



PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL HEADS ON PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT ON THE ZIMBABWEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of parents in Zimbabwean schools is governed by Statutory Instrument 87 of 1992 (SI87) for non-government schools and Statutory Instrument 379 of 1998 (SI379) (Bowora and Mpofu, 1998) for government schools. Non-government schools are run by School Development Committees (SDCs) and government schools are run by School Development Associations (SDAs). It is argued that comprehensive parent involvement is a pre-requisite for improving the culture of teaching and learning in schools. Against the background of a literature review which examines legislation affecting parents, this article draws on a qualitative inquiry of parent involvement in a small sample of primary schools in Matabeleland North selected by means of purposeful sampling. The research adopted a qualitative methodology using a case study design. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. Views of the research respondents were audio-taped, transcribed and became the primary data for analysis. The findings indicated that the schools were doing more to involve parents than is legally required. Strong leadership from heads of schools together with formal organisation of parent involvement has established parent-friendly schools, regular home-school communication and innovative parent volunteering. However, certain reservations to parental involvement were detected in school heads' attitudes. The study recommends that together with enabling legislation, schools can develop valuable initiatives to make parents more active and equal partners in the governance of schools.

Keywords:

- School Development Committee
- School Development Association
- Parent involvement
- School heads
- Parent-friendly schools

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of collaboration between parents and teachers are widely supported by research (Henderson and Berla, 1994; Booth. and Dunn., 1996; Cairney, 2000), and such collaboration is currently included in the policy of most education systems throughout the world. In Great Britain, government support home-school and parent education programmes gained particular attention in the Government's Education White Paper Excellence in schools in July 1997 (National Children's Bureau., 2000) and the contribution of parents has been linked to school effectiveness (Munn, 1993; Bastiani and Wolfendale, 1996; Wolfendale and Bastiani, 2000; Wolfendale, 2002). The importance of parent involvement is also evident in Australia (Angus, 1995) and New Zealand (Renwick, 1989). Parent involvement and school improvement have been linked in Hong Kong (Ng, 1999), the Netherlands (Smit *et al.*, 1993) and Indonesia (Van der Werf *et al.*, 2000). Additionally, the concept of parents as partners with schools has been well established in federal and state policy and legislation in the United States (United States Department of Education, 1996) and the rights of parents have been given considerable attention in the education systems of the European Union (European Information Network on Education., 1998).

In spite of this positive trend, it is difficult to understand why there is not more actual parent involvement in schools. This paper, therefore, explores the challenges that make it difficult for schools and legislators to translate the intention to increase parent involvement into practice. Merely to invite parents into schools is easier than overcoming subtle and powerful barriers to effective parent involvement on the part of teachers and parents. Most of the time, attitudes of schools towards active parent involvement are ambiguous. Although the official rhetoric claims that the parent-teacher relationship should be collaborative, equal and reflect an even distribution of power, this is often absent in schools. Investigations into parent involvement in Zimbabwean communities from the perspectives of teachers, parents and learners confirm the need for a broader conceptualisation of parent involvement which includes, but transcends, parent participation in school governance. Against the background of current policy and legislation, this paper reports on the implementation of comprehensive parent involvement in a small sample of primary schools in Zimbabwe based on the findings of a qualitative inquiry.

Statement of the Problem

The study sought to investigate the perceptions of heads of primary schools towards parents involvement in school developments.

Purpose of the Study

The study's aim was to expose the challenges encountered by parents in the governance issues of primary schools in Zimbabwe through interrogating the heads' experiences in their capacities as chief officers working with parents.

Research Objectives

The study intended to:

- To use heads' experiences in coordinating activities of SDCs/SDAs to unmask the operational challenges that they experience.
- To explore strategies that the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture can adopt to improve the functioning of SDCs/SDAs.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- Basing on the experiences of heads of schools, what are the challenges and limitations being experienced by SDCs/SDAs?
- How can the challenges experienced by SDCs/SDAs be addressed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualisation of Parent Involvement in School Governance

Before independence, parents in Zimbabwean schools operated in an ethos of authoritarianism (Moyo, 2000). The state regarded parent involvement (particularly in schools for blacks) primarily as a means of financing schools. At best, parents were seen as clients who had little say in school management and functioning. Parent responsibilities were perceived in terms of payment of school fees, attendance of school events and fundraising. In many communities, parent involvement has been virtually non-existent due to political turbulence, poor socio-economic conditions, teacher reluctance and parent apathy (Chindova, 1999). Eipsten and Dauber (1993) recommended a comprehensive strategic model of parent involvement which includes diverse types of parent activity. Various approaches to home-school partnerships that combine effective family practices with positive school programmes exist (Corner, 1984; Coleman, 1987; Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1995) (Gordon, 1977). Various authors advocate a broad approach to parent involvement which extends beyond school governance to incorporate as many and as diverse a representation of parents in a variety of tasks in and outside the school (Bastiani, 1989; Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1995). Currently, the most comprehensive model of partnership in the literature appears to be Epstein (1995) framework of six major types of parent-school involvement: parenting; communication, volunteering, learning at home; decision-making and community collaboration. Each type of involvement poses specific challenges for its successful design and implementation and each leads to different outcomes for learners, parents and teachers (Epistein *et al.*, 1997). Integral to the model is an organisational structure that coordinates schools, family and community partnerships (Epistein *et al.*, 1997). The latter should comprise parents and teachers and be part of, but not synonymous with the school governing body. Epstein in (Nardine and Morris, 1991) also maintains that rhetoric about the importance of parent involvement is meaningless without financial and technical support from education authorities.

Parents are called upon to assume their responsibilities as citizens of a democratic state through the fulfilment of basic responsibilities. Furthermore, the broad definition of parents implies that schools should acknowledge a variety of family types and develop a range of home-school linkages accordingly. Thus, teachers should co-operate with non-traditional caregivers; for example, grant parents, other relatives and older siblings. Many children in disadvantaged communities in Zimbabwe are cared for by grandparents or other relatives. However, it is exceptional for schools to engage a learner's relatives actively and purposefully in parent involvement practices (Angus, 1995). Laudably, the extensive powers of the school governing bodies accommodate the parents' role in vital matters of school governance. However, the contribution of parents in governing bodies is limited. The empowerment of the larger parent body depends on the efficacy of the liaison between them and the school governing body as well as the capacity of elected parent representatives to function effectively as governors. Many working-class and rural parents face constraints in terms of participation in school governing bodies as a result of poor skills, distance from schools and lack of time. Provincial and district education departments tasked with developing the skills of these bodies' members provide brief and uneven training for new governing bodies (Epstein, 1995).

Establishment of School Development Committees

A School Development Committee is a body corporate which is a stand-alone committee of the school that can sue or can be sued like any other business enterprise. The committee members are elected by parents/guardians of children in each of the schools in Zimbabwe (secondary and primary) government or non-government. The establishment of School Development Committees is governed by the Education Act of 2006 (Chapter 25:04).

Roles of School Development Committees/Associations

School Development Committees/Associations in Zimbabwe are supposed to provide resources and assist in the operation and development of the school. They are expected to advance the moral, cultural, physical and intellectual welfare of the pupils in the schools and to promote the welfare of the school for the benefit of its present and future pupils, their parents, teachers and the community at large. SDC/SDAs preserve and maintain the property and facilities of the school, employ, pay and fire support staff and at times, employ additional teachers to serve the needs of the school conditions and terms approved by the Minister (through the Provincial Education Director). They are also expected to see and take professional advice on matters affecting the committee and the school.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in that if heads of schools' experiences illuminate the challenges and limitations being experienced by SDCs/SDAs, measures can be put in place to ensure that parents play an effective role in the governance of their schools. This study also envisages to

improve the monitoring of SDC/SDA activities by the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture officials to make sure that parents are accorded the full rights in the affairs of their schools.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to the absence of the parents' voice on their involvement in school affairs. The study is also limited to a detailed account of parent involvement and is thus no more than a snapshot of practice in specific settings. Clearly, the findings cannot be generalised but they alert one to both the possibilities of parent involvement and difficulties encountered in a small sample of Zimbabwean schools.

Delimitations of the Study

The researcher delimited the investigation to establishing challenges faced and limitations displayed by parents as they participate in School Development Committees or Associations. Views of principals from ten primary school head teachers were used in the research. Perceptions from other stakeholders like parents themselves, school children among others, were not sought by the study.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology and made use of case study and document analysis, research designs. The methodology and the designs were selected because they afforded the heads the opportunity to relive their experiences in their daily interactions with parents. The population consisted of ten heads of schools from one cluster in Nkayi District in Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe. The inquiry explored heads' accounts of parent involvement in the governance of primary schools. Griffith (2000) emphasises the key role of the school heads, who as school leaders, are well positioned to drive parent involvement. She found that the definitive role of the principal in parent involvement is cardinal in schools with non-involved parents and disadvantaged school populations. Moreover, Chapman and Birchfield (1994) argue that principals in developing countries play a particularly striking role in implementing all school policies including parent involvement.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews lasting forty-five minutes using an interview guide. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and became the primary data source for analysis conducted by the researcher. The aim was to understand experiences from the participants' point of view. No attempt was made to generalise the findings or prove hypotheses. A transparent disclosure of the role of the researcher and his or her relationship with the participants, the 'volunteering' of participants and description of school settings was done to contextualise the research and allow for the impact of the researcher role and participant selection on findings. The use of a small sample is common in qualitative research, where the aim is depth and not breadth.

Findings and Discussion

The study sought to investigate the perceptions of school heads on the involvement of parents in Zimbabwean primary schools. This section is presented in two parts namely, demographic data and actual findings.

Demographic Data

Table-1. Distribution of research participants by sex (N=10)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	7	70
Female	3	30
Total	10	100

As Table 1 shows, 70% of the heads of schools were male and 30% of them were female. This datum was considered statistically significant to the extent that it tended to confirm the gender gap (in favour of males) with senior management in rural primary schools which has always been pointed out by many a gender activist on educational publications. For example, [Bowora and Mpofu \(1998\)](#) clearly acknowledge the existence of disparities in senior management positions between males and females in Zimbabwean rural schools and described them as a cause for concern.

Table-2. Composition of respondents by approximate age (N=10)

Age in years	Frequency	Percentage
30-39 years	2	20
40-49 years	4	40
50+ years	4	40
Total	10	100

Table 2 shows the age range for principals and teachers. As the table demonstrates the majority of the school heads were aged at least 40.

Table-3. Composition of respondents by experience as heads of schools (N=10)

Teaching Experience	Frequency	Percentage
0-5 years	0	0
6-10 years	0	0
11-15 years	7	70
16-20 years	1	10
Above 20 years	2	20
Total	10	100

Information on Table 3 indicates that the vast majority of heads of schools in this study have been in their posts for more than 10 years, since the categories of 0-5 years and 6-10 years passed by the respondents. The majority of them therefore could be said to be experienced administrators.

Table-4. Composition of respondents by highest qualification (N=10)

Highest Professional Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Primary Teachers' Lower (PTL)	0	0
Primary Teachers' Higher (PTH)	0	0
Certificate in Education (CE)	3	30
Diploma in Education (DipEd)	2	20
Bachelor of Education (BEd)	5	50
Master of Education (MEd)	0	0
Total	10	100

The demographic characteristics of respondents are shown in Table 4. Half of them have acquired the Bachelor of Education in Education Degree (50%) and 30% of them are Certificate of Education holders, while 20% of them are Diploma of Education holders. This information is significant in that it demonstrates that all heads have acceptable qualifications.

Actual Research Findings

According to international literature, there is a link between school effectiveness and improvement and school-based parent involvement programmes (Chrispeels, 1992). This inquiry suggests that strong parent involvement was linked to sound management and a strong culture of teaching and learning in these schools. The absence of the culture of teaching and learning is a grave concern in most rural schools in Zimbabwe. Most of the heads in this study agreed that most members of SDCs/SDAs were very keen to participate in school governance issues but were discouraged by lack of time and expertise in understanding some of the technical issues in the running of schools. For example, issues to do with the curriculum finance and employment contracts of teachers usually gave them challenges. It was the duty of the heads to guide the parents on these issues. To promote effective home-school communication, schools should establish regular two-way communication with all families about school programmes and children's progress (Epstein *et al.*, 1997). All the heads regularly communicated with parents sometimes directly through children or through parents' meetings and indirectly through community leaders like chiefs, councillors and others.

A common tendency among schools is to communicate with the home only when a behavioural or learning problem arises and to neglect to communicate good news about learners' achievements (Dietz, 1997). Most heads acknowledged that problem-orientated communication was the norm. Where achievements were acknowledged, this was done by sending a child's work home for a parents' signature. All heads of schools found that attendance of large, general parent meetings, including the crucial school governing body elections, was extremely poor. "We really have to work hard to get parents to come to meetings." Some schools even struggled to obtain the mandatory quorum to elect numbers of the School Development Committees or School Development Associations. In contrast, individual parent-teacher meetings where parents obtained feedback about their own child were always better attended.

Cullingford and Morrison (1999) agree that parents who are hard pressed for time are less concerned about policy issues and are primarily interested in their own child's progress. All head teachers claimed an open-door policy. One described this saying: 'I always invite parents to come to my office any time they feel like.' However, many parents are intimidated by contacting a school and especially the head. Moreover, heads of schools are inundated by parental demands on their time. One head resorted that, 'Unfortunately, having an open-door policy can backfire on you because your door is always closed because you always have people with you.' Another head of school did home visits in cases of repeated absenteeism or suspected child neglect. But the data showed that both written communication and parent-teacher meetings focused on the teachers' telling parents about activities and how children were progressing. To realise an equal partnership, parents' voices must be heard. Some of the schools found that a suggestion box functioned well. Parents could bring in their suggestions, comments or complaints which were referred daily to a senior teacher for immediate follow-up. But these strategies tended to provide parents with an anonymous and limited voice in the school.

Schools must become places where families feel wanted and recognised for their strengths and potential. Frequently, families, particularly poor families, do not feel welcome in school. In a sound partnership, this can be partly overcome by creating more family-like schools (Epstein *et al.*, 1997), which recognise each child's individuality and approach all families, not just those who are easy to reach. But, in spite of an open-door policy espoused by all schools, the data suggest that going beyond the hard core of interested parents and reaching larger numbers remains more of an ideal than reality, as one head remarked: 'Disempowered parents are not going to come knocking at the door and say, "Here I am." They have to be invited and the school is in the position to invite someone into its domain.' The endeavour to create an invitational environment was an ongoing concern for all heads that recognised that the responsibility lay with the school in what is often an unequal partnership. Another head observed 'My response to parent apathy is "How good is the school environment for parents?" Are they seen as the source of challenge or the source of complaint? I believe we've got to make parents welcome.'

A welcoming atmosphere requires more than just the rhetoric of policy. Activities to involve parents should consider the pressures of contemporary family life, should be feasible to implement and equitable to all types of families (Epstein *et al.*, 1997). These schools made concrete efforts to accommodate working parents on their terms. Parent meetings were held on Saturday mornings, Sundays or even public holidays so that parents could attend. Teachers were expected to work these unconventional hours without special compensation. Parents were given a tour of the school, visited classrooms, sat with their children at their desks and observed school activities.

Epstein *et al.* (1997) maintain that an individual cannot create a lasting comprehensive programme of parent involvement but, along with clear policies and strong support from education authorities, a coordinating body comprising parents and teachers is necessary. Interestingly none of the schools

had a written policy on parent involvement, although heads mentioned advice given to teachers at staff meetings regarding how to deal with parents.

In all cases, head teachers enjoyed harmonious relations with the governing body the SDCs/SDAs. Heads spoke warmly of their relationship with the chairperson or members whom they singled out for special mention. But a few linked this appreciation to the SDCs/SDA's allowing them to retain what they viewed as their legitimate autonomy as head. Some SDCs/SDAs want to poke their nose in certain things, which is not really their sphere. Especially, the academic things which definitely do not fall into the area of the SDC's jurisdiction. One head was outspoken in this regard: "They leave me to run the school. Yes we will discuss things but I am the one who makes the decision." Most heads indicated that finding members willing to stand for the posts in the SDC is not easy. It is a great commitment to work as an SDC member. Members had to meet at least monthly and that is just the main committee. Meetings are usually long and members are also co-opted to sub-committees. Another head repeatedly mentioned that parents feared that election to the school committee would mean sacrificing their home duties to spend time in the school mostly for no benefit.

At some time in all the interviews, the heads referred to the ambiguous relationship with parents. Parents involvement undoubtedly added value to the school, yet dealing with parents was seen as a delicate and time-consuming task. Parents could be a source of trouble as one had summed it up: 'A parent can really be a tricky thing. Sometimes you just have to handle them with kid gloves because you get some who will easily say, "I'll take my child out of your school."' In spite of good practice in their schools, the heads typified the view that the curriculum is the province of professional educators and that parental input in curriculum and instruction was unwelcome (Thomas, 1998). One head mirrored this viewpoint: "I don't really want parents to interfere in the classroom. One is very sensitive to that.'" All heads showed a need to 'control' parents, to maintain a balance of power with regard to parents who might interfere. One head remarked: 'We have our few that need to be sorted out and we sort them out'. Another head was very emphatic: 'I don't take any nonsense from the parents; I don't take nonsense from the School Development Committee.'

CONCLUSIONS

The heads of schools revealed that in spite of the legislation promoting the existence and operations of SDCs, these committees experienced challenges during their activities in schools.

- Most members of SDCs/SDAs were very keen to participate in school governance issues but were discouraged by lack of time and expertise in understanding some of the technical issues in the running of schools.
- There are challenges related to communication gaps between schools and parents especially on positive developments.
- There is generally apathy to attend school meetings by most parents.

- Many heads admitted that many parents were intimidated by contacting a school and especially the head, in spite of the pronounced open-door policy.
- Most heads indicated that they enjoyed harmonised relations with the governing SDC/SDA body. However, this was linked to the legitimate autonomy that SDCs/SDAs allowed heads.
- Most heads also indicated that most parents were very reluctant to take up posts as members of the SDC/SDAs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having the above findings and conclusions, the research puts forth the following recommendations:

- Schools should involve parents in setting goals of the school and consult them for their views so that they could cooperate and participate freely in school affairs.
- Schools should increase the frequency of holding parents meetings and educate parents on school policies and financial management so that they can be fully conversant with technical issues in running of schools.
- Heads should allow parents to partake in decisions concerning the academic issues which heads regard as their sole preserve.
- Schools can also come up with mechanisms that would help them identify potential parents with skills to include in the SCDs/SDAs.
- There is need for schools to constantly and consistently communicate with parents about their children on both positive and negative issues; the tendency is to communicate mainly the negative things like the misbehaviour of pupils or poor academic performance.
- Schools should hold meetings at convenient times for parents and committee members to participate without affecting negatively their other commitments. Meetings should not be held too early during the day or late during the day. They should not take long hours as this discourages parents from attending.

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