

Sustainable Leadership and School Accountability Management as Determinants of Students' Performance During COVID-19 Era in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The main thrust of this study was to examine the relationship between sustainable leadership and school accountability management as determinants of students' academic performance during the era of Covid-19 pandemic waves in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. This study was tailored to follow survey research design in which two null hypotheses were formulated in consonant with the specific purposes of the study. The population consisted of 681 secondary school administrators (227 principals and 454 vice principals) distributed across 227 public secondary schools situated in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Census technique was adopted in studying the entire population. Two self-structured and administered questionnaires titled: Sustainable Leadership and School Accountability Management Survey (SLSAMS) and Students' Academic Performance Scale (SAPS) were used as data collection instruments via online medium. The null hypotheses of the study were all tested at .05 level of significance using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis. Findings of the study indicated that sustainable leadership and school accountability management did have a partial significant relationship with students' academic performance in secondary schools. In line with this finding, relevant policy implications were discussed. It is recommended, among others, that secondary school principals should sustainably manage the school system with a very high sense of responsibility in order to enhance students' academic performance especially in this period of global Covid-19 pandemic waves.

Keywords: Sustainability, leadership, accountability, management, students' performance, Covid-19

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Introduction

Globally, the educational industry is confronted with various kinds of setbacks in an attempt to achieve its predetermined goals and objectives. In African context, like other continents of the world, the common challenges of schools range from poor academic performance, fraudulent practices and failed leadership among others (Uzoigwe, Chuktu & Eton, 2020; Uzoigwe & Ogbeche, 2020). Nigerian schools are not debarred from these challenges because there are multiple cases of dreaded Covid-19 pandemic outbreak (Uzoigwe, Onabe, Onwochei & Ekpenyong, 2020; Uzoigwe, Owashi & Opuwari, 2020; Ukpog & Uzoigwe, 2020). There is also poor implementation of educational policies and staff/student unrest (Ekpenyong & Uzoigwe, 2020), poor leadership practices, security challenges and vandalism (Onwochei, Uzoigwe & Ajino, 2019; Ekpoh, Edet & Ukpog, 2020). All these challenges in the school system has possibly debunked the acceptability of the new normal emerging from the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. The purpose of this paper therefore is to delineate effective school leadership and school accountability management efficiency as the prerequisites for improving students' academic performance despite the waves of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in public secondary schools in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular.

According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014) the goals of the education industry at the secondary school level are focused on preparing individuals for higher education, equipping school leavers with the needed skills, knowledge and values for effective living within the society. Hence, leadership in schools at this level is expected to be at its best and of sustainable quality with a high level of school accountability management efficiency in order to enhance students' academic performance in all subjects (Uzoigwe, Chuktu & Eton, 2020). Buttressing this fact, Uzoigwe and Ogbeche (2020) averred that the school administrator must encourage knowledge acquisition, the opportunity for higher education and a better learning outcome among the students. Unfortunately, recent observation and experience in Ebonyi State public secondary schools especially during the first and second waves of COVID-19 outbreak revealed that students' low academic performance has attracted public criticism. Again, it is quite appalling that some students in this State find it difficult to perform well in reading, writing, Basic Sciences and Mathematics (Uzoigwe, Chuktu & Eton, 2020). Some indulge in examination malpractice as a short-cut to acquire the needed number of credits to advance to higher institutions owing to the fact that some of the schools lacked accountability and effective leadership (Uzoigwe & Ogbeche, 2020). Some of the students cannot read, write, spell or pronounce words and sentences correctly. Others flock "miracle centres" for good grades during external examinations (Uzoigwe, Chuktu & Eton, 2020). These centres condone examination malpractices and breed educated illiterates and result in unemployment, over dependent on parents for stipend rather than making life meaningful for themselves and the society (Uzoigwe & Ogbeche, 2020). It is a matter of concern that many students would come out of schools and tend to exhibit corporate criminal tendencies rather than making good use of their technical and vocational job specific skills for self-reliance, and for Agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

This ugly scenario in Ebonyi State is more worrisome because many secondary school leavers are not enrolled in tertiary institutions during the waves of COVID-19 (Ekaette, Ekpenyong & Owan, 2019). As a result, many of them are now drug addicts while others are highly engaged in cultism and gangsterism (Alumona & Amusan, 2019). Many youths in Ebonyi State are school drop-outs without any form of entrepreneurship for livelihood and sustenance (Alumona and Amusan, 2019). As a means of earning a living, many of them end up becoming criminals and individuals living from hand to mouth (Contemporary Nigerian cultist groups: Demystifying the "Invisibilities" IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series, 2019). The problem has engendered a lot of concern among parents, teachers, government and other stakeholders. This calls for urgent attention because some scholars have documented also that there seems to be an overt incongruity between secondary education goals (that are clearly stated) and the observed performance of school leavers (Arop, Bassey, Ekaette & Offem in Okon, Arop, Osim & Ukpung 2020). The researchers are quite intrigued about this matter and sought to investigate if there is any link between sustainable leadership and school accountability management efficiency in determining students' academic performance during the waves of COVID-19 in public secondary schools in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

School accountability management was considered in this study because it is an assurance that an individual (administrator) or school organization will be evaluated on their performance or behavior related to an outcome (students' performance) for which they are responsible. Professional organisational managers see accountability as the measurement of performance against specific operational plans based on the goals and objectives of the organisation (Considine, 2012). The Federal government's involvement through the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" reinforces the prior movement of many States toward educational policies directed on measured student achievement. Dubnick (2017) found that efficient accountability systems introduced to incorporate teachers had a clear positive impact on students' achievement. This is still applicable today because accountability management is essential for the school organization in order to prove its stewardship

in achieving predetermined educational goals and objectives in the host communities (Okon, Arop, Osim & Ukpang, 2020). In fact, without accountability management, it will be extremely tedious to get school managers to assume ownership of their own actions because they believe they will not face any consequences (Considine, 2012). Accountability management in this context therefore implies that the school managers must be held responsible for successfully completing the administrative tasks and will have to at least explain details why they failed to do so (leadership issues) as the case may be vis-à-vis students' poor academic performance. Dubnick (2017) found that working on the full content of the information before group discussion results in better academic performance than when each member in the group works on part (positive resource interdependence) of the content before group discussion. Furthermore, it is shown that when members in cooperative learning group are informed that after group work a student will be called randomly from a group for examination and the student's score will be the score for the rest of the group members and the score will be part of the final grade, it strengthens individual and group accountability and consequently facilitates learning.

In a study conducted by Iyaiya, Fasasi and Alabi (2015) to explore accountability issues in basic schools of Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State, Nigeria. Findings revealed that teachers felt moderately responsible for their students' academic performance, especially in Mathematics. Thorough supervision and use of rewards were the best measures of promoting accountability while lack of sufficient instructional aids was seen as the greatest obstacle to teachers' accountability. Usman (2016) found some strategies for improving accountability in the school system to include regular supervision of schools, visionary leadership, effective communication, education auditing and adequate funding of the education sector to ensure efficient management and improve quality service delivery by the schools in Nigeria.

Another related study by Sunday-Piaro (2018) found that there is a significant and strong positive relationship between classroom discipline, effective teaching, use of classroom reward system and student academic performance and a significant and moderate relationship between use of delegation of authority in the classroom and student academic performance. Similarly, Nurudeen, Rasaq and Folorunso (2020) found a significant relationship between institutional accountability and students' academic performance in Oyo State secondary schools. Thomas and Amaechi (2019) found that to a high extent, accountability variables such as school buildings, technical workshop library facilities and location of school influences students' academic performance in technical colleges in Rivers State. Oginni and Awobodu, Alaka and Saibu (2013) investigated school factors as correlates of students' achievement in Chemistry. Findings from the study showed that as the conditions of school accountability factors improve, the performance of students in Chemistry improves. Chineze and Olele (2011) worked on academic accountability, quality and assessment of higher education in Nigeria. Findings revealed that academic accountability in terms of the quality of inputs and outputs was low; the quality of the process was high; and that research activities and community service in the institutions enhance development of the communities in which the universities are located. Conversely, lack of political willingness to develop higher education, low students' learning readiness and non-utilisation of research findings were found to be affecting the academic accountability of the institutions.

To build a stronger reliance between citizens and the educational system, the purpose of school accountability discourse is to show how educational institutions work both effectively and efficiently by allowing the bureaucracy to run more democratically and is understood as a value system in terms of the results and situations it has produced and as a social mechanism that produces these results (Bovens, 2010). In Nigeria, while the term accountability is mostly understood as the duties and responsibilities of school managers and teachers, it relates to strong norms of action such as exercising reliability, justice, a sense of responsibility, equality, responsiveness, transparency, and

liability towards teaching and learning in the school system (Bovens, 2010; Considine, 2012; Dubnick, 2017; Klingner, Nalbandian, & Barbara, 2001; Koppell, 2011). It is related to and expressed as the process of requesting and giving an account, which builds reliance between individuals and communities. MolokoMphale and Mhlauli (2014) submitted that among the several factors that could contribute toward students' low academic performance range from low accountability to poor school leadership and students' unpreparedness for the examinations. This implies that educational accountability includes setting goals and standards; applying tests; producing performance information; announcing school performance publicly; increasing competition, participation, and professional capabilities; and handing out rewards and punishments for sustainable leadership experience (Considine, 2012; Dubnick, 2017).

Sustainable leadership occurs when leaders of school organisations effectively manage learning environments and society with long-term sustainable development goals in mind devoid of compromising the tendency of future generations to achieve their own needs. Similarly, the educational industry needs leaders who can balance both the pressure of short-term goals and priorities along with long-term goals and incorporate a new set of ideals centered on improving social, school environment and academic performance issues. It is all about leading in a way that benefits societies and the environment while maintaining financial performance.

Filho, Eustachio, Caldana, Will and Salvi (2020) worked on the impact of sustainability leadership on students' performance in higher education institutions. Findings revealed that there was a positive change towards more sustainable universities' curriculum adaptation; investments in education for sustainable development (ESD), sustainable procurement, and reporting were mentioned. The study also revealed that gender issues were taken seriously among the sampled institutions, which is an encouraging trend. Challenges seen in implementing sustainability leadership were, for instance, a lack of interest by the university administration and among some members of the academic community, as well as lack of expertise and material resources.

Stephen (2010) examined leadership effects on student achievement and sustained school success. It was found that direction setting, developing people and redesigning the organization were practices common to successful principals in all contexts, including those in challenging, high-poverty schools. There was an emerged distributed teacher-leadership and professional self-renewal as processes central to sustaining success over time. Cristillo, Iter and Assali (2016) explored sustainable leadership: Impact of an innovative leadership development programme for school principals in Palestine. The results from a survey and in-depth interviews with principals offered promising evidence that the model of shared leadership appeared to have had a sustained impact on the attitudes and practices of principals in three key domains including technology and community building; results-based decision-making; and instructional supervision. Nicholas, Ozofo and Alinno (2017) found that sustainable leadership style was positively correlated with students' academic performance.

Contrarily, Obama, Akinyi and John (2015) established that principals in the study locale used leadership styles that were not conducive to teacher-student interactive learner-centered learning that enhanced students' academic performance. It was further established that there was a significant relationship between the leadership styles applied by principals as perceived by teachers and students' academic performance. The schools that embraced more sustainably democratic and participatory leadership styles that encouraged group work and team spirit performed significantly better than those that used more autocratic leadership styles that were largely dictatorial. Stephen (2010) reported that the five attributes of creating a sustainable school organization for learning were present because the principal built human capacity, the school resources targeted student achievement and there was a belief that all students can learn, the principal's ability to push staff to continuous results without pushing so hard that they lost trust and love for the students they serve.

Findings further indicated that there were, however, opportunities for improvement including creating a clear set of district supports for schools and improving cultural proficiency by setting high expectations for the students, no matter their situation, and created a culture of productive collaboration that was focused on continuously improving student achievement.

Another finding from Tsuut (2015) showed that sustainability management style plays an important role in determining the performance of students in examinations. The findings also showed that poor management stemming from lack of sustainability management leads to poor school performance. Lorna (2015) investigated the influence of sustainable leadership practices on classroom management, school environment, and academic underperformance. The results indicated significant positive relationships between sustainable leadership practices of principals, classroom management and perceived academic performance. A significant positive relationship was also found between sustainable leadership practices and perceived school environment. Bosanquet, Alison, Marshall and Orrell (2018) found that sustainable leadership practice includes recognizing the need to plan for succession, and providing adequate developmental opportunities for those who are likely to become leaders of learning and teaching.

Statement of the problem

Going by the blueprints of the National Policy on Education (2014), secondary education is established in Nigeria to effectively prepare students for useful living within the society and for higher education. But a critical observation in Ebonyi State during the first and second waves of COVID-19 pandemic is indicating relatively low performance of the public secondary schools. Students' massive failure as revealed by West African Examination Council in 2020 shows that only 23.2 percent in Onueke, Abakaliki and Afikpo zones (that is, 5,425,000 out of 692,435,000) of candidates who participated in the May/June Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (SSCE) administered by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) recorded credit pass in five subjects, excluding English Language and Mathematics, as against 36.57 percent in 2019 and 50.81 percent in 2018. It is disgusting to see that students' performance is drastically plummeting on annual basis due to leadership challenges and non-accountability issues.

Some administrators tend to disprove the fact that they are accountable for the success or failure of the school. They are not in the habit of measuring students' performance against specific operational plans based on the goals and objectives of the school organisation. Some principals do not seem to be accountable to parents and the host communities over the instructional outcomes despite the fact that the learners are their children and also because the parents give much support in cash and in kind to the learners. However, some administrators seem to lack the ability to envision solutions and lead change as school managers. It appears they lack the tendency to command respect and confidence, make decision on time, inspire action, organise and co-ordinate school activities especially during the period of COVID-19 pandemic waves.

The government has made some efforts in the area of providing Secondary Education Trust Fund, providing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities, yet school administrators' inability to effectively lead, render accurate accounts of the performance of the educational system still persists. This is reflected in the principals' inability to supervise the teachers in curriculum implementation and maintenance of school discipline for a better academic performance during the period of COVID-19 pandemic waves. This attracted the attention of the researchers while addressing this question: How do sustainable leadership and school accountability determine students' performance during Covid-19 Pandemic waves in Ebonyi State, Nigeria?

Purpose of the study

The study investigated sustainable leadership and school accountability management as determinants of students' academic performance during Covid-19 Pandemic waves in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to find out the relationship between:

- 1) Sustainable leadership and students' academic performance
- 2) School accountability management and students' academic performance

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated by the researchers to guide the study:

1. There is no significant relationship between sustainable leadership and students' academic performance in public secondary schools.
2. School accountability management has no significant relationship to students' academic performance in public secondary schools.

Methodology

This study was carried out in Ebonyi State of Nigeria. Ebonyi is one of the thirty-six (36) States in Nigeria. It is located in the South-Eastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Ebonyi is approximately situated at latitudes $6^{\circ}.15^{\circ}$ and $6^{\circ}.250^{\circ}$ North of the Equator and between longitudes $8^{\circ}.05^{\circ}$ and $8^{\circ}.083^{\circ}$ East of the Greenwich Meridian. The research design used for this study was the survey research design. The design was considered appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to sample the opinions of the respondents through the use of questionnaire and generalize the findings to other portions within the population of the study that were not studied.

Census technique was used in studying the entire population of 681 secondary school administrators (227 principals and 454 vice principals) distributed across 227 public secondary schools situated in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Two sets of questionnaires were considered by the researchers as the most appropriate instruments for the collection of data. Consequently, the researchers developed structured questionnaires tagged: Sustainable Leadership and School Accountability Management Survey (SLSAMS) and Students' Academic Performance Scale (SAPS). These instruments were designed in two parts – A and B. Part A of SLSAMS was designed to elicit the demographic data of respondents, while Part B SLSAMS was designed with 24 items while SAPS was designed with 10 items to elicit information from the respondents based on the variables under investigation. The Part B of the instrument was designed on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). Respondents were expected to indicate by ticking their agreement or disagreement with the statements. The instruments were subjected to face and content validity to ensure that the items selected for the study were capable of eliciting relevant responses needed for valid analysis. In achieving this, the designed questionnaires were presented to five experts (three Psychometricians and two Educational Administrators). These experts ensured that every item used, measured what they were intended to measure. Relevant suggestions were also made which were used to improve the overall quality of the instrument. The reliability test of the two instruments was performed to check for their internal consistency using the Cronbach Alpha. The reliability coefficient of 0.884 and 0.891 were obtained after the analysis of data and were considered high enough to warrant the use of the questionnaires. Primary data were obtained directly from respondents through the administration of the instruments designed for data collection. The researchers embarked on a visit to the various secondary schools in the area of study to administer copies of the questionnaire. The data obtained from respondents were scored based on the variables of the study. The responses were scored for positively worded items as follows: Strongly Agree (SA) - 4 points, Agree (A) - 3 points, Disagree (D) - 2 points, Strongly Disagree (SD) - 1 point. Responses

were scored in a reverse order for negatively worded items. The codes of all responses were summed to have scores for each variable required for data analysis. All computations were carried out through the use of SPSS version 28 statistical package.

Results

Hypothesis one

There is no significant relationship between sustainable leadership and students' academic performance in public secondary schools. This hypothesis was tested at the .05 alpha level using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (r) statistical technique given that the two sets of variables were both measured continuously. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation Results of the relationship between sustainable leadership and students' performance (N = 681)

Variables	Mean	S. D	Cal. r.	Sig.
Sustainable leadership	13.71	5.021		
Students' performance	16.95	5.380	.440*	.046

p>.05, df=679

The results in Table 1 indicates that sustainable leadership had a mean response rate of 13.71 and a standard deviation of 5.021; while the mean response rate and standard deviation for students' performance are 16.95 and 5.380 respectively. A close look at the calculated r-value of .440 shows that sustainable leadership is quite moderate and positively correlated to students' performance in public secondary schools. It was also discovered that the p-value of .046 as presented in Table 1, is less than the alpha level of .05 at 679 degrees of freedom. Based on this evidence, the null hypothesis was rejected while the alternate hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between sustainable leadership and students' performance in public secondary schools was retained.

Hypothesis two

There is no significant relationship between school accountability management and students' performance in public secondary school. In testing this null hypothesis, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistical technique was employed given that the two sets of variables were both measured continuously. The hypothesis was tested at the .05 level of significance and the result of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation result summary showing the relationship between the school accountability management and students' performance (N = 681)

Variables	Mean	S. D	Cal. r.	Sig.
School accountability management	12.81	4.557		
Students' performance	16.95	5.380	.599**	.004

p>.05, df=679

As shown in Table 2, school accountability management was rated with a mean of 12.81 and a standard deviation of 4.557, while students' performance was rated with a mean of 16.95 and a standard deviation of 5.380. The strength and direction of the Pearson (r) value of .599 indicate that the relationship between school accountability management and students' performance is moderate

and positive. Furthermore, the p-value of .004 is observed to be less than the alpha level of .05 at 679 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis was rejected while the alternate hypothesis was retained. By implication, there is a significant relationship between the school accountability management and students' performance in public secondary schools.

Discussion of findings

The first finding of this study showed a significant relationship between sustainable leadership and students' performance in public secondary schools. This finding is well justified because sustainable leadership qualities enable school administrators to effectively manage the educational programmes with long-term developmental goals in view without compromising the tendency of future generations to achieve their own needs hence promoting the smooth running of the school system. The finding is in line with the position of Nicholas, Ozofo and Alinno (2017) that sustainable leadership style was positively correlated with students' academic performance. This finding aligns also, with the position of Filho, Eustachio, Caldana, Will and Salvi (2020) that there was a positive change towards more sustainable universities' curriculum adaptation; investments in education for sustainable development (ESD), sustainable procurement and school performance reports. The finding equally agrees with that of Stephen (2010) who found that direction setting, developing people and redesigning the school organization were practices common to successful principals in all contexts, including those in challenging, high-poverty schools. There was an emerged distributed teacher-leadership and professional self-renewal as processes central to sustaining success over time including technology and community building, results-based decision-making and effective instructional supervision.

It was established through the second finding of this study that there is a significant relationship between school accountability management and students' performance in public secondary schools. This finding is not surprising since school accountability, to professionals, serves as the measurement of performance against specific operational plans based on the goals of the organisation. The principal is bequeathed with the statutory responsibilities of ensuring that the human, material and financial resources of the school are effectively managed and in turn gives account on the basis of valid evidence for the achievement of pre-determined objectives within the area of obligation. Thus the problem of shifting blames on others about students' poor academic performance is eliminated when the principal is hold to ransom to account for breach of contract. This will also improve the overall quality of teaching (by providing teachers with opportunities to access instructional materials) leading to increased chances of better instructional outcomes for students. This finding substantiates the results of previous studies including Iyaiya, Fasasi and Alabi (2015) and Usman (2016) who maintains that improving accountability in the school system involves regular supervision of schools, visionary leadership, effective communication, education auditing and adequate funding of the education sector to ensure efficient management and improve quality service delivery by the schools in Nigeria. The finding equally corroborates that of Nurudeen, Rasaq and Folorunso (2020) who found a significant relationship between institutional accountability and students' academic performance in Oyo State secondary schools. This implies that the performance of students is a function of the extent of sense of responsibility exhibited by the institutional administrators.

Conclusion

It was generally concluded based on the findings of this study that sustainable leadership and school accountability management has strong affinities with the academic performance of students during a pandemic era. Secondary schools' principals who are aware of this link would be better disposed in taking the lead towards maintaining and managing the resources entrusted to them for better quality

service delivery. For teachers' and students' performance to remain positive in secondary schools, principals must sustainably lead with a high sense of responsibility because it is the performance of teachers, and most especially, students that can be used to evaluate the extent to which schools have attained stated goals. On the contrary, in schools where there is leadership failure with sneering accountability, students' performance would likely regress. The study has implications for the prospective sustainability leaders and accountability managers in education generally and places a call on all line and staff personnel in the secondary school system to collectively work hard towards students' performance enhancement in a pandemic era.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Secondary school principals should imbibe the ability to envision solutions and lead change towards the direction of instructional challenges of teachers and students. They must develop the ability to accountably appraise their subordinates, get along with them for the purpose of enhancing students' academic performance.
2. Secondary school principals should not allow their egocentric feelings to override their sense of accountability in operating school rules and regulations as impersonal principles thus relegating independent, meaningful and constructive decisions regarding students' academic performance to the background.

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