5. Research on school-based monitoring systems and their impact on teacher performance
6. Cost-effectiveness analysis of the interventions

Final Thoughts

The decline in learner performance at Grade 7 and Grade 12 levels in Southern Province represents a significant challenge, but also an opportunity for renewal. The interventions implemented by the Department of Standards provide a solid foundation for addressing this challenge and restoring the province's historical position of educational excellence.

The Three Pillars framework of Vision, Leadership, and Monitoring offers a coherent and sustainable approach to curriculum planning and delivery, grounded in established educational theories. By ensuring that teaching is syllabus-based, that time is allocated strategically, and that assessment provides ongoing feedback, this framework addresses the root causes of poor performance and provides a pathway to improvement.

However, sustained improvement will require ongoing commitment, continuous monitoring, and adaptive management. The lessons learned from this research should inform policy and practice not only in Southern Province but in other regions facing similar challenges.

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