

Cultural Dynamics Influencing Community Participation and Their Impact on Quality of Basic Education: The Case for Rural Primary Schools in Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

This study set out to investigate cultural dynamics that influenced the behaviour of community members in their involvement in school activities. To sharpen the focus, the study was guided by the following research questions: What cultural practices influence community participation in providing basic education? How does this subsequent behaviour of community members influence quality of basic education? The research study was conducted in a qualitative paradigm which provided a platform for accessing in-depth cultural data through community engagement in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The data that were generated were analysed. The study found out that sacred days, community work groups, respect for traditional leadership, distribution of domestic chores by gender, and religion had influence of community members in participation and subsequently on quality of basic education. The study concluded that sacred days, respect for traditional leadership, and community work groups had potential for improving community participation. distribution of domestic roles by gender had a negative influence; and religious beliefs had both positive and negative influence. The study recommended that schools should develop strategies to maximise sacred days, community work groups and traditional leaders, and mitigate the effects of gender roles and religion.

Background to the study

Community participation has been believed worldwide as strategy for improving quality of education (Bray, 2003; Rose, 2003). However, the relationship between community participation and improvement of quality of education is not automatic (Chikoko, 2010). In agreement, Sango (2015) observed positive as well as negative impact of community participation on quality of education. This, according to White (1996) and Penderis (2012) is attributed to various dynamics that that impact community participation processes. Sango, Saruchera and Nyatanga (2015) observed that economic dynamics had some influence on community participation in education. This study focuses on cultural dynamics and how they influence community participation and subsequently quality of basic education.

Research Method

This study sought to investigate cultural practices that influenced community participation in education and the subsequent impact on quality of basic education in rural areas in Zimbabwe. The ‘truth’ about cultural practices and their influence on community participation and quality of basic education is best constructed by those actually living in the culture and are involved in providing basic education as observed by Creswell (2003) and Babbie (2010). Therefore, a qualitative research paradigm influenced the adoption of a multiple case study design which provided a platform for the community members to discuss their experiences, views and opinions on cultural practices and their influence on participation in providing quality basic education as supported by Ritchie and Lewis (2003). Parents, other community members, and teachers participated in data generation through active engagement in separate focus group discussions. School heads, traditional leaders and local councillors participated through individual in-depth interviews. Data that were generated were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed manually through the cut and sort method as directed by Krugger and Casey (2003) and Stewert (2006). Through the process of reading, re-reading, and sorting into categories, themes emerge as the findings of the study, all in guidance from Miles and Huberman (1984).

Research Findings

Summary of the research findings are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of the Research Findings

Cultural Practice	Effect on participation	Effect on quality of basic education
Chisi (Sacred Day)	Potential communal time created for school activities	Increased opportunity for parent involvement
Community work groups	Well Coordinated potential manpower for school tasks	Opportunity for coordinated work force for school tasks
Respect of Traditional leader	Potential for Effective leadership in communal school activities	Potential for effective community participation
Family distribution of domestic chores	Unequal availability of spare time for school activities	Unequal opportunity for parent involvement
Gender roles	Unequal availability of spare time for school activities	Unequal opportunity for participation
Religion	Restriction on time and engagement in school activities	Restricted range for parent and pupil involvement in school activities

Discussion of Research Findings

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study.

Sacred day [Chisi]

The study established that the communities had a special day each week that was set aside for general community activities. This sacred day [Chisi] was found to be used by the schools as the day for inviting community members for meetings, consultation, and other special occasions. In an in-depth interview with one of the village heads, he summarised thus,

Sometimes the head teacher and the school committee, ask for permission to do their activities on the ‘chisi’ day. Chisi is a special day, every Wednesday, we do not work in our fields but we can do any other task for our community. Our people can go and work on public tasks at the school, dip-tank...they work with their kraal heads...they also go to see the children’s books at school.

Community work groups and Respect for Traditional Leader

This study found out that the community culture of providing free communal labour to public programmes had some influence on school development. Communities had been organised in work- groups that provided free labour to school development projects. In a focus group discussion summarised,

Sometimes we come in groups according to our kraals [areas of residence]. We come on different dates to do the work at the school. Our kraal head and some of the school committee members show us the task to be done and we do the work. We do the work voluntarily and we are happy to do it. We provide labour for building classrooms, teachers’ houses and playgrounds. It is our school... we do it for our children.

A quality learning environment should have adequate and relevant physical facilities that include buildings such as classrooms, offices, toilets, specialist rooms; adequate furniture and other teaching and learning materials and equipment; sports fields, attractive school grounds and adequate teachers houses. These physical facilities have some

influence on teachers' working conditions and class sizes (Unicef, 2000; Kaarina and Gonzale, 2011). Parents coming together to provide free labour in constructing school facilities has some positive influence on quality of education (Heneveld, 1994).

Distribution of family tasks

The study found out that the distribution of family roles by gender had some influence on quality of education. The study found out that women and girls were mostly involved in working in the family fields and doing most of the household chores. The men were usually out doing some small contract jobs for money and boys were mostly involved in tending livestock and menial gardening activities. The distribution of domestic chores was found to influence children's school activities.

Gender

This study found out that culturally defined gender roles influenced community participation in education. This influence was evident in parent involvement in supporting children's school learning activities. Women seemed to do most of the tasks around the home and men were out to fend for the family. Thus, when children came back from school with homework, some of the mothers were too busy to monitor their homework. In a focus group discussion one female participant confirmed:

I have too much work in the home. I cannot get time for homework, I have to work in the field and garden, do laundry and ironing, cooking and washing up....time to sit down and do home work is not available, ...too much work.

In some of the cases girls assisted their parents in doing domestic chores. Girls got down to weeding the fields, cleaning plates, and fetching water for use in the home, while boys set out to herd cattle. One male participant, in a focus group discussion concurred:

We parents have a tendency that when the child comes home from school, we say, we were waiting for you.....we give him heavy work....that child has no time to do the work. Sometimes, we parents have a problem of not knowing and... he should have time for homework ...other tasks can come later

This implies that some children have limited time for homework. Homework is an essential element in providing quality education (Protheroe, 2009). More so, the younger children have less developed study habits and are less able to handle disturbances at home (Cooper, 2008). It follows that, the young Primary School children need more attention and guidance when doing homework. Therefore, the study shows that parents and children do not have enough time for children's homework.

Homework extends the children's learning time and offers them the opportunity to reflect on and consolidate what they would have learnt during the lessons at school (Protheroe, 2009; Davis, 2000). In the Zimbabwean education system, home work, is strongly encouraged. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (1990) advises school heads to design school timetables that could guide their teachers and children in planning for homework. And, research has shown that younger children have less developed study habits and are less able to manage disturbance at home (Cooper, 2008). In addition, research has also revealed that those children who are slow in class experience more difficulties with homework just because the work becomes more difficult for them and thus, rely on their parents for assistance (Protheroe, 2009). Therefore, homework helps to provide a conscious and tangible link between home and school. It encourages parents to get involved in the learning of their children, thus, making them partners in teaching and learning processes.

Religion

The study established that religion had an influence on community members' participation in providing basic education. Community members belonged to different religious groupings of different beliefs. While some of the religious groups appreciated school education, others did not. In a focus group discussion one school development committee chairperson summarised:

Our people belong to different churches. We have churches that discourage people from sending children to school... yet some churches are building schools for their children. So, some of our people do not like even to come and do work for the school...children are not allowed to do some of the school activities. They believe...

Therefore, religious beliefs had some influence on the behaviour of community members in participating in providing basic education.

Conclusions

The study concluded that cultural sacred days, respect for the traditional leaders, and community work groups influenced behaviour and had potential for improving community participation and thus quality of basic education. Family distribution of household roles by gender had a negative influence on females and subsequently on quality of basic education. Religion had positive and negative influence on behaviour and thus on quality of education

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