UNMASKING THE BRIDGE LINKING THE NETWORK IN LOCAL SCHOOL GOVERNANCE: A CASE OF ONE PRIMARY SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE (SDC) IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

An extract from a broader study on implementation of local school governance reform in Zimbabwe, this article unmasks the school development committee (SDC) as the link or bridge connecting the network of stakeholders that participate in local school governance in the context of the Zimbabwe's 1991 school governance reform policy in Zimbabwe. Underpinned by an interpretive framework, the study was a qualitative case study of one rural (SDC) intent on understanding the central or linking role that the SDC occupied and played respectively in bringing different stakeholders into participation in school development efforts. Purposive sampling enabled involvement of fifteen participants actively involved in school development. Data generation techniques included indepth interviews, observation and document analysis, which provided for data corroboration and in-build triangulation to enhance trustworthiness of findings. Thematic analysis entailed identifying emerging themes form the data that patterned around categories and their constituent elements. Findings indicated the SDCemerging as the bridge or link connecting a convergence of genuine and spontaneous participation of various stakeholders in local school governance and development.Participants revealed various stakeholder constituencies that included local traditional leadership structures, local government (rural district council), local business persons,local representatives of government departments,

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donor agencies, and ordinary villagers. Benefits brought by participants ranged from providing labour, organisation logistics, material resources, expertise and skills, to conflict mediation and resolution.The study recommends regular capacity building of incoming new SDCs on building and stakeholder relationships and participation for sustainable school development.

Key words: school development, committee, local school governance, decentralisation, network, participation.

1.   BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The SDC phenomenon as a reform policy that localised school governance in Zimbabwe should be understood with two marked historical developments that define its historical context. AsZvobgo (1986; 1994) chronicles, Colonial Zimbabwe had a dual, racially divided education system; European and African Education. While education for the whites was compulsory and fully funded by the state, African education was left at the mercy of missionaries with very little funding in terms of government grants with stringent conditions laid for African mission schools to qualify for grant disbursement. The famous 1966 Education Plan for African schools restricted movement of blacks through the education ladder by instituting a bottleneck system where only 50 % of primary graduates would proceed to secondary school education whereby 12.5% proceeded to academic (F1) secondary school destined for Cambridge examinations, and 37.5 % to the newly introduced industrial (F2) schools destined for a local examination by Ministry of Education (Zvobgo, 1994). Issues of school governance were therefore centralised. The same policy transferred ownership of most mission schools to local authorities, implying that the cash-strapped local district councils whose major source of income was monies realised from beer sales at council beerhalls suddenly became responsible authorities of most rural schools.

With the advent of independence, in the framework of freecompulsory primary education and Education for All policies adopted in a socialist framework, post-independence Zimbabwe abolished the dual education system by de-racialising and democratising education (Zvobgo, 1986). The policy framework that guided reforms in education for the first eight years was the ZANU PF Election Manifesto, 1980, especially Item L that declared free and compulsory education. The result was a rapid expansion in education that saw mushrooming of schoolsacross

the whole landscape, and phenomenal increases in enrolment figures, which included adults who had missed out on education during the colonial era, as Zvobgo (1986; 1997) vividly portrays. In the quest to meet the social demand for education, local parents in rural areas were not left out as they actively took part by providing labour and local resources such as moulding bricks, carrying sand, stones and water neededin the construction of school buildings (Zvobgo, 1986). This gigantic transformation and phenomenal expansion of the education system, as well as other social services sectors such as health, meant huge financial expenditures that the government soon could not afford. There was need to adopt mechanisms that would enable government to recapitalise.

The year 1991 saw Zimbabwe'sadoption of Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) as a package crafted by World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). ESAP policies advocated privatisation and liberalisation of the economy designed to reduce government expenditure and intervention. Characteristic features of ESAP were cuts in government subsidies, introduction (or re-introduction in some cases) of user fees meant to reduce government's financial burden (Mlambo, 1997;Zvobgo, 1997; Rose, 2003; Zvobgo, 2003). As such, adoption of ESAP came with drastic cost recovery measures that privatised the financing of education and other social services. The idea was to transfer the financing of education to the beneficiaries through reform policies such as re-introduction of tuition fees and decentralisation of school governance.

In the spirit of ESAP, Zimbabwe Education Act Amendment Number 26, 1991 devolved the responsibility of financing and provision of education to local communities (Mlambo, 1999; Zvogbo, 1997; 2003)by proclaiming the formation of SDCs in non-government schools. This amendment, later operationalised through enactment of Statutory Instrument (SI) Number 87 of 1992, a legal instrument that defines the composition of the SDC, its objectives and functions, as well as procedures. The amendment was subsequentlyenshrined in the Zimbabwe Education Act (Revised Edition) of 1996, Section 36. This way, Zimbabwe adopted a decentralisation strategy in an effort to reduce the pressure on the fiscus, thus meeting prescriptions of ESAP. Section 36 of the 1996 Education Act vests the SDC with control of financial affairs of the school for which it was established. According to SI 87/1992, the objects of the SDC are to provide and assist in

the operation and development of the school; advance the moral, cultural, physical and intellectual welfare of pupils at the school; and to promote the welfare of the school for the benefit of its present and future pupils, their parents and teachers. I argue that fulfilment of the mandated objects of the SDC involves a connectedness to constituencies and stakeholders outside of the SDC boundaries, and that have interestin, and participate in the development of the school.

2.　　LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL CLARIFICATIONS

Maclure (1994) argues that African countries are plagued with deterioration of physical infrastructure unable to accommodate the ballooning school population, acute shortages and lack of books and material, demoralised teachers, and insufficient resources to address such deficiencies. Admittedly, World Bank (1991) submits that in the face of strained government finances against ballooning school populations, it sounds reasonable for governments or states to transferthe cost of education and responsibilities to parents and other interested parties. In the spirit of decentralisation, the shift of financial responsibilities from central government to SDCs could also be seen as a strategy by central office elites to absolve responsibility and dump problems to lower or local level (Power, 1980). In this light, of interest is the networks that situate actors and other stakeholdersas collaborators in school governance in the SDC'sefforts to execute its mandated objectives.Local governance, if democratic, includes devolution whereby both real authority and responsibility are transferred to local bodies (Blair, 2000) such as the SDC. Where people vote for members, as in the SDC, interests of different stakeholders increase and so are the people involved.Technically, the representation that manifests in SDC deliberations imply collaboration with new and more constituencies such as business people, other government departments, sponsors or donors et cetera who find places in local school governance (Blair, 2000). For example, Mbokazi and Bhengu (2008) claim that collaboration between school governing boards and traditional leadership in South Africa remains unexplored yet influences of traditional leadership is apparent and felt. My argument is that successful local school governance involves collaborating with structures and authorities outside the boundaries of theschool and its respective SDC forms the connecting bridge. Arguably, local school governance should be participatory. But to enhance participation, there could be need to view SDC agenda making from Kingdon's (1995) idea of 'raising the mood' and 'softening up' in the

process of selling SDC ideas to constituencies to enlist participation, thus raising such ideas to agenda status.

As long as the belief that good governance is participatory, transparent and accountable (Lutz & Linder, 2004), it should engender equity and the identification of pressing needs. Greater participation by stakeholders should, therefore, lead to greater responsiveness to such pressing needs, as well as delivery of better quality services (Blair, 2000; Popoola, 2013). Rose (2003) differentiates between two extremes of participation. On one end is genuine participation entailing participation in real decision making with members sharing "equal power to determine the outcome of decisions and share in a joint activity" (p.47) Here, participation is voluntary and spontaneous. On the other end is pseudo participation entailing consulting and keeping members merely informed of decisions already made, which is what Rose (2003) calls extractive participation where participants are limited to "contributing resources for school construction and maintenance" (p.47). I argue that at the local level, participation is genuine since the success of school development is dependent on the various collaborations between the SDC and stakeholders with interests on the different facets related to school development.

3.   THE PROBLEM

While studies have been conducted on school governance in Zimbabwe, such asChivore et al. (2003) andChikoko(2008), none seems to explore and portray an in-depth reality picture of the relationships or collaborative dynamics that surround the center position occupied by the School Development Committee (SDC) in its quest to meet its school development mandate. There is need to explore how the various local constituencies or stakeholders are brought to participate in various ways in the business of local school governance bodies. This study sought to explore the local constituencies thatparticipate and influence school governance through the SDC as the link or bridge that seeks and enhances such purposeful collaborations and relationships. The guiding question for the study was: *In performing its mandated role, how does the SDC link the school to local constituencies or stakeholders?* The interest of this study lay in understanding manifestations that characterise the SDC's position and interactions with local participants and stakeholders in the performance of its legislated mandate on local school governance and development.

4. METHOD

The interpretive paradigm and its constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998) underpinned this case studyand thus took a qualitative approach to understanding how the school governance body (SDC) provided a link or bridge that connected various authorities and constituencies with interest in school development. With a desire for information-rich actors, as Stake (1995) and Glesne&Peshkin, (1992) advise, participants were purposively selected to include SDC lay (parents)and professional (educators) governors. Theoretical sampling led also to inclusion of stakeholder participants outside the physical boundaries of the case – the SDC, as Spindler and Hammond (2000) suggest, to generate data about the case. Because it focused on processes and lived experiences of the SDC, the case study utilised in-depth conversational interviews, document analysis and non-participant observation to corroborate data and provide the triangulation essential for thick description that includes verbatim excerpts from interview transcripts, as well as to enhance trustworthiness of findings (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 1995). Participants' rights to informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and rights to withdraw or stop participation were ethical considerations exercised during the research. Names that appear herein are thus fictitious to conceal identity of the school and protect participants' identities. Analysis of data proceeded with data generation in line with qualitative research procedure. Themes emerged from the data as recurring patterns with constituent elements identified and developed through follow-up structured interviews.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data for this article draws from case study research conducted over four months on implementation of local school governance reform in Zimbabwe. A theme that emerged from the data imaged the SDC as a bridge or link that connected the school in collaborative relationships and partnerships with the outside community and stakeholders that included individuals, donor organisations, representatives of government departments, traditional leaders, and business persons. Zidzvuku, a local businessman always came to the rescue of the SDC by providing transport to ferry building material such as cement, door and window frames, and roofing timber and sheets from town or local stores to the school using is big truck. SDC chairman Sunde indicated that the businessman even supplied the school with material on credit in cases of emergencies or when builders ran short of supplies such as cement or steel nails.

Sunde said, *The SDC simply asks one member to take a request to him when such need arose."* Document analysis of minutes of past SDC meetings revealed also such requests made by the SDC, and later settlements of such debts with Mr Zidzvuku. Admittedly, businessman Zidzvuku's participation centered on facilitating implementation of SDC resolutions and efforts towards development of school physical infrastructure thus increasing quality of service delivery by the SDC.

The SDC also linked, and facilitated collaboration between, the school and the rural district council. Mr Mpon'o, the sitting local councillor forward 8 at the time of this study,where Koja primary school is located, was also ex-officio member of the Koja SDC as mandated by law. Apparently, he was also a serving educator at Koja primary school, which gave Koja an advantage. Evidence indicated that as ex-officio member of the Koja SDC, CouncillorMpon'o was a connection link between Kojaprimary school and the rural district council as well as the donor community. He possessed procedural knowledge and access to stakeholders such as the donor community in establishing relationships, collaboration, and participation that enhanced development outcomes for KojaSchool and its SDC. In an interview, CouncillorMpon'o defined his role thus, "*My attendance at all SDC meeting is a must. I must be there. The SDC cannot hold meetings in my absence. I must make extra effort to attend. I attend both SDC and parents general meetings.*"

Analysis of documents revealed that ex-officio membership of the ward councillor on the SDC is mandatory and sanctioned by Zimbabwe Government Statutory Instrument 87/1992 as a representative of the district council on all SDCs of schools in one's respective ward. Councillor Mpon'o also represented the district council to parents in his ward, which includes the Koja community. At the Koja SDC's annual general meeting that I attended as a non-participant observer, the SDC chairman, MrSunde gave Councillor Mpon'o opportunity to address parents on the district council's school fees and levies policy for the year. Mpon'o stood up and read to parents a memo from district council to SDCs and parentson school levy charges for the year. The memo was written in English. He read it first in English and later translated into (Shona) - the local language. The contents sparked a heated debate in the meeting with most parents

claiming that the fee, and Councillor Mpon'o promised to relay parents' concerns to the district council.

Evidently, the councillor as SDC ex-officio member connects communication between the school's SDC and its parent community, and the district council and donors as partners or participants in the school development agenda. Councillor Mpon'o's position as teacher at Koja primary school explained his unique interest in the development agenda at Koja.

When I asked how the SDC benefits from his councillorship, Councillor Mpon'o said,

I assist the SDC where they need things such as construction bricks, sand, and concrete stones, even knowledge in terms of procedure (how to go about things). For example, if the school needs bricks for a construction project, I approach the district council for permission to divert public works [food for work] *people to molding bricks for school development. I also connect the school with donor agencies such as Community Action Group (CAP) and Lutheran Social Development (LSD). Last December I went to the Zezani-Gwanda meeting to submit and defend an application for a classroom block for Tarusema secondary school. CAP and European Union Micro project offered to build two teachers' houses each for this* [Koja] *school and Chipiwe primary school.*

  Evidence from minutes of SDC meetings revealed also, at certain points, the existence of direct communication between the SDC and district council. Where the SDC applied for donor assistance, the SDC, through the chairman and school head, went to the district council offices to inform council administrative officials who in turn provide advice on standards to be observed say, in construction of buildings. Because the district council legally owns the schools in its local government area of jurisdiction, the district council is the responsible authority of all rural schools, except for mission schools. The relationship between the SDC and district council was more apparent where donor-funded projects are at issue as some of the donations to schools were channelled through the district council. When such happened, the district council summons the SDC chairpersons and school heads to council offices. As indicated by Chairman Sunde in an interview,

At times when donors offer assistance to schools through the council, the council mounts an orientation workshop at the council center for the subcommittee members focused mainly on project fund management and procedures as specified by the donor agency.

In separate interviews, Chairman Sunde and Councillor Mpon'o concurred that such three to four-day workshops, though seldom occurring, were invaluable given the core roles and functions of the SDC in school development. This echoes Rose's (2003) assertion that for governance to be truly participatory, members must have appropriate skills and knowledge to execute their functions effectively. However, minutes of the SDC meetings indicated that only the school head, deputy head, and SDC chairman had attended three such workshops. Evidently, the SDC, in their operation, connect the school to the responsible authority (district council), with the bridge extending to the donor community as key stakeholders, thus reflecting broader and greater participation in local school governance matters, which ideally enhance delivery of quality service (Popoola, 2013) by the SDC.

Data from interviews revealed also a purposeful relationship that existed between the SDC and the local traditional leadership. At the village level, the SDC related and worked with the kraalhead, locally called *Sabhuku*who is the local representative of the traditional chief, and is the lowest level in a hierarchy that has the paramount chief at the top, the sub-chief/headman at the middle level. My interview with Chairman Sunde confidently situates local traditional leadership as a stakeholder and participant in SDC matters, with the SDC acting as a bridge in the relationship. In my search of how local traditional leadership connects to school governance issues, Chairman Sunde's response was,

We have kraalheads as representatives of the local chief. We call them and talk to them. We even write them on our parents' annual general meeting agenda so that they can motivate and inspire their subjects. They help us in selling SDC development ideas and drumming up support for SDC initiatives. This happens before a parents' general meeting – it really works. When calling parents for a meeting, the SDC sends notices to kraalheads who in turn inform and encourage their subjects to attend.

Analysis of SDC minutes of past meetings confirmed Sunde's above indications. In minutes of one past SDC meeting, it was recorded that kraalheads and the sub-chief/Headman attended. Records revealed that the sub-chief was given the honour to speak at the meeting, which was in keeping with cultural protocol. The record of proceedings indicated that,

"The Headman promised to call all his kraalheads to a dialogue so that they could go back and educate their subjects about this story [of supporting in both cash and kind, the construction of CAP and EU-funded houses for teachers]". As indicated in an interview with SDC Chairperson Sunde, providing the local Headman or kraalhead, a platform to speak at meetings, funerals, or other occasions of his subjects in his/her are or jurisdiction is a sign of respect and acknowledgement of their authority, and is also part of traditional protocol in rural Zimbabwean practice.

We also see the influence of traditional leadership in school governance as that akin to Kingdon's (1995) 'softening up' of SDC ideas or agenda items and motivating parents on school development. Evidence from interviews and documents showed that kraalheads as traditional leadership provided structure and a strategic mechanism to SDC plans and ways to organise and distribute and control labour among the villagers. As Chairman Sunde indicated,

We organise labour and work schedules according to kraalheads or villages[as groups] *who take turns to come and do work at the school. It also helps us as SDC to make the workgroup manageable, and SDC members can also take turns to supervise the parents. Taking turns means parents' and SDC members get time to do home chores such as herding cattle, working in the crop fields, and other chores.*

Arguably, because of the power and authority that traditional leaders wield in rural communities in Zimbabwe, the chief, sub-chiefs or kraalheads command allegiance among their subjects and serve in resolving conflicts in school governance related matters. We again see the SDC as the bridge between local school governance and traditional leadership. As Mbokazi and Bhengu (2008)argue, the influence and participation of traditional leaders in school governance deserves scholarly exploration.

Contrary to Chairman Sunde's view of "*Not much* [help] *from the church"* in one of my many interviews with him, evidence from observation showed that the school benefited directly and indirectly from the local church. However, indications from one senior teacher indicated that Lutheran Social Development (LSD), a charitable organisation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC), provided porridge meal for school children under the Supplementary Feeding Scheme designed to curb hunger and malnutrition among school children. I observed school children take turns by grade running down to the feeding point with plate and spoon in hand to get their share during mid-morning break time. A teacher offered to escort me to the feeding point for a first-hand experience of the feeding scheme activities. Two women villagers were at service and offered me a plateful in keeping with cultural gesture to a visitor. The porridge tasted so rich and nutritious. As my teacher escort retorted, *"This feeding scheme pushes every child to attend school every day."* He further explained that the women villagers took turns by kraals/villages to come and prepare and serve porridge to the school children.

Futhermore, I observed young school children attending class in a church building within the school campus. School head Calvin Gomwe (CG) indicated in in an interview that the church had offered the church building for use as a classroom for grade one pupils. As pointed out by CG, the church was constructing a new church building down at the village next to the turn-off to Koja primary school. CG indicated that once the new church building was completed, the church was going to donate and hand over the old church building for use by classes.While it could have been hindsight on the part of Chairman Sunde, the church emerged as an indispensable actor in complementing the efforts of the SDC in meeting its mandate.

The SDC also had linked the school to other government departments where the school needed to meet government prescribed standards. In an informal interview, school head CG mentioned that the school was soon going to be under pressure from the village health worker (a local parent working under Ministry of Health and Child Welfare), locally called *vaUtsanana –* meaning hygiene and sanitation monitor, with regard to pupils blair toilets. According to CG, the health worker ensured that schools, village homesteads, and business establishments adhere to ministry of health specifications on sanitation facilities. Minutes of past SDC meetings recorded a report by va*Utsanana*that the number of pupils at Koja was too high to be served by the two

blair toilets that existed at the time of the study. The meeting resolved to have more toilet pits dug. I proceeded to interview the local *Utsanana*by appointment who indicated that her duties entailed siting toilets and rubbish pits and inspecting such under construction to make sure Ministry of Health specifications or standards were met. Minutes of one past SDC meeting revealed that the SDC had charged the health worker (va*Utsanana)* and her trained, approved builders with the construction of a toilet block. Notably, there is evidence here of genuine participation and involvement that is empowering, as Rose (2003) argues that for governance to be truly participative, participants must have appropriate skills.

6.   CONCLUSION

Evidence from this study depicts a connected web of stakeholders or constituencies with interests in the mandate and agenda of the SDC. Some such as traditional leadership, the church, the local councillor and the businessman engaged in what Rose (2003) termed 'genuine participation where stakeholder participation was voluntary and spontaneous. There was very little of extractive participation except to some extent on the part of ordinary parents or villagers. However, there are indications of interest by stakeholders to partner the SDC in school development efforts. Given the political, and financial decentralisation we see in the institution, mandate and operation of the SDC, the SDC emerges at the center of the matrix of purposeful relationships, thus providing a bridge that connects, and seeks a connectedness with different constituencies in the business of school development.

7.   RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of data herein reported, there is need for continuous capacity building of new SDCs and school leaders on building and strengthening relationships with constituencies and local structures for enhanced school development. Further studies should explore and document school governance dynamics and networks to create local knowledge that can provide invaluable context-specific sources for school leader preparation curricula and in-service programmes.

8.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

broader doctoral study by the author on the implementation of local school governance reform policy in Zimbabwe.

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