

# An exploration of the Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) in addressing Literacy in primary schools: the case of Tsholotsho District in Zimbabwe

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**Abstract:** The standard of education in Matabeleland North has deteriorated to the extent that the province has over the years recorded the lowest pass rate at Grade Seven level in the country. Owing to the persistent high failure rate, the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture introduced the Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP). It is in this guise that this study focussed on the challenges and opportunities of the performance Lag Address Programme introduced to address suppressed literacy levels and high failure rate in primary schools. The study used a qualitative approach taking into cognisance the versatility of this approach in generation of appropriate descriptive information on the phenomenon under study. A case study design was chosen focussing mainly on Tsholotsho District in Matabeleland North Province. Purposive sampling and convenient sampling techniques were used to identify the teachers and Ministry of Education Officials to discuss PLAP programme implementation. The findings of the study revealed that scepticism by the teachers regarding the thrust and feasibility of the programme hindered its effective implementation. The study recommended that teachers should be equipped sufficiently to be effective in PLAP implementation. Furthermore, there is need for capital injection, expanse resource mobilisation and a multi-stakeholder approach to propel the programme to success.

**Key Words:** Performance Lag Address, implementation, resources, literacy

## I. INTRODUCTION

A general overview of the conditions of socio-economic and political nature besetting Zimbabwe prior to the onset of Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) has become of necessity in this study. Over recent years, political turmoil and economic collapse in Zimbabwe have received plenty of attention and coverage. At the same time, however, a crisis in the country's once well-regarded education sector has been developing more quietly, even though its implications could be as significant for Zimbabwe's future. Amidst national unrest, teaching was disrupted from 2006 to 2009, and with few mechanisms to help pupils catch up or re-take years, when they returned thousands found themselves unable to gain a meaningful education. Also underfunded and under-resourced, in 2011, a tide of schools recorded a zero per cent pass rate in national ordinary ('O-level') examinations. Now, Zimbabwe, as observed by Chiketo (2013), faces the serious challenges of dealing with a damaged education system in

which thousands of pupils are at higher levels than they can cope with, and a lost generation of young people many of whom were left unskilled and uneducated.

### *State of Education at the Onset of PLAP*

Zimbabwe has experienced a period of regressed learning from 2005 to end of 2010 and a dipstick evaluation showed that many schools attained zero per cent pass rate at both grade seven (7) and form four (4) or ordinary level examinations which are public national examinations. In Zimbabwe, PLAP was introduced as a response to the problems the Ministry of Education faced due to the collapse of the system between 2006 and 2009. The pilot study was carried in Matabeleland North and Manicaland provinces (UNICEF report, 2011). The period was characterised by a mass exodus of experienced education practitioners during the economic meltdown in the country. Data from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education reveals that between 2000 and 2008 more than 2 million children and young people failed their O-levels or dropped out aged 13.

Insufficient funding, amidst the country's political and socio-economic crises, Zimbabwe's schools lost part of 2006, the entirety of 2007 and 2008 and a segment of 2009's academic years. UNICEF found that 94 percent of rural schools were closed by 2009, with pupil attendance plunging from over 80 percent to 20 percent. Over 3 million skipped fundamental steps, and without the opportunity to retake years, pupils were simply pushed to higher grades and forms regardless of their mastery of previous levels (Chiketo, 2013).

When teachers returned in 2009, after the establishment of a coalition government, they encountered pupils who had skipped as many as three levels. It is not surprising then that the national pass rate for O-level exams in 2009 was a mere 19 percent, a significant drop on the 72 percent pass rate enjoyed in the mid-1990s. A 'Rapid Assessment of Primary and Secondary Schools', funded by the European Commission and conducted by National Advisory Board in 2009, confirmed that the decline in quality of education was due to a lack of teaching and lack of sufficient learning materials.

*PLAP Explored*

Owing to the foregoing education scenario in Zimbabwe the government adopted PLAP, 'a remedial programme which submits pupils to a diagnostic examination' (Jangara, 2013), while also serving as an evaluative tool. This is used to establish their challenges, otherwise referred to as 'their last point of mastery', which then provide strategies to help them catch up to where they should be. The programme involves revisiting the syllabus and targeting concepts that have proven persistently difficult for pupils to catch up on. The evaluation programme entails assessing the teaching process, teacher and pupil records, resource provisions, supervision, monitoring and evaluation programmes. Teachers detect the biggest challenges which students are facing and devise strategies to help the students, so that they can be on the same level with other students.

A need for an instrument that could establish learners' academic level of performance became key, seeing that learners had experienced a period of regressed learning from 2005 to end of 2010 as intimated earlier in the discussion. A psychological instrument called Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) was selected. WRAT, as put forward by Wilkinson and Robertson (2006), is an achievement test which measures an individual's ability to read words, comprehend sentences, spell, and compute math problems. Word reading measures letter and word decoding through letter identification and word recognition whereas sentence comprehension measures an individual's ability to gain meaning from words and to comprehend ideas and information contained in sentences using a close technique. Spelling measures an individual's ability to encode sounds into written form using a dictated spelling format containing both letters and words. Lastly, math computation measures an individual's ability to perform basic mathematics computations through counting, identifying numbers, solving simple oral problems, and calculating written mathematics problems. WRAT is a psychological instrument used to test pupils' operating levels academically and is largely linguistic in orientation. The learner's performance is evaluated in relation to their current grade/form level and a gap or a lag in learning is then established. PLAP uses WRAT as its primary diagnostic and evaluative instrument and relies on the outcomes of WRAT as starting point in addressing reading and spelling problems that a learner presents with.

PLAP's principal rule is 'starting from last point of success' and this puts classroom practitioners at a level where they make the child tackle concepts from the known to the unknown. The argument is that automatic promotion to the next level or grade has had a negative effect in learning as learners are moved to the next grade level without mastering concepts at their level which form a springboard for the next level. According to WRAT for example, a grade six (6) pupil operating at grade four (4) level, it is envisaged that learning stopped at grade four (4) and hence starting at last point of success is ideal. In addressing the gap, starting with grade four

materials will trigger the potential in the learner and gear them up for the grade five (5) level that will have been missed along the way. The learner would then proceed to grade six (6) level.

Lesson objectives are then formulated from the results of the WRAT. The WRAT can reveal sticking points in the learner's linguistic performance, that is, reading and spelling. The child could be presenting with word or letter recognition problems in which they would wrongly articulate particular sounds or misspell words. Mirror imaging is another challenge especially to early graders. The learner is accelerated to his/her present grade progressively based on the WRAT result. An Individualised Education Plan (IEP) is devised by the teacher. The Individualised Education Plan (IEP) is tailor made to suit each child's unique educational needs and skills. It is through the I.E.P that the lag shall be addressed. Acceleration takes a short time. A grade six (6) pupil performing at grade four (4) level is not expected to take the ordinary two (2) years to operate at his grade level but shorter time since cognitively the learner is already mature. They thus tend to grasp the concepts quicker and proceed to the next grade level.

Optimum conditions are created to develop the potential of learners to the maximum extent possible. Acceleration is a cooperative obligation in which the teacher and the parent work together with the learner at the centre or their top priority.

Learning and teaching especially at primary level demands that teacher and parent work together for the learner's academic development. During the 2005/2010 era, the symbiotic relationship between the three slackened. The child was no longer at the centre of learning. The teachers that were there and teaching no longer focussed on the child but concentrated on completing the syllabus at the expense of comprehension. The rest of the teachers were not at all motivated to teach and as such could not be faithful to teaching basic learning principles. Learning became compromised. These teachers focussed on finding their basic needs even during school-working hours. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, food comes first, and all others follow.

*The Government Position on PLAP*

Following the success of the Tsholotsho- Manicaland pilot study, the government has unrolled the programme to all the provinces in the country and unveiled US\$8.2 million to expedite the programme whose primary focus is to improve reading and writing. This kind of sacrifice comes at the understanding that reading and writing are the backbone for any successful learning situation. The government of Zimbabwe has made it mandatory for all schools to implement PLAP and encouraged all teachers to seriously embrace the programme if all children are to close the Learning Achievement Gap (LAG) and has recommended that children

be taught from their last point of success at whatever level within the primary sector.

The department of Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education within the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe has been mandated to administer the programme as is enshrined in government policy number P36 of 1986 of children with remediation and special needs. Government has also through Public Service instrument 8 of 2004 mandated Speech and Language Correctionists/ Therapists, Psychologists and Remedial Tutors to implement and monitor programmes that improve the quality of learning to children that have a lag in their learning.

A policy on Performance Lag Address Programme is in the pipeline as Government seeks to ensure that the 2005-2010 economic meltdown learning gap is addressed as a matter of urgency, and in the pipeline is the idea that every learner in Zimbabwe who has a lag is addressed through an Individualised Education Plan.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

The standard of education in Matabeleland North, Tsholotsho District in particular, has deteriorated to the extent that the province has over the years recorded the lowest pass rate at Grade Seven (7) level in the country. The former Minister of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture under the Government of National Unity (GNU), David Coltart, lamented the country's literacy rate that he said is under threat because of the low culture of reading among pupils. Sadly, a survey conducted in Matabeleland North established that most pupils in Form One were not able to read the textbooks that had been distributed to their schools. In essence, they operated at a literacy level far below them. It is in this guise that the Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture introduced the Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) to mitigate against the low performance levels of pupils. The implementation of this programme has presented with it some challenges and opportunities that have been observed worthy of investigation.

#### *Research Objectives*

- To discuss the education situation in Zimbabwe as foregrounding PLAP implementation.
- To explore the challenges and strengths of PLAP in addressing literacy in Tsholotsho district.
- To recommend strategies towards effective implementation of PLAP in Tsholotsho district.

#### *Research Questions*

- What has been the state of education in Zimbabwe prior to PLAP implementation?
- What are some of the challenges and opportunities of PLAP vis-a-vis literacy in Tsholotsho district?
- What are the possible recommendations for effective implementation of PLAP in Tsholotsho district?

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach taking into cognisance the versatility of this approach in generation of appropriate descriptive information on the phenomenon under study. The study focussed mainly on Tsholotsho District. A case study design was chosen because of its usefulness in providing a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analysing information, and reporting results. As a result, the researchers gained a sharper understanding of why performance challenges happened as they did and what might become important to look at in future research. Tsholotsho District has 83 primary schools with an enrolment of 37,461 pupils against a teacher population of 757 as at December 2014 (Tsholotsho District Statistical Schedule, 2014). Fifty teachers from ten schools and two District Education Officers who work on PLAP programme were selected for the study. Purposive sampling and convenient sampling techniques were used to identify the teachers and Ministry of Education Officials to discuss PLAP programme implementation. Purposive sampling was chosen because the researchers believed that PLAP programme is a specialised area where the right people had to be identified because of their expertise in the area being researched. Convenient sampling was adopted because it was convenient for the researchers to select schools in Tsholotsho District for proximity, relevance, and accessibility. Interviews were done to individual education officers and teachers on their perception of PLAP. Thematic analysis which is historically a conventional practice in qualitative research and involves searching through the data to identify any recurrent patterns was used as a data analysis method for this study. Identification, analysis and reporting patterns or themes within data as directed by Braun and Clerk (2006) was done. Tsholotsho district in Matabeleland North province was selected by the Ministry of Education ahead of other districts as an experimental district on the effectiveness of Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP).

#### *Theoretical Framework*

Performance Lag Address Programme adopted by Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in the schools nationally, is premised on David Ausubel's Meaningful Verbal Subsumption Theory. In his theory, Ausubel (2000) puts forward that meaning is created through some form of representational equivalence between language or symbols and mental context. He states that two processes are involved which are Reception and Discovery. Reception is employed in meaningful verbal learning whereas discovery is involved in concept formation and problem solving. Ausubel holds the view that the acquisition of knowledge is hierarchical in nature. Ausubel gave more emphasis to the verbal learning methods of speech, reading and writing.

In his Meaningful Verbal Subsumption theory, he came up with two types of subsumptions in which he said one is a correlative subsumption and another a derivative subsumption. The correlative subsumption says that the new material learned is just an extension of knowledge that is

already known whereas the derivative subsumption states that new material or relationships can be derived from the existing structure. New information can be moved in the hierarchy or linked to other concepts or information to create new interpretations or meaning. From this type of subsumption, completely new concepts can emerge, and previous concepts can be changed or expanded to include more of the previously existing information. This is like 'figuring out' or reading between the lines based on the information acquired.

This encourages rapid learning and retention. Ausubel also came up with what is called 'advance organizer' a tool used to help students integrate new information with their existing knowledge, leading to meaningful learning as opposed to rote memorization. This tool is also termed the mental learning aid. It is a means of preparing the learner's cognitive structure for the learning experience about to take place. It is a device to activate the relevant schema or conceptual patterns so that new information can be more readily subsumed into the learner's existing cognitive structures. Teachers could do this by providing a brief introduction about the way that information is going to be presented.

PLAP is premised on this theory as it seeks to address the learning achievement gap on learners through rapid learning and information retention. The philosophy behind PLAP is that the children lagging academically have some knowledge of what happened at previous grades and the strategy is to start at the last point of success. This augurs well with Ausubel's subsumption theory of learning particularly the derivative subsumption which implies that without considering the previous or existing knowledge of an individual, learning of new information may be very difficult. This is true of most cases of school pupils in the schools with zero percent pass rate. Most pupils lagging cannot link the existing information with the new information simply because the gap between the two is enormous.

Ausubel's advance organizer becomes the learning or teaching approach that takes into consideration each pupil's learning needs and starting them at the last point of success, that is, moving the learner from the known to the unknown. PLAP focuses on language and mathematics which are believed to be the bedrock of learning and communicating any given content hence Ausubel's emphasis on verbal learning methods of speech, reading and writing.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### *Opportunities*

#### *Learner Centered Approach*

In Tsholotsho district, nineteen (19) primary schools had recorded zero per cent pass rate in 2011 examinations. PLAP was implemented in January 2012 and in the November/December 2012 National examinations, the district had seven (7) schools with zero per cent pass rate. In line with the high failure rate across the country that has been a cause for concern. The pattern of zero percentage pass rate in three

years is shown in Table 1. Chakanyuka et al. (2009) have argued that the performance of grade seven candidates, nationally, in 2006, show that, 8.8% of students passed none of the four examinable subjects while 38.8% passed the four subjects.

Table 1: Percentage Pass Rate Before And After PLAP Implementation In Tsholotsho

Year	Number of Schools with zero (%) pass rate
2011	19
2012	7
2013	6

Own Source: 2014

Urban schools performed better due to better resources and more experienced teachers than rural schools. In the 2013 National examination only six (6) schools recorded zero per cent pass rate. In schools with zero per cent pass rate, the child was not at the centre of the learning system and rote learning was present. Children could not read or spell words correctly. There has been a remarkable improvement on pupils' performance at all PLAP targeted grade levels. Even with the slow reduction of zero per cent pass rate in comparison to 2012, the quality of grading symbols in 2013 were far much better than the 2012 grading symbols. This was attributed to quality time given by programme implementers to learners' educational needs.

#### *Learning Environment And Learner Attitude*

PLAP has been hailed by educationists in that 'no learner is left behind' since every learner should benefit from the learning process. The foregoing point has been raised and supported despite the work overload cited by the teachers. In the same vein, the programme has helped learners to improve on reading and writing since learning is needs based. Notable reading skill methods and demonstrable outcomes engaged by teachers in Tsholotsho district are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Reading Skill Methods and Demonstrable Outcomes.

Variable	Method	Demonstrable Outcomes
Reading Skill	Reading timetable, a reading moto, and reading culture	Better grading symbols
	Class libraries with reading materials	Improved reading skills and speed
	Reading homework	Extended independent reading
	Reading competitions among classes, grades, and schools	Competitive reading
	Demonstrative reading by the teacher (all schools)	Learners are given the opportunity to do imitative reading
	Reading games (all schools)	Participatory reading and word search
	Coaching on reading skills such as pronunciation, word attack and comprehension	Closed gap in reading
	Use of slides	Improved reading speed and accuracy

Own Source: 2014



It has been noted in Tsholotsho that schools recording better grading symbols and increasing their pass rates had a reading timetable, a reading motto, and a reading culture. The utility of PLAP, shown in Table 2, is commensurate with the argument that PLAP emphasises teachers to adjust curriculum and materials so that each student has equal access to high quality instruction (Shoenfeld, 1999). It also implies within class ability groups where students receive instruction suited to their varied readiness levels and learning preferences, thus enabling them to maximise the opportunity for growth (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993).

The rate of absenteeism cases among pupils has greatly been reduced because all learners are benefiting from the daily lessons. This scenario owes it to the observation by teachers that the pupils' 'opening of the mind to various concepts and ability to read and enumerate properly' has motivated them attend school and class since the teachers now talk to all pupils and not a segment of the class.

#### *Availability Of Learning Materials*

There was also a unanimous appreciation by the education officers, teachers and parents that PLAP attempts to reduce the number of non-readers in the school, and this is incumbent on the effective implementation and monitoring of the programme. The arising point was also that 'there cannot be any effective learning unless one is first able to read, hence PLAP comes in handy as a strategy to eliminate non-reading'. In this regard the government of Zimbabwe has, through UNICEF, reduced drastically the pupil textbook ratio to 1 book to 5 pupils in Tsholotsho district and this has had a positive impact on reading and general pass rate in the schools and the district. A national survey conducted in 2011 to assess the effectiveness of textbook distribution to primary schools confirmed that 99% of all schools registered with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education received a full set of core texts (UNICEF, 2011).

#### *Plap: A Game Changer*

The reduction from nineteen (19) schools to seven (7) in 2012 and to six (6) in 2013 is a sure sign that the Performance Lag Address Programme works well in the education system in Tsholotsho. A sharp decline in schools recording zero per cent in 2012 was attributed to a huge interest generated on the programme when it kick- started in 2012 and the dire need to reduce the zero per cent pass rate by schools and parents. Faithfulness in implementing PLAP also contributed immensely to the reduction of zero per cent pass rate. Rigorous campaigning against zero pass rate was done in 2012 where parents were also involved. A slow reduction in 2013 was noted and was largely attributed to lax in implementation and lack of motivation among classroom practitioners.

## IV. CHALLENGES

### *Wide Operational Gaps*

According to the WRAT scale, children within the same class operated at different levels. For example, grade seven learners were operating at grade 4 to 5 levels. A gap as large as six (6) years was identified in some children in the district. Such performance has meant that learning has had to be individualised hence the need to form multiple groups. Monitoring such performance has presented its own challenges demonstrated in Table 3. The presence of multiple groups in the same class was mentioned by most teachers to have made their teaching an arduous mission.

Table 3: Challenges Posed by Multiple groups

Variable	Challenge
Class size	Teaching becomes a difficult and laborious task in view of the teacher-pupil ratio of 1:45 in some schools
Records	The records that teachers must keep include, social record, teacher's mark schedules and scheme-cum-plan, of which the additional Individual Educational Plan (IEP) which addresses PLAP was seen as an extra and cumbersome record.
Time	Teachers lamented that the programme is time consuming especially since learning is individualised.

Own Source: 2014

### *Teaching and Learning Resources*

The programme has been stifled by the non-availability of adequate teaching and learning materials in the primary schools, particularly in the rural areas where pupils are made to crowd around a few reading texts or dire situations where the only person with the text is the teacher. Chakanyuka et al. (2009) have argued that the rapid expansion of the education system in 1980, and the introduction of automatic promotion in 1981, overstretched the Ministry's resources and capacity to service the school system effectively and an increase in pupil/teacher ratios compounded by the increase of untrained teachers especially in rural areas led to the decrease in pupils' performance. The non-availability of resources is deriving from the state of economic meltdown which stands as the primary reason behind PLAP implementation. Chiketo (2013) has been of different opinion citing that but perhaps the underlying issue that needs to be overcome is an ingrained government mentality which fails to recognise the importance of education. Then Minister of Primary and Secondary Education, David Coltart, has gone on record complaining that the unity government has failed to make education a priority, scathingly remarking that Zimbabwe's education crisis was being perpetuated by officials "spending three times more money on globetrotting compared to education". Despite the cited challenge the government of Zimbabwe has, through UNICEF, reduced drastically the pupil textbook ratio to 1 book to 5 pupils in Tsholotsho district and this has had a positive impact on reading and general pass rate in the schools and the district.

The foregoing point on lack of government commitment to fund education-oriented programmes has been closely coupled with lack of capacity building workshops which the education officers and teachers complained that it has stifled PLAP. Education officials within Tsholotsho District lamented that they lack funding for travel and subsistence to ensure that they can move around schools and workshop the teachers on PLAP implementation and improvement to mitigate teacher burnout.

#### *Guiding Policy Documents*

The education officers and teachers bemoaned lack of guiding policy document for PLAP. The programme started in Manicaland Province, one of the provinces in Zimbabwe, as a pilot programme. From there it was recommended by the Ministry of Education that it be adopted by other provinces even before the government could craft a proper policy, hence it was implemented differently by Provincial Education Directors. For now, the policy is still in its draft form awaiting ratification. Teachers want something documented which can easily be followed for easy and uniform implementation. Some teachers and school heads have backtracked on the programme citing lack of documentation, and at times teachers and District Education Officers play blame-game as they both do not have the document with which to standardise operations.

#### *A Cumbersome Method And Teacher Attitude*

Closely linked to the earlier raised point about PLAP and time consumption, it emerged from both the teachers and the education officers that there is disruption of the normal timetable since no additional time has been suggested for the programme. In terms of policy and time allocation at primary school, teaching stretches up to 12 noon or 1pm, of which anytime beyond that needs a policy document for regulation, hence posing a threat to timetabling of the programme. Some teachers cited scenarios where they have had to teach double periods for subjects, for example, English, and this has short-changed the other lessons such as Social Studies which may end up not being taught. In research carried out by Nkoma (2014:39) he concluded that 'interviews with teachers indicated that PLAP involves too much paperwork and hence cheating in this exercise and lack of resources. Such perceptions influence the way they teach [sic].' Teachers interviewed from Tsholotsho also stated that the guiding concept is the pupil concentration span of which if overstretched their grasping level becomes a challenge.

As much as PLAP aims at eliminating non-readers at primary schools, teachers in Tsholotsho district bemoaned negative psychological effect due to stigmatisation and discrimination among pupils operating below their grade level. For example, some teachers may handle the grade level differences casually to the point of calling a grade 7 pupil a grade 3 because of their academic operational level.

## V. CONCLUSION

Full implementation of PLAP would require a close collaboration between government and the concerned stakeholders. The improvement in pass rate in some schools that have implemented PLAP demonstrates the will power by the teachers to improve literacy levels of pupils despite the challenges besetting the programme. For now, the programme appears to have more challenges than strengths thereby spelling badly on its effectiveness, yet it is being downplayed by lack of clear policy framework. It is appreciated from the challenges posed to the PLAP programme that the happenings on the socio-economic and political strata of the country have a direct bearing on financing, monitoring and evaluation of policies meant to improve literacy levels in the country.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

It emerged that there is need for a clear policy document detailing how PLAP is to be coordinated and implemented. Closely tied to the policy is the need for specification of time allocation for PLAP lessons on the master timetable to ensure concise and effective monitoring by the school and education officers.

There is need to put in place motivational parameters for the implementers, that is, teachers and supervisors alike. Motivational parameters could include vehicles for programme monitoring, fuel technical support and some allowances for the concerned teachers.

Parents of learners who benefit from the programme should be addressed so that there is continuity of the programme even at home because there is extra homework to be taken care of by the pupils on PLAP. Consistency on the part of teachers is vital in PLAP implementation as teachers need to constantly monitor the progress of their pupils.

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