

## **A Surgical Analysis of Community Participation: Designing a Model for improving quality in Stragglng Rural Schools**

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### ***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 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). As a result, community participation in education has become a common area of interest in many policy documents, not only for governments but also for international development organisations (Bray, 2003).*

*In this light, the government of Zimbabwe went on to make education policy that would facilitate increased community participation for improving quality of education in the schools. The policy was instrumental in the formation of School Development Committees (SDC) that had the mandate to coordinate and represent community members at school management level.*

*The SDCs were trained in skills for effective management practices as well as coordination of community participation activities. This training exercise was co-sponsored by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and the United Nations International Children’s Education Fund and covered all SDCs in the country (Boonstpell and Chikohomero (2012). In addition, handbooks for SDCs were produced and distributed to all primary and secondary schools.*

*However, it appears that, despite concerted government effort in Zimbabwe, increasing power and scope of community involvement in school operations, educational provisions and quality have remained critically low particularly in rural schools (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2010). Most primary schools do not have essential resources- such as, exercise and textbooks, teachers’ stationery, adequate classrooms and suitable furniture, lack of clean water, electricity, and teacher accommodation. School children’s enthusiasm to learn has been driven low as evidenced by the low pass rate at the Grade Seven Standardised National Examinations which seem to have continued to drop in some schools Mushanawani (2014).*

*Therefore, there is need for developing another community participation approach that should focus on improving quality of education in these poor performing schools. The approach needs to put more attention in understanding diverse and complex participation relationships among community members and school teachers. These relationships do not seem to yield the expected positive influence on education development and quality. This raises questions on the nature and influence of the different relationships and dynamics in community participation in providing quality education. There is, therefore, need for a review of literature on community participation.*

### **Overview of Community Participation**

Basing on the related literature reviewed for this study, many scholars believe that the philosophy of community participation has its origins in the ideas of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian education philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his most celebrated literature, ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, Freire (1974) argued that, all people, and especially the poor and disadvantaged, have both the right and duty to be involved in decisions that affect their daily lives. This philosophy was of great appeal to both development practitioners and academics; particularly Chambers (1983) cited in (Penderis, 2012) who maintained that ‘putting the last first’ was the only way to achieve ‘real’ rural development, as he advanced his advocacy for Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques in development projects.

The term, participation, in the development context has been defined as, “a process through which people with an interest [stakeholders] influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them” (African Development Bank (2001:6). However, this definition seems to view community participation as an alignment of response behaviours with specific expectations of those

initiating participation in different sectors of community development such as agriculture, tourism, health, and education as well as by those defining the nature of educational participation (Cleaver, 2001). In this study, the working definition of community participation in education focuses on how community members are involved in the education of their children within their various contexts.

Therefore, this study, though steeped in the education discipline, borrows significantly from development studies discourse. The study embraced two principal theories from development studies discourse to illuminate relational issues involved in community participation in providing education. They include the 'Typology of Participation Model (Pretty, 1995) and the Typology of Interests Model' (White, 1996). The concepts that have been articulated in these theories, together with the education quality framework suggested by UNESCO (2004), have influenced this study's conception of the relationships involved in community participation in providing quality education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study set out to investigate how community participation dynamics influenced quality of education in rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. To situate this study in the appropriate theoretical context, this section discusses relevant 'participation' and 'education' theory (PET). This PET theory lays the foundation for developing the 'lens' through which the expectations of the study questions were best understood and directed. A combination of theories contributed immensely to clarify participation concepts and relationships as reflected in the conceptual framework in Figure 2 **above** as well as giving direction to the research process.

The first theory discussed is the Pretty (1995) Typology of Participation. This theory suggests that there are different levels of participation that range from low level participation (manipulative), to the highest level of participation which Pretty termed self mobilisation. According to the typology theory, the intentions of the participation initiator exert significant influence in shaping the manner with which participation is modelled and organised. The later version of Pretty's Typology of Participation is the International Association for Public Participation (2007) Spectrum of Public Participation Model. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Model provides a framework of increasing levels of intensity, the respective goals for community participation, and respective action by agents of participation. The theories were adopted for this study for specific purposes. Pretty's (1995) model was useful in understanding the nature of participation relationships that developed among school staff and school development committee members, who usually created space for community participation, and community members who were usually invited to participate. The IAP2 Model was useful in understanding how participation agents behaved at various levels of community participation.

The third theory that guided this study was White (1996) Typology of Interests' Model. White's Typology of Interests model suggests that participation is an arena where different people's interests are overtly or covertly contested. Further, this model is most relevant to this study since it introduces issues of dynamics into the participation discourse. It maintains that community participation dynamics arise from differences in member perceptions influenced by gender, politics, education levels, age, socio economic status, technical skill levels, and even culture among many others (White, 1996). In this study, the Typology of Interests Model assisted the researcher to conceptualise and make sense of how and why the research participants were doing things they said they did or not doing what they did not do on various occasions in providing education.

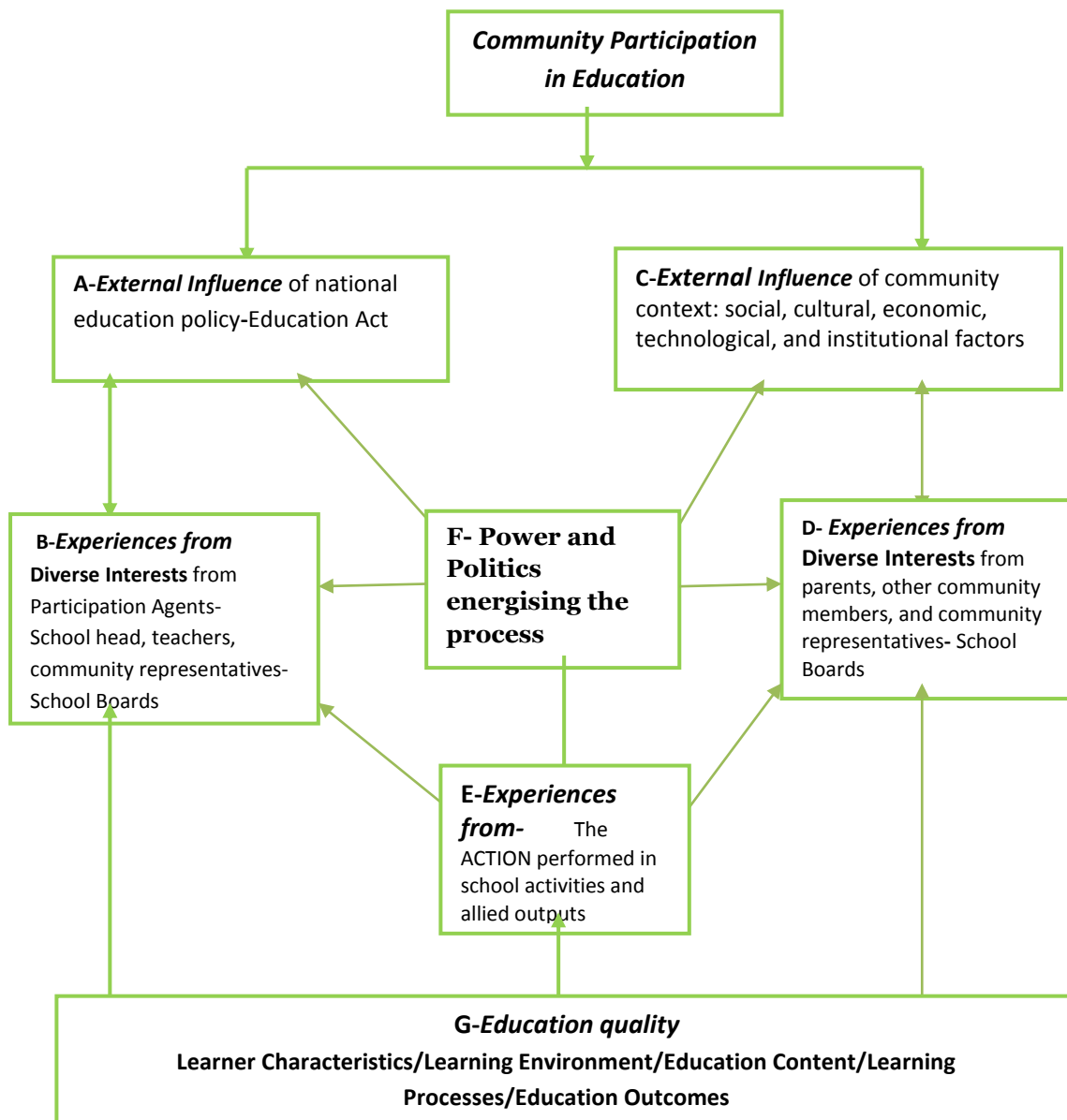
The last theory that was discussed was the UNESCO (2004) Model for Understanding Education Quality. In its true spirit, the model attempts to collate the many different perceptions of quality education into a framework that emphasises the importance of the key dimensions that constitute quality education. Understanding quality education from this framework implies that the critical quality dimensions in education may include healthy and motivated learners, competent teachers who use progressive teaching methods, relevant curricula, sound school leadership, and adequate resources (UNESCO, 2004). The

framework was relevant to this study as it identified and unpacked education quality dimensions, from where the influence of participation dynamics can be observed and assessed.

The theories that have been discussed in this section have briefly highlighted critical tenets that define community participation theory that was relevant to this study. These tenets included issues relating to levels of participation, contesting interests, different forms of participation, purpose of participation, and dynamics in participation. The next section presents the researcher’s conceptual framework that derives from personal understanding of the participation relationships as articulated by the literature reviewed.

**The Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework has been referred to by several scholars as, the researcher’s understanding of the relationships in the natural progression of the phenomenon under study (Camp, 2001). In this study, the conceptual framework is provided in Figure 1. The framework depicts the stakeholder relationships involved in community participation in providing quality education as conceptualised from literature reviewed. Figure 1 simplifies the conception of the otherwise complex structure of relationships that helps explain the natural progression of community participation in basic education. Boxes A to G represent potential zones of influence that generate diverse decisions and experiences for community actors.



## Figure 1: Relationships in Community Participation in Education

Source: Sango (2017)

Zones **A** and **C** – represent external forces that influence community participation processes. These forces emanate from the education policies on community participation **A** and also from the community context **C**. Education policies **A** provide guidelines for creating participation structures; pronounce national education aims and objectives; and state government support for education. The community contextual factors **C** which include, cultural, socio- political, economic, technological, historical, and institutional factors, shape the community members' individual and group interest and expectation from participation along age, gender, class, financial and status variables.

Zones marked **B** and **D** represent community members' interaction space. In zone **B** elected community representatives bring with them community as well as individual interests and expectations from participation to engage in school level management decision making processes. The school leadership, on their part, also bring along professional as well as individual interests and expectations, thus, creating a maze for competing overt as well as covert interests and expectations for negotiation at management level. Power relations are at the centre of this interaction whose outcome has influence on community members' decisions.

In zone **D** community members who have been influenced by external forces from zone **C** bring along their group and individual interests for negotiation at community level, where decisions to include or exclude; participate or not to participate emerge as competing interests and power relations among members of the community drive the process.

The output from school management level **B** and community level **D** shapes the nature of the final participation action in zone **E** which has a direct influence on quality of education **G**. Zone **F** represents the presence of power and politics that energise the whole process and the arrows represent the relationships among the zones. The information given in this conceptual framework informed the choice of research design, data gathering, analysis and interpretation processes.

### Research Methodology

The study was carried out in a constructivist paradigm in which qualitative methodology was used. A multiple case study made up of three communities was used. The three communities were purposefully selected to represent the different levels of development in rural areas in Zimbabwe. Permission to carryout this study was granted from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Research participants willingly participated and were assured of anonymous and confidential handling of all research data. The data were generated through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions that provided the research participants an opportunity to reflect on and interpret their experiences as they constructed reality on their involvement in providing school education for their children. In addition, School and SDC documents were analysed, and observations on school routines, SDC, as well community member behaviours were observed. These observations provided a sound basis for empirical credibility, trustworthiness, and dependable findings that were made. A clearly documented audit trail was maintained for confirmability of the study results.

Research data were analysed through the manual cut and paste method in which all data were sorted according to particular relevance to research questions. The data were then coded into categories from where sub themes emerged, leading to emergence of the main themes making the research findings.

The study was guided by the following research findings: How are community members involved in providing school education? What participation dynamics are influencing community members' participation? How do participation dynamics influence quality of education in schools? How can community participation in providing education be improved?

### Research Findings

The research found out that community members were involved through preparing children for school. This activity involved ensuring that children were enrolled with the local school, bathed, fed, appropriately

dressed, provide stationery and regular attendance. However, some parents are not able to fulfil their obligation as expected through the community participation policy. In a focus group discussion, one teacher revealed, “Parents should give their children food...they have nothing to eat at break time.” In concurrence, another teacher added:

“The other day I had to give a packet of ‘maputi’ [popcorn] to a girl in my class. She was complaining of a headache and... She ate it all. After some time she started playing with others and.....”

In addition, parents maintained schools. They provided labour for building and general maintenance and upkeep of school buildings, sport facilities, equipment and grounds. In an in-depth interview, one headman summarised:

It is like, when the school does not look good anymore....like there is a lot of litter and overgrown with grass...the kraal heads receive the message from the headman. They pass the message to the people... the people go and clean it up....all community members...yes...on ‘chisi’ [sacred day].

In a focus group discussion, A man added,

We also fitted window panes and we are still going further...because we wanted to repaint our sign post out there....but were disturbed by a funeral in the community....we arranged that we are meeting this coming Saturday.

Parents made financial contributions through funding school administrative budgets. In a focus group discussion, one SDC chairman summarised the issue of paying school levy:

We can say their [parents] major task is to contribute towards the school fund by paying for their children. This money is used to pay for various school requirements... So it is their paying that makes the school operate. The school does not get any other money from anywhere. The little from government....

In some cases, parents monitored teachers’ activities as well as children’ learning progress.

This study established that economic, social, and cultural dynamics were negatively influencing participation of community members in providing school education. The economic dynamics negatively impacted on parent’s ability and willingness to pay school levies, commitment to attend school related activities such as meetings, general work gatherings, and open days. These economic dynamics also fuelled conflict among community members and teachers as well as limiting the scope of the curriculum to minimum levels. These economic dynamics influenced people’s choice of members to be elected on the SDC. In focus group discussion, one female participant summarised this phenomenon: “We will be looking for someone who has something to show at his home. Someone we know...one who is educated, one who pays fees on time.” In support, another female participant added:

One whose home looks presentable...does he have some form of job that he is doing, we want check what he know; in the school, what does he offer? Because even here at school he may have a challenge, he may not be able to motivate others to make progress in developing the school if he does not have money himself.

Thus, the elected SDC members are likely to peg school levies at detriment of those with lower income levels as observed by (White, 1996) and thus setting into motion forces of influence from economic dynamics. In an in-depth interview with young parent, He revealed that, because he was frustrated by the decisions made by the SDC, he no longer liked to do anything for the school. Upon further probing, the young parent, when responding to a question on why he no longer liked his former school, or pay school levy, He confirmed:

Anobhowa madhara aya, kunyanya SDC yacho. Vanodaidzira mari yakareba, yezera ravo vega, zvichemo havanzwi. Tingaita sei mudhara? [These seniors frustrate us, especially the SDC. They ask for large amounts of money, which, only they can afford. They don’t listen to our plight. What can we do sir?].

Further, the elected elite members of the SDC were most likely to advance their interests with respect to quality of school facilities and resources (White, 1996), and would use their influence to make meeting



resolutions in their favour. In a focus group discussion, one male participant summed up the plight of the community members:

When we are called for meetings, the agenda is already set from the office; the issues that come from parents are not accepted. They simply say let us focus on what is on the agenda, those are now arising...and then they come too late in the meeting. There will be no time...it is not transparent. We have had several meetings which do not get to conclusions; meetings end in confusion as nobody will be listening to anyone...people will just be speaking anyhow. Sometimes people just walk out. We have had several of such meetings. It has happened for a long time....we no longer attend these meetings.

Social and cultural dynamics were mostly responsible for retarding parents support for children's learning. level of parents education was found to be a dynamic that influenced behaviour in participation in providing education. Parents with low level basic education did not seem to support their children's educational activities meaningfully. In an in-depth interview with one councillor, he summarised the general level of education for the community members:

We can say the parents in this community are lowly educated. Yes, they went to school but they did not get to form Four. Those who went up to grade 7 are the ones who are so called the educated. The majority are not properly educated...they don't care much about the education of their children....

The effects of these dynamics on quality of education were profound. Economic dynamics resulted in hungry children in schools operating without basic resources such as stationery and sporting equipment. In an in-depth interview with one head teacher he explained:

Parents do not buy stationery for their children. It is difficult to teach them well. Some can go for the whole term....and with some parents....its not because they do not have money but because they do not feel responsible for exercise books for the children's school work. As a result, schools would turn away children whose levies were in arrears, and times end as school drop outs.

In a focus group discussion, one teacher revealed: "There is too much absenteeism in this school." In an in-depth interview, the head teacher concurred:

.....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.....others just drop out school like that.

Social and cultural dynamics were responsible for both absenteeism and creating strained relationships among parents, teachers and children. Parents would detain children to focus on domestic chores or engage them after school at the expense of learning and home work assignments, a practice that teachers disliked. In a focus group discussion a teacher revealed:

If there is 'mutsvare' [local language for the activity of gleaning grain after a 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....it disturbs my work plan.....I dislike this practice....

In some cases cultural gender role dynamics were active against community participation in providing education. Women seemed to do most of the tasks around the home and men went 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. In a focus group discussion a woman remarked:

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... the child should have time for homework ...other tasks can come later.

This implies that some children had limited time for homework created strained relationships with their teachers, all due to competing interests in the community participation arena (White, 1996). These strained relationships ended up negatively impacting classroom teaching and learning processes.

The participation dynamics thus put learners in a serious predicament that affects their learning progress. The affected children were unlikely to perform at their best in the given circumstances. In a focus group discussion one teacher summarised:

For those children whose parents provide what the school requires, if it is books they bring, if it is fees they pay, the children are found excelling really well, evidence that learning was really taking place. They pass outstandingly well. Like us teaching in the infant classes ...we get children scoring 25 out of 25. But those ones who don't have books, those who get books after 3 weeks, and during fees times they will be absent, they score marks as low as 3 marks only. You can see the variation 25 and another child scores 3. That's what it comes out like ... yes...have high potential... it's only the supplies that will be inadequate...

### **Strategies for improving community participation**

This study found out that one strategy for improving participation of communities in providing school education was for the SDCs to work transparently and provide space for community members to genuinely participate in making school decisions. In a focus group discussion one male participant summarised up the general opinion:

Things should be transparent. We are not involved in the decisions they [SDC] make. We should be involved. In meetings, the SDC..., they don't listen to our ideas. We are not happy about this...we are the people... some don't come to meetings any more, why should we...

In an in-depth interview, one school head confirmed:

If you want to work well with parents, transparency is the key. Tell them that, here we don't have water; we don't have this and that, so we need to make contributions. Then you explain to them, some get wild, others express different sentiments, but in the end they will understand the need, they end up agreeing, just agree with them and it will happen. What they don't like is for you and your SDC to impose things on them.

In addition, the study revealed that, by improving the level of community members' understanding of educational issues and roles, their extent of participation also improves. One female teacher, in a focus group discussion agreed:

I think there is need to have those meetings where parents are told about the importance of education, and tell the parents about the importance of helping the school... coming to consultation days. This is not the time of.....; it is time for your child to be educated...the parents need to be given this kind of knowledge....

In an in-depth interview with one councillor, he concurred:

Our people are not difficult. They can work well with schools. It is a case of ignorance.....they don't know what they should do and...also why they should do it...some parents are not educated. Parents should be taught how the school operates, what they should do. They should have some workshops.

And, a headman, in an in-depth interview summarised:

These parents need some education..., if there was a chance to take them in small groups and they get some adult education..., because for one to tell them without education... they don't understand these school things....they need to know...

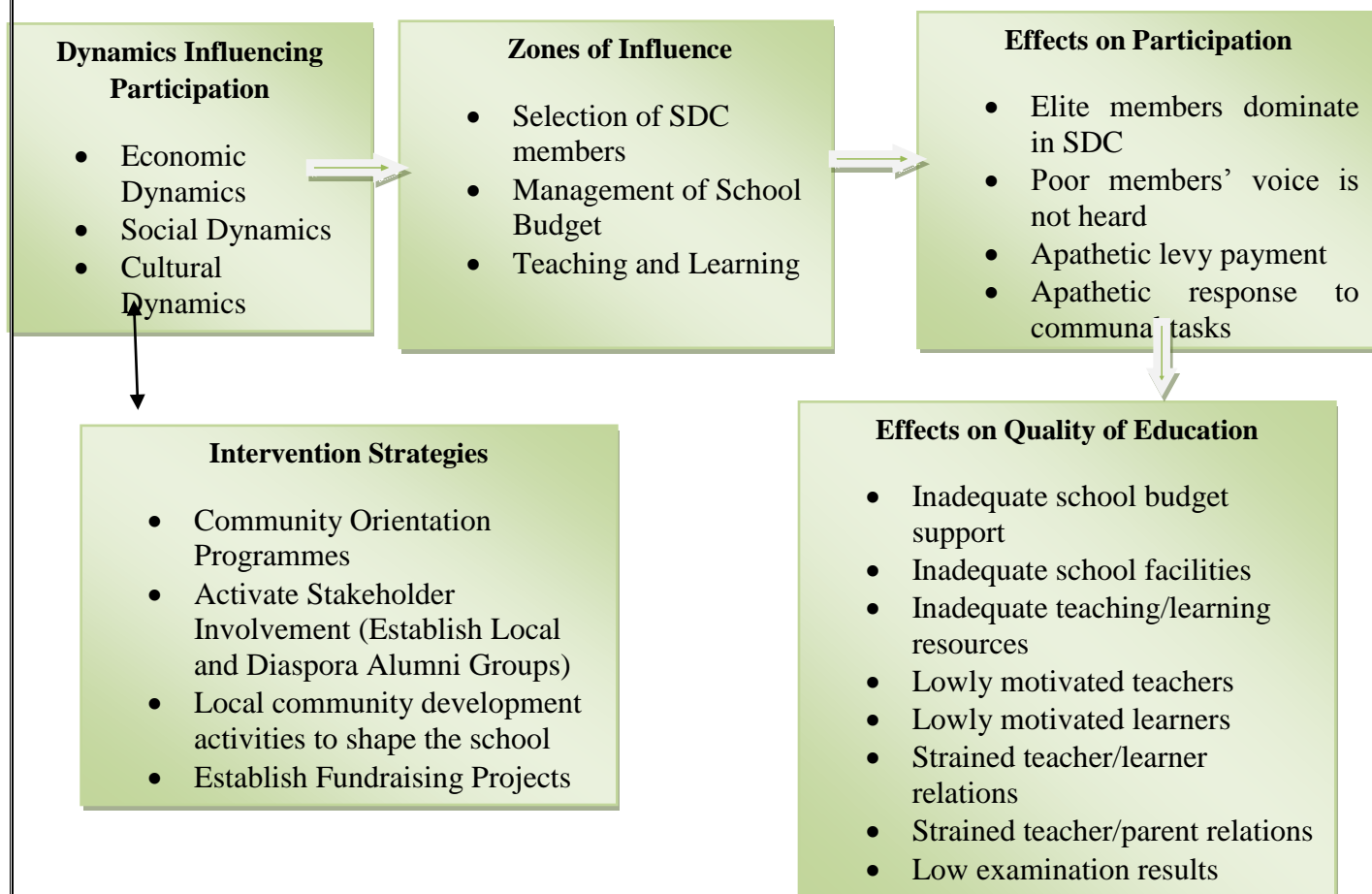
The data that were generated and analysed for this study also revealed that it was essential for community members to have some form of external financial or material assistance for them to effectively participate in providing school education. In a focus group discussion, one female participant agreed: "We need money...we don't have money.....if we had money we would put our heads together ... give us money....we do the rest". In support, another female participant added: "We expect the Government to help...they give money...we do our part in building classroom". In an in-depth interview, one councillor summarised: "Government should help us....and we do our part in this school. These people can do a lot for this school if they get help. All they need is help with money or building materials".

## Summary

A reflection on the findings of this study reveals a cause and effect relationship running through the community participation process. This highly complex relationship originates with the human interface created on this participation arena where individuals bring along their different backgrounds and expectations. Clearly identified in this study are dynamics that arise from individual expectations driven by differences in economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Differences in economic backgrounds seemed to put those with stronger economic background ahead in chances to become members of the SDC, thus assuming more power and privileges in the participation process. There is potential for abuse of power as evidenced in the study.

Social background differences seem to distinguish the more informed from the less informed about educational issues. The less informed seemed to lack the relevant appreciation of the value of education thus posing potential threat to creation of a shared perception of quality education. Those members of the community with a lower regard for education tended to retard school development progress as revealed in the study.

The culturally endorsed differences revealed in the form of gender differences on the community participation platform. These differences tended to reflect in differences in expectation in the level of participation in monitoring children's school work, and amounts of study opportunities during and after school. The study findings are summarised into model for understanding and improving community participation in providing education as given in Figure 2 below



Source: Sango (2017).

**Figure 2: Model for Improving Community Participation in Education**

Source: Sango (own 2017)



## **Explanation on the model**

### **Dynamics influencing community participation**

This model would be useful in diagnosing failing community participation initiatives in education programmes. In using this model, an appreciation of the existence of participation dynamics is critical. The economic, social, and cultural dynamics are understood to have potential to create opposing forces against effort in engaging community participation in providing education. Therefore, there is need for those responsible for success of community participation programmes in education to look beyond programming frameworks, to explore potential influence of participation dynamics.

### **Participation zone influenced**

Community participation dynamics were seen to manifest in the key processes in the participation process. The selection of community representatives was critical. The power that is inherent in coordinating committees such as SDCs may not be fairly distributed among community groups. Such a scenario may be cause for contested decisions in carrying out participatory activities. Management of school budgets, from planning, through revenue collection to budget expenditure is a high risk zone. Differences in levels of income tend to divide the community, with those in the low income group likely to resist financial decisions made by SDCs as demonstrated in the study. Differences among community members and staff may arise in the teaching and learning process. There may be some need to look out for potential forces that may stifle participation due to differences in expectations in this zone.

### **Effects of dynamics on participation**

The participation dynamics identified have potential to create situations in which SDCs are dominated by the elite from the community, thus creating a situation where there are no moderating voices from the lower income groups. Such a scenario breeds potential for unconstructive conflict. There is likelihood for the lower income groups, whose numbers are usually more than those of the elite, to slow down on participation. A situation that may promote apathetic payment of school levy and low level response to communal tasks at school may arise.

### **Effects of dynamics on quality of education**

The manifestation of uncontrolled participation dynamics in community involvement in providing education may result in the following vices in schools, as revealed by this study. These are inadequate educational facilities and resources, unmotivated personnel and learners, dysfunctional relationships among teachers, parents and learners. These vices may lead to low pass rates.

### **Strategies for improving stragglers schools**

The findings of this study recommend establishment of fundraising projects that include initiating both local and Diaspora alumni participation in developing their former school. The fundraising projects would aid in reducing levels of levy on low income groups in the communities as well as help expand school facilities and increase availability of teaching and learning resources. Community orientation programmes aim at improving community awareness in educational issues. Stakeholder involvement focuses on creating mutual relationships with community based and other voluntary and donor organisations. The study recommends that the intervention facilitators plan an incubation period that will allow for a gradual weaning and ensure sustainability of intervention programme.

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