School learning improvement plans: An Unggai Bena case study

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Abstract

This research study explored the implementation of School Learning Improvement Plans (SLIP) in one of the highlands districts of Papua New Guinea. A SLIP provides an implementation framework for promoting excellence in student learning and school performance. The rationale for the study was to identify strengths and weaknesses from the viewpoints of people involved in SLIPS at the school level. Using mixed methods, data were obtained from selected primary school head teachers, senior teachers and assistant teachers. The study found that SLIPS were a highly effective strategy to get collaboration among stakeholders to plan for school improvement. Benefits to schools were seen to be provision of teaching and learning materials, focus on improved student learning, professional development for staff, infrastructure maintenance, good parent and community support and financial reporting. Responses varied in regard to the extent to which strategies were effective. Effective leadership was seen to be the key to success.

Key words: school learning improvement plan (SLIP), leadership, head teachers, senior teachers, tuition fee free education subsidy, quality education

Introduction

This study explored the implementation of School Learning Improvement Plans (SLIPs) at the primary school level in the Unggai Bena District of Papua New Guinea (PNG). In particular, the study sought views on leadership for successful development and implementation. SLIP is the acronym for School Learning Improvement Plans, which provide the implementation framework for promoting excellence in student learning and school performance. The intended outcome of a SLIP is improved student performance resulting from improved classroom practices, school management and resource allocation.

Each SLIP has vision and mission statements. Teachers, students, parents, community members and other stakeholders contribute to the development of school SLIPs thereby gaining a sense of ownership and accountability. SLIPs are structured as three-year plans with a limited number of achievable targets and clear and measurable outcomes. Annual plans are prepared indicating what will be done and by whom; when it will be done; what resources (human and fiscal) will be needed; and how success will be judged. Six focus areas for SLIPs are student learning, staff professional development, infrastructure

development, school management and administration, school governance and community relations, and budget allocation to support a SLIP.

Integral to SLIP implementation are internal and external school reviews. The internal review appears in a school's annual report that describes achievements against targets. External school reviews are done at three-year intervals and involve teams that include standards officers and peer head teachers. Internal and external reviews are critical elements of the SLIP process to assess and assure quality in education across PNG.

Literature review

It is important for the school community to take ownership of SLIPs so that it becomes school culture and provides norms for school practices. Each school sets its own priorities for students' learning, teacher professional development, students' welfare, physical development, management, community relations and budgeting (Kants & Rema, 2011). As Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan and Hopkins (1998) argue, actions required to bring about educational change usually exceed people's understanding of how to do so effectively.

Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinback (1999) described twenty leadership concepts under six broad categories of approaches to school leadership. These include instructional, transactional, transformational, moral, participative, managerial and contingent leadership. It is the author's view that SLIP leaders must be transformational leaders to be the agents or facilitators of change and who influence other teachers and school communities to implement a SLIP successfully. Leaders share the SLIP vision with other staff members and students and work collaboratively to achieve quality education. Fullan (2001) contends that leaders may increase their effectiveness if they pursue moral purpose, understand the change process, develop relationships, foster knowledge building, and strive for coherence with energy, enthusiasm, and hopefulness. If leaders do so, the rewards and benefits will be enormous.

> …..."conceiving, believing, and knowing what you are achieving can overcome the force of gravity and allow you as a leader to break through the three critical brain barriers and redraw the maps in people's heads to create lasting change" (Fullan, 2003).

The key to the successful implementation of the SLIP is the quality of the school leadership and the level of cooperation that they can build up from the school community to support its implementation. As described by Hesselbein and Paul (1999), if school organisations are to expand and provide some genuine services to people then leadership is the guardian of vision. Many may see head teachers as holding power to lead change, but as Moller and Pankake (2000) explain, they may have less power than is thought and they need to exercise their power cautiously and conservatively. Furthermore, Foskett and Lumby (2003) found that in the Marshall Islands, lack of resources and training were seen by teachers as more significant barriers to achieving effectiveness in bringing about the desired changes at the school level than the leadership

provided by head teachers. Chapman and Adams (1998) suggest that leadership may make a difference in the efforts of improving educational provisions, but if it does not, the cause may lie with the leadership of individuals.

Design of the study

The study involved the theoretical perspective of phenomenology. Data was collected using a mixed methods approach which generated quantitative and qualitative data through use of a questionnaire and interview. The primary research question was: *How effective is SLIP leadership provided by head teachers and supervisors to impact on student learning at primary schools in the Unggai Bena District?* In addition, sub-questions examined the impact on students' learning at schools as a result of effective leadership practices and explored the implications of implementing SLIP for head teachers and supervisors.

The Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee at Divine Word University granted ethical approval before the study commenced. Permission to conduct the research in the school was given by the Education Director for the Division of Education in the Eastern Highlands Province. Head teachers from selected schools gave permission to approach teachers in schools. Only those participants who signed the consent forms took part in this study. The questionnaire was pilot tested as soon as ethical clearance was granted.

The quantitative and qualitative data collected in this mixed method study included questionnaires, interviews, field notes from observations, and a wide variety of SLIP records such as internal reviews done by school and external reviews done by external assessors. The use of multiple methods of data collection validated the data collected and facilitated triangulation. Both focus groups and individual interviews were used to collect qualitative data which complemented the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire. The approval of head teachers, supervisors and some assistant teachers in primary schools in Unggai Bena district who are currently implementing SLIP was sought to gain their permission to undertake the study.

First, the questionnaires were distributed during the first head teachers meeting at the District towards the end of February 2015 to minimize cost and administrative time. Second, selected schools were visited, data collected and interviews with some teachers conducted during the first term break around mid-March 2015, to minimize school disruptions.

Participants in the project included 23 head teachers, 17 senior teachers and 17 assistant teachers. That was a representative sample of 57 out of the total population of 215 teachers teaching in Unggai Bena district at the time. The study sample involved 29 females and 28 males. From the five commonly used non-random designs, convenient purposive sampling was used because I, as a researcher, only visited those who in my opinion were likely to have the required SLIP information and be willing to share it with me. I had preselected

my SLIP schools and participants in this research because I was able to get to them easily which was what convenient purposive sampling does.

The survey questionnaire aimed to discover head teachers, supervisors and teachers' views on effective SLIP leadership strategies provided at the school level. The two general areas on which the questionnaire focused were the general perception of SLIP implementation and the effectiveness of SLIP leadership.

Data analysis and interpretation

Sixty (60) questionnaires were distributed to the schools in the district but only 57 responses were returned and analysed. The questionnaire contained a variety of question types to capture data to inform the SLIP leadership issue at the school level. For example, there were dichotomous yes/no, rank order responses, scale responses cumulative or Guttmann scale, and filter or contingency types. Data analyses and interpretations were done on individual questions. The SPSS package and/or a related analytical instrument on the computer were used to analyse both the quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative data from open-ended questions. A brief presentation of the data and discussion is presented in the following sections.

Results

Teacher participants
Figure 1 shows percentage of participants by gender and designation. This shows more female (51%) than male (49%) participants overall in the study, but males dominating at the head-teacher level.
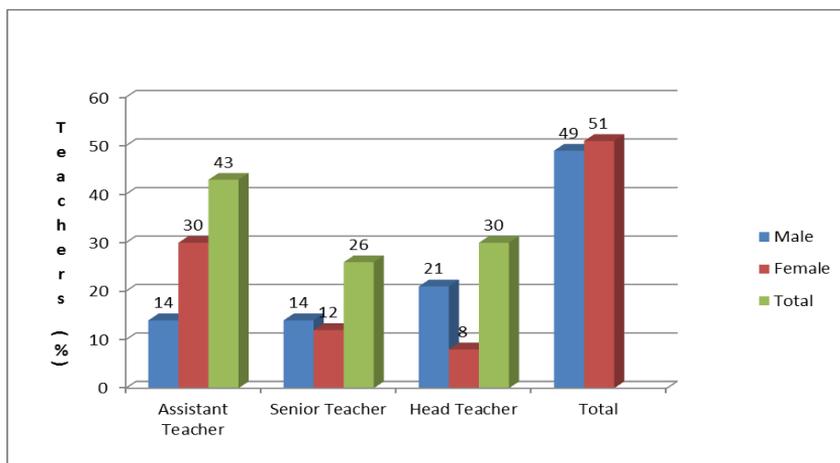

Figure 1: Participants by gender and designation

Teacher experience
Figure 2 shows years of teaching experience of male participants and Figure 3 shows years of teaching experience of female participants.
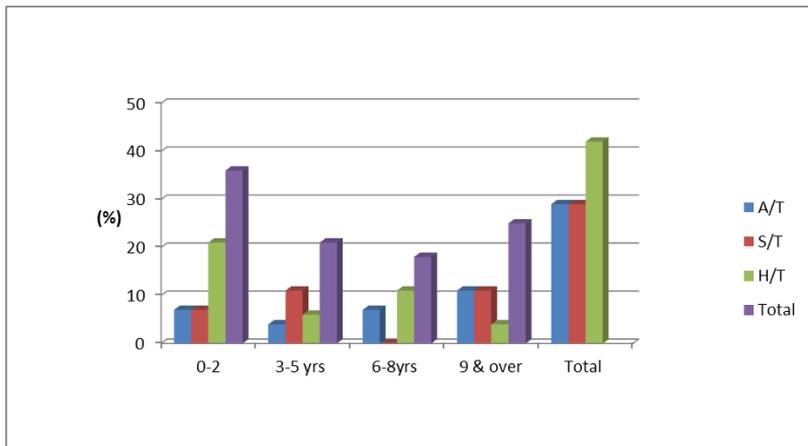
Figure 2: Male teachers' teaching experience on current level

Teachers' experience in teaching and management of the school can make a difference in the successful implementation of any program at the school level. Thirty-six per cent (36%) of male participants had teaching experience of 2 years or less. Also 21% of the male head teacher participants had less than two-years' experience as head teachers. This indicates that head teachers with little experience as managers have roles and responsibilities of leading curriculum, instructional and SLIP activities at their respective schools.

Figure 3: Female teachers' teaching experience on current level

Forty-eight per cent (48%) of the female assistant teachers have less than five years' teaching experience while only 10% have more than six years' experience. Ten percent (10%) of female senior teachers have 3-5 years teaching experience while only few have over six years teaching experience. Only 10% of the female head teachers have less than two years' experience. This shows that more female teachers in the sample have less than five years teaching experience. Generally, it was seen that female teachers with little

experience are involved in SLIP activities at the school level. The numbers of experienced female teachers who lead the SLIP implementation are much lower than that of the male teachers.

Professional support
Figure 4 shows percentage of participants who did, or did not, have SLIP training at the school level after initial implementation.
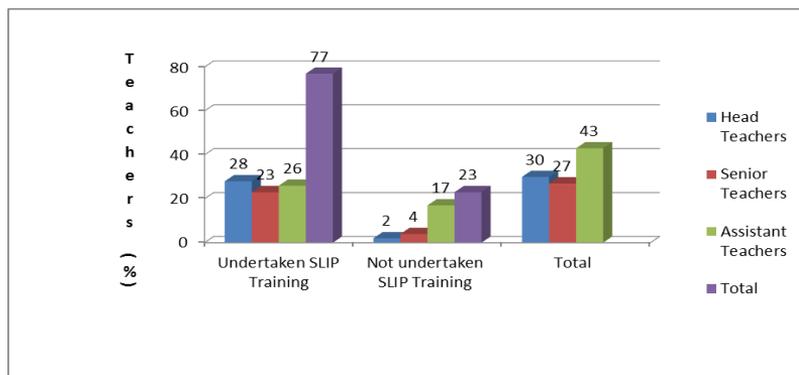

Figure 4: Teachers with SLIP training

Seventy-seven per cent (77%) of the teachers had undertaken SLIP training while only 23% had not. This data suggests that those who had not received SLIP training may be newly appointed head teachers and senior teachers, or teachers who had transferred from other provinces. AR the time of the study, SLIP had been in place for nine (9) years.

Years of involvement
Figure 5 shows the number of years in which participants had been involved in SLIP activities.

Figure 5: Teachers involvement with SLIP

Twenty-six percent (26%) of teachers have no SLIP experience and 34% have less than one year SLIP experience. This suggests that teachers were not fully involved in the implementation of SLIP at the school level. Teachers need to

understand the processes involved in SLIP in order to support it well and make it successful. Awareness provided to the teachers on how the SLIP processes work is vital for the successful implementation of the SLIP.

Understanding
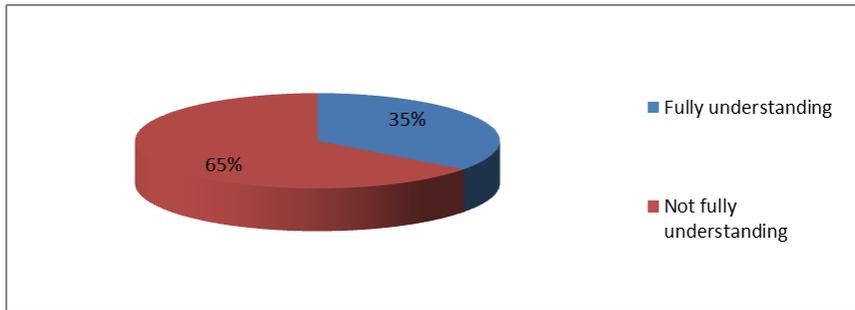Figure 6 indicates participant level of understanding of SLIP processes.

Figure 6: Level of understanding of SLIP processes

Sixty-five percent (65%) of the teachers did not understand well the processes involved in the implementation of the SLIP. This suggests that the SLIP implementation in the various schools will have varying levels of success which may be dependent on the level of understanding of the SLIP processes.

Adequate training
Figure 7 indicates participant views on the need for ongoing training during the SLIP implemrntation process.

Figure 7: Need for more SLIP training

Most of the teachers (90%) are of the view that more training should be provided on the SLIP. This suggests that the teachers are aware of their limitations and weak implementation in their school. They acknowledge their need for professional support in order to improve the SLIP implementation.

Length of training

Figure 8 indicates participants' views on the length of SLIP training required annually at district or cluster school workshops.
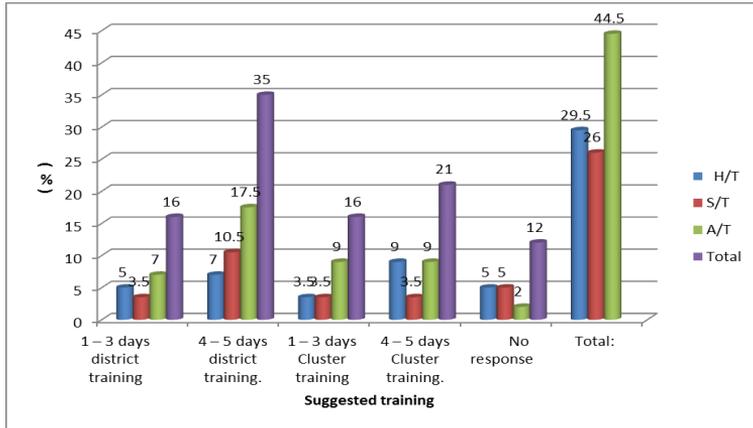

Figure 8: Length of SLIP training needed

The majority (35%) of teachers want four to five days training at the district level while the other 21% wants four to five days training at the cluster school in-service. Only 12% of teachers have indicated no responses at all. This suggests that teachers strongly want one-week SLIP training at the district level rather than at the school or cluster base in-services.

School improvement

Figure 9 indicates participants' views on the ways by which SLIPs have contributed to school improvement.

Figure 9: SLIP contribution to school improvement

The findings suggest that there are significant improvements in students' academic performance and stakeholders support, but lacking in accurate financial reports or acquittals on the use of TFFE funds.

SLIP strategies

Figure 10 shows teachers' views on SLIP strategies that may boost the morale of their staff, BOM, parents and students to become effective SLIP implementers.
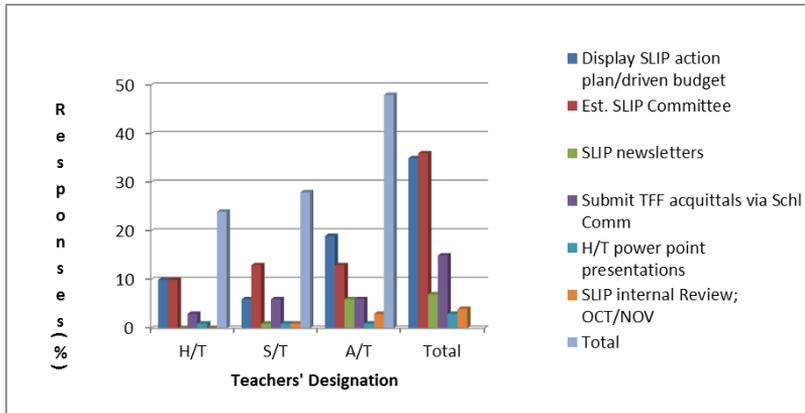

Figure 10: Preferences for SLIP strategies

Thirty-six per cent (36%) of teachers ranked the display of SLIP annual action plan and goal-driven budgets as their first choices. This suggests that all stakeholders expect schools to display annual action plan and school budgets for public viewing for transparency purposes.

SLIP committees

Figure 11 indicates participants' views on whether or not SLIP Committees were active in their schools. The result was that more participants disagreed than agreed about the effectiveness of SLIP Committee operations.
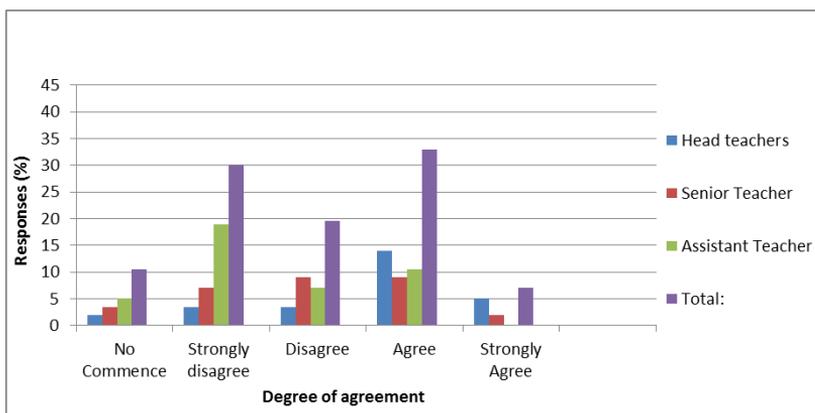

Figure 11: SLIP committees are active.

Stakeholders

Figure 12 shows participants' views on whether or not stakeholders had adequate opportunities to be involved in SLIP activities. The results show that about half the participant group agreed and half did not.
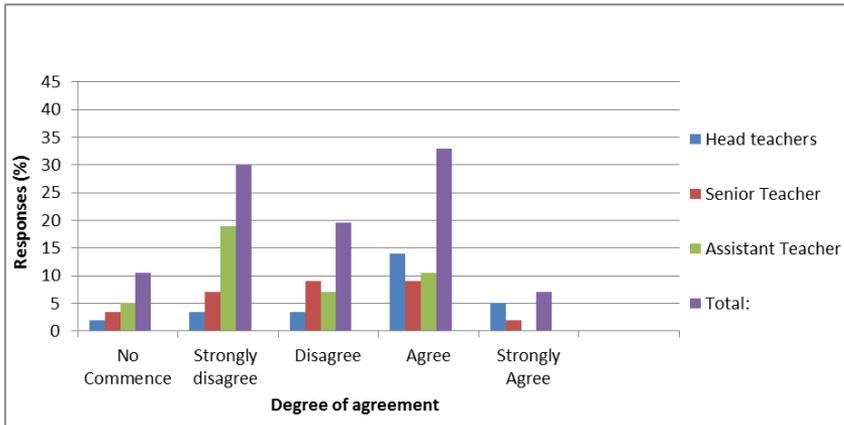

Figure 12: Stakeholders are actively involved with SLIP implementation.

TFFE Funds

Figure 13 indicates participant views on whether or not Tuition Fee-Free Education (TFFE) funds are wisely spent on SLIP activities. More participants disagreed (47%) than agreed (37%) with some (16%) not offering an opinion.
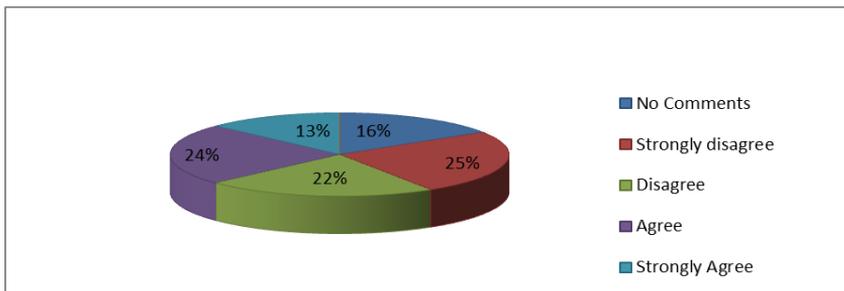

Figure 13: TFF funds wisely used for SLIP budgets

Internal reviews

Figure 14 shows participants' views on whether or not SLIP internal reviews were done annually. The result was overwhelmingly positive (96% agreement) that SLIP internal reviews occurred annually at their schools.
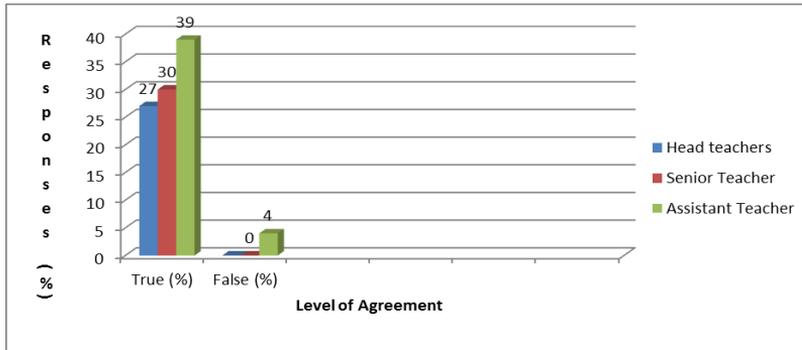
Figure 14: SLIP internal reviews done annually

SLIP execution

Figure 15 indicates participants' views on ranking of strategies for successful SLIP execution. Results are as follows:

- The Department of Education should have a policy on Tuition Fee Free funds being used for SLIP driven budgets (37%)
- Teachers, students, parents and Boards of Management members need to work collaboratively to plan, implement and review SLIPs (17%)
- Stakeholders must take ownership of SLIP activities for accountability and transparency (14%)
- Head teachers need to intensify efforts for stakeholders to be involved in SLIP activities (12%)
- Head teachers need to take a leading role in SLIP implementation (10%)
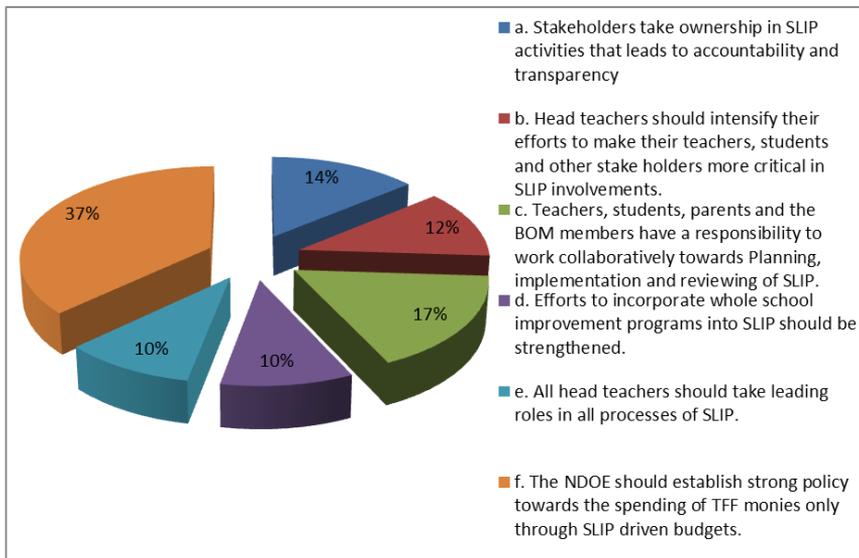- Whole school improvement plans need to be incorporated into SLIPs (10%).

Figure 15: Ranking of SLIP implementation

Staff performance

Based on individual teachers' experience in SLIPs, participants were asked their views in a simple true or false statement, on whether or not improved staff performance and outstanding students' academic achievements were a result of SLIPs in their schools. As indicated in Figure 16, fewer participants (36%) agreed than those who disagreed (64%).
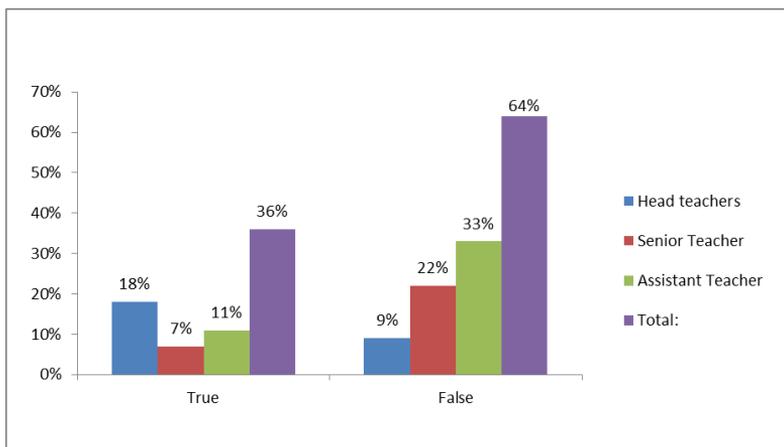

Figure 16: SLIP influences high staff and student achievements

Staff appointments

Teachers were asked their opinions, in a simple true or false statement, whether or not the system of appointing teachers was a significant factor contributing to ineffective SLIP leadership in schools. As indicated in Figure 17, the clear majority (84%) agreed.
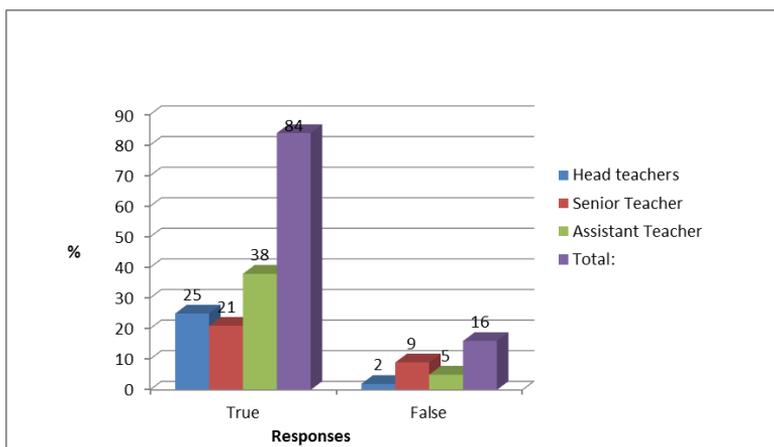

Figure 17: Poor teacher appointments and ineffective SLIP leadership

Teacher efficiency

Teachers were asked their opinions, in a true or false statement, whether or not head teachers organize teachers in an efficient manner to get the SLIP activities done. As indicated in Figure 18, the overwhelming majority (96%) agreed that head teachers utilise teachers efficiently.
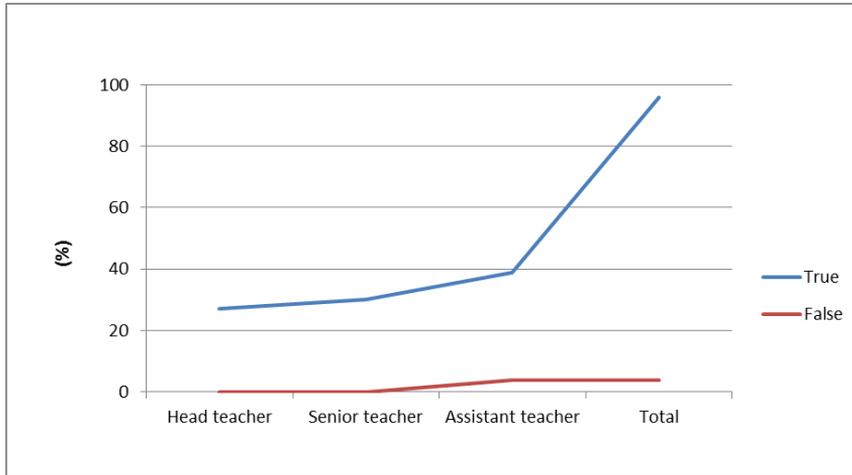

Figure 18: Head teachers need to provide efficient SLIP leadership

SLIP implementation

Teachers were asked to express their own general views on weaknesses in SLIP implementation at their school level. Results are shown in Figure 19.
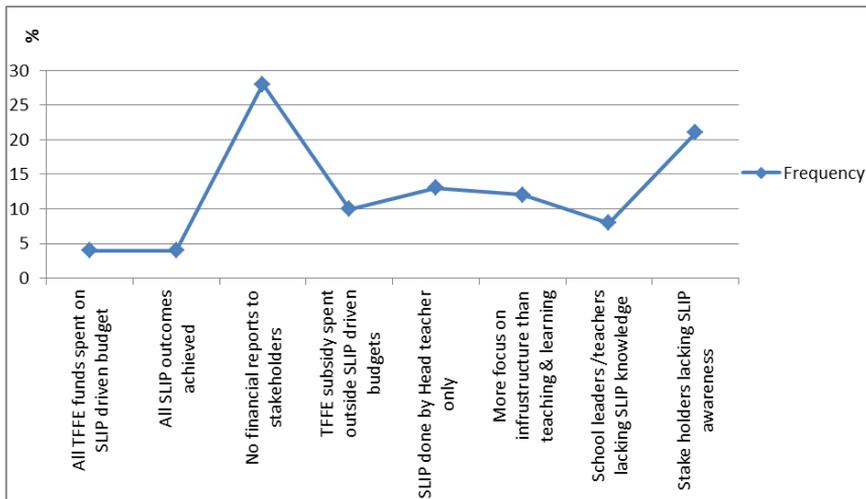

Figure 19: Weaknesses in SLIP implementation

Weaknesses in SLIP implementation were:
- financial reports were not presented to stakeholders on the use of TFFE funds at their schools (28%)
- there was inadequate awareness of SLIPs by stakeholders (21%)
- SLIPs are prepared by head teachers only (13%)
- the school administration focussed more on infrastructure needs than on teaching and learning (12%)
- TFF funds were spent outside of the SLIP driven budgets (10%)
- Teachers and school leaders have inadequate knowledge of SLIP processes (8%)
- All SLIP targets were achieved (4%)
- All TFF funds spent on SLIP driven budgets (4%).

Teacher suggestions
Teachers were asked to suggest strategies for improvements on how best school leaders can become effective SLIP leaders at their schools. These are displayed in Figure 20.
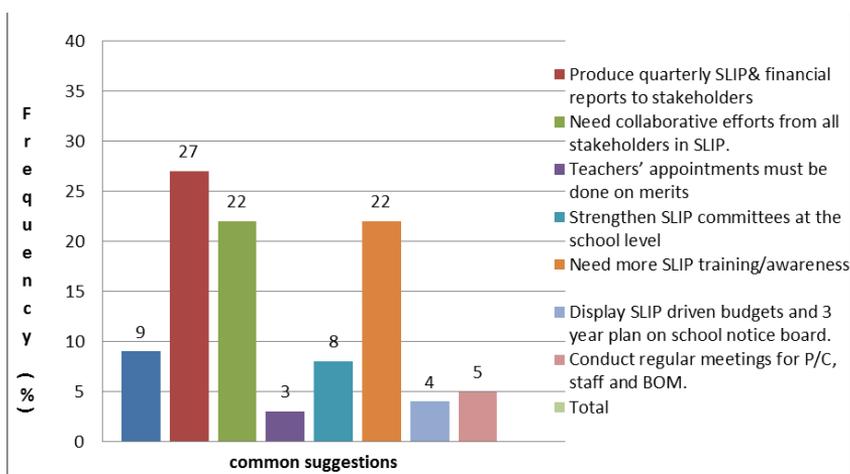

Figure 20: Suggestions for SLIP improvement

In ranked order, participant responses for successful SLIP implementation were:
- Produce quarterly SLIP and financial reports to stakeholders (27%)
- Collaborative efforts of stakeholders needed to construct SLIPS (22%)
- Adequate awareness and training SLIP intent and processes needed (22%)
- SLIP Committees must operate effectively at the school level (9%)
- The 3-year SLIP and SLIP-driven budget to be displayed on school notice boards (8%)
- Regular meetings of BOM and P&C to be conducted (5%)
- Teachers appointments to be carefully considered for SLIP leadership and done on merit (3%).

Conclusion

In answer to the main question guiding the study, it is concluded that participants' opinions varied on the effectiveness of SLIP leadership provided by head teachers and supervisors. Where teachers with limited experience are appointed to leadership positions, it is critical that they receive support and mentoring according to individual needs. It was broadly agreed that collaboration and shared responsibility should exist among stakeholders for successful implementation of a SLIP. Leadership should be seen as shared or distributive. From the findings it is concluded that attention must be given to adequate awareness of SLIP process and training for staff and other stakeholders. Plans for targets and measurable outcomes must be known to all and reported. Strengths of SLIPS were benefits to schools by the provision of teaching and learning materials, focus on improved student learning, professional development for staff, infrastructure maintenance, good parent and community support and financial reporting. While SLIPS contribute to school improvement, it was the view of most participants that multiple factors, not only SLIP, contribute to improved student learning outcomes. Some participants expressed concern that SLPIs focussed more on infrastructure than on teaching and learning matters. A perceived weakness was thought to be the use of TFF government funds for SLIP goals and financial reporting on a quarterly basis. A positive finding was that virtually all schools provided annual reports with internal school reviews of achievements against SLIP targets. The value of SLIPs as a strategy for school improvement was indisputable. The findings of this study indicate areas where improvements to leadership for successful SLIP implementation could be made.

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