

Training Needs for Improving Quality of Basic Education: The Case for Rural School Development Committees in Chimanimani and Buhera Districts – Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

This research initiative was driven by the need to enhance the capacity of School Development Committees (SDC) in improving the effectiveness of rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. Thus, the study sought to describe the 'training-gap' as experienced by the key stakeholders in school development. This study was guided by the following research questions: how are schools implementing the provisions of Statutory Instrument 87 of 1992, which guides the involvement of SDCs in school development; what is the state of facilities and resource in schools; how are development initiatives happening in the schools; how are school financial resources being managed; and, what capacity challenges are SDCs facing in their development activities? A multiple qualitative case study design was used to generate qualitative data from 8 rural primary schools selected for convenience of access and potential for providing rich data for thick description of SDC training needs. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with school heads and senior education officers and focus group discussions with SDC members and parents. In addition, data were collected through observing and analysing school facilities and documents respectively. Data were analysed through the scissors and sort technique. The study found out that SDCs were not operating according to the Statutory Instrument no 87 of 1992 policy guidelines; Schools did not have adequate educational facilities and resources; School development activities were not systematic; School funds were not managed properly; and SDCs had challenges in communicating development issues as well as raising funds for school development. The study recommended that SDC capacity building training may focus on interpretation and implementation of the SDC legal framework; school facility and resource requirements for quality education; school development planning; management of school funds; communication; and management of school-community relationships. The study also recommended that further research be done to investigate influences of participation dynamics on community involvement in providing basic education.

Background to the Study

Community participation has been internationally recognised as a fundamental strategy for improving quality of education in both developed and developing nations (WCEFA, 1990; Shaerffer 1994; UNESCO, 1994; Bray, 2000; Pradhan et al., 2012). Literature reviewed in this article has shown that community participation in education can help increase the volume, relevance, impact and the amount of resources available for education (Bray, 2000, Rose, 2003). There are various structures that successful countries developed to facilitate community participation in schools. These social structures range from legally incorporated school boards to village education committees.

The most popular model is the legally incorporated boards (LIB) which are created in accordance with the education policies of that particular education system (Suzuki, 2000). These legally incorporated boards are known by different names in various countries. In Zimbabwe they are known as School Development Committees (Zimbabwe-Education Amendment Act of 2006). In relation to legally incorporated boards, participation policies legally prescribe guidelines for establishing participation as well as specifying the nature of the functions of the members of the boards. Membership in school governing bodies usually comprises elected parents, the school head, and representatives of other stakeholders such as classroom teachers, churches, and local government authority (Bray, 2000). Functions of school boards, inter alia, include receiving financial allocation from central

government, decide how it is spent and keep accurate accounts and thereby be accountable to the parents; coordinate labour for construction of school facilities; appoint additional staff and have supervision, disciplinary and grievance handling arrangements for pupils and staff; and to have a policy to control the use of school premises outside the school day (Bray, 2003). The LIBs can facilitate effective community participation in school development processes through promoting genuine participation by parents, transparency in managing school activities, regular communication, and inclusivity (Wilson and Wilde, 2003) in Cag-Consultancy (2012).

Community participation in education in Zimbabwe has been facilitated by various Acts of Parliament which compel responsible authorities of schools to establish school committees. The Education Amendment Act of 1991, through Statutory Instrument 87 of 1992, required the establishment of SDCs in non government schools and SDAs in government schools. These SDCs, which are legally corporate boards, have the mandate to create space for parents and other community stakeholders to participate in developing their schools for quality basic education. School development involves having a shared vision to guide the process, and school professionals working together with LIB members in planning and implementing related activities (Welsh Government, 2014).

However, the effectiveness of community participation as a strategy for improving quality of basic education, particularly in rural areas, does not seem to have always given the expected results, hence has come

under academic spotlight (Bray, 2003). The relationship between community participation and improvement of quality of education has not been automatic (Chikoko, 2009). In Zimbabwe, relevant literature reviewed shows that some of the SDCs were not aware of the roles they were expected to do in the schools (Boonstoppel and Chikohomero, 2011). Some of the SDCs lacked skills in managing school finances, especially preparing and using financial budgets, keeping inventories of school assets, and raising funds for school development (Nyandoro, Mapfumo, and Makoni, 2013). As a result, many rural schools do not have adequate facilities, equipment, and stationery (Chivedza, Wadesango, and Kurebwa, 2012; Nhamo, 2012). In some of the rural schools, the available facilities are of inferior quality and there is prevalence of poor academic outcomes (Mupindu, 2012).

Pass rates at National Standardised Grade Seven level final examinations were declining with some schools scoring 0% pass rates (Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) Report (2002). Manicaland Province had 56 such schools in the 2009 examination (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2010). Cognisant of the deteriorating education quality, and in a bid to rescue the situation, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in partnership with SNV decided to improve the capacity of SDCs in improving the quality of education in the schools. It is in this capacity building effort that this training needs assessment was carried out in Chimanimani and Buhera districts in Manicaland Province-zimbabwe. The needs assessment study was guided by the following research questions: how are schools implementing the Statutory Instrument 87 of 1992; what is the state of school facilities and resource; how is school development happening; how are school financial resources being managed; how are SDCs communicating with stakeholders; and what challenges are SDCs facing in their development activities?

Methodology

This study set out to identify training needs for school development committee members in providing quality
Box 1: Themes- training areas

basic education. This therefore required that the people themselves describe their experiences and opinions on their involvement in providing basic education. The study was, therefore, carried out in a constructivist paradigm which according to Babbie (2010), works with qualitative methodology. The study was carried out using the case study design which provided a platform for using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, documents, and observations to generate qualitative data as advised by Stake (1995); White (2000); and Yin (2003). SDC members and other stakeholders were able to bring out their experiences, opinions, and views from their interaction in managing school activities.

The sample for this study was made up of 8 rural primary schools from which school development committee members, parents, teachers, school heads participated in this study. In addition, senior education officers in the school districts participated in the study. 30 Semi structured- open ended questionnaires were completed by teachers and education officers, 8 in-depth interviews for school heads, and 16 [1 SDC;1 parents per school] focus group discussions with school development committees and parents generated qualitative data for the study. Additional data, which was useful in verifying in-depth interview and focus group discussion data, were generated through observing school facilities and analysing SDC record books.

Data generated through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion were tape recorded and later transcribed to facilitate analysis. The data set that was analysed included transcripts from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews as well as narratives from the open ended questionnaires, observation, and document analysis. Data were analysed through the scissors and sort technique, which was quite effective in bringing out categories and themes as highlighted by Stewart and Shamdasani(1990); Ryan and Bernard (nd); Stewert (2006). The key themes that emerged are summarised in box 1 below:

Emergent Themes

- Legal Framework
- School facilities and resources
- Planning school development
- Management of funds
- communication
- School and community relationships-conflict

Discussion of findings**The legal framework**

The research data revealed that some of the SDC members and parents were not aware of the provisions of statutory instrument SI 87 of 1992, which was the official document guiding the operations of SDCs in schools in Zimbabwe. According to the SDC members, the document had not been accessible to them nor were they conversant with its contents. Parents as well as the SDC members were not aware of the official position on objectives, operational procedures, duties and responsibilities in their participation in providing basic education. Such a scenario would likely create confusion and subsequent conflict situations among school leadership and community members.

School facilities and resources

In many of the communities that participated in this research, the school facilities and resources were inadequate. In some of the schools, classrooms and teachers' houses were not weatherproof. Some of the children were learning in the open under trees. In many of the schools children did not have enough exercise books and text books. In a focus group discussion with one SDC a member summed it all up saying,

“Tinedambudziko nemunofundira vana nedzimba dzematacha. Hatinamari. Makirasi anonaya, dzimbadzematacha hadzina mahwindo. Vana Havana mabhuku. Zvamauya zvanaka. Motombotibatsirawo. Mari inobva kufizi haikwani” Which translates to [We have problems with our classrooms and teachers' houses. The roofs leak and teachers' houses have no window panes. Children have neither textbooks nor stationery. We have no money. It is good you have come. You will help us with money. What we get from school fees is not enough].

This scenario seems to reveal that some of the schools did not have enough money to provide adequate facilities and stationery for quality teaching and learning. In addition, the SDC seemed to look up to look up to well-wishers for salvation. In contrast, the legal framework expects SDCs to actively engage parents to participate through fundraising activities for improving school facilities and supply of stationery for their children.

Planning School Development

Data that were analysed in this study showed that SDC members were not aware of the school development processes. In focus group discussions held with the SDC members, many of them indicated that they were not involved in planning the development of their schools. Many of the parents who participated in this study indicated that they did not know the 'vision and mission' of their schools. In some of the schools, the 'school vision and mission statement' was not available. A school without a shared 'vision and mission' to guide activities by its stakeholders is not likely to provide quality education. The SDCs have the responsibility to plan and coordinate school development processes (Zimbabwe Government (1992; Bray, 2003).

Management of school Funds

The study found out that, in many of the schools that participated in this study, SDCs had some financial records and presented financial statements at Annual General Meetings. However, data also revealed that in some schools that participated in this study, financial records showed that they were not compliant to statutory procedures as given in statutory instrument SI 87 of 1992. The following non compliance incidents were indicated:

- cash book transactions were not reconciled regularly
- money received was used before it was deposited with the school's bank

- Delayed banking and keeping fairly large sums of money as petty cash.
- Inconsistence in the routine of auditing of the use of school finances.
- Many of the schools had a very limited revenue base
- Confused roles for the secretary and treasurer.
- Lack of variance analysis in budget implementation.

This finding is similar to conclusions made by Nyandoro, Mapfumo, and Makoni, (2013) that, some of the SDCs lacked skills in managing school finances, especially preparing and using financial budgets, keeping inventories of school assets, and raising funds for school development. Ineffective management of school financial activities tends to impact negatively on school development activities and subsequently on quality of education produced in the schools.

Communication

Data generated and analysed for this study revealed that although SDCs were communicating school issues through meetings with parents, the communication was not effective. In a focus group discussion with parents, one woman, when contributing to discussion on challenges faced during participation activities remarked: “tinobvumirana zvekuita, ngatibhadhere mare tiite chakati. Vamwe tinobvatabhadhara asi hazvitwi. Hapana zvatinouduzwawo...” translated to mean, “we agree to do something, eg. Let us pay money for this and that, some of us pay the money but nothing is done and no feedback is given”. Communication is critical in community participation activities as it enhances trust among stakeholders. Ineffective communication is likely to create suspicion and animosity among community members. SDCs are accountable to the rest of the community and thus may need to communicate effectively (Bray, 2003).

Conflict Management

Data revealed that senior education officers recommended that SDC members be equipped with conflict management skills. In the open ended questionnaires, many senior education officers indicated that conflict between school heads and SDC members, as well as between school teachers and parents were rife in the schools. The major sources of conflict, as revealed through in-depth interviews, were differences in perceptions in relation to stakeholder roles, management of school funds, and teachers’ work as well as public behaviour. Conflict can be either functional or dysfunctional. Therefore, there is need for SDCs to be equipped with both skills for managing

conflict situations effectively in the interest of school development goals.

Recommendations

- This study, basing on the findings discussed above recommends that SDC members be given opportunity to improve skills capacity in the following critical areas of their operations in school development.
- Legal framework- with particular focus on statutory provisions regarding membership, meetings, powers of SDCs, and duties of members chairman and treasurer.
- School facilities and resources- with reference to expected quality standards of facilities and resources, as prescribed by relevant government-education departments.
- Planning school development: Training may give particular focus to the general stages of ‘School Development Planning Cycle’ as provided by relevant government departments and other relevant literature.
- Management of funds- Training may give general guidelines on ethical financial management practices to SDC members, and give more detailed government recommended standards to school heads and SDC treasurers. The training session could also provide practical skills in fund raising programmes.
- Communication- training- training may develop awareness on the role of communication in community participation in school development. In addition, skills in using various modes of communication, including meetings may be developed.
- Conflict management- the training may focus on developing an awareness of the need to engage the community, strategies for engaging the community and skills in using various strategies for resolving conflict among stakeholders.

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