Social Dynamics Influencing Community Participation And Their Impact On Quality Of Basic Education: The Case For Rural Schools In Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

this study set out to investigate social dynamics that influence behaviour of communities in their involvement in providing basic education. This study, therefore, sought to answer the following research questions: How are communities members organised for participation in education? What are the social dynamics that influence community participation in education? How are the dynamics influencing quality of basic education? A qualitative case study design directed the research process. The study found out that community attitude towards education, level of school education of community members, awareness of educational issues, political affiliation, and availability of basic needs in families shaped the behaviour of community members in their involvement in school related activities. These behaviours were found to result in shortages in financial resources, school facilities, teaching and learning materials. In addition, supervision of homework, pupil attendance, scope of curriculum, and motivation of teachers were negatively affected. The study recommended parent orientation programmes, increased government and non-governmental organisation support.

Background to the study

The World Conference on Education for All (2000) recommended that community participation be encouraged as a strategy for achieving education for all goals in developing countries. In tandem, many scholars, Bray (2003); Hinz, Patel, Meyers and Dammet 2006; Dunne, Kwame, and Humphreys, 2007); Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2010 have observed that community participation has potential for improving quality of education. In response, many governments world over have made educational policies that provide for community participation (Shaeffer, 1999; Bray 2000; 2003).

However, it seems the participation arena is more complex than is commonly supposed by many macro-policy documents. Scholars have observed that macro – policies, both at national and international levels have been designed on assumption that a community comprises of a homogeneous group of individuals, or has mutually compatible interests in education (Bray, 2003; Dunne, Kwame, and Humphreys, 2007). In contrast, literature defines a community as a heterogeneous group whose individual differences occur with respect to interests, in addition to age, gender, wealth, social status, and ethnicity and race (Figueira-McDonough, 2001; Dunne, Kwame, and Humphreys, 2007). Therefore, individuals and groups in a community are most likely to show diverse interests in their participation in education (White, 1996; Cleaver, 1999; Cornwall, 2008).

In the same vein, a group of community development scholars led by White (1996) believe in possibilities that, the participation process can be stage-managed and abused by the more powerful to pursue both their covert and overt interests. Therefore, community participation processes in education are dynamic as power relations are played out on a daily basis to accommodate resistance forces throughout the course of action (White, 1996; Pryor, 2005).

Surprisingly, little has been written and published about the characteristics of 'participatory relationships' in development in general (Kelly and Vlaenderen, 1996). In Zimbabwe particularly, very little is known about community dynamics in participating in education. This reveals a critical inadequacy in the understanding of 'participation relationships' which seem to be a fundamental phenomenon that determines what actually happens on the ground as community members participate in providing basic education, and hence shape the quality of education produced.

Methodology

The study was carried out in a qualitative paradigm in which community members were given the opportunity to relate their experiences, views and opinions in the process of creating '*truths'* about social dynamics influencing community participation in education as acknowledged by Creswell (2003) and Babbie (2010).

A multiple case study design was used as it allowed for in-depth mining of qualitative data from various sections of three purposefully and conveniently selected rural primary schools and their respective communities as suggested by Yin (2003). The sample comprised one resettlement school situated in a former commercial farming area, a rural primary school in the former tribal trust lands, and a school in a small scale commercial farming area, all in Mutasa district in Zimbabwe.

Teachers, School Development Committees, parents shared their experiences in focus group discussions, and school heads, local councillors and village traditional leaders participated in data generation through in-depth interviews.

Tape-recorded data were transcribed and analysed manually through the cut and sort method as advised by Stewert (2006) and Kruger and Casey (2003). The data were categorised and themes emerged as findings of the study.

Research findings

Theme (Dynamics)	Attitude towards education	Level of education	Awareness of educational issues	Political affiliation	Availability of basic needs
Effects on participation	Poor attendance at school meetings, non participation in proving labour, non payment of school levies, low motivation for students, no monitoring of student attendance at school	No encouragement of children to continue with school, supervision of homework is inadequate, inadequate provision of learning materials, low motivation of teachers and students	Partial participation in school activities, ineffective participation in school governance	partisan participation in school activities, strained relationships among community members	Reduced time for community participation in school activities, reduced rate of paying fees
Effects on quality of education		Shortages in school facilities, teaching and learning materials, and financial resources. Little support for children's homework. Lowly motivated teachers and students, student absenteeism and drop out. Narrow scope of curriculum.			

Table 1: Summary of research findings

The social dynamics that were found influencing community participation in education included attitude towards education, level of awareness of educational issues, political affiliation and the level of availability of basic needs.

Attitudes towards education

This study found out that community members had differences in their attitude towards education, in which some showed negative tendencies and others positive. The data revealed that some community members had positive attitude and valued the education of their children and others had negative tendencies towards education. In a focus group discussion one SDC member summarised:

> The nature of the parents we have here is difficult to understand, we have very some parents who like to participate in school activities, others don't want...they are not interested...they are not concerned...they are not worried about their children's education...these people who were working on the farms don't come for school meetings. (Msdc).

General level of education

This study found out that there were some differences in the general level of education among community members. The research data showed that some of the community members had low levels of basic education. In a focus group discussion one participant highlighted: "I and my wife, we ended in Grade four, we are not educated, and so we expect the teachers to do everything for children. (Mf 2:5)." Another, in a focus group discussion expressed: "Some of us are not educated...I am not able to do the work but they ask us to help children read... (Mm 2:12). In an in-depth interview, one of the councillors summarised the general level of education for the former farm workers:

> We can say the people in this community are lowly educated. Yes, they went to school but most did not complete primary level. Those who went up to the last grade are the ones who are so called the educated. The majority are not properly educated...if a child is now able to read and write then it is done (Mc 5:4).

> The data that were analysed for this study revealed that some of the lowly educated parents experienced fear of the teachers in the school so much that they avoided meeting them even when invited. In a focus group discussion with the teachers, one female teacher summarised:
> I asked a parent to come and see me here at school. She didn't come. When I met the woman in the village she said, 'let me be honest madam, I got the message but I did not come. I knew my problem and I thought you would disturb you'....it is a place for educated people...you see they fear coming to the school.....they fear us (Mt 9:10).

The study also observed that during the annual general meeting at one of the schools, some of the community members did not comprehend the abridged financial statement which was presented by a deputy head. Some of the community members could not understand the basic accounting language that was used by presenter. As a result, some of the community residents did not seem to understand the presentation.

According to the Statutory Instrument 87 of 1992, the financial statement was supposed to be presented by the honorary treasurer of the SDC. Therefore, the SDCs did not understand their financial role. This finding is similar to findings made by Nyandoro, Mapfumo, and Makoni (2013) in their study on Effectiveness of School Development Committees in Financial Management in Chimanimani- Zimbabwe in which they concluded that SDCs were not effective in managing school finances. Therefore, the community members could not monitor the use of their financial contribution towards improving quality of education at the school.

Awareness of educational processes

Data that were analysed showed that there existed two distinct groups of community members with different levels of understanding and appreciation of roles of parents in providing basic education. There were those who detailed what they felt they should do for their school children, mentioning roles such as *assisting their children in doing homework, providing exercise books, and monitoring of children's attendance at school.* On the contrary, there were some community members who seemed to be unaware of what parents could do for their school children. In an in-depth interview with a school head: he summarised:

> Some of these community members are not aware of the educational importance of their involvement in education processes of their children...some of the parents do not attend meetings... they see teacher as having the sole responsibility in the child's education...That's not it. Parents should assist teachers. The pare nt's effort is important (Mht 17:23).

In addition, I observed that the SDC chairmen in the three primary schools that participated in this study were relying on their respective school heads for direction in carrying out their duties. The SDC chairmen as observed depended heavily on guidance from their respective school heads in most of what they had to do, including what was clearly specified in their statutory instruments.

Politics

This study also found out that community participation was influenced by local politics. This included group politics as well as affiliation to national political parties. One councillor, in an in-depth interview, summed it up: "The participation of parents and other community members, especially in group tasks, is now affected by political affiliation of the members involved. The various local political party leaders are using their political power to influence how the community members are participating in issues concerning these schools. Further, the councillor summarised the general context:

> So far I have talked about the issue of the political situation, sometimes parents, when there is a leader who is affiliated to a political party, they observe to see where that person who is advocating development is aligned to and you find that their support is biased towards that person or otherwise...This is why I wish the political situation could get better so that parents don't say if so and so says something we don't respond, and if so and so says something we respond. That is affecting us. Things should be like, we want to do this, from the leader who will be there, and things should happen. This issue of which political side is he... is destroying our children's education... (Mc 15:23).

This scenario implied that the community was divided according to community member's affiliation to politics obtaining in the area. The community sense of togetherness would have been removed. The sense of togetherness is an essential element for communities to participate effectively in development projects (Chaskin, Brown, Vankatesh, and Vidal, 2001). Therefore, without a sense of community togetherness, community members would not effectively participate to improve the quality of education in their school.

Basic physiological needs

The research data revealed that community participation in providing education was influenced by the availability of human physiological basic needs. In this study, the most critical basic need that influenced community members' participation in education was food. The data revealed that there were distinct levels of availability of basic needs

among members of the communities that participated in this study. Community members who had higher levels of availability of basic needs seemed to have more time available for other social engagements including educational activities for their children. On the other hand, community members, both men and women, who did not have adequate food available in the homes tended to spend a lot of their time looking for provisions for their families, leaving little or no time to attend to children's school issues. Some of the parents who did not have adequate food reserves in the home did not have time to attend school occasions such as meetings and consultation days. In an in-depth interview summarised the general situation:

> The major issue that hinders parents from participating freely is that parents prioritise. If it is meeting...., can I go to the meeting ...., sometimes the child at the school there, as an example, will need food when he comes back, so they prioritise. Sometimes they put looking for food first, the school later, so that's what usually happens (Mhm 13:9).

According to Wilson and Wilde (2003) effective community participation takes place when there is regular communication between the school and community members. Therefore, this scenario where community members fail to attend school meetings does not facilitate effective community participation and subsequently quality of education.

Effects on quality of education
The study found out that social dynamics had some negative influence on quality of basic education in that primary schools did not have adequate teaching, learning facilities, and financial resources and thus had a narrow curriculum scope. Schools experienced frequent absenteeism and drop out of students, and some of the teachers were not committed to their work.

Inadequate teaching and learning resources
This study found out that some of the children did not have exercise books for writing exercises in Mathematics, languages and content subjects. Data revealed that several children struggled to write something during written work time. I observed that while some of the children attempted to write on ordinary newsprint paper or khaki covering paper, others would just sit and stare without doing anything. In a focus group, one SDC member concurred: "If you get into a class you can see that this child is not writing, that one has no pen.... this child has no exercise book, and that is the trend in the classes.... (Bsdc 9:19)."

Inadequate financial resources
The research data also revealed that the basic needs also influenced participation in paying the school levy. In an in-depth interview, one headman summarised the general situation: "When they get that small money.... for them to break it from there is difficult because there is hunger in the family. So it is like someone not willing.... Mhm2:7)" Another headman, in an in-depth interview added: "I can say... like this year there is hunger...they will be pleading that, please allow us to focus on looking for food, I have no money. I hope to get some money sometime later (Chm6:16)." In the AGM, a female participant summed it up: "I have three children in this school. I cannot afford to pay for them... There is hunger this year. The little money I get is for food......Cagm14:17."

Financial resources are essential inputs in quality education processes (Unesco, 2000). Therefore, reduced financial income in the primary schools was likely to result in reduced quality of basic education.

Absenteeism

This study found out that children were frequently absent from school. Absenteeism was a direct result of various community participation related dynamics. In a focus group discussion, one teacher revealed: "There is too much absenteeism in this school (Mt 7:9)." In an in-depth interview, the head teacher concurred:

> At the moment, absenteeism is a problem. Sometimes a child is removed from the register....then later resurfaces. There are cases where children come to school for less than 10 days per term. You can even remove them from the register, only to find them come someday (Mt 21:23).

Data also revealed that some of the children whose parents had not paid school levy were sent back home by the SDCs. In a focus group discussion one SDC member confirmed: "We tell the child to go back home and remind the parent ...it is now too long before you have paid the fees (Csdc 5:21)". However, the low income parents were not happy with the move. One female participant in a focus group discussion summarised their disappointment:

> This chasing away of our children because of these money issues....they do not hesitate to send away our children away because of these issues of school fees. The child is sent back home...go and collect the money....and the child takes three to four days before going back to school. We are not happy with.... (Bm 2:6).

This strategy meant that children whose parents had not paid school levy would be absent from school. Therefore, some of the children from the low income group were losing learning time. In addition, school children who did not have exercise books or pens for written exercises were sent back home by the teachers so that parents would provide for them. A male teacher concurred: "I sometimes go to the office to ask for assistance... but if he doesn't have anything he tells me to send the child back home to get the required materials (Bt 5:1)." Some of the children absent themselves from school to avoid humiliation from inadequate school supplies. In a focus group discussion one male teacher confirmed: "The child feels ashamed to walk around the school without materials for use in class. The child ends up being truant and is absent from school (Ct 9:17). A teacher in a focus group discussion concluded: "so that's what we experience here, if the book is used up, they stop coming to school (Bt 7:8).

The study found out that absenteeism was also a result of parents' directives. In an in-depth interview one school confirmed: "At the moment absenteeism is a problem. Parents don't even monitor attendance. Actually, they are the ones who make them stop coming to school.... you are not going to school. Remain and take care of the baby (Mht 26:6)". In concurrence, a teacher added:

> If there is 'mutsvare' [local language for the activity of gleaning grain after the commercial farmer has finished harvesting the field] you don't see anyone here at school. The whole of that week, we spend it alone here. You won't see any child in the school. When they finish searching for grain with their parents...that's when they start coming to school (Mt 9:21).

This scenario implies that some of the children missed school while attending to domestic chores. Literature reviewed for this study shows that effective learning takes place when children attend school regularly (Douglas and Ross, 2011). A situation where several children are absent from school implies that little learning takes place in that school. Therefore, parents' response to social dynamics was interfering with children's learning.

Drop out

This study established that some of the children who were frequently absent from school ended up as dropouts of the system. In a focus group discussion one female participant confirmed: "when children are sent back home to collect fees, some of the children end up staying at home. They don't go back... for example, the children who stay up there.... (Mm 2:12)." One councillor, in an in-depth interview concurred: "There are times when parents fail to get money for the child to continue with school (Mc 3:10)." In agreement, one school head in an in-depth interview remarked: "when the pressure for fees is high, they [parents] can even make the child stay at home for the whole term (Mht 6:4)."

Teacher commitment
This study established that some of the teachers who were teaching in the three primary schools that participated in this study were not motivated in doing their jobs. They were not happy with the way they were being paid the incentive money. The payments were irregular and the amount of incentive money was small. Data revealed that this incentive issue had strained teacher and parent relationships. The teachers appeared casual in their school business. In a focus group discussion, one male teacher summarised the teachers' general feeling:

> It affects me as a teacher, why? Because in some schools around and especially urban areas, they get more meaningful incentives, but we are all civil servants with the same training... and you really see that you are behind. So I won't be able to do my work properly and whole heartedly. If I'm motivated I give more advanced class work...and even homework ... but without motivation, I just give the minimum.... (Ct 19:19).

The study established that some of the teachers left their classes unattended, when they boarded city bound commuter omnibuses well before the end of school day. The teachers had unsuccessfully negotiated for meaningful upward review with their respective SDCs. The study found also found out that some of the teachers had adopted a 'go slow' mode of operation with their classes. In an in-depth interview one school head confirmed:

When it happened, it was related to the issue of incentives. When it started, teachers were getting to the extent of 'going slow'... and that was affecting the children....that ended up affecting the child in the classroom...I was worried.... (Bht 3:18).

Scope of school curriculum

The study found out that community participation had an influence on the scope of the curriculum that the primary schools could offer to the children. The study established that community participation influenced development of school facilities and the hiring of skilled manpower. In all the schools that participated in this study, the school heads had failed to introduce some of their locally desired school subjects due to lack of facilities and equipment. Data revealed that some of the schools did not have enough classroom facilities, sports fields, and equipment for their children. In a focus group discussion one teacher agreed:

> Our school should have some computers for teaching children..., even home economics, we should have a special classroom where each class goes for home economics lessons where they actually do the ironing, the actual practical, and simple cooking since it is primary....(Bt 11:8).

In support, a male teacher, in a focus group discussion added: "There should be equipment for Physical Education, Home Economics, and Carpentry .... (Ct 16:1)." In support one SDC member concurred: "Our classrooms are so few. It is disturbing for Grade Six and Seven children to be learning in one room, facing different directions (Msdc 13:17)." A school head in an in-depth interview supported: "the classrooms should have electricity so that there will be computers, I can say all information technology taking place, it should happen in the classroom (Bht14:9)." In conclusion, one male participant, in a focus group discussion emphasised:

> We need some tools for the school...like shovels, hoes...and a place where gardening activities can be done...If they are doing building...there should be a place where building lessons take place, there should be computers because you see that if our child competes with one from.... school, there will be a big difference because we don't have what they have there.... (Mf 6:23).

The situation in the schools implies school children did not have a wide range of relevant subjects as well as games and sporting activities on their school curriculum. One of the aspects of good quality school curriculum is relevancy to the educational aspirations of the people served by the school (Hawkes, 2009). The schools in this study did not meet some of the educational needs of the community members. Therefore, community participation hindered improvement of quality of education in the schools.

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