Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences OPEN ACCESS
Abbreviated Key Title: Sch J Arts Humanit Soc Sci
ISSN 2347-9493 (Print) | ISSN 2347-5374 (Online)
Journal homepage: https://saspublishers.com

School Leadership in Volatile Environments: The Zimbabwean Experience

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DOI: 10.36347/sjahss.2021.v09i09.009 | **Received:** 18.06.2021 | **Accepted:** 25.07.2021 | **Published:** 17.09.2021

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

School heads in Zimbabwe face relentless changes in the environment in which they operate. Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) created by the diversity, intensity and rapidity of these changes present challenges on ways to effectively lead as existing methods apparently prove inadequate. This study examines the major sources of volatility that affect school operations in Zimbabwe. It explores the challenges faced by school heads as they live through volatility in their operational environments. It further explores the strategies that have been put in place to ensure that schools counter these challenges. The study employs a mixed design methodology that involves the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods complementing each other. The study employed convenience sampling to select twenty school heads that formed the study sample. The theoretical framework guiding this study was the chaos theory. The study found the major sources of volatility and resultant challenges were economic crisis, political interference, globalization, poor technology and disasters (both natural and manmade). The study found that agility, that is, the ability to communicate across the organization and to move quickly to apply solutions, was the key strategy school leaders could employ to cope and win in volatile environments. Resource planning was also found to be an important strategy to win in volatile environments characterized by many changes that affect the normal operations of schools. Perhaps the major finding was that complex problems in schools could be resolved through deliberate coordination, interventions and creative effort. System oriented thinking was found to enhance such interaction and engagement. The key recommendation for this study was the need for school heads to employ readiness strategies in turbulent environments and organizational resilience principles in line with this study's findings.

Keywords: Volatile environment, leadership, VUCA, volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity.

INTRODUCTION

School heads, just like any other organizational leaders face dynamic and profound change that is unprecedented; with the speed, intensity and frequency of change to produce operating environments with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) (Matthysen and Harris, 2018). Rimita *et al*., (2020) assert that a recent study of 13 124 leaders indicated that VUCA was the greatest challenge facing leaders in this century. The research revealed that only 18% of the leaders were capable of leading in turbulent environments, leaving a research gap that has to be exploited. The context of leadership in a volatile environment and the complexity of decision-making prove problematic. Volatility challenges the very essence of Henri Fayol's thinking and the cornerstone of management where planning, controlling, organizing, commanding and coordinating are no longer possible in a highly turbulent business environment (Rimita *et al*., 2020). Unprecedented change in a volatile world disrupts leadership and organizational models which were designed for reliability and accountability. This ultimately creates inertia and resistance to transformation. Horney *et al*., (2010) maintain that volatility readiness prepares organizational leaders to anticipate and respond to change in a multipolar world. Lack of readiness may cause organizational leaders to suffer from increased stress and other mental health issues and organisations to perform poorly due to unpredictability, chaos, complexity and confusion present in the operating environment (Millar *et al*., 2018). An increased understanding on volatile environments and strategies educational leaders can employ during volatility could add new knowledge to both theory and practice and thereby helping to avert challenges presented in the volatile world. The current study sought to explore the major sources of volatility that affect school operations in Zimbabwe. It further sought to explore the challenges faced by school heads as they live through volatility in their operational environments. Finally, it sought to explore the strategies

that have been put in place to ensure that schools counter these challenges. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What major sources of volatility often affect the school business environment operations?
- What are the challenges faced by school heads experiencing volatility in their environment?
- To what extent are school heads ready for volatile situations?
- What strategies can school heads put in place to ensure schools can counter challenges in volatile environments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept Volatile Environment

The word volatile implies instability. Volatility is turbulence (Sullivan, 2012). Volatility exists when things change fast but without a predictable trend or repeatable pattern. Organisations experience volatility when unexpected events upset an established routine with speed, magnitude, and volume of change creating disorder (Horney *et al*., 2010). In volatility, leaders understand the changes and have sufficient information about the change. However, although the dynamics of change are understood, they are unpredictable and the rapidity of occurrence challenges the speed of responses and leader focus. Horney *et al* (2010) maintain that the frequency and unpredictability of the changes compound risk exposure and decision-making. Conventional leader practices of pattern identification, experience, and use of best practice are obsolete in a world of increasing volatile change (Codreanu, 2016). Organisations established to operate adhering to set plans and routines with fixe d structures built for reliability are presented with challenges in such circumstances.

Volatility previously used to be driven by wars, natural disasters, epidemics, and severe economic crises. However, today, it is also driven by globalization as well which triggers increased interconnectivity and interdependence in organisations. Technology also instigates digital and social media disruptions while financial interdependence produces volatile markets and growing consumer awareness leading to constantly changing demands (Lemoine *et al*., 2017).

Economic Influence on Education

During an economic crisis, there are both negative (harmful) effects and positive (beneficial) effects on educational outcomes. However, empirical evidence reveals that the negative effects are typically stronger than the positive effects. The slowdown of the economy is associated with reduction in hourly wage rates and the amount of public and private funds available for schools. Such conditions affect children's educational outcomes such as school enrollment, attainment, attendance and performance. Shafiq (2010) argues that a reduction in adult income makes it harder for the parents to bear the direct costs of education such as tuition, fees, books, supplies, uniforms and private tutoring. Educational outcomes are consequently harmed because the child is either withdrawn from school or inadequately prepared for it. Reduction in hourly or daily wage rates of adults may force the parents to become more reliant on child labour. An increase in labour hours for the child can harm educational outcomes for the child because the additional labour is physically and emotionally draining and leaves fewer hours for studying. In the same vein, reductions in hourly or daily wage rates of adults may force the parents to work longer hours which in turn reduces the time that parents can devote assisting their child with homework, reading and other educational activities.

The net effect of an economic crisis on educational outcomes varies by child characteristics such as age and gender. In Indonesia, younger children experienced larger reductions in school enrollment during the crisis of the 1990s (Eloundou-Enyegue and Davanzo, 2003). As for gender, there is evidence that girls' educational outcomes decline more in an economic crisis than boys' outcomes. (Eloundou-Enyegue and Davanzo, 2003) maintain that during Cameroon's crisis years in the 1980s and 1990s, girls were 83% more likely than boys to drop out of school. At any given level of education, the outcomes of rural girls fared worse than those of urban girls during Cameroon's crisis periods. Poorer households were much more likely to sacrifice the education of girls than of boys in Cameroon. The Peruvian government sharply decreased public expenditures during its 1987-91 crisis years. Recurrent expenditures in Peru declined by 50% during the crisis but capital expenditures for Peruvian schools remained low and stable (Schady, 2004). The fall in recurrent expenditure for Peruvian schools was accompanied by declining real earnings for teachers and administrators which increased teacher absenteeism rates because teachers began seeking other part-time employment.

In Zimbabwe, the democratisation of education in 1980 had considerable impact on state resources. Skyrocketing enrolments led to increased budgets. A fall in economic performance was realized during the second half of this decade. The net effect of this volatile situation was low economic performance and growing failure by government to sustain its social and economic reform programmes which were costing the state considerable resources. Resources for social services, including education began to dwindle resulting in the weakening of the services themselves and education was not spared. Disinvestment rate of companies seeking relocation in other countries signified the volatility of the Zimbabwean environment. Shrinking state resources compounded by reduced financial support for education by donor agencies and foreign governments resulted in diminishing teaching and

learning resources and a failing supervision and inspectorate system. The impact of the recession and poor economic performance on teaching and learning was noticeable as resources for teaching and learning became fewer as production costs began to skyrocket. By 1990, it was realized that the socialist ideological stance pursued was creating serious economic problems and was not viable in Zimbabwe. Government finally adopted the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP).

A number of strategies were introduced to reform the Zimbabwean economy. These included a reduction in government expenditure through a reduction of the civil service and reduced expenditure on social services through a cost-sharing arrangement with the beneficiaries (Shizha and Kariwo, 2009; Zvobgo, 2003). This meant that there would be no more free primary education. Zvobgo (2003) notes that government schools would be allowed to supplement resources from Treasury by levying parents for various services offered by the schools. All educational institutions would institute cost-recovery measures in order to reduce the financial burden created by increasing costs. The education sector suffered tremendously from ESAP as government reduced budgetary allocation for educational and training programmes. Poverty became more acute and widespread leading to many parents finding it difficult to afford tuition fees for their children. Shizha and Kariwo (2009) are of the view that the cost – sharing measures adopted led education to become an economic merchandise and marketable commodity to be sold to willing buyers while educational institutions were turned into commercial organisations. Such measures resulted in less financial support for the schools and widened the gap between the rich and the poor.

The financial crisis of 2008-2009 rendered many businesses obsolete and organisations throughout the world were plunged into turbulent economic environments (Lemoine *et al*., 2017). In the new normal, education institutions were caught in a critically demanding and increasing unknown present and future characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

Economic concerns along with recessions left the Zimbabwean government providing decreasing resources for education while demanding increases in productivity. A substantial number of teachers left their jobs and sought for alternative employment in neighboring countries and elsewhere. The brain drain reversed the gains that had been attained. The government had provided trained teachers to the system in order to achieve education for all by 2015. However, low morale within the teaching profession led to staff exodus from the teaching profession. Unfortunately, professionals with essential and vital skills for economic and social development were likely to seek alternative ways for survival in countries that could sustain their livelihoods. The situation was further exacerbated by industrial actions frequently organized by teachers to force government to pay them accordingly. In urban areas, increased joblessness and growing closure of foreign as well as domestic companies reduced earnings available to the worker resulting in many children either dropping out of school or not enrolling at all. Thus, in such a volatile economic environment, Zimbabwean educational leadership had to navigate.

Political Influence on Education

A well performing education system is central to achieving inclusive development. However, the challenge of improving educational outcomes has proven to be unexpectedly difficult. Access to education has increased, but quality remains low, with weakness in governance comprising an important part of the explanation.

'Achieve universal primary education' was adopted unanimously at the UN in 2000 as the 2nd of the Millennium Development Goals. As of 2015, 91% of children in the relevant age cohort in developing countries were enrolled in primary schools up from 83% in 2000 (Levy *et al*., 2018) . Levy *et al*., (2018) further argue that the 2008 results from the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) found that more than ½ of developing –country students who took the test scored below the 'low' threshold benchmark set for the test.

Kingdon *et al*., (2004) and Hickey and Hossain (2018) identify a multiplicity of distinct political explanations for lagging quality which include the use of patronage to sustain political support, that is, the use by political leaders of public resources and positions as mechanisms for rewarding friends, punishing opponents and more broadly, sustaining political support. One key consequence of patronage orientation is to give strong support to expansion of access to education (with all its associated promises to voters, new jobs in the sector and new procurement contracts) but in practice to give low priority to improving quality (Levy *et al*., 2018).

When Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980, radical changes in educational policy were effected. Zvobgo (2003) asserts that by 1987, the 1987 Education Act became the legal basis for free education in Zimbabwe. Education was democratized and government had to spend heavily on social programs that included providing tuition-free primary education. In addition to free primary education, secondary and tertiary education was heavily subsidized. According to Zvobgo (2003), the number of primary schools as well as secondary schools massively increased in the country by 1991. Primary school and secondary school enrolment also rose from 819 200 to 2.4 million. The number of primary school teachers rose by 210% from

28 455 in 1979 to 59 874 in 1992 (Zvobgo, 2003). Zvobgo (2003) further says that the number of secondary schools increased during the same period from 177 to 1517, a rise of 857%. Enrolment rose from 66 213 to 687 742, a 1038% increase while the number of teachers increased by 700% from 3 730 to 25 759.

Crowded classes and high teacher/pupil ratios of 1:45 or more began to affect teaching and learning standards. Education began to experience great difficulties and the gains made during the first decade of independence in improving citizens' right of access to education started to suffer. An equally volatile situation for education was the difficulty in addressing issues of quality. It became evident that the socialist ideology adopted in 1980 was no longer suitable to the changing world and was placing a heavy financial burden on the government. The government amended the 1987 Education Act (No. 5/1987) in 1991. The 1991 Act (No. 26/1991) reintroduced tuition fees at primary school level. Shizha and Kariwo (2009) argue that the reintroduction of tuition fees was a policy reversal of the principle of free primary education enacted in the 1987 Education Act. Education became a marketable commodity. Thus, those who could afford it could get it and those who could not, could do without. Thus the policy fuelled school dropout rate and at the same time reduced the central government's administrative and financial responsibility. This resulted in less financial support for the schools especially those in poor rural areas thereby widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Such policies as the 1991 Act (No. 26/1991) presented challenges to school administrators as they experienced critical shortage of resources at their institutions.

Globalization Influence on Education

Education institutions, once face bound, are no longer confined to traditional "brick and mortar" buildings (Ball *et al*., 2020). Access to education has been facilitated by access to technology. Lemoine, *et al*. (2017) assert that any time/anywhere access to education provides a significant instrument for permitting enhanced economic prosperity as well as social participation of people. Education is viewed as a crucial economic outcome of globalization across international borders, which is considered to be a tradable commodity by decision-makers Lemoine *et al*., 2017). Cooper, Hersch and O'Leary (2012) maintain that economic considerations related to international competitiveness have significantly contributed to the internationalization of learning. The movement of educational services and products improved significantly in the last decade (Lane and Maznevski, 2014). Education is increasingly seen as both an export commodity and as a key national brand for a nation's knowledge proficiency (Lemoine *et al*., 2017). In this regard, knowledge institutions, whether private or public, are regarded as significant in a country's global and local competitiveness. Thus, as learning increasingly becomes borderless, education becomes the significant other in national agendas. To become globally competitive, every country, large or small, is tackling educational reform (Jandhvala, 2015). However, the accelerated pace of globalization and technological change requires management systems and organisational arrangements that are adroit processing equivocality and sophisticated in cultivating cooperation across organisational and cultural boundaries (Beugré *et al*., 2006).

To become globally competitive as well, the Zimbabwean government reformed its educational system at all levels. Compatible with the 21st century global trends which were sweeping across Zimbabwe, the government mandated the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to come up with a competence based curriculum which was scientifically and technologically biased. Such an innovation created a volatile educational environment as educational leaders had not been prepared for such an educational business environment.

Technological Influence on Education

Technology is regarded as the basis of economic growth. Raja and Negasubramani (2018) maintain that an economy which is poor in technology can never grow in today's world. The impact of technology can be felt in every field, including education. In many organisations, the introduction of new technological elements will institute a paradigm shift encompassing the entire value system (Stewart *et al*., 2016). (Lemoine *et al*., 2017) posit that such changes threaten to rupture existing value chains, change the form, nature and content of products and their delivery. Rapid changes in technology are often ambiguous as mandates for change increase.

Changes in societies and technology around the world are forcing organisations to clarify their values, develop new strategies and learn new ways of operating (Beugré *et al*., 2006). Such changes in the external environment call for new challenges in the organisational structures, management practices and leadership. The Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education embarked on a comprehensive curriculum reform process meant to embrace the technological advances in today's world. A new competence – based curriculum framework was developed and finalized in 2015 and its phased implementation commenced in 2017. The curriculum demanded that learners be engaged in vocational subjects which empowered them with entrepreneurial and survival skills. Learners would be exposed to the disciplines of science, technology, engineering and mathematics which would provide them with scientific and technological skills which learners would require in the productive sector of the economy. However, such a massive curriculum innovation could not be effectively

implemented without presenting some challenges to educational leaders.

Social Influence on Education

Zimbabwe has often experienced both man – made and natural disasters including droughts, floods, disease outbreaks, forest fires and road traffic accidents. Lives, livelihoods and infrastructure have been lost in these disasters. Such disasters negatively impacted on the education sector of the nation.

Zimbabwe experienced Cyclone Idai, an extreme whether event, in March 2019. The storm and subsequent flooding and slides left 340 people dead and many others missing (Chatiza, 2019). Flooding and landslides caused damage to homes, fields, schools and roads and disrupted livelihoods in Manicaland, Masvingo and Mashonaland East Provinces of Zimbabwe. Chatiza asserts that Cyclone Idai affected 270 000 people in Zimbabwe. 51 000 were displaced; more than 340 died and many others went missing. According to the Education Cluster's Rapid Joint Education Needs Assessment Report of 6 May 2019, at least 91 000 children's learning and wellbeing was affected. Schools across the cyclone - affected districts had a critical shortage of teaching and learning materials, damaged or destroyed school infrastructure, a reduction in staffing, low attendance rates and teachers and learners who required a range of support. Although the majority of schools were functional, the quality and safety of the learning environment and overall capacity to meet the needs of students was reduced as a result of the emergency.

Calls on humanitarian actors, donors and government and non – governmental agencies to restore safe learning spaces and ensure continued access to learning had to be made urgently. However, because disaster risk factors remain and need to be understood and managed, the building of resilience has become very important. This requires evidence – based reduction of risks and building the capacity of potential victims of disaster and their institutions. Institutional and infrastructural changes to better manage and respond to disaster risks are key as appropriate and timely actions during and immediately after a disaster help with early recovery and anchor sustainable development actions (Chatiza, 2019).

In the same vein, the Covid-19 virus affected the whole world and forced most governments to close schools, colleges and universities in 2020. However, education was not closed to students and teachers. The pandemic replaced the century old chalk and talk method of teaching to online teaching (Saradhamani and Krishnakumani, 2020). Future Workplace's recent survey entitled 'The Impact of the Coronavirus in the Workplace' conducted among 350 HR leaders in the USA revealed that across the globe, working from home would be the new normal for workers (Meister, 2020). Face time will no longer be the measure of worker productivity. Meister sees a future where machines would handle problem solving and humans would focus on problem finding. Learning would be radically transformed. This new normal of working would drive new ways to learn on line.

In today's world, students can be reached through such E-learning and e-teaching applications as Microsoft teams, Zoom, Easy class, Google classroom and Go to meeting. However, in order to use these platforms or applications, both teachers and students need such things as computer/mobile with internet access, necessary software and separate workplace. Even though there are various techno-driven products available to teachers and students to teach and study online, the basic things which are hardly needed to access those platforms are not distributed equally to all. Drop-out rates are likely as a result of this massive disruption to education access.

Saradhamani and Krishnakumani (2020) are of the view that Covid-19 has become the accelerator for one of the greatest workplace transformations of our time. How we work, exercise, learn and where we learn will be changed forever. The pandemic is shifting how organisations do business and accelerate the 4th Industrial Revolution fuelled by smart technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and mobile supercomputing. The survey revealed that Covid-19 could be an opportunity for organizations to rethink assumptions on their products, services and business model as well as cross training and creating new products to be better prepared for the next pandemic. Meister (2020) views the Covid-19 as an accelerator for defining the role of the organization, remote working, re-skilling, skill - based hiring and the transformation of corporate learning. Educational leaders will have to get rid of their old practices which relied heavily on face to face learning and resort to using the latest consumer technologies. This is educational leaders' opportunity to show how they can lead in a crisis as they navigate the unprecedented journey during the pandemic era.

Theoretical Framework

The theory behind this study is the Chaos theory. Chaos theory is a branch of mathematics focusing on the study of chaos. It is an interdisciplinary theory that states that, within the apparent randomness of chaotic complex system, there are underlying patterns, interconnectedness, constant feedback loops, repetition, self – similarity, fractals and self – organization (Bau and Sachmurove, 2002). Chaotic behavior exists in many natural systems including fluid flow, heartbeat irregularities, weather and climate. Chaos theory has applications in a variety of disciplines including meteorology, sociology, philosophy, computer science and anthropology. The theory concerns deterministic systems whose behavior can, in principle, be predicted. Chaotic systems are predictable

for a while and then 'appear' to become random. The amount of time that the behavior of a chaotic system can be effectively predicted depends on how much uncertainty can be tolerated in the forecast, how accurately its current state can be measured and a time scale on the dynamics of the system.

The term chaos means a state of disorder (ibid, 2002). Deterministic systems that exhibit irregular, random – like and complex behavior are referred to as chaotic. In chaotic systems, the uncertainty in a forecast increases exponentially with elapsed time. When meaningful predictions cannot be made, the system appears random. Such a system is sensitive to initial conditions. Sensitivity to initial conditions (the butterfly effect) means that an arbitrarily small change or perturbation of current path or trajectory may lead to significantly different future behavior. One of the characteristics of chaotic systems is high sensitivity to initial conditions. Bau and Shachmurove (2002) argue that when a system exhibits high sensitivity to initial conditions, we cannot predict its future behavior. Any small inaccuracy in the initial data such as may result from measurement errors, will amplify rapidly and will render any long – term prediction useless. The flapping way of the butterfly represents a small change in the initial condition of the system which causes a chain of events that prevents the predictability of large scale phenomena. Had the butterfly not flapped its wings, the trajectory of the overall system could have been very different. A consequence of sensitivity to initial conditions is that if we start with a limited amount of information about a system, then beyond a certain time, the system would no longer be predictable.

The proponent of chaos theory was Henri Poincare, a French mathematician, dynamist and astronomer who in the 1880s realized that small differences in the initial conditions may produce very great ones in the final phenomena. However, the theory was only formalized during the second half of the 20th century when some scientists discovered that linear theory, the prevailing system theory at that time, could not explain the observed behavior of certain experiments. It was not until the appearance of electronic computers that detailed depiction of the complex behavior exhibited by chaotic systems could be understood. In 1963, meteorologist Edward Lorenz, an early pioneer of chaos theory, discovered that small changes in initial conditions produced large changes in long term outcome as he worked on weather predictions using a simple digital computer. Although the scientific community recognized that deterministic systems may exhibit random – like, turbulent behavior, the prevailing dogma had been that such behavior would be exhibited by only systems with very many degrees of freedom. Lorenz's work demonstrated that a system with relatively small number of degrees of freedom (as few as 3) may also exhibit chaotic behavior. Since these conditions are not precisely known and are subject to perturbations, long – term predictions of the behavior of these systems are impossible. Lorenz's discovery showed that even detailed atmospheric modeling cannot make precise long – term weather predictions.

Although chaos theory was born from observing weather patterns, it has become applicable to a variety of other situations such as geology, sociology and educational leadership. Although the chaotic behavior defy long term predictions, short – term predictions with error estimates can still be made. Many chaotic systems are controllable. One can suppress their chaotic behavior altogether.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed design that involved the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods complementing each other. The use of qualitative design helped the researcher to understand individuals in their natural settings while the use of the quantitative design ensured that measurement was valid, reliable and generalizable.

Sampling

The population of the study was the 132 primary school heads in Masvingo District of Zimbabwe. Convenience sampling was used to select twenty school heads that formed the study sample. Convenience sampling is a specific type of non-probability sampling procedure that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in the study (Saunders, Levis, and Thornhill, 2015). A structured interview guide was used for data collection. Out of the 132 primary schools in Masvingo District of Zimbabwe, only 20 schools were conveniently selected during the study. Heads of the 20 schools were interviewed and proceedings recorded. To ensure greater validity and reliability, a peer reviewer read through the interview guide and made some adjustments to the questions.

Data Analysis

Collected data were organized and presented in a meaningful way to provide insight into relationships that existed. Data analysis involved reducing accumulated data to a manageable size, developing summaries, looking for patterns and applying statistical techniques. Data in graph and table form enabled the researchers to check for uniformity, consistency and accuracy while narrative reports brought out findings more clearly in a qualitative way.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study found the major sources of volatility and resultant challenges to be economic crisis, political interference, globalization, poor technology and disasters (both natural and manmade). The global Covid-19 crisis topped the charts in as far as natural disasters were concerned. The findings also revealed

that agility, that is, the ability to communicate across the organization and to move quickly to apply solutions, was the key strategy educational leaders can employ to cope and win in volatile environments. Lawrence. (2013) maintain that agility is the ongoing development and maintenance of decision – making capability under changing circumstances. A basic requirement for agility consists of clear and understandable objectives, responsible leadership, respectful communication, a suitable learning infrastructure and the ability to experiment and play around with new ideas. Leadership agility and adaptability are now required skills if organisations are to succeed in this volatile environment (ibid, 2013). Educational leaders must therefore make continuous shifts in people, process, technology and structure if they are to succeed. This requires quickness and flexibility in decision – making (Horney *et al*., 2010).

The study also revealed that resource planning was an important strategy to win in volatile environments characterized by many changes that affect the normal operations of educational institutions. Educational leaders have to adjust their plans and redirect their efforts toward the most crucial issue. In support of this view, Rimita *et al*., (2020) assert that, to succeed, educational institutions operating in volatile environments need to create alignment between human resources with a fluid business strategy and to re – engineer their processes for flexibility to enhance the speed of response to volatility. Thus, resource planning was identified in this study as one of the strategies that could be employed in turbulent environments.

It was observed that complex problems in educational organisations could be resolved through deliberate coordination, interventions and creative effort. The findings in this study revealed that system oriented thinking in educational institutions enhances interaction and employee engagement. In support of this view, Rimita *et al*., (2020) say that leaders have to move away from linearity and closed loop thinking and need to adopt a consulting style of working. Empowerment allows shared leadership and faster decision – making to take advantage of opportunities emerging in the chaos. Trusting the employees to make the right decisions entails sharing the vision, as rigid and complacent thought processes in volatile environments blinds leadership.

The study also revealed that educational institutions were not ivory towers in communities in which they operated. Respondents revealed that educational leaders needed to employ a multi - stakeholder management approach in turbulent environments to create networks for collaboration and partnerships. In support of adopting the multi - stakeholder approach management, Rimita *et al*., (2020) suggested that as organisations planned for uncertainties, they required a strategic focus within a complex system of multiple stakeholders in collaborative and equitable partnerships for achieving more sustainable performance. Through networking, educational leaders generate the much needed information while partnerships create backups for dealing with fragile working relationships.

The importance of employing a variety of leadership styles such as shared, transformational and purpose – driven was identified as one of the strategies that could be employed in volatile environments. Rimita *et al*., (2020) assert that such leadership styles enhance flexibility in decision – making, harness the power of the network, and inject ethics into every decision.

In volatile environments, purpose –driven leaders focus on helping others cope with elusive and volatile forces while maintaining the organisational vision. Coccia (2015) maintains that purpose – driven leadership is a model that align aspects of running organisations with the core values and beliefs of the said organization as a way to remain sustainable irrespective of the turbulent nurture of the environment.

These findings confirm that leadership remains the foundational organizational strength in volatile and non- volatile times. School heads contribute significantly to society and create positive social change in many ways that promote the dignity of teachers and the communities in which they operate. The volatile environmental challenges identified in this study include disruption of school programmes due to ailments such as the Covid-19 pandemic, economic and financial challenges and politics of patronage. Developing an awareness of how to lead in a volatile environment may contribute to school business success, thereby alleviating negative individual, organisational and societal problems stemming from failing organizational operations (Saleh and Watson, 2017). Through studies on volatile environments, empirical knowledge that better prepares educational leaders to face persistent change by enhancing organizational leader readiness awareness and their understanding of complexity in an era of constant change is generated.

The findings from this study may contribute to new knowledge and assist leaders through emotional turmoil brought during volatility. They may inform them on ways to be volatile- ready to reduce instances of organizational failures which may lead to negative social impact. Current and future leaders could be informed on the ways to ensure that their strategies are robust, agile and sufficiently adaptive to navigate in a highly complex environment. Understanding how to navigate in a volatile environment could build organisational resilience thereby minimizing the impact of drainage and operational losses (Rimita *et al*., 2020).

Organisations and societies in constantly changing environments must learn to be agile and to

enhance recovery mechanisms to achieve positive social change. The implication of multi-stakeholder management approach promotes positive social change. When people come together, they create a support network that enhances greater performance of the social and economic system because of the shared vision and systems thinking. The collaboration and partnership found in multi-stakeholder approaches to work foster relationships necessary for sense-making in turbulent times.

Lawrence (2013) asserts that volatility can be countered with vision which is vital in turbulent times. School heads should therefore have a clear vision of where they want their organizations to be. Such school heads can better weather volatile environmental changes such as economic downturns or technological developments in the environment. They are able to look and listen beyond their functional areas of expertise to make sense of the volatility and to lead with vision. They should excellently communicate with all levels of teachers in their schools and demonstrate teamwork and collaboration skills to thrive. Their focus should be more on complex thinking abilities and less on behavioral competences. Leadership development should be focused on learning agility, self - awareness, comfort with ambiguity and strategic thinking (Petri, 2011). Thus, educational talent managers in the education system and talent management professionals offering educational leadership and management programmes at tertiary institutions have to ensure that their training and development programmes included the VUCA skills needed by educational leaders to navigate in volatile environments.

- At the selection process of school heads, the selection panel should assess agility and complex thinking skills by using a structured interview format designed to evoke from the examples of past agility on the job. Lawrence (2013) suggests that these talent management professionals can formulate other questions that can assess a candidate's strategic thinking skills, self – awareness, openness to change, ability to collaborate and communicate across functions and other skills required in a volatile environment.
- Existing leaders can still be developed to be agile leaders through on – the – job training, job assignments, coaching and mentoring. However, to develop VUCA leaders, educational talent development professionals must focus on programmes that help develop agility, adaptability, innovation, collaboration, communication, openness to change and other higher – order critical thinking skills. Such programmes need to be quickly delivered to keep up with the pace of the change. O'Shea and colleagues suggest that talent management professionals should engage in scenario planning about possible futures when developing leadership programmes. This involves projecting possible situations and deciding how the organization would or would not react. Through scenario planning, the knowledge, skills and other attributes leaders may need in future business environments can be identified.
- Leadership development programmes can also include scenario training where participants can anticipate possible future challenges and devise possible solutions. This makes school leaders more confident when they actually encounter new situations.
- Simulations can be used for developing volatility leaders. Participants are given an opportunity to practice skills in a safe, non – threatening environment. At the same time, they are able to assess their strengths and weaknesses. This makes them more aware of their own skills and gaps.
- School leaders should employ job rotation to develop collaboration and to encourage thinking outside the box. In this regard, school heads should be changed when need be.
- To survive in a volatile world, the education system must create an organizational culture that rewards the desired behavior and retains agile employees. This can be achieved by rewarding innovation, agile behavior and calculated risk – taking. Performance management systems should reflect VUCA Prime values and attributes. Rewards for desired behaviours could include job perks, additional compensation, promotions and preferred work assignments. The best rewards systems in a volatile environment are not to be rigid and to offer successful leaders rewards that appeal to them. The organizational culture that promotes and rewards agile educational leaders will perpetuate itself and attract and retain the type of innovative and agile talent that educational institutions are seeking.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to literature on VUCA in general and educational volatility, in particular. It provides a perspective on how economic, political, social and globalization changes have influenced volatility in the Zimbabwean education system and strategies that were employed by some educational leaders to navigate through the turbulent environments.

The findings reveal that today's leaders are not fully prepared for the challenges of the volatile world and provide strategies to apply in volatile educational environments to achieve success. This prevents failure and reduces employee stress levels brought by constant change and uncertainty in today's world. Educational leaders have therefore to augment their leadership skills and daily strategies to keep up with this "new normal" for business.

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