Navigating School Infrastructural Projects in Zimbabwe: The Roles of Leadership Styles, Political Interference and Stakeholder Participation

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the challenges faced by school administrators in implementing new projects in primary schools in Buhera District, Zimbabwe. Primary data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 103 purposively selected participants and interviews conducted with ten school administrators from 10 purposively selected schools in Buhera District. Stata 17 Software and Nvivo 12 Software were used to analyse quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. The study found a significant positive statistical relationship between leadership styles and project implementation and a significant negative association between political interference and project implementation. However, the relationship between stakeholder involvement and project implementation was found to be insignificant. Additional analyses of the results indicated that stakeholder involvement and leadership styles encouraged payment of fees, as the respondents opined that parents were willing to honour their fees payment obligation when they believed that the projects that the schools intended to roll out brought benefits to the entire community. However, the relationship between availability of funds, which determined the schools' capacity to implement projects, was insignificant, which suggest that, owing to weak internal control systems, some of the school administrators corruptly misappropriated funds intended for income-generating projects. Overall, the study found that leadership styles constitute the major challenge faced by school administrators in implementing new projects.

INTRODUCTION

Effective implementation and management of infrastructural projects in educational institutions are fundamental to the enhancement of teaching and learning environments across both developed and developing contexts (Adan & Keiyoro, 2017; Barmasai & Mbugua, 2020; Msila, 2024). Globally, the success of such projects is intricately linked to leadership capacity, governance structures, stakeholder collaborations and institutional resilience (Bush, 2007; Van der Vlies, 2020). In Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in rural districts such as Buhera in Zimbabwe, the challenges related to failure of infrastructural projects are often exacerbated by limited resources, politicisation of school governance structures and weak accountability mechanisms (Kapelela et al., 2024; Muzenda, 2016).

Drawing on transformational and distributed leadership styles (Bakker et al., 2023; Nadeem, 2024), the researchers aver that effective project implementation requires leadership that is not only visionary but also adept at mobilising diverse stakeholders and navigating systemic constraints. Rothenberg (2022) emphasises the importance of having reflective leadership in place, where leaders engage with past experiences, while shaping future strategies, as essential in addressing the complex realities of school development in marginalised

communities. Accordingly, this study situates the case of Buhera District within global debates on educational leadership and infrastructural governance to examine the manner in which local leaders negotiate competing pressures to deliver on school agendas.

The increasing demand for access to education in Zimbabwe, which is driven by policies such as Basic Education Assistance Models (BEAM), has exacerbated resource constraints, heightening the need for innovative leadership and stakeholder collaboration. Yet, in many developing contexts, school administrators are appointed on the basis of pedagogical merit rather than formal training in project management, financial planning, or stakeholder coordination (Adan & Keiyoro, 2017; Medford & Brown, 2022; Msila, 2024). As a result, they are required to navigate complex implementation tasks with limited training and institutional support. Emerging research highlights that the effectiveness of leadership in such environments is shaped not only by individual leadership styles, but also by the ability to manage external influence, such as political interference and community expectations (Muzenda, 2016; Van der Vlies, 2020).

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the challenges faced by school administrators in implementing new projects by examining the key factors that influence project implementation in the context of Buhera District, Zimbabwe. By integrating quantitative data analysis with qualitative insights from school leaders, the research provides a comprehensive view of the barriers to and enablers of school-based infrastructural projects. The findings underscore the critical role of ethical, participative leadership and inclusive stakeholder engagement, while highlighting the detrimental impact of political interference.

Through its findings, the study aims to inform policymakers, educational practitioners, and researchers on the strategies that can be adopted to enhance project implementation, ultimately improving educational infrastructure in similar contexts across Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical framework

Public Value Theory

The Public Value Theory (Moore, 1995), asserts that public institutions should not merely deliver mandated services, but must actively generate value that is reflective of citizens' collective interests. In the education sector, this perspective recasts school leaders and governance bodies, such as School Development Committees (SDCs) as public stewards, obliging them to be responsible for aligning administrative decisions with community values, local developmental priorities and the country's national educational goals. In the Zimbabwean context, where education is constitutionally recognised as a right, this normative duty becomes even more pressing. School heads are thus expected to uphold the principles of transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness in resource allocation and infrastructure development (Medford & Brown, 2022; Msila, 2024).

Agency Theory

The Agency Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Jensen, 1986) conceptualises the relationship between principals (in this case, community representatives or government authorities) and agents (school administrators) in the delegation of authority. This theory addresses the central problem of the misalignment of interests between the agent and the principal, often requiring monitoring mechanisms and incentive structures to ensure compliance good governance protocols. In Zimbabwean rural schools, SDCs serve as community-based principals that expect school administrators to execute development projects on their behalf. However, the possibility of agency problems, such as misappropriation of funds, lack of transparency, and lack of accountability, threaten project implementation. This theory justifies the inclusion of governance mechanisms, such as audits, reporting structures, and community involvement, in aligning stakeholders' interests and reducing opportunistic behaviours. As such, the study applies the Agency Theory to investigate how leadership's conduct, ethical practices and governance structures affect trust and cooperation in school development activities.

Systems Theory

The Systems Theory (Rothenberg, 2022) complements the Agency Theory by recognising schools as open systems embedded in larger socio-political, economic, and cultural environments. Effective project implementation requires leaders who rationalise systematically, identifying interdependencies among resources, actors, and policies. A systems-thinking school head perceives school development projects not as isolated tasks but as components of a broader educational mission. The issue of capacity becomes critical in rural districts like Buhera in Zimbabwe, where economic constraints, donor conditions, and local expectations constantly interact. As Talley and Hull (2023) argue, leadership that is rooted in systems thinking is better equipped to adapt and innovate amidst the complexities.

Stakeholder Theory

Finally, the Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984; Parmar et al., 2010) expands the notion of accountability by recognising the diverse interest that must be considered in organisational decision-making. In the context of school development, stakeholders include not only the government and teachers, but also parents, local communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and students as well. The theory argues for inclusive decision-making and mutual engagement to foster sustainable outcomes. However, studies have revealed that engagement in many schools remains tokenistic, especially when SDCs lack the training or authority to challenge the dominant actors such as school administrators (Msila, 2024; Mugambi, 2013). Effective school leaders must therefore cultivate inclusive cultures that transcend compliance with Public Finance Management Act in Zimbabwe, enabling stakeholders to co-create value, resolve conflicts and maintain project momentum. Applied to this study, the theory explains the extent to which stakeholder involvement, through consultations, participatory budgeting, or project monitoring, either enhances or hinders school-based infrastructural development in rural Zimbabwe. The theory also elucidates conflicts arising from unbalanced power dynamics or lack of representation in the school governance system.

Together, these theories offer a robust framework for examining how leadership, governance, and engagement shape project implementation in resource-constrained educational environments. The Public Value Theory provides the purpose; the Systems Theory explains the complexity; the Agency Theory diagnoses governance risk; and the Stakeholder Theory offers participatory remedies. This integrated perspective is essential for understanding, and improving, educational leadership practices in countries in the Global South.

Hypotheses development

Stakeholder involvement and project implementation

Multiple studies have emphasised that stakeholder involvement enhances project ownership and success, promoting transparency and community support, which are critical for timely and sustainable project implementation (Kamau & Muturi, 2015; Kariithi & Mbugua, 2018; Okoth, 2014). However, the involvement of tokenism often leads to weak support and project failure (Mugambi, 2013). Hypotheses steering this study are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Stakeholder involvement significantly influences the implementation of new projects in primary schools.

Leadership styles and project implementation

Leadership significantly influences the success of school project through mobilising resources and coordinating stakeholders. Transformational and democratic leadership styles promote innovation, participation, and better project outcomes (Dartey-Baah et al., 2025; Kaguri et al., 2014; Musara & Razafiarivony, 2024; Raziq et al., 2025). However, in developing countries such as Zimbabwe, many school leaders lack proper training in financial and project management because promotions are often based on teaching-related performance rather than leadership skills, thus limiting their effectiveness as project implementers, managers and monitors (Medford & Brown, 2022; Muzenda, 2016; Msila, 2024).

Hypothesis 2: Leadership styles significantly influence implementation of new projects in public primary schools.

Political interference and project implementation

Political contexts play a critical role in shaping education systems by influencing policy decisions, resource distribution and reform outcomes (Levy, 2022). However, these political dynamics have empirically been shown to hinder educational project execution, as politicians often prioritise personal or political gain over community needs (Cameron et al., 2018; Keefer & Khemani, 2009). In Zimbabwe, the politicisation of school development committees (SDCs) undermines school leaders' professionalism, as political actors impose projects that are misaligned with community needs.

Hypothesis 3: Political interference significantly and negatively influences implementation of new projects in public primary schools.

METHODS

Research approach

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach, utilising insights from a pragmatist worldview. An explanatory research design was adopted and that made use of quantitative and qualitative primary data.

Sampling technique and size

Buhera district has 143 public primary schools drawn from 4 electoral constituents (Buhera South, Buhera North, Buhera Central and Buhera West). A purposive sample of 10 schools was selected from all the electoral constituents, targeting 118 respondents. Of these, 103 completed and returned their questionnaires, resulting in a strong response rate of 87.3%. The quantitative data were drawn from 80 teachers and 23 School Development Committee (SDC) members. To compliment this, qualitative insights were obtained through 10 in-depth interviews with school administrators—one from each sampled school. This approach allowed for a comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of the challenges affecting project implementation in rural schools.

The sample size of 103 participants, drawn from all electoral constituents in Buhera District, is methodological sound and well-justified. Specifically, three primary schools were selected from Buhera South and three from Buhera North, while Buhera Central and West each contributed two schools, ensuring proportional and representative coverage across the district. The study achieved a high response rate of 87.3% from the targeted 118 respondents, enhancing the reliability and credibility of the data collected. Importantly, the sample includes key stakeholders—teachers, SDC members, and school administrators—who are directly involved in or affected by project implementation, ensuring relevance and depth in the responses. Moreover, the inclusion of schools from geographically and socio-economically varied rural settings allowed for the capture of a wide range of implementation challenges and governance dynamics. Last but not least, the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods enhances the richness of the data, making the sample size adequate for capturing meaningful insights while maintaining analytical rigour.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

In order to effectively analyse the quantitative data, the following basic regression model was estimated;

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_n + \varepsilon_t$; where Y is the dependent variable, Xn is a vector of independent variables, and ε is the error term.

Variable construction procedures

Main dependent variable: Project implementation (PI)

Project Implementation (PI) was the main dependent variable in the study. To operationalise this variable, participants were asked to estimate the total amount of funds invested in new infrastructural projects over the past five years at their respective schools. To normalise the data and address potential skewness due to large variations in investment amounts, the natural logarithm of the estimated monetary value was computed. This transformation ensured comparability across responses and enhanced the robustness of subsequent statistical analyses.

Independent variables: Challenges faced in implementing new projects

To assess the challenges faced by school administrators in implementing new projects, the following steps were followed.

1. Response compilation: participants rated items on a 1-5 Likert Scale (1= strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

2. Scoring: An average score was computed for each main variable per participant (stakeholder involvement (**SI**), political interference (**Pol_I**), leadership styles (**LS**), and availability of funds (**FA**)).

3. Pre-test and coding: A pre-test using 30 questionnaires ensured accuracy in coding and identification of any issues. Inter-coder reliability exceeded 90%, aligning with prior research.

4. Data normalisation: The final step involved computing the natural logarithm of the variables to normalise the data for statistical analysis.

Reliability and validity tests for data collected from the questionnaire

To ensure the credibility of the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire, reliability tests were conducted using Cronbach's Alpha. This statistical measure assesses the internal consistency of the items within each construct, ensuring that they reliably capture the intended dimensions. In this study, all the key constructs—such as leadership styles, stakeholder involvement, and project implementation—recorded Cronbach's Alpha values above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable to high reliability. This confirms that the questionnaires used were consistent in measuring each construct and that the data collected is dependable for further statistical analysis.

Qualitative data

The study used Bingham's (2023) five-phase cycle for qualitative data analysis: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. Nvivo Software was used to facilitate efficient coding, organisation, and synthesis of textual data. A deductive coding approach was adopted, with some nodes predefined on the basis of the study's framework. Despite a slow start due to lengthy interviews, the process became more consistent and refined over time. Nvivo improved the speed and clarity of the analysis, allowing the researcher to confidently code and reorganise data into meaningful categories that aligned with the study's conceptual framework.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND ANALYSES

Demographic profile of questionnaire respondents

The study collected quantitative data from two key stakeholder groups: teachers and SDC members, using two tailored questionnaires. Completed questionnaires were received from 40 male teachers (100% response rate) and 40 female teachers (80% response rate). All 23 targeted SDC members also returned their questionnaires, yielding a 100% response rate for that group.

In terms of age distribution, the majority of participants (52%) fell within the 41-50 years age bracket, while 20% were above 51 years. Gender-wise, 60 respondents were male (58%) and 43 were female (42%). This demographic mix provided a balanced and representative sample for understanding project implementation challenges in primary schools across Buhera District.

Descriptive statistics from the opinions of participants

Table I indicates that the sampled schools invested approximately $33,359.09 (10^4.52) in the implementation of new project over the past five years, and this was based on the participants' responses. Using a Likert Scale from 1 to 5 (where 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), the mean scores for stakeholder involvement, leadership styles and political interference are 0.61, 0.52 and 0.57 respectively. The standard deviations for all the variables are less than 1.96, suggesting that the variables are normally distributed around their means.

Table I: Results of Descriptive Statistics of the Key Variables

Variable	**obs**	**mean**	**Std. dev.**
PI	103	4.52	0.10
SI	103	0.61	0.15
LS	103	0.52	0.11
Pol_I	103	0.57	0.08
FA	103	0.61	0.07

Note: the variables are well defined in the appendix section

Correlation Matrix

Table II presents the Pearson correlation coefficients for the variables used to examine the challenges faced in the implementation of new projects, specifically the influence of stakeholder involvement, political interference and leadership styles on the implementation of new project. A multicollinearity test was conducted, and the results indicate that the independent variables are not highly correlated, as all the correlation coefficients are below 0.8 threshold commonly used to detect multicollinearity (Gujarati, 2003).

Table II: Multicollinearity Results

	PI	SI	LS	Pol_I	FA
PI	1.000				
SI	0.073	1.000			
LS	0.302	0.468	1.000		
Pol_I	(0.185)	0.008	0.004	1.000	
FA	0.125	0.422	0.347	0.119	1.000

Heteroscedasticity Results

The Breusch-Pagan or Cook-Weisberg test for heteroscedasticity was done. The results indicate the presence of heteroskedasticity (chi2 (1) = 4.35; Prob > chi2 = 0.0371. In this case, the null hypothesis of constant variance

was rejected, and it was possible to proceed with Heteroskedastic linear regression with robust standard errors in Stata Version 17.

Ramsey Reset Test

The Ramsey Reset Test for omitted variables was done. The results indicate no problem of omitted variables (F (3, 96) = 1.81; Prob > F = 0.1510).

Regression Results

Table III: Main regression results showing factors influencing project implementation

Independent variables	Coefficients	Std. errors	z-statistic	p-value
LS	0.3020	0.1194	2.53	0.011
Pol_I	-0.2150	0.0760	2.53	0.005
SI	-0.0545	0.0878	-0.62	0.535
Cons	4.5212	0.0556	81.40	0.000
lnsigma2 cons	-4.8123	0.1549	-31.07	0.000

Table Notes: This table presents the results of the Heteroskedastic Linear Regression estimating factors influencing project implementation. The dependent variable is project implementation (PI). The model is estimated using the Heteroskedastic Linear Regression to correct heteroskedasticity. The number of observations is 103. The model fit statistics are Wald chi2 (3) = 13.10 and Prob > chi2 = 0.004, suggesting that the model is statistically significant and correctly specified.

Leadership styles and project implementation

In Table III, a statistically significant positive effect of good leadership style of school manager on project implementation was reported (coefficient= 0.3020; p- value = 0.011), suggesting that effective leadership, particularly inclusive and participatory leadership styles, leads to better outcomes in school development initiatives. This effect is economically significant as shown in the following analysis. A 33.2% increase in project implementation per one standard deviation improvement in leadership is both practically and economically meaningful. It shows that leadership is not just a symbolic factor but a measurable driver of project performance. School heads with strong leadership capabilities can mobilise support, more efficiently coordinate resources, and sustain stakeholder motivation throughout the project lifecycle.

Stakeholder involvement and project implementation

Results in Table III reveal that a statistically insignificant negative relationship exists between stakeholder involvement and project implementation (coefficient = -0.0545; p-value = 0.535), which implies that stakeholder involvement does not have a significant impact on project implementation. However, this finding contradicts prior researches that found that stakeholder involvement impacts positively on project implementation.

Political interference and project implementation

The Results in Table III indicate that political interference significantly and negatively affects project implementation in schools. The coefficient of -0.2150 with a p-value of 0.005 confirms a statistically significant relationship. Economically, the effect of political interference is also notable. Using the standard deviation of political interference (0.08), the estimated reduction in project implementation is 0.0172, which equates to 17.2% of the standard deviation of project implementation (0.10). This analysis confirms that even a modest increase in political interference leads to a measurable and meaningful decline in project success, emphasising the

importance of insulating school projects from political manipulation if project implementation outcomes are to be improved.

Additional analyses and robustness checks

Effects of the availability of funds on project implementation

To ensure the robustness of the results, an additional variable that captures availability of funds (FA) was added to the model, and the results did not change materially, as shown in Table IV below. The variables of interest maintained their signs and statistical significance, though the availability of funds (FA) did not have a statistical significance on project implementation. This finding contradicts prior findings, suggesting that the funds are diverted by school administrators from the core purposes articulated in the budgets and used for other self-motivated issues amid high levels of corruption rampant in schools.

Table IV: Regression results showing how funds availability (FA) influences project implementation

Independent variables	Coefficients	Std. errors	z-statistic	p-value
LS	0.2880	0.1180	2.44	0.015
Pol_I	-0.2260	0.7842	-2.88	0.004
SI	-0.0718	0.0939	-0.76	0.445
FA	0.1117	0.1355	0.82	0.410
Cons	4.4772	0.0722	61.97	0.000
lnsigma2 cons	-4.819	0.1495	-32.24	0.000

Table Notes: This table presents the results of the Heteroskedastic Linear Regression estimating factors influencing project implementation. The dependent variable is project implementation (PI). The model is estimated using Heteroskedastic Linear Regression to correct heteroskedasticity. The number of observations is 103. The model fit statistics are Wald chi2 (3) = 13.85 and Prob > chi2 = 0.0078, suggesting that the model is statistically significant and correctly specified.

Examining schools' capacity to implement new projects through fundraising

This section examines how leadership styles, political interference and stakeholder involvement influence schools' ability to raise the funds needed to finance capital projects. To assess this relationship, a regression model was estimated with availability of funds as the dependent variable. Before estimating the equation, the model for heteroskedasticity was tested, and it was found that heteroskedasticity was a problem. To obviate the problem, the Heteroskedastic Linear Regression model was ran in Stata with robust standard errors to correct standard errors for the heteroskedasticity problem. Table V presents the results.

Table V: Regression results showing factors influencing the capacity of schools to raise funds

Independent variables	coefficients	Std. errors	z-statistic	p-value
LS	0.1254	0.0540	2.32	0.020
Pol_I	0.0992	0.0613	1.62	0.106
SI	0.1547	0.0543	2.85	0.004

Cons	0.3983	0.0623	6.40	0.000
lnsigma2 cons	-5.5156	0.1602	-34.44	0.000

Table Notes: The table presents factors that influence fees collection. The dependent variable is funds availability (FA). The model is estimated using Heteroskedastic Linear Regression. The number of observations is 103. The Wald chi2 (3) = 13.10 and Prob > chi2 = 0.0044, suggesting that the model is correctly specified.

Leadership styles and the capacity of schools to raise funds

First, a positive relation exists between leadership styles (LS) and funds availability (FA) (coefficient = 0.1254; p-value = 0.020), which implies that school administrators' leadership styles positively influence fees payment in the selected schools. This is a key finding, as it indicates that leaders who exhibit good leadership skills are also good at influencing parents to pay school fees for the learners.

Stakeholder involvement and the capacity of schools to raise funds

Additionally, a statistically significant positive relationship existed between stakeholder involvement and funds availability, which indicates that involving stakeholders is a key issue in enhancing payment of fees. This result resonates well with the idea that good leadership styles enhance stakeholder involvement in key issues such as budgeting and implementation of new school projects.

Political interference and the capacity of schools to raise funds

However, political interference was found to insignificantly influence the availability of funds, according to the opinions of the participants indicating the insignificant effect of political interference on the availability of funds (coefficient = 0.0991; p-value = 0.106)

Effects of interacting leadership styles with stakeholder involvement on fundraising capacity

These results are robust after interacting leadership styles and stakeholder involvement as shown in Table VI below. The coefficient of the interacted term (SI*LS) becomes stronger, indicating that effective leadership amplifies the positive impact of stakeholder involvement on the availability of funds. This finding reinforces the idea that school leaders who actively engage stakeholders and foster inclusive decision-making processes can significantly improve financial support for school projects, particularly through enhanced payment of fees by parents and the community.

However, though not significant, political interference had a negative relationship with the availability of funds in schools, which adds more insights into the negative role that politics play in the collection of schools.

Table VI: Regression results showing the combined effect of stakeholder involvement and leadership styles on funds availability

Independent variables	Coefficients	Std. errors	z-statistic	p-value
SI*LS	0.3930	0.1021	3.85	0.000
Pol_I	-0.1016	0.0634	-1.60	0.106
Cons	0.5563	0.0385	14.45	0.000
lnsigma2 cons	-5.4097	0.1707	-31.68	0.000

Table Notes: The table presents combined effect of stakeholder involvement and leadership styles on fees collection. The dependent variable is Log funds. The model is estimated using the Heteroskedastic Linear

Regression. The number of observations is 103. The Wald chi2 (3) = 13.10 and Prob > chi2 = 0.0044, suggesting that the model is correctly specified.

Relationship between stakeholder involvement and project evaluation methods

To further test the robustness of the findings, the study examined the relationship between stakeholder involvement and the methods used to evaluate projects. Existing literature suggests that stakeholder engagement tends to be stronger when proposed projects are perceived to yield tangible benefits to the community. To explore this issue further, a scatter plot was used to visually assess this relationship.

Figure 1 presents the scatter plot [the] results, indicating a positive relationship between stakeholder involvement and project evaluation methods. This means that effective or transparent evaluation methods result in higher stakeholder participation, especially during budgeting phases. This result provides an important insight into relationship between stakeholder involvement and project evaluation methods, as stakeholders are more willing to support and finance school projects that they view as beneficial to the wider community. Thus, school administrators who use clear, inclusive evaluation methods are likely to receive greater support in project implementation.

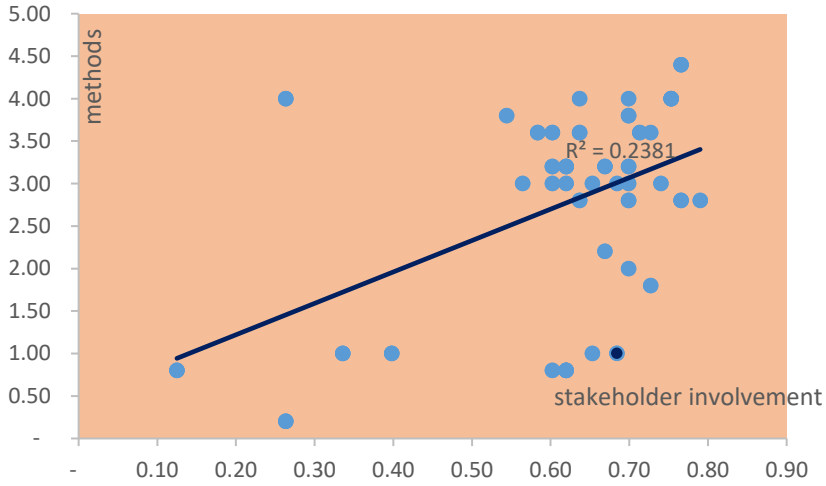

Figure 1: Scatter plot showing relationship between stakeholder involvement and methods used in evaluation projects

Interview Results

Ten interview sessions were carried out on a one-on-one basis with heads and deputy heads of the sampled schools in Buhera District in Zimbabwe. The interview sessions varied in length and raged between 30 and 60 minutes. The findings from the collected interview data were analysed using latent thematic analysis to give deeper insights into the challenges faced by school administrators in implementing new projects in Buhera District. The main themes were first derived from the study's main research question. Further, subthemes were developed after the researcher had repeatedly skimmed through the interview transcripts. An analysis of the interview data was done using coding queries of the coded interview data.

Leadership styles

From the interviews, it was noted that another theme that affected implementation of new projects was the school head's charisma and how ethical he conducted himself or herself. A participant had this to say:

"When parents do not have trust in you, they don't pay fees. For instance, if the leader at one-point misappropriated funds, parents do not pay fees. So, as a leader, you should get enough autonomy and support from key stakeholders; however, these issues can only be attained if they have trust in your leadership qualities" (Participant 1).

Stakeholder involvement

Stakeholder involvement also emerged from the interviews as a key theme and a factor influencing the implementation of school projects. A participant opined:

"Raising funds is possible if the school is able to engage the local community. It follows that, for establishment, there is need for consultation with local leadership and teachers" (Participant 10).

Another participant intimated

"Inclusivity enables us to implement new projects; we discuss our ideas on new projects with all stakeholders and when the stakeholders believe that the projects benefit them either directly or indirectly, they are supportive of our ideas through payment of levies. For example, in 2018, we wanted to construct an ECD block and we then presented our idea to the community, and introduced an ECD levy fund to finance the building of the block; and the parents were so supportive of the initiative. Most of the parents honoured their pledge" (Participant 2).

Political interference

Political interference was a prevalent theme among the interviewed school administrators. The political problems experienced in Zimbabwe negatively affected the implementation of new projects. The following extracts from the interview transcripts provide evidence attesting to the fact that political factors had been a major challenge faced by school administrators in the implementation of new projects. One participant reported:

"The politics of the country negatively affects the implementation of school projects. The macro-economic and political environment affects the payment of fees. Since parents are the school's main stakeholders, they may no longer have the capacity to raise funds at the expected time and this delays payment of fees because of the prevailing political environment. Parents are failing to look for food to feed their families and, in this regard, it looks impossible for them to pay fees when they don't have the money to buy food" (Participant 9).

To this end, the political and economic challenges that were experienced in Zimbabwe negatively impacted implementation of new projects in primary schools, as illustrated by the interview data cited above.

Government policies

Another prevalent theme among the interviewed school administrators was government policies. Interview data reveals that government policies negatively affected implementation of new projects in schools. A participant professed:

"Government policies sometimes conflict with the expectations of local stakeholders. For example, when you want to construct a classroom block, you have to apply for it to the Permanent Secretary; however, you have to apply through the district and then provincial office. The construction of the classroom block may take longer than planned since the application procedure is too bureaucratic" (Participant 3).

One other participant indicated:

"Government policy is our major problem, as it hinders our effort in terms of collecting fees. We are not allowed to send children home to collect fees. More so, government defers payment of fees for children under BEAM. Taken together, these policies hinder our effort to implement new projects" (Participant 5).

The above evidence from the interviews highlights how government policies negatively impacts on implementation of new projects.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of this study provide compelling insights into the multifaceted challenges that school administrators

in rural Zimbabwe face in implementing new projects. Each of the key constructs, leadership styles, stakeholder involvement, and political interference, has produced findings with both empirical and contextual relevance.

Leadership styles and project implementation

The statistically significant positive relationship between leadership styles and project implementation affirms the critical role of school heads as transformational leaders and project managers. In the Zimbabwean context, where school heads often operate with limited training in financial and project management (Muzenda, 2016), effective leadership becomes a proxy for institutional trust and strategic direction. As revealed in the qualitative interviews, communities respond more positively when school leaders are perceived as ethical, transparent, and inclusive. This aligns with Msila's (2024) view that change in education depends largely on what school leaders do and believe in.

In rural districts, such as Buhera, which are marked by economic precarity and high dependency on parental levies, a school head's motivational, communication, and consultation abilities become essential. Thus, improving leadership capacity, through pre-appointment training or continuous professional development, may directly contribute to the success of project outcomes.

Stakeholder involvement and project implementation

Contrary to theoretical expectations, stakeholder involvement showed an insignificant negative effect on project implementation. While this finding contradicts previous research findings (Algahtani, 2014; Kariithi & Mbugua, 2018), it may highlight the tokenistic or procedural nature of stakeholder engagement in Zimbabwean schools (Mugambi, 2013). Often, stakeholders are invited to meetings but excluded from meaningful decision-making, leading to disengagement and disillusionment.

Moreover, structural factors such as low financial literacy levels, economic constraints, and lack of training among SDC members may render their participation less effective. The interaction effects (LS*SI), however suggest that when good leadership is present, stakeholder involvement becomes more meaningful, contributing to increased fundraising and support.

These results advocate for capacity-building among stakeholders and clearer role definitions, especially for SDCs, which legally oversee development projects but often lack the technical know-how in terms of implementation.

Political interference and project implementation

The finding that political interference significantly and negatively affects project implementation is both statistically and contextually revealing. In Zimbabwe, where educational governance often intersects with political interests, school projects are vulnerable to hijacking for political agendas, especially during election cycles. Politicians may impose projects for the sake of their visibility, overriding community priorities, or disrupting budget allocations. This corroborates earlier findings by Cameron, Hoadley and Naidoo (2018), who noted that political interference often leads to resource misallocation and poor project continuity. In Buhera District, interviewees highlighted how political actors occasionally blocked or delayed projects, creating uncertainty among parents and undermining trust in school management.

Additional analyses reveal that political interference insignificantly influenced the schools' fundraising capacity, suggesting that its impact is more procedural and operational than financial. Interestingly, such evidence indicates that political interference in public institutions—particularly schools—should not be viewed as an isolated or incidental issue but rather as a systemic risk that undermines governance structures, accountability, and institutional effectiveness over time. This interference is deeply embedded in the political economy of many developing contexts, including Zimbabwe, where political actors often exert control over school governance structures, resource allocation, and leadership appointments.

From a systemic perspective, political interference distorts institutional incentives and decision-making processes. It creates a parallel authority structure where allegiance to political patrons can supersede professional

competence and accountability to stakeholders. For instance, politically aligned school administrators may be shielded from consequences despite misappropriation of funds or project failure. This entrenches impunity and weakens internal controls, resulting in long-term inefficiencies and corruption.

Furthermore, when political considerations drive the selection of school development projects, priorities may shift away from community needs toward iniatives that offer political mileage or patronage benefits. This not only erodes trust among local stakeholders but also fragments collective action needed for successful project implementation.

Theoretical frameworks like institutional theory and political economy analysis underscore that such interference is not accidental. It reflects power dynamics, vested interests, and instiutional weaknesses that must be structurally addressed. Therefore, mitigating political interference requires systemic reforms—such as depoliticing school governance, strengthening community voice and oversight.

Availability of funds and project implementation

The results of the study reveal the insignificant role of availability of funds on project success, signalling issues of corruption and misappropriation, which have been reported in Zimbabwe's education sector. Corruption and misappropriation of funds thus emerge as manifestations of agency problems, particularly moral hazard and adverse selection. Moral hazard arises when agents engage in risky or unethical behaviour because they do not bear the full consequences of their actions. Adverse selection occurs when individuals with corrupt intentions are placed in positions of authority due to poor vetting processes. In both cases, the lack of transparency and enforcement exacerbates agency loss, undermining project implementation and institutional trust. This underscores the reality that even when funds are allocated, poor governance and lack of transparency can still derail infrastructural projects. Hence, improving financial accountability and strengthening school financial management systems are critical steps moving forward. As such, agency theory, not only diagnoses the root causes of corruption but also informs governance reforms that can mitigate such risks in public financial management.

Qualitative insights: Trust, communication and participation

Interview data further reinforced the quantitative results. A recurring theme was trust, not just in leadership, but also in the transparency of the project processes. Where trust was absent, levy payments dropped, community participation waned and, ultimately, projects stalled. Effective communication and clarity in budget usage were seen as the most vital enablers of support.

The respondents also underscored the importance of inclusivity and local consultation, particularly when introducing new levies or initiating large infrastructural projects. These practices helped in securing community buy-in, even in financially strained settings.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

1. Geographical scope: Findings may not be generalised to all districts in Zimbabwe due to unique political, social-economic and geographical dynamics in Buhera. As such, the study recommends future studies to consider other districts.

2. Sample size: although a high response rate was achieved, the sample size of 103 participants for quantitative data remains relatively small, especially for capturing diversity of stakeholder views and school contexts.

3. The use of purposive sampling may introduce selection bias, as only schools perceived as relevant or accessible were chosen, potentially excluding outlier cases.

4. Cross-sectional design: data was collected at a single point in time, limiting the ability to observe changes or trends in project implementation and stakeholder dynamics over time.

5. Self-reporting bias: questionnaire responses may be influenced by social desirability or fear of reprisal, especially when discussing sensitive issues like corruption or mismanagement.

6. Limited stakeholder categories: the study focused mainly on teachers, SDC members, and administrators. It did not include other potentially influential stakeholders such as district education officers, parents at large, or local councillors.

7. Limited financial data: the study inferred misappropriation from perceptions rather than accessing or auditing actual financial records, which limits the strength of conclusions on corruption.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that leadership styles pose the key challenges that are being faced in the implementation of new projects in primary schools in Buhera District. This evidence suggests that Zimbabwe's political and economic environment creates a breeding ground for corrupt activities, with unethical leaders taking it as a prime time for them to further their personal interests. This finding supports the Agency Theory. More so, the study found that when stakeholders have faith and trust in school leaders, they are ready to pay fees and support infrastructural projects; and along this line of thought, stakeholders have an affinity for those projects that will add economic and social benefits to the communities in which they live, which is consistent with the principles of the Public Value Theory.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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