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Participant observation on classroom practices and learner performance at a high school in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines the classroom practices and instructional strategies employed at a high school in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, to understand the factors contributing to persistent learner underperformance. Framed by the School Effectiveness Framework and Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, the research employed an in-depth, obtrusive participant observation methodology over eight months to generate rich, contextual data within a purposively selected high school setting. A convenience sample of teachers and instructional documents provided the primary units of analysis. Findings reveal systemic barriers to effective teaching and learning. These include teacher-centred instructional delivery that limits student engagement, ineffective assessment and feedback practices characterised by inconsistent marking and demotivating comments, inadequate quantity and quality of written work, absence of differentiated instruction, and low-level questioning techniques that fail to develop critical thinking. Findings indicate that students repeatedly fail the same concepts across multiple assessment types, suggesting fundamental weaknesses in instructional design, formative assessment, and remedial practices. The study concludes that improved classroom performance requires a deliberate shift from content-coverage models to learning-mastery frameworks, supported by targeted professional development in diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, and constructive feedback practices. Recommendations include mandatory declaration of clear learning objectives, structured corrections-of-corrections processes, and classroom-based coaching on equitable questioning techniques and quality written work design. The study contributes new insights to the Zimbabwean educational scholarship by providing empirical evidence of the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, illuminating the micro-level practices that perpetuate underperformance despite systemic reform efforts.

Keywords: classroom performance, diagnosis, individualised instruction, remediation, concept mastery, interaction, participant observation

Introduction and Background

Through an in-depth, obtrusive participant observation, this research explores the dynamics of classroom interaction and identifies factors that influence high school learners' performance. Classroom observation constitutes a critical exercise that school leadership can utilise not only to assess teacher performance but also to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to find ways to improve teaching and learning processes (Tarusha & Bushi, 2024). The improvement of classroom performance demands that teachers possess error analysis and proper diagnostic skills as critical elements to enhance student achievement (Wachter & Michaeli, 2024). To that end, the teachers' skills are critical in analysisng errors made by learners. Alderson (2005) articulates the importance of diagnostic assessment:

Diagnostic tests are designed to identify both strengths and weaknesses in a learner's knowledge. Focusing on strengths will enable the identification of the level a learner has reached, and focusing on weaknesses or possible areas for improvement should lead to remediation or further instruction. Diagnostic assessment should enable detailed analysis and report of responses to tasks

and must give detailed feedback which can be acted upon (Alderson, 2005:256-257).

The need for teachers to check proficiency in content learned is critical to ensure mastery of concepts (Lee, 2019). Strategies such as questioning, discussions, paired and group work, audio/visuals, proper diagnosis, and remediation help students master concepts (Munna & Kalam, 2021). Diagnostic assessment skills thus become necessary for teachers to be fit for purpose.

Improving school performance requires content actualisation skills where the teacher places the learner at the centre of the learning process and provides repeated examples to make content meaningful. Learners are often positioned at the margins of the learning process, yet they should be active participants in didactic processes. Improving learner performance requires joint effort and cooperation among learners, teachers, and school leadership, alongside effective assessment skills that surface students' problems in each concept taught (Carney, Zhang, Charsha, Taylor & Hoshaw, 2022). Through effective strategies where these groups work together, an ideal learning environment can be achieved that contributes to academic success and skills development.

High-quality classroom practices largely depend on high-quality practitioners (Qingyan et al, 2023). Effective learning represents the primary goal that teachers strive to achieve. School performance serves as a criterion for evaluating education quality and the level of interaction between learners and teachers (World Bank, 2017). Teachers with strong classroom management skills form the capital for successful learning activities (Sholeh et al, 2021). Teachers must possess qualities that create exceptional study habits, character building, and achievement of learning objectives. It is argued that "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (Barber & Mourshed, 2007:61) because teachers are the most important factor in enriching classroom experiences and removing barriers to effective learning. The first goal of education is character building and it is the way in which the learners are equipped wit the intra and inter-personal intelligences that develop learning dispositions (Sari et al, 2023). This improvement requires continuous assessment of learners' reality, developing comprehensive strategic plans, providing ongoing training for pedagogical and didactical practices, and encouraging innovation in classroom practice. It is the role of school leadership to ensure that teachers possess such critical skills.

Academic performance represents gaining true knowledge rather than surface-level comprehension. Teachers should check learners' proficiency levels to avoid pseudo-performance. Effective teachers nourish critical thinking skills development among learners and require comprehensive pedagogical knowledge (Mafa-Theledi, 2024). To teach learners according to contemporary standards, teachers need to understand subject matter content knowledge deeply and flexibly so they can help students create useful cognitive maps that connect ideas across disciplines and to everyday life (Shulman, 1992; Shulman, 1987). Teachers need a lot of practical knowledge to improve learner performance. Knowledge is a fundamental element of a teacher's professional identity and a key factor in the quality of education particularly in clearing misunderstanding of concepts by learners. Teachers' practical knowledge must be founded on the principles of subject knowledge, student knowledge, and knowledge about student learning and understanding (Runtic & Brcic, 2026). This understanding provides pedagogical content knowledge that enables teachers to make ideas accessible to learners.

How students come to terms with understandings, forms of discourse, and levels of discipline mastery is central to teacher quality. High-quality teachers significantly impact student achievement and learning processes (Kanya et al, 2021). High academic performance is founded on quality teaching and learning. Quality means doing the right things right, knowing what is significant, what is less so, and what is trivial. Engida et al, (2024) found that the delivery of instruction, specifically including, communicating with students, using questioning and discussion techniques, and demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness, is positively associated with

student achievement. The study provides direct support for the central premise that teacher quality is fundamentally about how students achieve understanding and mastery. The richness in depth and breadth of what students learn depends on teacher quality (Land et al, 2005). Lack of such leads to underperformance by learners.

Student success is directly impacted by the direction teachers provide (Akhtar & Akhtar, 2024). Schools cannot survive without effective teachers, who constitute one of the key elements in any school. Effective teaching serves as a key propeller for school improvement. High-quality teaching, time on task, and personalised teaching and learning contribute significantly to improving student performance. Teachers are mentioned as essential ingredients for improving school performance (Kanya et al, 2021). The success of an organisation cannot be achieved if individuals within it cannot enmesh their various talents to work as a team. It is the teacher who must provide protective space for students not to be affected by poor performance.

Domains of effective teaching and learning

Teacher effectiveness is significantly influenced by planning and content delivery as well as knowledge of the domains of effective teaching and learning (Saoke et al, 2025). Domains of effective teaching form the basis upon which all good teaching is founded. Teachers need knowledge of these domains to have a deep understanding of their subject areas and to provide accurate and comprehensive instruction. Teacher effectiveness is measured by the level of planning and delivery of lessons. Teachers' knowledge of domains helps them identify and address students' misconceptions, tailor instruction to diverse learners' needs, and create valid assessments while providing constructive feedback. The domains of effective teaching are valuable to this study because they provide a comprehensive analytical framework for systematically assessing the observed classroom practices at the selected high school, enabling the identification of specific gaps in lesson planning, instructional delivery, assessment, and feedback that contribute to learner underperformance while also serving as benchmarks for targeted professional development interventions.

The domain of school leadership and organisational culture serves as a pillar and cornerstone in enhancing teacher and learner performance. Gento (2002) argues that:

A school leader is a person with the ability to provide the liberation, from inside, of the internal energy existing in other human beings, so that these voluntarily make the effort to attain, in most effective and comfortable ways, the aims they themselves have decided to achieve in order to obtain their own dignity and those they live within the specific environment and context they are responsible for (Gento, 2002:183).

The citation is highlighting that school leadership is a foundational condition for creating the supportive professional environment necessary for improved classroom practices and learner performance. School aims are expressed in syllabus documents that govern what is taught and how it is taught. School leaders are therefore expected to ensure that teachers teach content knowledge emanating from policy documents expressed in syllabuses.

Statement of the Problem

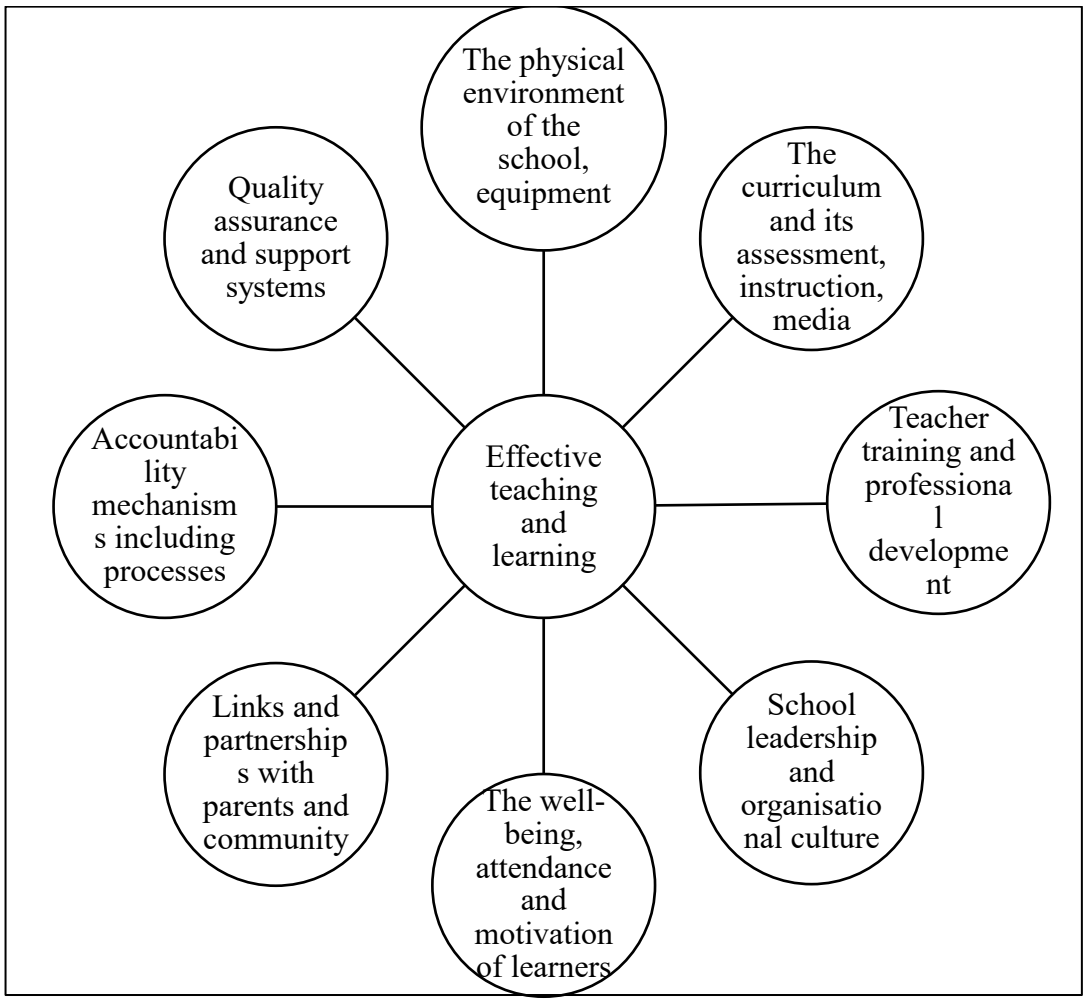
The quality of teacher performance as a professional represents an important issue to discuss, considering its significant role in student achievement (Canales & Maldonado, 2018). Despite efforts to enhance classroom performance by school leadership, responsible authorities, and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe, many high schools struggle with suboptimal classroom performance, hindering students' academic achievement and future opportunities. Given the concerning trend of poor academic performance among high school learners, this study explores the realities of classroom practice, exploring the factors that contribute to underperformance and the gaps between intended strategies and enacted practices.

Research Questions

- What instructional practices characterise classroom interactions and how do these practices relate to learner performance?

- How do assessment and feedback practices influence learner performance at the selected high school in Masvingo?
- What gaps exist between intended instructional strategies and enacted classroom practices, and how do these gaps contribute to learner underperformance?

Figure 1.-Effective teaching and learning



Source: Effective teaching and learning (World Bank, 2000)

Conceptual framework

This study is premised on the School Effectiveness Framework, which identifies strong leadership and effective governance structures, high teaching and learning quality, student achievement, community engagement, and school culture as key factors that contribute to school effectiveness (Javornik & Mirazchiyski, 2023). The concept of school effectiveness emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in response to growing concerns about education quality and the need to improve educational outcomes for students. The movement aimed to focus on studying factors within schools that could lead to better academic performance irrespective of students' social background. The framework emphasises the need to gather data on student achievement and progress over time, pointing to frequent quality assessment of students' progress. The quality of teachers in terms of qualifications, professional development, and effectiveness must be monitored to avoid decay and complacence as shown in Figure 1. Student attendance, behaviour, and participation are critical elements requiring close monitoring (Javornik & Mirazchiyski, 2023). This study applies the School Effectiveness Framework to

examine classroom experiences that contribute to or impede student achievement.

The School Effectiveness Framework is justified for this study because it provides a comprehensive lens for examining the systemic and structural factors that influence learner performance at the selected high school as shown in Figure 1. The framework's emphasis on strong leadership, high teaching quality, student achievement monitoring, and school culture (Javornik & Mirazchiyski, 2023) aligns directly with the study's aim of understanding why learners continue to underperform despite reform efforts. By applying this framework, the study can systematically assess whether the school exhibits characteristics of effective institutions such as clear learning objectives, robust assessment systems, and continuous improvement practices or whether gaps in these areas explain persistent underperformance. Furthermore, the framework's focus on monitoring and data-informed practice provides a standard against which to evaluate the observed assessment and feedback practices, revealing how systemic weaknesses in these areas contribute to learning gaps.

Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivist Theory

The Social Constructivist Theory advanced by Vygotsky (1978) undergirds this study. The theory emphasises the role of teacher-learner and peer interactions, classroom interactions and pedagogical practices in shaping learning outcomes. It recognises that learners construct their own understanding through experiences and interactions. The theory provides a basis for understanding strategies to enhance classroom performance, such as promoting collaborative learning and scaffolding. Key tenets of social constructivist theory highlight that learning occurs through social interactions with others, including peers, teachers, and family members. Knowledge is constructed by individuals through their experiences and interactions rather than being passively received. Learning is most effective when it occurs within a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where challenges are slightly beyond an individual's current level of mastery. More knowledgeable others provide scaffolding to help learners master new concepts and skills. The theory helps explain why teacher-dominated monologue, pedagogical dimensions to underperformance, limited student participation, and inadequate feedback fail to support deep understanding, while also illuminating how collaborative learning and meaningful dialogue could enhance concept mastery. It provides analytical tools for interpreting the observed instructional practices.

Literature review

This section reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature on classroom practices, instructional strategies, assessment and feedback, and factors influencing learner performance, providing a foundation for understanding the observed classroom realities and situating the study's findings within existing scholarship.

Effective Instructional Strategies

Research on academic strategies to improve students' performance indicates that effective teachers begin lessons with short reviews of previous learning, present new material in small steps, provide students with opportunities to practice at each step, ask relevant questions and check responses, provide models, guide student practice, check for understanding, require and monitor independent practice, and engage students in regular reviews (Kisiga, 2022). Schools often use extra hours to teach students identified as slow learners, providing remedial gap-filling exercises. A study conducted by Imran et al, (2024) found that there is need to support slow learners because they need extra time and resources to achieve academic success in the classroom. Inducing different teaching and learning strategies is important because students have different learning abilities. Some are fast learners, others moderate, and others slow learners and require teachers to use varied strategies to accommodate all learners' needs (Imran et al, 2024).

Teachers' teaching methods can be influential in improving learners' critical thinking skills (Murphy, 2015). A variety of teaching strategies can be employed including direct instructional methods (lecture), indirect instructional methods focusing on concept

formation, interactive methods involving debate and discussions, and independent instructional methods that are inquiry-based, involving learners in research and assigned tasks (Wekwete & Higgs, 2024). These approaches promote active learning in the classroom (Olatunji, 2017), a strategy for making learners powerful critical thinkers during participatory activities (Murphy, 2015). Less teacher-talk gives learners more time to think, helping them master concepts and apply them.

Research on strategies for improving classroom performance has focused on improving teacher quality. Nan (2021) concluded five main strategies for constructing high-quality teachers. These include, among others, strengthening teachers' ethics and reshaping teacher spirit; focusing on pre-service and post-service integrated training to build a whole-chain quality training system; deepening reform of the teacher management system and modernising teacher management; making up weak points and consolidating the foundation of high-quality teachers; and improving the system to build a strong defence line of high-quality teachers.

Assessment and Feedback Practices

Effective feedback is critical for quality instructional practices that enhance student performance. Crooks (1988) identifies several ways to enhance feedback effectiveness. Feedback is most effective when it focuses students' attention on their progress in mastering classroom tasks, enhancing self-efficacy, encouraging effort attributions, and reducing attention to social comparison. Easley and Zwover (1975) capture the approach that leads to most valuable feedback:

If you can both listen to children and accept their answers not as things to be judged right or wrong but as pieces of information which may reveal what the child is thinking you will have taken a giant step towards becoming a master teacher rather than merely a disseminator of information (Easley & Zwover, 1975:25).

Feedback should be provided soon after task completion, with subsequent opportunities for students to demonstrate learning from the feedback. Mastery approaches emphasise feedback and subsequent opportunities to correct without penalty for earlier failure. Feedback should be specific and related to need, with simple knowledge of results provided consistently. Praise should be used sparingly and should be task-specific, while criticism should be communicated in a productive and helpful manner (Crooks, 1988).

Differentiated Instruction and Learner-Centred Pedagogy

The knowledge, skills, and competences that characterise effective teachers are important elements in ensuring students receive quality written work (Langelaan et al, 2024). This involves teachers recognising students' learning needs and deficiencies, adjusting learning objectives, curriculum content, instructional methods, learning tasks, and ongoing assessment of student development and concept mastery (Van Gee et al, 2019). Written work must be tailored to provide learning experiences that meet syllabus expectations and make education accessible to all students.

Implementing learner-centred pedagogy in classroom settings is a complex challenge in most countries (Chimbi & Jita, 2021). Lack of action research skills to solve students' problems immediately is noted as a deficiency among many teachers in Zimbabwe (Banda, Rembe & Chagwida, 2025), acting as an impediment to smooth delivery of classroom action. Effective schools have a culture valuing professional development, collegiality, collaborative leadership, and teamwork (Gulsen & Celik, 2021). Staff development empowers teachers with skills of analysing student data and improving the quality of classroom interactions, which are important to students' outcomes as they affect engagement and motivation.

Curriculum Alignment and Accountability

Syllabuses are crucial documents during teaching and learning as they act as key source documents and roadmaps, defining learning and assessment objectives, course structure, and creating a contract between teacher and learner that ensures accountability for both parties. The success of learners depends largely on the teacher's adherence to syllabus expectations and

demands (Gauthier, Banner & Winner, 2025). Textbooks can be used to complement syllabus material if they contain related and relevant matter. Tendencies of sticking to textbook use without adhering to syllabuses are problematic because examiners test what is in the syllabuses, not what teachers might consider important or what is obtained from textbooks. Leadership must ensure synchrony between syllabuses, schemes of work, and lesson plans to maintain accountability and learner success (Gauthier, Banner & Winner, 2025).

Gaps in the Literature

While existing literature provides extensive guidance on effective teaching strategies, assessment practices, and the importance of teacher quality, there remains limited empirical research examining the actual implementation of these strategies within Zimbabwean secondary school contexts. The gap between policy intentions and classroom realities is underexplored, particularly regarding how teachers enact (or fail to enact) recommended practices. This study contributes to addressing this gap by providing detailed observational evidence of classroom practices and their relationship to learner performance, offering insights into the micro-level dynamics that shape educational outcomes in Zimbabwean high schools.

Methods

Research Philosophy and Design

This study is grounded in the interpretivist philosophy as it emphasises understanding and interpreting the meanings that individuals assign to their social realities (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The qualitative research case study design was adopted because it enables intensive examination of a bounded system, in this case, a single high school academy in Masvingo, within its real-world context (Lim, 2024). The design allowed the researcher to capture the dynamics and complexities of classroom performance as they naturally unfolded. Case study was employed to contribute depth to the inquiry through examination of individual classes, teachers, and groups (Lim, 2024).

Thematic analysis was identified as the suitable analytic framework for this study as it enables the identification and analysis of themes within qualitative data, including documents (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The six-phase framework was employed involving familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Thematic analysis guided the integration of data from participant observation and document analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to classroom performance within the single high school academy.

The study employed a single embedded case study design (Yin, 2018) where the primary case was the academy, and embedded units of analysis were individual teachers, departmental groups, and classroom documents. Data was collected through two complementary methods, participant observation and document analysis, which were integrated during the analysis phase using thematic analysis as the unifying analytic framework.

Participant Observation

The researcher adopted the role of participant as observer (Gold, 1958; Hurst, 2023), actively participating in classroom life while systematically recording observations. Observational research stands as a cornerstone of qualitative inquiry, offering a lens through which a researcher can witness firsthand the complexity of classroom norms, social interactions, and processes. As Hurst (2023:167) notes, “Participant observation is a field approach to gathering data in which the researcher enters a specific site for purposes of engagement where the researcher becomes a member of the organisation being studied.” Engaging directly with learners, teachers, and documents as a participant observer, the researcher captured the subtleties of human behaviour and interaction in natural settings.

During the eight-month period, the researcher observed lessons at high school levels from Form One to Upper Sixth, scrutinised learners’ exercise books during and after lessons, participated in daily teaching and learning routines such as morning work and test administration, and

maintained detailed field notes. Field notes were centred on classroom interactions, student behaviour, teachers' instructional strategies, and discrepancies between stated policies and enacted policies. The principal strength of observational research lies in its ability to provide a rich, detailed understanding of a setting and helps researchers to see how people behave in their natural environment, particularly revealing when there is a difference between what people say and what they do (Lim, 2024). By actively participating and observing lessons and records, the researcher aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students and teachers in classrooms that affect performance.

Document Analysis

Documents were sampled purposively. The researcher selected documents that were contemporaneous with the observation period and relevant to classroom performance. Learner exercise books, morning exercises, test and examination scripts, record of marks, schemes of work and lesson plans, syllabuses, departmental policies and procedures were the documents analysed. Analysing academic records was critical. Regarding document analysis, Bowen affirms that:

The rationale for document analysis lies in its role in methodological and data triangulation, the immense value of documents in case study research, and its usefulness as a stand-alone method for specialised forms of qualitative research. In other types of research, the investigator should guard against over-reliance on documents (Bowen, 2009:29).

In line with Bowen's (2009) affirmation, academic records in this study were analysed not as standalone evidence but as complementary data sources for methodological triangulation with classroom observations, while guarding against over-reliance on documents to ensure contextualised and corroborated interpretations.

Sampling Participants

Sampling occurred in three sequential stages. Purposive sampling, the first stage, was done to select a high school academy in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. This academy was purposively selected because it represented an information-rich case relevant to the research question on strategies for improved classroom performance. Participants were those who had the required status or experience or were known to possess special knowledge to provide the researcher with data. The researcher spent eight calendar months in the field, allowing for building trust with participants, observing routine practices across different terms, and collecting sufficient documentary evidence.

Convenience sampling was the second stage employed to select teachers for observation while teaching. Convenience sampling is the most common form of qualitative sampling and occurs when people are invited to participate because they are conveniently available regarding access, location, time, and willingness to participate (Golzar, Noor & Tajik, 2022). According to Rahi (2017), convenience sampling describes the data collection process from a research population that is effortlessly reachable to the researcher. The third and final stage was case sampling, which was done to classify teachers according to specialised areas. Teachers were then grouped into departments to search for strategies that can be used to enhance student performance, enabling cross-departmental comparison of strategies.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were observed throughout the research process. Permission was obtained from school authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants. In this study, the researcher safeguarded confidentiality and anonymity of participants throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. The obtrusive nature of the participant observation was disclosed to all participants prior to data collection (Alhabsi, 2024).

Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings from the study.

Research Question 1: What instructional practices characterise classroom interactions and how do these practices relate to learner performance?

Theme 1: Instructional Delivery and Pedagogy

Instructional delivery and pedagogy emerged as a critical theme, with classroom observations exposing a persistent disconnect between policy-intended learner-centred practices and the reality of teacher-centred, textbook-dependent instruction that failed to develop conceptual mastery or foster active student participation. The following observations were made:

- Some lessons were poorly delivered, leading to a thin grasp of content. Teachers dominated talk time with no room for student practice, and there was a lack of classroom management (students moving around during teaching).
- No clear learning objectives were established or declared at the start of lessons.
- Teachers did not spend adequate time developing concepts, nor did they use assumed knowledge to begin lessons.
- Some teachers relied exclusively on textbooks without linking to the syllabus, ignoring incremental syllabus changes.
- Explanations lacked detail, concrete examples, and illustrations; abstract concepts were taught without realia.
- Group work was often too large (8-12 students), limiting interaction and individual contributions. All groups received the same task, leading to redundant reporting.

Field Notes:

In lesson delivery, students were showing misconceptions due to inadequate instruction. Some lessons are generally poorly delivered leading to thin grasp or understanding of content/concepts. The teacher is teaching, and some students are moving around, there is no classroom management at all. No clear learning objectives are established or declared. There is no concentration at all, the teacher is wasting time. No use of assumed knowledge at the start of the lesson. Some teachers stick to textbooks only and do not link with syllabus.

The findings suggest that classroom instruction is characterised by teacher-centred monologue, weak scaffolding, absence of clear learning objectives, and limited student interaction. Lack of declaration of intended lesson objectives prevents students from mastering new concepts, making students passive recipients in the learning process. This also points to misuse of instructional time as teachers spend time without addressing critical points. From a School Effectiveness perspective, these findings indicate gaps in teaching, quality monitoring, and professional development. Effective schools demonstrate strong instructional leadership, clear learning objectives, and active student engagement, elements notably absent in the observed classrooms. From a Vygotskian social constructivist lens, the observed practices violate core principles of co-construction, mediation within the Zone of Proximal Development, and active student participation (Mulaudzi, 2025). The absence of meaningful teacher-student dialogue and collaborative learning opportunities suggests that students are not engaged in the social construction of knowledge that social constructivist theory identifies as essential for deep learning. This indicates that the school's academic success may be compromised by prevailing instructional methods.

Kibirige et al (2025) argue that misuse of instructional time has negative effects on students' academic achievement. Research on academic strategies to improve students' performance indicates that effective teachers begin lessons with short reviews of previous learning, present new material in small steps, provide students with opportunities to practice at each step, ask relevant questions and check responses, provide models, guide student practice, check for understanding, require and monitor independent practice, and engage students in regular reviews (Kisiga, 2022). Mulaudzi (2025) emphasises that social constructivist principles require co-construction, mediation within the ZPD, and active student participation. Less teacher-talk gives learners more time to think, helping them master concepts and apply them (Murphy, 2015; Wekwete & Higgs, 2024).

Theme 2: Quantity and Quality of Written Work

The quantity and quality of written work emerged as a critical theme, with observations exposing inadequately planned exercises that lacked diversity of concepts, ignored Bloom's Taxonomy, and provided no extension work, factors that hindered meaningful progress assessment and left early finishers disengaged. Observations shed light as follows:

- Written work included very few items, ignoring diversity of concepts. Bloom's taxonomy was not followed, and no extension work was provided for early finishers.
- Assumed knowledge, exercises, and typical examination questions were not integrated into written tasks.
- Ineffective lesson planning resulted in inadequate written work, hindering progress assessment.

Field Notes:

Some teachers just give very few items in the exercise not considering the diversity of items or concepts that make up the lesson. We do not see assumed knowledge work, the exercise and typical examination questions yet these must characterise the written work given to students adequately sampled. The Bloom's taxonomy is not followed when giving written work, where written work is graded to suit the levels of all the students in the class. Ineffective lesson planning where no written work is planned for adequately was noted. Students who finish early sleep and this disrupts others; no extension work given. Teachers do not allow students to work at their pace, so they lack support.

With inadequate work, teachers struggle to assess student progress adequately. The need for teachers with skills of differentiated instruction is evident. Knowledge, skills, and competences that characterise effective teachers are important elements in ensuring students get quality written work (Langelaan et al, 2024). This involves teachers recognising students' learning needs and deficiencies, adjusting learning objectives, curriculum content, instructional methods, learning tasks, and ongoing assessment of student development and concept mastery (Van Gee et al, 2019). Written work must be tailored to provide learning experiences that meet syllabus expectations and make education accessible to all students. From a School Effectiveness perspective, inadequate written work represents a missed opportunity for formative assessment and student engagement. Effective schools ensure that written work is aligned with learning objectives, appropriately challenging, and provides meaningful feedback on student progress. From a social constructivist lens, written work should be designed to promote collaborative learning and peer interaction, not merely individual completion of tasks. The absence of extension work for early finishers and the lack of differentiated tasks reflect a failure to recognise and respond to diverse learning needs, contradicting the social constructivist principle that learning should be tailored to students' ZPD.

Langelaan et al (2024) emphasise that the knowledge, skills, and competences that characterise effective teachers are important elements in ensuring students get quality written work. Van Gee et al (2019) argue that this involves teachers recognising students' learning needs and deficiencies, adjusting learning objectives, curriculum content, instructional methods, learning tasks, and ongoing assessment of student development and concept mastery. Chimbi and Jita (2021) note that implementing learner-centred pedagogy in classroom settings is a complex challenge in most countries. The concept of differentiated instruction requires teachers to understand that students learn at different paces and in different ways (Gulsen & Celik, 2021).

Theme 3: Questioning Techniques-Absence of Critical Thinking

Classroom observations uncovered a concerning absence of critical thinking development through questioning, as teachers relied heavily on superficial recap questions that reinforced rote memory rather than fostering analytical reasoning or conceptual understanding. The observations given below shed light.

- Questions were vague and low-level, typically recapping: "What did we learn yesterday?" "What do you remember?"
- No critical thinking skills were developed, leading to poor concept mastery.

Field Notes:

Teachers asked questions that were vague particularly when starting lessons. Most questions were poorly asked. No critical thinking skills were developed. Lessons started with a recap of what was done the day before or in the previous lesson. To start off the lesson, most teachers would start by asking learners: What did we learn about yesterday? Who can tell me what we did yesterday? What do you still remember from what we did yesterday? It was very evident from the questions that questions that promote critical thinking were not asked.

Poor questioning skills are evident from the observations made and this results in lack of critical thinking skills among students. Such lack of the development of critical thinking leads to poor mastery of concepts by learners (Chimbunde, Moreeng & Chawira, 2023). Advancing the argument from school effectiveness perspective, low-level recapping fails to drive academic excellence, as effective schools prioritise higher-order questioning to maximise learning time and critical cognitive engagement (Kyriakides et al, 2023). Lack of critical thinking among students leads to surface-level mastery (Ruiguo & Zhao, 2024). Poor practices in questioning leads to a missed opportunity for formative assessment and cognitive growth (Hattie & Zierer, 2019), directly undermining both school effectiveness and constructivist learning theory.

Chimbunde, Moreeng & Chawira (2023) argue that lack of the development of critical thinking leads to poor mastery of concepts by learners. Kyriakides et al (2023) contend that effective schools prioritise higher-order questioning to maximise learning time and critical cognitive engagement. Ruiguo and Zhao (2024) note that lack of critical thinking among students leads to surface-level mastery. Hattie and Zierer (2019) argue that poor practices in questioning leads to a missed opportunity for formative assessment and cognitive growth. Teachers' teaching methods can be influential in improving learners' critical thinking skills (Murphy, 2015). A variety of teaching strategies can be employed including interactive methods involving debate and discussions, which promote active learning in the classroom (Olatunji, 2017; Wekwete & Higgs, 2024).

Theme 4: Lack of Innovative Strategies

Classroom observations revealed a striking absence of innovative strategies, as teachers neither differentiated instruction to meet diverse learner needs nor applied action research to address the recurring pattern of students failing the same concepts across exercises, weekly tests, monthly assessments, and end-of-term examinations. Observations below shed more light.

- No evidence of differentiated instruction, despite literature arguing its importance. Teachers do not adjust learning objectives, methods, or tasks to meet diverse student needs.
- No use of learner-centred pedagogies, which are noted as a complex but necessary innovation.
- No action research skills are applied to solve student problems immediately, a noted deficiency among teachers.

Field Notes:

There was an observed pattern where learners failed concepts in exercises. The same concepts were failed in the morning work, in weekly, monthly and end of term tests.

Findings show that some concepts are not properly grasped, and learners lack proper explanation to solidify their understanding. This might mean lack of enough practice, leading to a lack of fluency (Van Gee et al., 2019). Learners might have developed misconceptions or misunderstandings about the concept. There could be gaps in prior knowledge that is foundational to the current concept, causing learners to struggle. There could be challenges in the methods used by the teacher. It is argued that lack of action research

skills that solve students' problems immediately is noted among many teachers in Zimbabwe (Banda, Rembe & Chagwida, 2025). Lack of such skills by the teachers acts as an impediment to smooth delivery of classroom action.

Banda, Rembe and Chagwida (2025) note that lack of action research skills that solve students' problems immediately is lacking among many teachers in Zimbabwe. Van Gee et al (2019) suggest that lack of enough practice leads to a lack of fluency. Keiler (2018) refers to situations where teachers fail to adequately cater for and support students, leading to a lack of understanding of certain concepts and topics. Teachers need to employ self-reflection practices for good teaching because "effective self-reflection is a key component of excellent teaching" (Bell et al., 2010:57).

Theme 5: Corrections of Corrections-Absence of Mastery Learning

Observations uncovered a concerning absence of corrections of corrections, as misconceptions were not identified or remediated, reflecting a failure to apply mastery learning principles. This is a critical gap given that, as field notes observed, "knowledge builds on top of another knowledge," and weak foundations inevitably hinder further learning. The following observations were noted:

- The idea of correcting corrections was missing; misconceptions were not corrected, leading to repeated failure of the same concepts.
- Clear identification of what is to be learned, demonstrated achievement, multiple assessment strategies, and time for each learner, were not observed.

Field Notes:

The idea behind enforcing corrections of corrections was missing. Misconceptions among learners were not corrected. Knowledge builds on top of another knowledge therefore, if the foundation of knowledge is weak, then students automatically fail to build other blocks of knowledge.

Teachers need to be aware of how to pass on educational concepts to learners to avoid corrections of corrections as this destroys the 'self' of the learner. In line with the social constructivist theory employed in this study which explores the complex dynamics of classroom performance and informs strategies for improvement, teachers are thus critical in helping learners to clear misconceptions to avoid failing the same concept several times.

Towers (1992) highlights that:

Education that is outcome-based is a learner-centred, results-oriented system founded on the belief that all individuals can learn. In this system, what is to be learned is clearly identified, learners' progress is based on demonstrated achievement, multiple instructional assessment strategies are available to meet the needs of each learner, and time and assistance are provided for each learner to reach maximum potential (Towers, 1992:291).

In support of the above citation, Siegel and Biesta (2021) argue that isolated details are especially readily forgotten, and information is remembered better and more usable if students learn it within a broader framework of meaningful interrelationships and understanding.

Theme 6: Transfer of Knowledge-A Missing Innovation

Observations uncovered a striking absence of knowledge transfer, as students could not apply concepts in new situations. This is a deficiency rooted in teacher-dominated, rote learning approaches that provided no room for practice, reinforcement, or independent application of learned content. The following shed light:

- Applying concepts in new circumstances was not tested or developed. Students could not transfer what they had learned.

Field Notes:

There is no transfer of knowledge, where students can apply concepts in new situations. The methods of teaching mainly centre on rote learning. The teacher is talking throughout the

lesson and there is no room for students to practice, this shows lack of classroom management skills. The teacher does not spend adequate time on developing the concept. Students are not listening while the teacher is teaching.

Self-efficacy is totally built when students can transfer knowledge of what they have learnt in various circumstances. No innovative strategies were observed in classroom practice. The findings reveal predominantly traditional, teacher-centred, and poorly executed methods that fail to address learning gaps, build self-efficacy, or foster critical thinking. Thorndike (1969:2) notes, "the crucial indicator of a student's understanding of a concept, a principle, or a procedure is that he/she can apply it in circumstances that are different from those under which it was taught". Transferability is the key feature of meaningful learning. If we are to test for understanding, we must test in circumstances which are at least part new.

Research Question 2: How do assessment and feedback practices influence learner performance at the selected high school in Masvingo?

Theme 1: Assessment and Feedback Practices

Systemic deficiencies in assessment and feedback practices are being revealed. The following observations highlight the deficiencies:

- Marking was inconsistent: very long ticks that did not indicate what was correct, overlooking errors, bias towards certain students, and marking wrong items as correct (no follow-through).
- Feedback was delayed, limiting time for reflection and corrections. Corrections were sometimes not marked or were done while students waited to write the next exercise.
- Comments were too general, derogatory, or demotivating (e.g., "This is poor work," "Be serious") rather than constructive or task-specific.
- Tests contained too few items (e.g., five items converted to percentages), lacked validity, and did not adequately sample taught content.
- No use of test-retest methods to ensure mastery; revision was left to students without teacher guidance.

Field Notes:

There is a tendency by some teachers to put very long ticks sometimes covering a paragraph which do not show what exactly is correct. Overlooking certain errors and bias towards certain students then ignore. Marking wrong items correctly-no follow through error, no concentration during marking. Taking too long to give feedback to students, there is no time to reflect. Corrections not done and if done, they are sometimes not marked. Corrections are marked while students wait to write the next exercise. Some students do new work before previous work is marked-how do they ensure that the concept has been grasped. Misconceptions are not corrected. Comments are too general and do not speak to specific areas observed. Marking is not painstakingly done; there is no evidence of footprints by the marker. Students fail written work due to inadequate practice.

The practice of marking wrong answers as correct and using long ticks leave misconceptions unaddressed. Effective feedback is critical for quality instructional practices that enhance student performance (Kibirige et al, 2025). From a School Effectiveness perspective, the assessment practices observed fail to provide the formative data necessary for instructional improvement and student progress monitoring. The absence of meaningful feedback loops undermines the teachers' capacity to identify and address learning gaps systematically. From a social constructivist lens, the feedback practices observed represent a fundamental breakdown in the dialogical relationship between teacher and student. Constructive feedback is a form of scaffolding that should help students progress through their ZPD. When feedback is delayed, demotivating, or absent, the scaffolding necessary for knowledge construction is withdrawn. The derogatory comments observed (e.g., "This is poor work," "Be serious") do not reduce the distance between student and content but rather create

emotional barriers to learning, as Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005) caution. The findings align with Crooks' (1988) argument that feedback should be specific, timely, and focused on task progress rather than personal criticism. The observed practices such as delayed feedback, generalised comments, and marking wrong answers as correct, contradict established principles of effective assessment. This suggests a need for professional development focused on formative assessment practices, constructive feedback techniques, and the use of assessment data to inform instruction (Pang, 2020).

Kibirige et al (2025) argue that teachers should treat the matter of giving effective feedback with the seriousness it deserves and give feedback in time. Crooks (1988) identifies several ways to enhance feedback effectiveness, noting that feedback is most effective if it focuses students' attention on their progress in mastering classroom tasks. Easley and Zwover (1975) capture the approach that leads to most valuable feedback:

If you can both listen to children and accept their answers not as things to be judged right or wrong but as pieces of information which may reveal what the child is thinking you will have taken a giant step towards becoming a master teacher rather than merely a disseminator of information (Easley & Zwover (1975:25).

Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005:345) explain that "who we are, what we believe, and what assumptions we hold about students…affect what we do in the classroom." Makofane et al (2025) note that without timely feedback loops, at risk learners go unnoticed until challenges have become rooted. Palmer (1997) argues that good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

Theme 2: Role of Teachers-Building Self-Efficacy and Addressing Learning Gaps

Observations are revealing that teachers failed to unlock learning problems, neglected prerequisite knowledge, and relied on feedback from a limited student sample, practices that lowered self-efficacy and perpetuated misconceptions. The following observations shed light:

- Teachers were expected to build learner self-efficacy through repeated success on challenging tasks, but instead, repeated failure was common, lowering self-efficacy.
- Teachers failed to unlock learning problems or close gaps in prerequisite knowledge. Problems were carried forward and were not identified early.
- Teachers solicited feedback from only a small number of students, misleading themselves about class understanding.
- Teachers did not listen carefully to student answers, missing root causes of misconceptions.

Field Notes:

Problems are not easily identified at the early stage of the learning process and hence continue to exist till they manifest at a later stage. Teachers solicit feedback from a very small number of students who get the chance to answer questions and mislead them for concept grasp. The sample of question distribution engages very few students. Lack of adequate practice on learned concepts, teachers are moving quickly. They leave students behind by not attending to details needed in concept. Teachers are not listening to students answers carefully and thus failing to assist them and attending to the root cause of problems. Incremental changes that are made to the syllabus are not followed hence teachers teach what they know about the topics at the expense of real matter. Insufficient explanations which lack detail and that are not clear are evident. Lack of concrete examples and insufficient illustrations. Teaching abstract concepts without realia at all.

The need to build self-efficacy among learners is evident. The findings point to practices by teachers of moving too quickly and failing to identify learning gaps among learners, which does not promote school effectiveness. The data reveals a collapse of essential teacher-student interaction patterns, as teachers fail to engage in the dialogical feedback necessary for the construction and mastery of concepts. Lack of equitable questioning patterns might result in system failure to address

prerequisite gaps among students. This erodes learner self-efficacy and diminishes teacher commitment to continuous improvement (Juan et al, 2018). The School Effectiveness concept addresses the need for ensuring that foundational learning deficits are addressed so that they do not become invisible over time without corrective measures. The social constructivist theory emphasises that learning is built through shared experiences (Thorndike & Woodyard, 1934), yet findings show that teachers are not making learning active, which prevents deep understanding of concepts by students. The failure to listen carefully to student answers represents a lost opportunity for formative assessment and responsive teaching, contradicting the social constructivist principle that teachers should act as mediators who adjust their support based on student responses.

Juan et al (2018) note that lack of equitable questioning patterns might result in system failure to address prerequisite gaps among students and erodes learner self-efficacy. Thorndike and Woodyard (1934:214) argue that "a mind which for any reason becomes engaged in an activity and finds itself repeatedly and persistently failing therein, is impelled to intermit or abandon it." The mechanism for building self-efficacy in a particular domain can be experienced through repeated success on tasks in that domain (Bandura, 1997). Teachers need to guard against repeated failure which leads to lower self-efficacy by the learner.

Theme 3: Formative Assessment Innovations (Recommended but Not Implemented)

This theme examines recommended but unimplemented formative assessment innovations, revealing a disjuncture between recommended classroom assessment and reality on the ground. Observations made were as follows:

- Poorly constructed test items were noted.
- Inadequate test items were being given which limit practice and give a false picture of the learners' performance.
- Feedback innovations such as immediate, task-specific, progress-focused feedback were not practiced.

Field Notes:

Five items were considered as a test and then marks were converted to percentage. Items do not adequately sample all the work that was taught, no validity. Teachers do not test for consistency to ensure mastery of concepts-use the test-retest methods/ giving a similar test after the first one. There is no thorough revision done in preparation for the tests, students are just told to revise on their own, in the absence of the teacher. A lot of gaps are then observed with questions left unanswered. Work that was not well grasped continues to be failed, no diagnosis done. There is evidence that students have very little practice on work taught.

We do not need questions that make students memorise because this becomes sabotage of the whole teaching and learning process. Rogers (1969) argues that the use of typical examination questions tells students our real aims. Tests are part of formative assessments. Literature suggests innovative formative assessments which include, among others, homework, concept maps, minute papers, peer review, quizzes, and class discussions (Lopez-Pastor & Sicilia, 2017). However, observations show only traditional, poorly constructed tests and exercises. In all their variations, formative assessments seek to capture whether, or the degree to which, students are making progress towards the intended learning outcomes so students and their teachers can adjust, improve, extend, or give course corrections (Lopez-Pastor & Sicilia, 2017). If formative assessment activities are properly done, they can contribute positively to student performance during summative assessment.

Rogers (1969) argues that the use of typical examination questions tells students our real aims. Lopez-Pastor and Sicilia (2017) suggest innovative formative assessments which include, among others, homework, concept maps, minute papers, peer review, quizzes, and class discussions.

Research Question 3: What gaps exist between intended instructional strategies and enacted classroom practices, and how do these gaps contribute to learner underperformance?

Theme 1: Role of School Leadership-Curriculum Alignment and Accountability

The theme shows a disconnection, lack of curriculum alignment and accountability among school leaders. It was observed that:

- Syllabuses were not followed and lesson objectives did not align with assessment objectives. Teachers taught content not found in syllabuses, relying on textbooks that were not policy documents.
- There was no synchrony between what syllabuses demanded and what was contained in lesson plans. Lesson objectives were not in line with assessment objectives.
- Teachers taught whatever they thought. When the researcher tried to find the source of such content, teachers could not locate it. Some could point to textbooks as sources, but that content would be missing from the syllabuses.

Field Notes:

In some instances, there was no synchrony between what the syllabuses demand and what was contained in the lesson plans. The lesson objectives were not in line with the assessment objectives. Teachers taught whatever they thought. When the researcher tried to find out the source of such content, the teachers could not locate that. Some could point to textbooks as sources, but that content would be missing from the syllabuses. Textbooks which are not policy documents or authentic sources for what to teach are misleading teachers on the right content to impart to students.

The syllabus, also known as the course plan, is a document rooted in the interaction between teachers and learners in the classroom. Syllabuses are crucial documents during teaching and learning as they act as the key source documents and roadmap, defining learning and assessment objectives, course structure, and creating a contract between the teacher and the learner, ensuring accountability for both parties. The success of learners depends largely on the teacher's adherence to syllabus expectations and demands (Gauthier, Banner & Winner, 2025). Textbooks can be used to complement syllabus material if they contain related and relevant matter. Tendencies of sticking to textbook use without adhering to syllabuses are problematic because examiners test what is in the syllabuses and not what teachers might consider important or what is obtained from textbooks. Leadership must ensure synchrony between syllabuses, schemes of work, and lesson plans to maintain accountability and learner success (Gauthier, Banner & Winner, 2025). This gap between intended curriculum alignment and enacted practice directly contributes to underperformance by ensuring students are not taught what they will be tested on.

Gauthier, Banner & Winner (2025) argue that the success of learners depends largely on the teacher's adherence to syllabus expectations and demands. Gulsen and Celik (2021:340) state that "a school should have a culture that values professional development of its teachers, collegiality, collaborative leadership, and teamwork to be effective." So-Qaheb and Du Plessis (2023) found that school leaders require multiple competencies, such as accountability, effective communication, good interpersonal relations, subject-matter competencies, administrative competencies, digital competencies and listening skills to be able to support their teachers' professional development efforts.

Theme 2: Role of Teachers-Professional Development and Collegiality

Lack of teacher professional development and collegiality is being revealed. An absence of data-driven practices to improve instruction is evident. Observations below shed light:

- Staff development should empower teachers to analyse student data and improve classroom interactions, but evidence of such practices was absent in the findings.

- Rote learning was noticed. Students performed well in exercises but failed in tests-clear elements of rote learning.
- Individual contributions were limited. In some cases, the same task was given to all groups to work on. The moment one group reported back, information from other groups was ignored because it spoke to the same matter.

Field Notes:

Rote learning is noticed. Students perform well in exercises but fail in tests. These are clear elements of rote learning. Individual contributions are limited as well. In some cases, the same task is given to all groups to work on. The moment one group reports back, the information from other groups is then ignored because it speaks to the same matter.

The need for staff development is being raised clearly. Teachers need to shift focus from using methods that encourage memorising to fostering critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving. The concept of differentiated instruction has become popular in recent years, so teachers need to know this. Teachers need to understand that students learn at different paces and in different ways. Effective classroom management practices are critical for good teaching. Literature indicates that effective schools have a culture valuing professional development, collegiality, collaborative leadership, and teamwork (Gulsen & Celik, 2021). There is a need to avoid guess work on teaching methods that work and those that do not work. In line with the concept of school effectiveness, "a school should have a culture that values professional development of its teachers, collegiality, collaborative leadership, and teamwork to be effective" (Gulsen & Celik, 2021:340). Staff development empowers teachers with skills of analysing student data and improving the quality of interactions in the classroom. Teacher-student interactions are important to students' outcomes as they affect their engagement and motivation during the lessons. From a social constructivist perspective, the absence of professional development focused on interactive, collaborative teaching methods represents a missed opportunity to transform classroom practices. The observed rote learning and limited individual contributions suggest that teachers may not have the pedagogical knowledge or skills to implement student-centred approaches that align with social constructivist principles. This points to a need for systemic professional development that addresses both content knowledge and pedagogical skills.

Gulsen and Celik (2021) indicate that effective schools have a culture valuing professional development, collegiality, collaborative leadership, and teamwork. Nan (2021) concluded five main strategies for constructing high-quality teachers: strengthening teachers' ethics and reshaping teacher spirit; focusing on pre-service and post-service integrated training; deepening reform of the teacher management system; making up weak points and consolidating the foundation of high-quality teachers; and improving the system to build a strong defence line of high-quality teachers. Strengthening continuous professional development is a strategic priority for improved classroom experiences.

Theme 3: Effectiveness Outcome-Persistent Learning Gaps

The effectiveness outcome of persistent learning gaps is being exposed. Observations noted that:

- Students displayed learning gaps, failing the same concepts across exercises, morning work, and all test types (weekly, monthly, end of term), indicating that current strategies are largely ineffective.
- There were topics not understood across a level by both boys and girls. Students struggled to grasp concepts across the whole academy.
- Students displayed many learning/content/concept gaps in such topics. Weaknesses in understanding concepts were displayed in tests and exercises.
- Students lacked a solid foundation in prerequisite knowledge. There was

evidence of insufficient practice and teaching methods/knowledge by teachers.

Field Notes:

There are topics not understood across a level by both boys and girls. Students struggle to grasp the concepts across the whole academy. Students display a lot of learning/content/concept gaps in such topics. Weaknesses in understanding the concepts are displayed in tests & exercises. Students lack a solid foundation in prerequisite knowledge. There is evidence of insufficient practice, teaching methods/ knowledge by teacher. If the teacher has the discipline identity knowledge, then he/she must unlock the learning problem/difficulty to close the learning gaps. Address a problem within other problems-problems carry forward.

It is argued in educational theory and practice that isolated details are especially readily forgotten, and that information is remembered better and is more usable if students learn it within a broader framework of meaningful interrelationships and understanding (Siegel & Biesta, 2021). Students need to understand all concepts taught by the teacher. Literature suggests that the purpose for the existence of the teacher in the classroom is to teach; there is no room for unthinking unilateral disarmament observed in some classrooms that cause students to fail to understand some topics (Keiler, 2018). This refers to a situation where teachers fail to adequately cater for and support students, leading to a lack of understanding of certain concepts and topics. Guided by the school effectiveness conceptual framework, teachers need to build self-efficacy among learners. The mechanism for building self-efficacy in a particular domain can be experienced through repeated success on tasks in that domain. Success at tasks perceived as difficult or challenging is more influential than success on easier tasks. Teachers need to guard against repeated failure which leads to lower self-efficacy by the learner. Thorndike and Woodyard (1934:214) argue that "a mind which for any reason becomes engaged in an activity and finds itself repeatedly and persistently failing therein, is impelled to intermit or abandon it." From a social constructivist perspective, the repeated failure of students to master concepts suggests that scaffolding is either absent or ineffective. The social interactions that should mediate learning are not occurring in ways that support knowledge construction. The findings suggest a systemic breakdown in the teaching and learning process where foundational weaknesses, ineffective pedagogies, and a lack of reflective practice combine to perpetuate poor student performance.

Siegel and Biesta (2021) argue that isolated details are especially readily forgotten, and information is remembered better and more usable if students learn it within a broader framework of meaningful interrelationships and understanding. Keiler (2018) suggests that the purpose for the existence of the teacher in the classroom is to teach; there is no room for unthinking unilateral disarmament observed in some classrooms that cause students to fail to understand some topics. Thorndike and Woodyard (1934:214) argue that "a mind which for any reason becomes engaged in an activity and finds itself repeatedly and persistently failing therein, is impelled to intermit or abandon it."

Theme 4: Role of Teachers-Marking and Feedback as Relational Practice

The theme shows that teachers fail to reduce the distance between students and content. Observations shed more light:

- Marking styles were automatic and unreflective. Derogatory comments destroyed the learner's "self" rather than reducing distance between student and content.
- Comments did not seem to be reducing the distance between the student and the content but were rather derogatory, demotivating, demeaning.

Field Notes:

Comments do not seem to be reducing the distance between the student and the content but are rather derogatory, demotivating, demeaning. Teachers have difficulty in providing constructive comments. Comments like 'This is poor work', 'Be serious', 'Work hard', 'Stop playing' characterise students' feedback. Is there any point to say this,

does it build them. Comments do not address both the content and presentation of the work. They are not helping or aiding students in recognising their strengths and identifying areas that require further development. Teachers are not checking students' notes, class exercises and tests.

The issue of quality marking is being raised. Findings also point to the need by teachers to provide immediate feedback to students. Frequent monitoring of learners' progress allows teachers to identify learning gaps early and adjust instruction accordingly. Without timely feedback loops, at risk learners go unnoticed until challenges have become rooted (Makofane et al, 2025). It is argued that good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher and one's ability to make these present in the classroom (Palmer, 1997), especially during marking. Over time, marking styles may become overlearned and automatic, allowing teachers to practice them without conscious thought. When reflection on marking is absent, teachers' identity and assumptions affect classroom practice (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). Engaging in a formal reflection marking process allows teachers to remain mindful of their comments. The findings point to a gap between the intended practice of constructive, developmental feedback and the enacted practice of automatic, unreflective, and sometimes destructive feedback. This gap contributes to underperformance by destroying student motivation and self-efficacy rather than supporting learning.

Palmer (1997) argues that good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher and one's ability to make these present in the classroom. Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005) explain that:

who we are, what we believe, and what assumptions we hold about students…affect what we do in the classroom. This recognition provides the major impetus continually to question and rethink who we are and what we want our relationship with students and the subject matter to be (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005:345).

Makofane et al (2025) note that without timely feedback loops, at risk learners go unnoticed until challenges have become rooted. Crooks (1988) emphasises that praise should be used sparingly and where used should be task specific, whereas criticism or other identified deficiencies should be communicated in a productive and helpful manner.

Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal a comprehensive and systemic breakdown in the teaching and learning process at the selected high school in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The instructional practices observed are predominantly characterised by teacher-centred monologue, weak scaffolding, absence of clear learning objectives, and limited student interaction, all of which violate core principles of both the School Effectiveness Framework and Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory. Students are reduced to passive recipients of information rather than active constructors of knowledge, with teachers dominating talk time and failing to provide the dialogical feedback and collaborative learning opportunities essential for deep understanding. The quantity and quality of written work is inadequate, with teachers failing to differentiate instruction, integrate examination-type questions, or provide extension work for early finishers. Assessment and feedback practices are equally problematic, characterised by inconsistent marking, delayed and demotivating feedback, invalid tests with too few items, and an absence of test-retest methods to ensure mastery. The cumulative effect of these practices is evidenced by students repeatedly failing the same concepts across exercises, morning work, and all test types, demonstrating persistent learning gaps that are carried forward and compounded over time.

The study further concludes that significant gaps exist between intended instructional strategies and enacted classroom practices, with these gaps directly contributing to learner underperformance. Syllabuses are not followed, with teachers relying on textbooks that are not policy documents, resulting in students not being taught the content that examinations assess. The absence of synchrony between syllabuses, schemes of work, and lesson plans undermines accountability and learner success. Professional development appears to have had limited impact, as evidenced by the persistence of rote learning,

limited individual contributions, and the absence of innovative strategies such as differentiated instruction and learner-centred pedagogies. The findings reveal a fundamental failure to build learner self-efficacy, with teachers moving too quickly, soliciting feedback from only a few students, and failing to listen carefully to student answers, thereby missing the root causes of misconceptions. The concept of correcting corrections is absent, allowing foundational misconceptions to remain unaddressed, and students cannot transfer knowledge to new circumstances due to the predominance of rote learning. These findings paint a comprehensive picture of a system where foundational weaknesses, ineffective pedagogies, unreflective assessment practices, and a lack of accountability combine to perpetuate poor student performance, requiring urgent and systemic intervention at both classroom and school leadership levels.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that school leadership mandate the consistent declaration of clear, lesson-specific learning objectives at the start of every lesson and enforce strict adherence to official syllabuses, ensuring that textbooks are used only as supplementary resources rather than primary sources of content. Teaching must be targeted towards individualised instruction through classroom-based coaching on basic classroom management, equitable questioning techniques that engage a wider cross-section of students, and the design of written work that includes varied item types aligned with Bloom's taxonomy, assumed knowledge exercises, and extension tasks for early finishers. A structured, mandatory process for corrections of corrections should be implemented, where students demonstrate mastery of previously failed concepts before new content is introduced, thereby preventing the accumulation of foundational learning gaps. School leadership should establish robust monitoring systems to ensure synchrony between syllabuses, schemes of work, and lesson plans, with regular audits to verify that teachers are teaching examinable content and that lesson objectives align with assessment objectives.

Furthermore, the study recommends that school leadership prioritise ongoing, practice-based professional development focused on formative assessment practices, constructive feedback techniques, and the use of assessment data to inform instruction. Teachers need training in providing encouraging, task-specific comments that identify exactly what is incorrect and how to correct it, moving away from derogatory, generalised feedback that destroys student motivation. Marking practices must require brief written footprints that address misconceptions rather than long ticks or automatic corrections, and feedback should be provided promptly to allow time for reflection and correction. Professional development should also address learner-centred pedagogies, differentiated instruction, and the development of action research skills to enable teachers to identify and solve student learning problems immediately. Schools need to shift deliberately from content-coverage models to learning-mastery frameworks, where the focus is on ensuring all students achieve conceptual understanding before progressing to new material. Additionally, school leadership should foster a culture of collegiality, collaborative leadership, and teamwork, creating opportunities for teachers to share effective practices, analyse student data collectively, and engage in reflective practice that continually improves the quality of classroom interactions and ultimately enhances learner performance.

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