Bridging Governance Gaps in Zimbabwe's Mother–Satellite Schools: Implications for Educational Equity and Quality

Authors: 1. Mugove Mukucha Email: mugokuchi@gmail.com;

2. Ndongwe Evershine: ndongweevershine10@gmail.com;

3. Mangwiro Temba: mangwirotembachisadza@gmail.com

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe

Abstract

Satellite schools were established in Zimbabwe to expand access to education in underserved rural communities. However, limited empirical evidence exists on how administrative and operational relationships between mother schools and their affiliated satellite schools influence educational equity and quality. This study examines the effectiveness of the mother–satellite school linkage model in Mudzi District, Zimbabwe. Guided by Social Identity Theory, the study investigates how role clarity, resource allocation, communication, supervision, and coordination shape educational outcomes in satellite schools. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, involving a survey of 20 school leaders, in-depth interviews with 10 participants, and document analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings reveal significant gaps in role definition, uneven resource distribution, weak supervision, limited communication, and identity-based tensions. Satellite schools face higher teacher–pupil ratios, inadequate infrastructure, and limited pedagogical support, which contribute to lower learner performance. The study advances a governance–identity model of mother–satellite linkages and concludes that the absence of a formalised operational framework undermines the model's equity goals. Policy reforms focusing on structured governance, resource equity, and strengthened coordination are recommended.

Keywords: satellite schools, mother schools, educational equity, school governance, rural education, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Equitable access to quality education remains central to Zimbabwe's national development agenda and is aligned with global commitments such as Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2023). In

Zimbabwe, the expansion of schooling opportunities intensified following the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, which reconfigured settlement patterns and generated increased demand for education in previously underserved rural areas (Moyo, 2011; Zvobgo, 2003). To address this demand under conditions of fiscal and infrastructural constraint, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education institutionalised the satellite school model, whereby emergent schools operate as extensions of established "mother schools," enabling rapid spatial expansion without full institutional resourcing (MoPSE, 2020).

Within this arrangement, mother schools are mandated to provide governance oversight, administrative coordination, professional supervision, and resource support to satellite schools. As a policy instrument, the model reflects a hybrid decentralisation strategy that combines centralised control with localised service delivery, intended to enhance both efficiency and equity (Bray, 2000; Chikoko & Mhloyi, 2019). However, the assumption that administrative linkage can compensate for material deficits remains insufficiently interrogated. Emerging evidence suggests that, rather than equalising provision, the model often reproduces systemic inequalities between mother and satellite schools.

Empirical studies consistently document disparities in infrastructure, teacher deployment, instructional resources, and learner outcomes, with satellite schools disproportionately affected by underdevelopment and operational fragility (Mafa, 2017; Ncube & Tshabalala, 2020; UNICEF, 2022). Yet, the dominant explanatory focus on resource scarcity obscures the institutional mechanisms through which such disparities are organised and sustained. Specifically, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the governance architecture and operational linkages that structure interactions between mother and satellite schools, including how authority, accountability, and resource flows are negotiated within this relationship.

This study argues that the mother–satellite configuration is more appropriately understood as a governance subsystem within a decentralised education system, where outcomes are mediated not only by resource availability but also by coordination mechanisms, organisational hierarchies, and identity formations. Drawing on decentralisation theory and organisational systems perspectives, the study conceptualises administrative linkage as a set of structured interactions that shape decision-making, supervision, and institutional performance (Bush & Glover, 2014). At the same time, insights from institutional and dependency theories suggest that satellite schools occupy structurally subordinate positions

that may constrain autonomy, reinforce dependence, and limit context-responsive innovation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

This study makes two key contributions. Theoretically, it advances a governance-subsystem framework that integrates decentralisation, organisational systems, and institutional dependency perspectives to explain how administrative linkages shape educational inequality. From a policy perspective, it provides empirically grounded insights to inform the redesign of coordination, accountability, and support mechanisms within the mother–satellite model to enhance equity and system effectiveness.

The persistence of disparities between mother and satellite schools therefore, raises a critical policy paradox: a model designed to expand equitable access may simultaneously institutionalise differentiated quality. This paradox is not merely a function of resource constraints but reflects deeper governance tensions embedded in the design and implementation of the mother–satellite relationship. Without a clearer understanding of how administrative and operational linkages function in practice, policy interventions risk addressing symptoms rather than underlying structural drivers.

Problem Statement

Despite the widespread adoption of the satellite school model in Zimbabwe as a mechanism for expanding access, significant disparities in educational quality and outcomes persist between mother and satellite schools. Existing research has largely attributed these disparities to resource limitations, with insufficient attention to the governance and operational dynamics that shape how resources are distributed, decisions are made, and accountability is enforced. Consequently, the administrative and relational mechanisms underpinning the mother–satellite linkage remain under-theorised and empirically underexplored, limiting the effectiveness of policy and leadership interventions aimed at achieving equitable education.

Research Questions

To address this gap, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are administrative and governance responsibilities structured and enacted between mother and satellite schools?

2. What coordination mechanisms and operational practices shape resource allocation, supervision, and decision-making within the mother–satellite relationship?

3. How do organisational identity and dependency dynamics influence the functioning and performance of satellite schools?

4. In what ways do these administrative and operational linkages contribute to, or mitigate, disparities in educational quality and learner outcomes?

2. Literature Review

Research on satellite schools in Zimbabwe has consistently highlighted structural and operational constraints that undermine their effectiveness. A dominant strand of scholarship documents persistent infrastructural deficits, including inadequate classroom space, limited access to water and sanitation facilities, and shortages of teaching and learning materials (Jakachira, 2020; Tarisayi, 2019). These material constraints are often compounded by human resource challenges, particularly the deployment of inexperienced or underqualified teachers and the prevalence of multi-grade teaching, which places significant pedagogical demands on educators and constrains curriculum coverage (Mafa, 2017; Tarisayi, 2019). Similar patterns have been observed across rural education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, where resource limitations intersect with systemic inequalities to constrain learning outcomes (Tikly, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Beyond material constraints, comparative analyses consistently show that satellite schools underperform relative to their mother school counterparts in key indicators such as learner achievement, progression rates, and examination outcomes (Hlupo & Tsikira, 2012; Ncube & Tshabalala, 2020). These disparities reflect not only differences in resource provision but also variations in institutional capacity, leadership support, and access to professional development opportunities. In many cases, satellite schools operate at the margins of formal administrative systems, receiving irregular supervision and limited pedagogical guidance from mother schools (UNICEF, 2022). Recent studies further suggest that such marginalisation is a common feature of decentralised education systems, where peripheral institutions often experience weaker support structures (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

Emerging scholarship has begun to shift beyond deficit-oriented accounts by examining the relational and organisational dimensions of the mother–satellite arrangement. Studies highlight ambiguity and contestation in leadership roles, with unclear delineation of authority between mother school heads and satellite school administrators often resulting in fragmented

decision-making and weakened accountability structures (Mutanga & Kapoka, 2021). This ambiguity is frequently compounded by communication gaps, logistical constraints, and the absence of formalised coordination mechanisms, which undermine effective governance and support. Similar governance challenges have been reported in decentralised education contexts across Africa, where weak coordination and unclear mandates limit system effectiveness (Bennell & Sedel, 2021).

Despite these insights, the literature remains conceptually fragmented. Much of the existing work treats infrastructure, staffing, leadership, and performance as discrete issues, with limited effort to integrate them within a coherent analytical framework. In particular, there is insufficient engagement with governance theory to explain how administrative arrangements shape resource distribution, decision-making processes, and institutional behaviour. Decentralisation theory suggests that the effectiveness of devolved systems depends not only on structural arrangements but also on the clarity of roles, alignment of incentives, and strength of coordination mechanisms (Bray, 2000; Bush & Glover, 2014). At the same time, organisational and institutional theories emphasise how power relations, dependency structures, and legitimacy dynamics influence how organisations function within hierarchical systems (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Importantly, recent scholarship points to the need to incorporate relational and identity-based dimensions into analyses of educational governance. Social Identity Theory suggests that organisational actors are influenced by group affiliations and perceived hierarchies, which shape patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and decision-making (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In decentralised education systems, such identity dynamics may reinforce institutional inequalities, particularly where satellite schools are positioned as subordinate entities.

This study addresses these gaps by advancing an integrated perspective that links administrative structures, coordination mechanisms, and organisational identity processes to educational outcomes. By conceptualising the mother–satellite relationship as a governance subsystem rather than a purely logistical arrangement, the study extends existing scholarship and provides a more comprehensive explanation of how inequalities are produced and sustained in resource-constrained education systems.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals and groups derive part of their identity from their membership in social categories, influencing perceptions, behaviours, and intergroup relations. Within organisational contexts, these dynamics shape patterns of authority, collaboration, and decision-making.

In the mother–satellite school system, institutional arrangements may produce distinct group identities, where mother schools are perceived as dominant "in-groups" and satellite schools as subordinate "out-groups." Such categorisation can influence governance processes by shaping access to resources, participation in decision-making, and the distribution of authority. Satellite school leaders may experience reduced legitimacy and constrained autonomy, while mother schools may exercise greater control over administrative and operational processes.

SIT provides a critical lens for understanding how identity-based dynamics interact with governance structures, reinforcing hierarchical relationships and influencing organisational outcomes. In this study, identity processes are theorised to mediate the relationship between administrative linkages and educational outcomes, particularly in terms of coordination, resource allocation, and institutional effectiveness.

4. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Mother–Satellite School Governance Subsystem
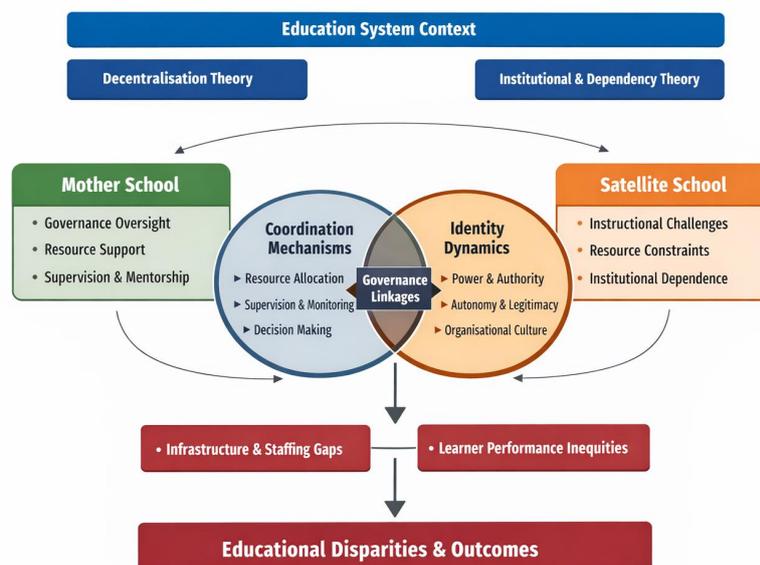
The study conceptualises the mother–satellite relationship as a governance subsystem constituted by interrelated administrative and organisational dimensions:

(i) role clarity and formalised institutional linkages,

(ii) resource flows and distributive equity,

(iii) communication and coordination mechanisms, and

(iv) pedagogical support and instructional supervision.

Drawing on decentralisation and organisational systems theory (Bray, 2000; Bush & Glover, 2014), these dimensions are understood as core governance processes that structure decision-making, accountability, and institutional support. At the same time, informed by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the framework incorporates identity dynamics as a cross-cutting influence that shapes how these governance processes are enacted, particularly in relation to power, legitimacy, and institutional positioning.

The interaction of these governance dimensions determines the operational effectiveness of satellite schools, reflected in their capacity to mobilise resources, implement instructional practices, and sustain organisational functionality. In turn, variations in operational effectiveness produce differentiated educational outcomes, including access, learner retention, and academic performance.

By integrating structural (governance), relational (coordination), and symbolic (identity) dimensions, the framework provides a comprehensive analytical model for understanding how inequalities are produced and sustained within the mother–satellite school system.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, which enables the concurrent collection, analysis, and integration of quantitative and qualitative data within a single phase of the research process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mother–satellite school relationship by combining the breadth of quantitative patterns with the depth of qualitative insights. While quantitative data facilitated the identification of trends in governance practices and operational outcomes, qualitative data enabled the exploration of underlying processes, perceptions, and contextual dynamics. The two strands were analysed independently and

subsequently merged during interpretation to allow for convergence, complementarity, and corroboration of findings.

5.2 Population and Sample

The study was conducted in Mudzi District, Zimbabwe, a predominantly rural context characterised by a high concentration of satellite schools and resource-constrained educational environments. The target population comprised school leaders operating within mother and satellite school structures, given their central role in governance, decision-making, and instructional supervision.

A total of 10 schools (5 mother schools and 5 satellite schools) were included in the study. From these institutions, 20 school leaders, including headteachers, deputy heads, and senior teachers, participated in the quantitative phase. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct experience and substantive knowledge of the mother–satellite administrative relationship (Patton, 2015). The quantitative component is exploratory and descriptive in nature, and findings are interpreted within the limits of small-sample inference.

For the qualitative component, a sub-sample of 10 participants was selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria included leadership role, years of experience, and level of involvement in administrative coordination and supervision processes, ensuring diversity of perspectives across both school types.

Sample Size Justification

The sample size of 20 participants across 10 schools is considered appropriate for a mixed-methods study of this nature, which prioritises depth of contextual understanding alongside comparative analysis. In qualitative research, smaller, purposively selected samples are widely accepted as sufficient when participants possess rich, experience-based knowledge relevant to the research problem (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

5.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

The structured questionnaire generated quantitative data on governance dimensions such as role clarity, resource allocation, communication practices, and supervision frequency. Items were measured on Likert scales to facilitate statistical comparison. Before the main study, the

instrument was pilot tested with a small group of school leaders in a neighbouring district to refine clarity, wording, and internal consistency.

Semi-structured interviews elicited in-depth qualitative insights into participants' experiences and interpretations of administrative linkages, coordination challenges, and institutional dynamics. Interviews were guided by a flexible protocol, allowing probing of emergent issues.

Document analysis included supervision reports, policy circulars, staffing records, and resource allocation documents, enabling triangulation and contextual grounding of findings.

5.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentages) to summarise governance practices and operational conditions. Where appropriate, comparisons were made between mother and satellite schools to identify patterns of disparity.

To ensure reliability, internal consistency of the questionnaire scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of 0.70 or higher considered acceptable for social science research (Field, 2018). Items with low item-total correlations were reviewed and refined following the pilot phase.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving systematic coding, categorisation, and theme development. Both inductive and deductive approaches were employed, with the latter informed by the study's conceptual framework.

To enhance **trustworthiness**, the study applied established qualitative criteria:

- **Credibility** was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants and triangulation of data sources.

- **Dependability** was strengthened through maintaining an audit trail of data collection and analysis procedures.

- **Confirmability** was supported by linking interpretations directly to participant narratives and documentary evidence.

- **Transferability** was addressed through a thick description of the research context and participants.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through methodological triangulation, allowing convergence and corroboration of results across data sources (Denzin, 2012).

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from relevant educational authorities, including the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and district-level offices. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before data collection.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by assigning codes to participants and schools, and by ensuring that no identifiable information appeared in the reporting of findings. Data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Additionally, care was taken to minimise potential power imbalances, particularly where participants were reporting on administrative relationships, by creating a neutral and non-evaluative interview environment.

The study adhered to principles of integrity, transparency, and respect for persons, ensuring that findings were reported honestly and without misrepresentation.

5.6 Limitations of the Methodology

While the study was designed to ensure methodological rigour, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was confined to 10 schools within a single rural district (Mudzi), which may limit the generalisability of findings to other districts with different socio-economic or institutional contexts. However, the study prioritises analytical generalisation rather than statistical generalisation, offering insights that may be transferable to similar settings.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data from school leaders introduces the possibility of response bias, particularly on sensitive issues such as leadership effectiveness and resource allocation. This limitation was mitigated through triangulation with document analysis and qualitative interviews.

Third, the use of descriptive statistics restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between governance variables and educational outcomes. Nonetheless, the mixed-methods

design compensates for this by providing in-depth qualitative explanations of observed patterns.

Finally, while the convergent design allows for integration of data strands, differences in the depth and scale of quantitative versus qualitative data may create interpretive imbalances. Careful integration procedures were therefore employed to ensure coherence and complementarity of findings.

For the quantitative component, the study does not aim for statistical generalisation but rather for descriptive and comparative insights within a bounded system, making a modest sample size methodologically defensible (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Furthermore, the inclusion of both mother and satellite schools enhances the comparative validity of the findings, while the integration of multiple data sources strengthens overall inferential robustness.

6. Findings

6.1 Quantitative Results

The quantitative findings reveal significant disparities between mother and satellite schools across key operational and governance indicators. While inferential statistics were not applied due to sample size limitations, observed differences are substantial and consistent across indicators.

Table 1: Comparison of Key Indicators

| Indicator	Mother Schools	Satellite Schools
Teacher–pupil ratio	1:34	1:52
Adequate infrastructure (%)	80%	30%
Teaching materials availability (%)	75%	40%
Monthly supervision (%)	70%	10%

As shown in Table 1, satellite schools are systematically disadvantaged across all measured indicators. The teacher–pupil ratio in satellite schools (1:52) is substantially higher than in mother schools (1:34), indicating increased instructional burden and reduced individual learner support. Similarly, only 30% of satellite schools reported adequate infrastructure,

compared to 80% of mother schools, reflecting pronounced disparities in physical learning environments.

Access to teaching and learning materials is also uneven, with satellite schools reporting nearly half the availability observed in mother schools. Most notably, monthly supervision—a critical governance and instructional support mechanism—is markedly limited in satellite schools (10%) compared to mother schools (70%). This suggests a breakdown in administrative linkage and weak enforcement of supervisory structures.

 Figure 2: *Reported Administrative Challenges in the Mother–Satellite School System Note. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents identifying each challenge.*
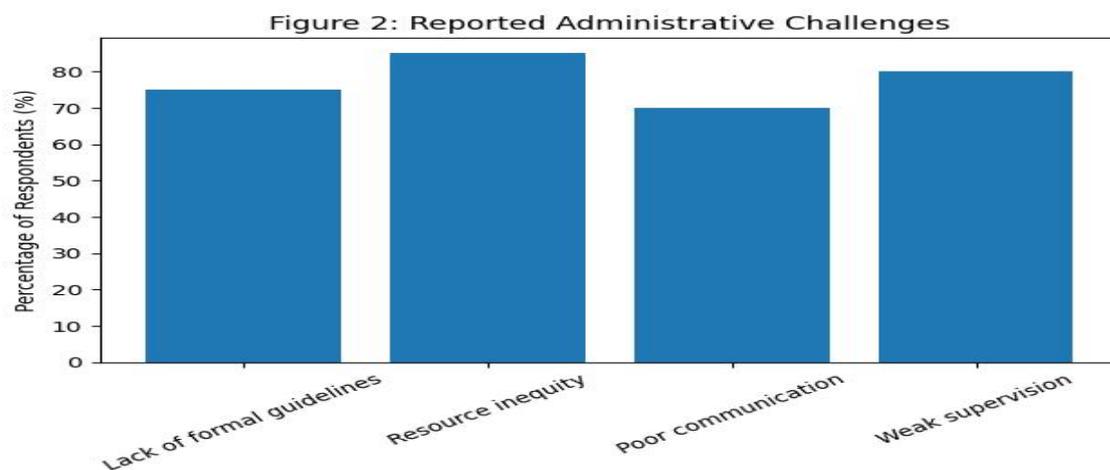
Figure 2 further highlights systemic administrative challenges. A majority of respondents identified resource inequity (85%) and weak supervision (80%) as the most critical issues, followed by lack of formal guidelines and poor communication. These findings reinforce the argument that disparities are not merely material but are embedded in governance and coordination failures.

6.2 Qualitative Themes (Revised with Contrasting Perspectives)

The qualitative analysis yielded four interrelated themes: role ambiguity, resource inequity, coordination gaps, and identity tensions, each of which provides insight into the governance dynamics underpinning the quantitative patterns.

Role Ambiguity:

Participants consistently reported unclear delineation of responsibilities between mother and satellite schools. Satellite school leaders indicated uncertainty regarding decision-making authority, particularly in areas such as resource allocation, staffing, and disciplinary processes.

As one satellite school leader noted: *"We are told to manage the school, but when it comes to key decisions, we must wait for the mother school"* (R1). Another added: *"There are no clear guidelines on what we can decide independently and what must be referred"* (R3).

However, a contrasting perspective from a mother school leader suggests that this ambiguity may also reflect accountability concerns: *"We are still responsible for the satellite school, so we cannot allow full independence without proper structures in place"* (R9).

Resource Inequity

Participants described uneven and often discretionary distribution of resources, with satellite schools positioned as secondary recipients.

One respondent explained: *"Most of the time, we receive what is left after the mother school has taken what it needs"* (R5), while another stated: *"Satellite schools are always at the bottom of the priority list"* (R2).

In contrast, a mother school leader argued that allocation decisions are shaped by resource constraints rather than deliberate exclusion: *"We also face shortages, so we distribute what we have as fairly as possible, though it may not always be enough"* (R10).

Coordination Gaps:

Weak communication and irregular interaction were widely reported.

"We rarely meet as a cluster, and communication is mostly informal and inconsistent" (R7), noted one participant, while another added: *"Sometimes months pass without any supervision visit"* (R4).

These gaps were partly attributed to structural and logistical challenges, including distance and limited transport resources.

Identity Tensions:

Satellite school leaders reported feelings of marginalisation and limited autonomy.

"We are treated as a branch, not as a full school" (R6), and *"It feels like we are always under control, with little space to lead independently"* (R8), were recurring sentiments.

These perceptions highlight the relational and symbolic dimensions of governance, extending beyond formal administrative arrangements.

7. Discussion

This study set out to examine the mother–satellite school relationship as a governance subsystem, with particular attention to how administrative and operational dynamics shape educational outcomes. The findings provide strong evidence that disparities between mother and satellite schools are not solely resource-driven but are embedded in governance structures, coordination mechanisms, and institutional relationships. This reinforces recent scholarship showing that educational inequality in rural contexts is structurally produced through governance and leadership dynamics rather than material deprivation alone (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Tikly, 2020).

Role Ambiguity and Decentralisation Theory

The persistence of unclear roles and overlapping authority reflects a fundamental tension within decentralised systems. Decentralisation theory posits that effective governance depends on clearly defined responsibilities and aligned accountability mechanisms (Bray, 2000; Bush & Glover, 2014). In this study, the absence of formalised role boundaries undermines decision-making efficiency and creates administrative delays, corroborating findings by Mutanga and Kapoka (2021). More recent studies in Sub-Saharan Africa similarly highlight that decentralisation reforms often result in "partial or symbolic devolution", where authority is transferred without corresponding autonomy or capacity (Bennell & Sedel, 2021; du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

From a Social Identity Theory (SIT) perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), role ambiguity also reinforces group differentiation. Satellite school leaders' uncertainty about their authority reflects their positioning as an "out-group" within the governance structure, limiting their participation in decision-making processes and reinforcing hierarchical boundaries.

Resource Inequity and Distributive Governance

The unequal distribution of resources between mother and satellite schools highlights the limitations of administrative linkage as a mechanism for ensuring equity. Consistent with prior studies documenting infrastructural and material disparities (Mafa, 2017; Ncube & Tshabalala, 2020), the findings indicate that resource allocation remains discretionary and mediated by institutional hierarchy. Recent research further shows that rural schools in Africa often experience systemic underfunding and inequitable distribution frameworks, even within decentralised systems (Tikly, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

From a governance perspective, distributive justice depends on transparent, rule-based allocation systems, which appear weak in the current model (Bennell & Sedel, 2021). Through the lens of Social Identity Theory, these inequities can also be interpreted as outcomes of in-group bias, where mother schools—occupying dominant institutional positions—prioritise their own needs over those of satellite schools, thereby reinforcing structural inequality (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Coordination Gaps and Organisational Systems Theory

The identified coordination challenges underscore the importance of communication and interaction within organisational systems. According to systems theory, effective organisations rely on feedback loops, information flow, and coordinated action (Bush & Glover, 2014). The weak communication structures observed in this study disrupt these processes, leading to fragmentation and reduced system coherence. These findings are consistent with recent studies highlighting that weak institutional coordination remains a major barrier to effective school governance in rural African contexts (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

From a Social Identity perspective, limited interaction between mother and satellite schools reduces opportunities for intergroup integration and shared identity formation, thereby reinforcing divisions and weakening collaborative governance (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This lack of relational cohesion further undermines effective supervision and support.

Identity Tensions and Institutional Theory

The emergence of identity tensions points to deeper institutional dynamics within the mother–satellite relationship. Institutional theory suggests that organisations within hierarchical systems adopt differentiated identities shaped by power relations and legitimacy structures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The marginalisation reported by satellite school leaders reflects this dynamic and supports earlier observations of contested authority (Mutanga & Kapoka, 2021).

Importantly, Social Identity Theory provides a complementary explanation by highlighting how perceived group hierarchies shape attitudes, behaviours, and organisational outcomes. Satellite schools, positioned as a lower-status out-group, experience reduced legitimacy,

constrained autonomy, and limited recognition, which negatively affects leadership agency and performance (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Similar patterns have been observed in rural schooling contexts where institutional hierarchies influence teacher motivation and school effectiveness (Tikly, 2020).

Towards a Governance-Subsystem Perspective

Taken together, the findings support the conceptualisation of the mother–satellite model as an asymmetrical governance subsystem, where administrative linkage alone is insufficient to ensure equity. This extends existing literature, which has largely treated infrastructure, staffing, and performance as isolated issues (Hlupo & Tsikira, 2012; Jakachira, 2020), by demonstrating how these outcomes are systematically produced through governance processes and institutional relationships.

The interaction of role ambiguity, inequitable resource flows, weak coordination, and hierarchical identity structures produces a system that inadvertently reproduces disparities rather than mitigating them. This study, therefore, advances scholarship by integrating decentralisation theory, organisational systems perspectives, and Social Identity Theory into a unified explanatory framework (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Tikly, 2020).

Improving educational equity, therefore, requires not only increased resource investment—as emphasised in prior studies (Mafa, 2017; UNICEF, 2022)—but also a reconfiguration of governance relationships that addresses both structural and relational dimensions of inequality.

9. Conclusion and Contribution to Knowledge

This study examined the mother–satellite school relationship in Zimbabwe as a governance subsystem, revealing that persistent disparities in educational quality and outcomes are rooted not only in resource constraints but also in administrative structures, coordination mechanisms, and institutional dynamics. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study demonstrates that the satellite school model, while effective in expanding access, operates as an asymmetrical governance system that can inadvertently reproduce inequality.

The study makes several important contributions to knowledge. Theoretically, it advances a governance-subsystem framework that integrates decentralisation theory, organisational

systems perspectives, and institutional theory to explain how administrative linkages shape educational outcomes. This moves beyond fragmented analyses of infrastructure, staffing, and performance by offering a holistic explanation of how inequalities are produced and sustained within education systems.

Empirically, the study provides context-specific evidence from rural Zimbabwe, contributing to limited literature on the operational realities of satellite schools and decentralised education models in Sub-Saharan Africa. The mixed-methods approach strengthens the validity of the findings by demonstrating convergence between statistical patterns and lived experiences.

Practically and policy-wise, the study offers actionable insights for redesigning governance structures, improving coordination, and promoting equity within the education system. It underscores the need to move beyond access-focused reforms towards governance-sensitive approaches that address the structural and relational drivers of inequality.

In conclusion, achieving equitable and quality education in decentralised systems requires not only expanding schooling infrastructure but also transforming the governance arrangements that underpin service delivery. Future research should extend this work by exploring longitudinal impacts of governance reforms and comparative analyses across districts and countries to deepen the understanding of effective models for equitable education provision.

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