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Leadership Practices of Secondary School Heads in Supporting Staff Development: Evidence from Mbeya Urban, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the leadership practices used by secondary school heads to support staff development in public secondary schools in Mbeya Urban, Tanzania. Guided by Transformational Leadership Theory and Instructional Leadership Theory, the study adopted a qualitative case study design involving eight public secondary schools. A sample of 32 participants comprising eight school heads, eight heads of departments and sixteen teachers was selected purposively. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observation and document review and were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that instructional supervision, teacher motivation, promotion of collaborative professional learning, mentoring support, resource mobilization and participatory communication constituted the dominant leadership practices through which school heads supported staff development. Instructional supervision was widely described as the most systematically implemented practice, though its developmental effectiveness depended critically on the quality and constructiveness of post-observation feedback rather than observation frequency alone. Teacher motivation through verbal recognition, delegation and emotional support was identified as the most accessible non-financial mechanism for sustaining professional engagement. Collaborative professional learning was actively encouraged through departmental interaction and peer learning, though it lacked formal scheduling or institutional protection. Mentoring of newly posted teachers existed in all schools but remained informal and dependent on individual goodwill rather than structured systems. Resource mobilization was a recognized leadership responsibility, though severely constrained by school budget limitations. Participatory communication improved teacher commitment to professional development decisions. The study concludes that leadership support for staff development in Mbeya Urban is genuine in intent but inconsistent in implementation, limited by financial constraints, competing administrative demands and absence of formal structures. It recommends protected instructional leadership time, structured feedback systems, formalized mentoring, dedicated professional development budgets and collaborative leadership training.

Keywords: Leadership practices, instructional supervision, staff development, Transformational Leadership Theory, school heads, Mbeya Urban.

1.0 Introduction

Effective school leadership is universally recognized as a critical determinant of staff professional development and, by extension, educational quality. Research consistently identifies school heads as the primary institutional agents responsible for creating conditions that enable teachers to grow professionally, adapt to curriculum changes and improve instructional effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger, 2020). In the United States and United Kingdom, school principals who engage actively in instructional supervision, provide constructive feedback, promote collaborative professional learning and motivate teachers consistently produce better instructional outcomes and higher teacher retention rates than those who remain confined to administrative management (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2019). In Finland, school heads build trust-based collaborative cultures that encourage peer learning and shared professional responsibility as primary mechanisms for staff development (Antinluoma et al., 2021). In Singapore and China, structured lesson study, peer observation and mentoring programmes supported by school leadership have produced measurable improvements in teaching quality (Tan, 2017; Li & Liu, 2019).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the relationship between school leadership and staff development is equally recognized but frequently complicated by structural constraints. Mokoena (2022) found in South Africa that school principals who combine supervision, mentoring and collaborative facilitation contribute significantly to teacher professional competence, while Asimeng-Boahene (2021) documented similar patterns in Ghana. Across East Africa, studies in Kenya and Uganda confirm that principals' investment in professional learning communities and supervision quality positively influences teacher development (Andedo et al., 2021; Namanya, 2025). In Tanzania specifically, research has identified instructional supervision, coaching, mentoring and collaborative professional practices as the leadership mechanisms most closely associated with teacher development in public secondary schools (Moshia, 2021; Rugambwa et al., 2022; Mugisha et al., 2024). However, Mligo (2023) and Mwakabenga and Paine (2024) found that leadership capacity for sustained professional development support remains constrained by inadequate training, financial limitations and heavy administrative workloads.

In Mbeya Urban, limited context-specific empirical evidence exists on how secondary school heads actually exercise leadership in support of staff development. While general studies acknowledge that supervision, mentoring and collaboration occur, the specific practices through which school heads implement these functions, their quality, consistency and the conditions enabling or constraining them, remain underexplored. This study was guided by Transformational Leadership Theory, which explains how leaders inspire professional growth through motivation, individualized support, intellectual stimulation and collaborative vision (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) and Instructional Leadership Theory, which emphasizes direct involvement of school heads in classroom supervision, curriculum monitoring, feedback provision and facilitation of teacher learning (Hallinger, 2020). The study pursued the specific objective of examining the leadership practices used by secondary school heads to support staff development in public secondary schools in Mbeya Urban.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Mbeya Urban, an urban local government area in Mbeya Region, southwestern Tanzania. The area was selected because it hosts a significant number of public secondary schools facing increasing student enrolment, workload pressure and resource constraints, creating conditions in which the quality of leadership support for staff development becomes particularly consequential for educational outcomes.

2.2 Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, appropriate for understanding how school heads and teachers interpret leadership practices and staff development in their real institutional contexts (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative case study design was employed, with eight public secondary schools constituting the cases, enabling in-depth investigation of leadership practices as they occur naturally in school settings (Yin, 2018).

2.3 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used to select 32 participants comprising eight school heads, eight heads of departments and sixteen teachers. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study required participants with direct experience of leadership practices and staff development in their schools (Patton, 2015). Sample adequacy was guided by data saturation.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school heads and heads of departments to obtain detailed accounts of leadership practices. Focus group discussions were held with teachers to capture shared experiences of how leadership shaped their professional development. Non-participant observation was used to observe staff meetings, supervision activities and professional learning events. Document review examined observation records, professional development minutes, supervision schedules and feedback documentation.

2.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used following Braun and Clarke (2006), with repeated reading of transcripts, generation of initial codes, grouping of codes into themes aligned with the study objective and development of interpretive narratives grounded in participant quotations. Triangulation across all four data sources ensured credibility and trustworthiness.

3.0 Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Of 32 respondents, 18 (56.3%) were male and 14 (43.7%) female. By professional category, 50.0% were classroom teachers, 25.0% school heads and 25.0% heads of departments. Teaching experience was concentrated in the 11 to 20-year range (43.8%), with 37.5% having 1 to 10 years. Employment status showed 81.3% as permanent staff and 18.7% on contract, providing perspectives across different employment security conditions.

3.2 Instructional Supervision as a Leadership Practice

Instructional supervision emerged as the most consistently described leadership practice across all eight participating schools. School heads described it as a central professional responsibility extending beyond administrative compliance to encompass genuine developmental support for teachers'

instructional improvement.

One school head articulated this developmental framing directly: "When we visit classrooms or review professional documents, our intention is not simply to identify mistakes but to understand the challenges teachers are facing and determine how they can be supported." (Interviewed School Head 4, 18 March 2026)

This framing reflects the Instructional Leadership Theory principle that effective supervision focuses on improving learning rather than policing compliance. Teachers' experiences of supervision, however, varied considerably depending on the quality of post-observation interaction. Some described supervision as a genuinely transformative professional experience:

"When supervision is conducted professionally, it becomes a learning experience rather than an inspection exercise. There are occasions when school leaders observe lessons and provide feedback that helps teachers improve classroom management. Teachers are more likely to benefit when supervision is conducted in a supportive and collaborative manner." (Interviewed Teacher 5, 20 March 2026)

Others described supervision experiences where observation occurred but feedback was absent, partial, or focused exclusively on weaknesses without constructive guidance for improvement. Document review confirmed this variation: Schools One and Four possessed systematic classroom observation records, completed feedback forms and signed supervision schedules, while Schools Five and Six had incomplete or absent documentation. Observation data reinforced the same contrast: in schools with developmental supervision cultures, teachers discussed lessons openly with school heads, while in schools with compliance-oriented supervision, post-observation interactions were brief and unilateral.

The key finding is that instructional supervision's contribution to staff development was determined not by whether it occurred but by its quality. Supervision characterized by dialogue, specific feedback, practical suggestions and mutual problem-solving functioned as a powerful professional development tool. Supervision characterized by fault-finding, absence of follow-up, or purely administrative orientation produced minimal professional growth despite consuming equivalent time.

3.3 Teacher Motivation as a Leadership Mechanism

Teacher motivation through recognition, encouragement, delegation and emotional support was identified as the most accessible leadership practice for supporting professional development in a context where financial incentives are unavailable. School heads recognized motivation as an essential leadership responsibility because teachers operate under multiple pressures that can erode professional engagement:

"Teachers need encouragement if they are expected to participate actively in professional learning activities. When teachers feel respected and supported, they become more willing to attend workshops, participate in departmental discussions and engage in activities that improve their professional competence." (Interviewed School Head 5, 25 March 2026)

Teachers consistently affirmed the importance of non-financial recognition. When school leaders acknowledged effort, celebrated instructional improvement and expressed confidence in teachers' professional capacity, the effect on willingness to engage in professional development was substantial:

"When school leaders appreciate the work that teachers do, it creates a sense of belonging and encourages us to perform better. Teachers are human beings who need recognition for their efforts. On the other hand, when teachers feel ignored or criticized constantly, they may lose interest in activities that are intended to support professional development." (Interviewed Teacher 6, 1 April 2026)

Delegation of leadership responsibilities emerged as a particularly powerful motivational tool. Teachers assigned to lead departmental professional development sessions, coordinate peer observation schedules, or mentor newly posted colleagues described elevated professional confidence and increased personal investment in the success of development activities. This aligns with Transformational Leadership Theory's individualized consideration dimension, in which leaders develop followers' capacity by assigning meaningful responsibilities that stretch professional competence while providing appropriate support.

3.4 Promotion of Collaborative Professional Learning

Promoting collaborative professional learning between and within subject departments was a deliberate leadership strategy across most participating schools. School heads described this as a core responsibility because they understood that professional learning occurring through daily peer interaction is both more accessible and more contextually embedded than formal external training:

"Teaching should not be viewed as an individual activity where every teacher works independently without interacting with colleagues. Schools achieve better results when teachers collaborate and learn from each other. This creates opportunities for professional growth and helps build a stronger academic culture within the school." (Interviewed School Head 6, 3 April 2026)

School heads promoted collaboration through several mechanisms: encouraging heads of departments to organize joint lesson planning sessions,

facilitating cross-departmental professional discussions during staff meetings, publicly recognizing collaborative achievements and framing teamwork as an institutional expectation rather than an optional courtesy. Teachers in schools with stronger collaborative cultures confirmed that leadership framing made a measurable difference:

"In schools where leaders encourage collaboration, teachers do not hesitate to seek help from colleagues or share ideas openly. Professional learning becomes part of everyday practice because teachers understand that they are working toward common goals." (Interviewed Teacher 7, 1 April 2026)

However, observation data revealed an important structural gap: despite school heads' positive framing of collaboration, the school timetable did not formally protect time for collaborative professional activities in any of the eight participating schools. Collaboration therefore continued to depend on teachers' personal initiative during break periods and after school, making it vulnerable to competing demands and inaccessible to teachers with longer commuting distances or family responsibilities. The absence of institutionalized collaborative time represents the most consequential gap between leadership intent and structural reality identified under this objective.

3.5 Mentoring Support for Newly Posted Teachers

Mentoring of newly posted teachers was identified as a leadership-supported staff development practice across all eight schools. School heads described it as essential because many new teachers arrive with theoretical knowledge but lack the practical professional skills needed for effective classroom management, assessment and curriculum implementation:

"When a new teacher arrives at our school, we do not simply assign classes and leave them to work independently. We usually introduce them to heads of departments and experienced teachers who can guide them through the expectations of the school. This support helps them gain confidence and become more effective in performing their duties." (Interviewed School Head 2, 9 March 2026)

Heads of departments played a particularly active role in mentoring, assisting new teachers in interpreting syllabi, preparing schemes of work and addressing specific classroom challenges. The professional guidance provided through these mentoring relationships was consistently valued by newly posted teachers who experienced it.

However, a critical implementation gap characterized mentoring across all eight schools: the process was entirely informal, undocumented and dependent on individual senior teachers' personal commitment and available time. One newly posted teacher described the resulting inconsistency:

"Senior teachers try their best to support us whenever we ask for assistance and I appreciate the help that I have received since joining this school. Sometimes senior teachers are willing to help, but they are also overwhelmed by their own teaching responsibilities. This can be frustrating, especially during the first months of employment when everything is new and unfamiliar." (Interviewed Newly Posted Teacher 1, 11 March 2026)

Document review confirmed this informality: no school in the study possessed formal mentoring schedules, assigned mentor-mentee pairs, progress review documents, or evaluation mechanisms. School heads recognized this gap but attributed it to time constraints and absence of a formal policy framework requiring structured mentoring systems. The result is a mentoring culture that works well when individual senior teachers are motivated and available, but fails systematically when they are not.

3.6 Resource Mobilization for Staff Development

Resource mobilization was recognized across all schools as a leadership responsibility directly enabling staff development. School heads described active efforts to secure teaching materials, training opportunities and external professional development support from district education offices, NGOs and community stakeholders:

"Resources are essential if schools are expected to implement effective staff development programmes. Unfortunately, financial limitations affect many of the activities that we would like to organize. Even when financial resources are limited, we try to ensure that teachers have access to professional materials and information that can support their learning." (Interviewed School Head 1, 3 April 2026)

The gap between leadership commitment to resource mobilization and available resources was the most visible structural limitation under this theme. School heads described spending significant time and personal energy seeking external support for activities that adequate school budgets would fund routinely. Strategies adopted included organizing community fundraising events, writing proposals to NGOs, requesting district allocation for specific training events and identifying teachers with relevant expertise who could facilitate internal professional development sessions at no cost. These creative compensatory strategies demonstrated genuine leadership commitment but also revealed the inadequacy of systematic institutional support.

3.7 Participatory Communication and Teacher Involvement in Decisions

Participatory communication through which school heads consulted teachers in identifying professional development needs, planning activities and evaluating outcomes was identified as a leadership practice that significantly influenced teacher commitment to staff development. When teachers were involved in decisions about their own professional learning, they demonstrated greater ownership, enthusiasm and sustained engagement:

"Teachers are more committed to professional development activities when they are given opportunities to express their views and contribute to decision-making processes. Effective communication therefore plays an important role in ensuring that professional development activities respond to actual needs within the school." (Interviewed Teacher 7, 6 April 2026)

School heads described conducting needs assessments through departmental meetings, individual teacher consultations and review of examination performance data as foundations for professional development planning. This participatory approach reflected the intellectual stimulation dimension of Transformational Leadership Theory, in which leaders engage followers as co-authors of improvement strategies rather than passive recipients of leadership directives. Observation data confirmed that schools characterized by more participatory communication showed higher teacher attendance at professional development sessions and more sustained peer learning activity between formal events.

4.0 Discussion

4.1 Instructional Supervision: Quality Over Frequency

The finding that instructional supervision's contribution to staff development depends on quality rather than frequency directly reinforces Hallinger's (2020) argument that effective instructional leadership is characterized by the depth of professional engagement rather than the administrative regularity of observation. Leithwood et al. (2020) similarly establish that school heads influence teacher learning primarily through the quality of feedback and dialogue that follows observation, not through the act of observation itself. The present study's finding that developmental supervision characterized by specific feedback, constructive problem-solving and genuine dialogue functions as a powerful staff development tool while compliance-oriented supervision produces minimal growth, adds qualitative texture to these theoretical predictions by documenting the mechanisms through which each supervision approach operates in practice.

The variation in supervision quality across schools, confirmed through documentation, observation and teacher accounts, indicates that supervision quality is not determined by school location, resource level, or teacher experience distribution but by school heads' leadership philosophy and their communication skills. Bush and Glover (2019) argue that effective supervision must be understood as a professional conversation rather than an evaluative judgment and the present study confirms that this distinction is experienced by teachers as fundamentally determining whether supervision feels like support or control. This finding has direct implications for leadership training programmes, which should prioritize feedback quality, constructive communication and participatory dialogue over compliance-focused observation procedures.

4.2 Motivation as the Foundational Leadership Practice

The finding that non-financial motivation recognition, delegation, encouragement and emotional support is the most widely accessible and consistently impactful leadership mechanism for sustaining professional engagement is strongly consistent with Transformational Leadership Theory. Bass (1985) identifies individualized consideration as a core transformational leadership dimension specifically because it addresses followers' individual developmental needs and creates conditions for professional growth through personal relationship rather than material incentive. Nguni et al. (2019) found that school heads who demonstrate active interest in teachers' professional wellbeing and publicly recognize their contributions produce significantly stronger professional commitment than those who rely on authority or procedure, directly paralleling the present study's finding that teachers describe recognition as the primary determinant of their willingness to engage in professional learning activities.

The bidirectional nature of this relationship where positive recognition increases engagement and negative or absent recognition decreases it is particularly important for school heads operating under financial constraint. The finding that motivation effects are independent of material resources means that leadership motivation is not a luxury of well-resourced schools but an accessible and high-impact professional development tool available to every school head, regardless of budget. This has significant policy implications: building motivational leadership capacity through training and mentoring of school heads costs comparatively little and can produce substantial improvements in teacher professional engagement even where budget constraints prevent expansion of formal training programmes.

4.3 Collaborative Learning: Leadership Intent and Structural Gap

The finding that school heads promote collaborative professional learning while simultaneously failing to institutionalize it through formal scheduling and protected time reflects a tension between transformational leadership intent and structural implementation that is well documented in the

international literature. Antinluoma et al. (2021), studying professional learning communities in Finnish schools, found that collaborative culture requires both leadership facilitation and structural protection that inspirational leadership without time allocation produces values without practice. Hairon and Dimmock (2020) similarly argue that collaborative professional learning communities succeed only when school leadership actively creates structural conditions for collaboration, not merely encourages the idea of collaboration in principle.

The present study's finding that all eight participating schools valued collaboration while none formally protected time for it in the school timetable represents exactly this gap. The result, documented through observation and teacher accounts, is that collaboration remains an informal and individually driven activity that works well for teachers with the initiative, time and collegial relationships to sustain it, but fails to serve teachers who lack those personal resources or face competing demands. This inequity in access to collaborative learning determined by personal circumstance rather than institutional entitlement mirrors the resource inequality documented in other aspects of staff development and represents a structural gap that requires deliberate policy rather than personal leadership style to close.

4.4 Mentoring: The Goodwill Problem and its Structural Solution

The finding that mentoring of newly posted teachers is universally recognized as important but universally implemented informally, without formal scheduling, assigned responsibilities, documentation, or monitoring, confirms what Mulkeen (2019) identifies as one of the most persistent structural weaknesses in teacher support systems across Sub-Saharan Africa: the tendency for important professional support to be delegated to individual goodwill rather than institutionalized as a systematic responsibility. When mentoring depends on whether a senior teacher happens to be available, willing and not overwhelmed by competing duties, it systematically fails precisely when new teachers need it most at the beginning of the academic year when the entire school staff is busiest. Mokoena (2022) argues that mentoring programmes are only effective when supported by clear institutional structures including assigned mentors, scheduled meetings, documented objectives and evaluated outcomes, confirming that the formalization gap identified in this study is the primary reason mentoring's recognized value is not consistently delivered.

The leadership implication is clear: school heads who genuinely value mentoring must move it from a cultural practice to an institutional system. This does not require additional resources it requires a policy decision to formalize existing informal practices through structured frameworks, which is within the authority of every school head to implement with support from district education offices.

4.5 Resource Mobilization: The Limits of Leadership Commitment

The finding that school heads demonstrate genuine commitment to resource mobilization for staff development but are severely constrained by inadequate school budgets confirms what Mlilo (2023) and Mulkeen (2019) both document: that financial constraints are not merely limiting factors but structural barriers that can neutralize even the most committed leadership engagement with staff development. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that sustainable teacher professional development requires coordinated financial and technical support from national and local authorities, not merely school-level initiative. The present finding that school heads resort to community fundraising, NGO proposals and cost-free internal facilitation as compensatory strategies demonstrates leadership creativity under constraint, but also documents the inadequacy of relying on school-level resourcefulness as a substitute for systematic budget provision.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the leadership practices used by secondary school heads to support staff development in public secondary schools in Mbeya Urban, Tanzania. The findings establish that school heads employ multiple genuine and meaningful leadership practices instructional supervision, teacher motivation, promotion of collaborative learning, mentoring support, resource mobilization and participatory communication that collectively constitute a real and valued leadership contribution to staff development. However, the effectiveness of each practice is constrained by specific implementation gaps: supervision lacks consistently developmental feedback quality, motivation lacks institutionalization, collaboration lacks protected time, mentoring lacks formal structure, resource mobilization lacks adequate budget and communication lacks systematic documentation.

The study concludes that leadership support for staff development in Mbeya Urban is genuine in intent but inconsistent in delivery, shaped more by individual school heads' personal commitment and communication style than by institutional structures that would guarantee quality and consistency regardless of who occupies the leadership role. This gap between individual leadership quality and institutional system quality is the study's central finding and its most important implication for sustainable staff development improvement.

Based on these findings, the study recommends the following. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should develop formal school-based mentoring frameworks providing school heads with standardized guidelines, assigned mentor-mentee structures, documented meeting schedules and monitoring requirements, making mentoring a mandatory institutional system rather than an optional cultural practice. Education authorities should require all public secondary schools to include protected weekly time blocks for collaborative professional activities in official school timetables,

converting informal peer learning from an optional activity into a structured entitlement. A mandatory constructive supervision feedback protocol should be developed and trained into all school heads, specifying that every classroom observation must be followed within 48 hours by a documented professional dialogue covering specific strengths, specific areas for improvement and concrete strategies for growth. The Mbeya District Council Education Office should establish dedicated professional development budget lines for each school proportional to teacher numbers, reducing dependence on school heads' individual resource mobilization efforts and ensuring equitable access to professional development funding across schools. The Ministry should develop and implement a structured school leadership development programme equipping all serving school heads with competencies in motivational leadership, feedback communication, collaborative facilitation and mentoring system design, ensuring that institutional systems support rather than depend on exceptional individual leadership qualities. Finally, district education officers should conduct quarterly instructional leadership review visits assessing not only whether supervision occurred but the quality of feedback documentation and evidence of professional follow-up, creating external accountability for the developmental rather than merely procedural quality of school heads' leadership practices.

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