

# Critical Analysis of Leadership in Action: A Case Study of the Directorate of Inspection and Advisory Services (DIAS) In Malawi

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**Purpose: Running an education organisation in the twenty-first century is one of the difficult tasks. This is because the education system is volatile (Kaume-Mwinzi, 2016), fluid as well as convoluted (Reyes, 2015). In addition, it exists in complex and competitive twenty-first century settings (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). As such this paper explores complexity leadership in relation to the inconsistencies that occur in the school inspectorate system in Malawi. Specifically, the emerging disconnects between deep-rooted practices and newly-introduced standards. To achieve this purpose, the papers uses theories of educational leadership to describe complex leadership, outline issues in the school inspectorate system, discusses options and possible implications, and explains as well as justify choice for solutions.**

## I.INTRODUCTION

*Theories of educational leadership in times of uncertainty and complexity*

Numerous uncertainties happen in institutions due to shifting, globalised, social, political and economic situation. The uncertainties arise from interconnections which tolerate occurrences and produce unforeseen results (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). These changes generate complex, complicated and loose structures (Weick, 1976). One such structure is the education system and specifically the school inspection system. In this era of uncertainty complexity happens on numerous levels and through various settings (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Therefore, systems need complexity leadership to survive (Baltaci & Balci, 2017).

Different authors such as Baltaci & Balci (2017) and Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017), agree that complexity leadership involves leaders supporting their institutions to function as networked systems which can adjust and progress amid shifting circumstances. Complexity leadership incorporates a distributed leadership approach (Murray, 2017). Moreover, Baltaci & Balci (2017) and Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017), affirm that complexity leadership is a combined resultant of operational leadership, entrepreneurial leadership and enabling leadership.

Operational leadership is the prescribed strategy and systemic procedural arrangements applied to change novelty into adaptive functioning to improve operation and outcomes (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Prescribed strategies comprise

behaviours that cultivate vigorous collaborative management attitude (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). As collaborative practices unfold, collective action increases resulting into groups adjusting to changes in their situations (Murray, 2017). Operational leadership is established on firm control and meaningful organisational hierarchy (Baltaci & Balci, 2017).

Entrepreneurial leadership produce improvement, culture and growth (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). This is grounded in innovative problem-solving, resonating with contemporary situations and knowledge (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). Such an approach incorporates situational transformation which is leveraged by spontaneous order and self-correcting systems and tools (Murray, 2017). Through such patterns of behaviour leaders enact and inspire organisations and outcomes (Watkins, et al., 2017). This implies that entrepreneurial leadership approach offers a systemic view of leadership which aims at growing future leaders. To confirm this, Barber, Whelan, & Clark (2010) assert that excellent education systems nurture potential leaders by isolating them early in their professions; and growing them to purposefully acquire experience.

Enabling leadership is creating adaptive opportunities to guarantee the constant sustainability and suitability of an institution (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). It requires instant decision-making structures and dynamic output (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). The mission of the leader is to initiate an atmosphere that can enable inventiveness, learning and adaptableness (Murray, 2017). To create such an empowering space, leaders require a range of competencies, skills and attributes. For instance, Kaume-Mwinzi (2016) and Watkins, et al., (2017) agree that emotional intelligence competencies, analytical reasoning skills, inventiveness, communication skills, technological skills, organisation skills, and personal management skills are needed. Stephen Hawking (2000) summarised these twenty-first century competences into interpersonal skills, inventive thinking, work-related skills, knowledge management skills, and self-regulation. These capabilities permit leaders to be effective in experiential reflection, understanding circumstantial indications, interacting with workmates, and growing relations (Watkins, et al., 2017).

It is also noted that critical reflective practice is useful in all the three functions of complexity leadership. Twenty-first century educational leaders as evaluators need to incorporate critical reflective practice (Archbald, Neubauer, & Brookfield, 2018). This is because critically reflective custom, which comprise critical friend partnerships, is one of the survival requirements for educators (Brookfield, 1998). Critical friendships are vital in personal-learning, unlocking opportunities to analytically reflect professional practices, and reframe accordingly (Wright & Adam, 2015). Additionally, Sheppard & Santora (2013) argue that a leader's personal self-reflection is similarly significant. This is because s/he is a role model for institutional values and actions (Sheppard & Santora, 2013).

However, it is observed that in sub-Saharan African nation's educators rarely have opportunities to mutually reflect on their practices (Juma, Lehtomaki, & Naukkarinen, 2017). This is probably because most leadership theories are largely Western (Sheppard & Santora, 2013).

## II. DIAS SITUATION

The current situation is that there are inconsistencies in school inspection data collection, interpretation, and report writing (DIAS, 2017). The discrepancies are a product of multiple system interaction across numerous contexts (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). The interconnections make gathering of data in schools as well as interpretation of the collected evidence challenging (Ng, 2010). Nevertheless, information is the hub of school inspection system (Ng, 2010) therefore collecting inadequate information results into deficient and/or irrelevant recommendations made to stakeholders.

The major reason for the inconsistencies is the emerging disconnect between school inspectors' deep-rooted practices and newly-introduced standards. Several studies show that deeply held beliefs, knowledge and practices are a potential barrier to education reforms. For instance, based on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, inspectors' deep-rooted practices are a component of school inspection system. This is because the initial function of those practices was not withdrawn, as such it grew into the DIAS culture (Wright & Adam, 2015). Both Kitchen (2003) and Reyes (2015) approve that deep-rooted practices are possible obstacles to inspectors' receipt of newly-introduced standards. Therefore, it follows that failure to successfully attach with inspectors' deep-rooted practices will lead to a disconnect (Lee & Witz, 2009). As such inspectors will have difficulties to use the newly introduced standards when evaluating schools.

Mixed factors are associated with inspectors' deep-rooted practices which further leads to the inconsistencies. For instance, school inspectors incompetently tackle fundamental questions of what data to gather; and how it is to be gathered in a purposeful way (Ng, 2010). Essential issues which are indicated in the new standards are overlooked because inspectors cannot do self-assessment on deep-rooted beliefs, knowledge and practices (Wright & Adam, 2015). This is

because most educators in the sub-Saharan Africa, which includes Malawi, engage in minimal reflective practices (Juma, Lehtomaki, & Naukkarinen, 2017). As such the views which inspectors form about the nature and quality of information to collect are limited.

It is also noted, based on Reyes (2015) and Weick (1976), that the school inspection system is loose, complicated and complex. As such it is susceptible to multiple level complexity such as rapidly changing, globalised, social, political and economic difficulties. For instance, the school inspection system is prone to competences deficiencies, talent retaining, malleable work forcing, and institutional structural reforms (Sheppard & Santora, 2013). In addition, the school inspection system is controlled according to rigid lawful arrangements and standards (Hall, 2017).

Another reason why there are discrepancies is that contemporary challenges have arisen in schools and the education systems. These challenges are opposing conventional way of conducting school inspection. This is because education as a complex system will continuously have latest ideas occurring (Omorigho, 2017).

Currently what is happening is that inspectors copy and paste requirements given in the standards instead of capturing actual practices and behaviours in schools. As such they are collecting inaccurate and irrelevant evidence (DIAS, 2017). Consequently, providing unsatisfactory judgement regarding student attainment, teaching, as well as school leadership and management (Gustafson, et al., 2015).

Extraneous evidence is being collected because inspectors have insufficient competences in interpersonal skills, inventive thinking, work-related skills, knowledge management skills, and self-regulation. In addition, they have insufficient knowledge of the newly established National Education Standards. According to Baltaci & Balci (2017) and Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017), this deficiency indicate that inspectors cannot adjust and progress with a transforming situation. As such they choose to cling to their deeply-held practices of inspection other than implementing the newly introduced standards (Reyes, 2015). Consequently, they cannot engage in continuous critical reflection, meaningful inquiry and action as inspectors (Archbald, Neubauer, & Brookfield, 2018).

## III. OPTIONS FOR DIAS

Since the problem exists in a loose, complicated, complex system then leadership complexity is required to tackle the situation. The suggested options include offering enough resources for conducting inspection and training which improves inspectors' competences (Ololube & Major, 2014). Training of inspectors is to help them acquire the twenty-first century competences and match with the education system complexity (Baltaci & Balci, 2017) and the demanding requirement for quality (Omorigho, 2017).

Another possibility is to employ ethical cooperative connections which seek intellectual stewardship (Sheppard & Santora, 2013). According to Sheppard & Santora (2013) the key is to absorb professional multiplicity in inspiring and innovative ways which inculcates confidence and affirmative emotions in all inspectors. This builds meaningful interactions, cultural brainpower, open mindedness, persistence, and adaptableness (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). To develop ethical collaborative networks, DIAS requires socially receptive, competence enriched, self-reflective and long-term human advancement courses (Sheppard & Santora, 2013).

Alternatively, DIAS should reinforce policies and activities that nurture continuous professional development among school inspectors. The activities should resonate with newly established standards and joint management mentality (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). Collaborative management mentality will help to address inspectors' deep-rooted practices and prepare them for performance and solutions.

Another option is to embrace critical reflective practice. Twenty-first century school inspectors as evaluators should incorporate critical reflective practice in their professions (Archbald, Neubauer, & Brookfield, 2018). This requires establishing critical friend relationships. Such relationships facilitate self-learning, viewing and experiencing professional practices to find more positive alternatives (Wright & Adam, 2015). Self-study allows assessment of one's deep-rooted practices and how the practices resonate with suggested innovations. Therefore, critical reflective practice can help inspectors to reduce the gap existing between their deeply held practices and newly-introduced standards.

One more choice is to grow inspectors for tomorrow. According to Barber, Whelan, & Clark (2010) excellent education systems nurture future leaders. This requires pinpointing likely school inspectors in their early professions and offering progressive mechanisms which consciously expose them to inspection experiences (Barber, Whelan, & Clark, 2010). Such activities can include integrating them in professional development activities, engaging them in data collection, analysis and report writing, and making them lead school self-evaluation process in their respective schools.

Learning from analogous situations, it is evident that negligence of deep-rooted practices is one of the common causes of unsuccessful education reforms. For example, a mathematics education reform faced challenges because it neglected potential barriers such as teachers' deeply held beliefs, knowledge and habits of practice (Kitchen, 2003). A science curriculum study showed that reform attempts are not harmonised with teachers' individual beliefs and interests, as such ignoring teachers' deep values is a major obstacle for progressing (Lee & Witz, 2009). According to Kitchen (2003) and Lee & Witz (2009) teachers' personal values, concerns, deeply held beliefs and practices are major potential barriers to education reform. Therefore, the findings are applicable to

this case study. According to Lee & Witz (2009), inspectors have established individual meanings of the newly established standards which are based on their values, philosophies, concerns, and experiences. As such DIAS should help them to broaden their interpretation of newly-introduced standards.

#### IV. SOLUTIONS TO DIAS

The paper suggests critical reflective practice, growing school inspectors for tomorrow, and developing strategies and behaviours that foster continuous learning as solutions to deal with inconsistencies in school inspection. Critical reflective practice has several implications which should be considered. For example, it requires minimal budget to implement. This is because the process requires reflection on actions and everyday practices in one's work place (Cunningham, 2012). As such no extra costs will be incurred because school inspectors will be practising critical reflection in their work stations.

In addition to economic value, critical reflective practice is contextually viable. For example, critical reflective practice is needed for school inspectors as assessors (Archbald, Neubauer, & Brookfield, 2018). This is because it empowers them to develop analytical decision-making skills (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). Hence, they make realistic decisions about what data to gather as evidence as well as interpret that information effectively (Ng, 2010). In addition, new challenges have emerged which oppose the traditional way of conducting school inspection. Therefore, critical reflective practice will enable inspectors with innovative ideas of handling inspection (Omorigho, 2017).

However, introduction of critical reflective practice might face resistance because of several reasons. For example, Kitchen (2003) and Reyes (2015) point out resistance due to inspectors' deep-rooted practices. In addition, school inspectors might resist critical reflective practice because in many sub-Saharan African countries educators rarely engage in reflection on their practices (Juma, Lehtomaki, & Naukkarinen, 2017). This implies that implementation of critical reflective practice is a long-term intervention because the idea of reflective practice among school inspectors is new and not fully developed.

Also, the solution of growing school inspectors for tomorrow has some repercussions. For instance, developing potential school inspectors requires creation of opportunities to gain experience and exposure to school inspection. This suggestion has economic implications since in most African countries including Malawi, school inspection activities and the whole education budget are weakly funded owing to struggling economies (Ololube & Major, 2014).

Contextually, growing potential inspectors through exposure to school inspections can help to have well-rounded inspectors who have gained experience (Barber, Whelan, & Clark, 2010). However, the approach might create instances of corruption during identification of potential inspectors. This is

because corruption is one of the significant ethical problems in this era of complexity (Sheppard & Santora, 2013). In addition, the approach might face resistance because it is against the long-existing system of recruiting inspectors through an oral face-to-face interview. Besides, growing future inspectors requires long-term preparation and political commitment (Barber, Whelan, & Clark, 2010).

Likewise, developing strategies and behaviours that foster continuous learning involves implications. For example, this incorporates all-time learning and organised learning openings for school inspectors which will contribute towards developing twenty-first century competences (Kaume-Mwinzi, 2016). Both Ololube & Major (2014) and Sheppard & Santora (2013) concur that these competences will further facilitate socially accountable practices which promote collaborative capacity building. In addition, training inspectors makes them self-regulating, valuable, and competent to deal with demanding issues for quality (Omorigo, 2017).

However, continuous professional development requires adequate funding and it is a long-term investment. This might be a challenge in Malawi because of funding problems (Ololube & Major, 2014). Contextually, it will be a challenge to train school inspectors who are close to retirement age as this will imply investing in somebody who is on the verge of quitting. On the other hand, it will be unethical to exclude them from training on the grounds of close retirement. In addition, since they have been in the education system for a lengthy period they might have difficulties to balance their time-honoured approaches and liberal thinking (Reyes, 2015).

#### V. THE BEST OPTION RECOMMENDED TO DIAS

A closer examination of the three suggested solutions shows that the best option is involving critical reflective practice in all DIAS activities. There are several justifications for recommending this choice. For instance, despite being economical, critical reflective practice incorporates all the three functions of complexity leadership namely operational leadership, entrepreneurial leadership and enabling leadership. For example, applying operational leadership denotes that DIAS leadership will firmly control and employ a meaningful bureaucratic hierarchy (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). As such inspectors will collaboratively adjust to newly introduced standards (Murray, 2017). This is because strict controls will frame inspectors' way of thinking collaboratively (Baltaci & Balci, 2017).

Engaging in entrepreneurial leadership entails DIAS leadership producing innovation through inspiring problem-solving which resonates with newly-introduced standards (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). Inspectors' acclimatisation of the new standards will be leveraged by initiating self-organising and self-correcting practices (Murray, 2017). This approach provides chances for further learning, improvement and designs of actions which will shape the school inspection system as well as the outcomes (Watkins, et al., 2017).

Furthermore, critical reflective practice will facilitate development of the twenty-first century competences. These competencies will enable DIAS leaders and inspectors to reflect on practices, interpret situational prompts, connect with colleagues, and grow relationships (Watkins, et al., 2017). Ultimately establishing adaptive spaces (Murray, 2017), refining decision-making processes (Baltaci & Balci, 2017), and securing a constant viability and suitability of DIAS (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

Also, critical reflective practice has the capacity to transform inspectors' individual self-reflection (Sheppard & Santora, 2013), which helps them to develop into analytical evaluators (Archbald, Neubauer, & Brookfield, 2018), and critical decision makers (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). By achieving these attributes, school inspectors will make informed decisions related to student success, teaching, organization and leadership which are based on newly-introduced criteria and standards (Gustafson, et al., 2015).

Further, critical reflective practice will empower school inspectors to become reflective practitioners. This will empower them to model complexity leadership to both teachers and students (Cunningham, 2012). Modelling leadership, collecting evidence and offering recommendations to various stakeholders entails that school inspector role requires creating critical friends' relationships (Wright & Adam, 2015). Therefore, critical reflective practice offers an opportunity to develop inspectors as critical friends (Archbald, Neubauer, & Brookfield, 2018).

According to Wright & Adam (2015), a critical friendship approach will enable critiquing, reconsidering and reframing of existing inspectors' practices in a collective and open culture. Such an approach will develop inspectors' solidity, confidence and sincerity to peer analysis, hence, minimise the discrepancies.

According to Brookfield (1998) inspectors' engagement in reflection in action, reflection on action and reflective practice has several benefits. This include informing inspectors' drawbacks that require attending, position inspectors' behaviours in correct evidence. In addition, it fosters inspectors' reflectivity, shapes confidence, and demonstrates analytical thinking, model receptiveness, and it exemplify democratic procedure.

However, the democratic process might be limited due to the control of inspection judgements which are based on firm legal arrangements and standards (Hall, 2017). Also, inspectors' ability to embrace critical reflective practice is determined by their capacity to build on previous experiences and incorporate new learning through challenging one's thinking (Densten & Gray, 2001). This imply that inspectors need to understand the systems that affect them because they exist in a loose and complicated system (Weick, 1976). Therefore, critical reflective practice requires inspectors to question their contextual, knowledge, and practices (Densten & Gray, 2001). This is done through identifying daily

surprises, how the encountered surprises resonate with their context, and further exploration of the encountered surprises (Brookfield, 1998).

## VI. CONCLUSION

The problem of inconsistencies in school inspection data collection, interpretation, and report writing has multiple levels and is influenced by many contexts. As such it requires complexity leadership to address. An integration of the three shared resultant outcomes of complexity leadership and critical reflective practice create an enabling school inspection system. The combination further enables school inspectors to challenge their deep-rooted practices, context and knowledge then find a positive alternative to the discrepancies.

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