

Impacts of School Development Committees in Addressing Challenges in Mudzi District of Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study assesses the impacts of School Development Committees in addressing challenges faced by schools in Mudzi District. A qualitative research design was applied in the study. Ten schools were selected for the study using simple random sampling and they consisted of 5 primary and 5 secondary schools. The target population consisted of 10 school heads, 10 SDC chairpersons, 10 teachers from the ten schools and 10 village heads. These were interviewed for their views on the impact of SDCs in solving challenges in schools. Informal interviews of other members of staff and villagers were made to ascertain their views on the impact of their SDCs in addressing challenges faced by the schools. Key informant interviews were also conducted for councilors and Schools Inspectors who happen to be the responsible authorities' representatives for both council and government schools respectively. Descriptive analysis of results was conducted for challenges being faced in schools and how the SDCs are addressing such challenges. Findings from the study suggest that the impact of SDCs in addressing challenges faced in schools has been minimal. Challenges like shortages of classrooms, teachers' houses, ablution facilities, teaching and learning materials and equipment, shortage of teachers, non-adherence to procurement and financial management procedures as well as shortages of finances due to non-payment of levies, still persist in the schools despite the presence of the SDCs. Recommendations included the need to train SDC members adequately and timeously so they can effectively discharge their duties as well as conducting regular supervisory visits by Ministry officials to monitor adherence to policy and procedure among many other recommendations.

Keywords: School Development Committee: An institutional body found in Zimbabwean schools formed for the purpose of spearheading and promoting the infrastructural advancement of schools

Challenges: Those shortfalls or setbacks that inhibit or delay the progress of schools

1. INTRODUCTION

The Government of Zimbabwe's thrust has been to harness the desire of local communities to develop their schools. Since the attainment of independence from colonial rule in the country, local communities have played a pivotal role in the development of schools. In the rural communities of Mudzi, the locals have participated in various capacities including the moulding of farm bricks for the construction of school buildings, carrying river sand, pit sand and water to the construction sites, as well as providing labour for the construction processes inclusive of land clearance and preparing motor for the builders. In view of the valuable work of the local peoples, the government of Zimbabwe saw it fit to establish School Development Committees (SDCs) at every school in terms of Section 36 of the Education Act Chapter 25: 04 of 2006 as a way of involving the local people in the decision-making process in the running of schools.

According to the former minister of Education Ambassador Cain Matema, SDCs play a critical role in:

- Creating conducive, inclusive, learning-teaching environments for learners, teachers, staff and parents.
- Developing infrastructure.
- Mobilising resources.
- Managing school finances.
- Managing conflict

However, these roles of an SDC can only be realised if its members are conversant with their duties and responsibilities as office bearers and the functions of the SDC as an entity. In most instances, many rural communities seldom produce resident cadres who possess the knowledge and skills to understand how schools run and competently manage school developmental affairs in a meaningful manner without running the risk of them being manipulated or suppressed by the school authorities. It is with these scenarios in mind that this research to assess the impacts of SDCs in addressing challenges in schools was mooted.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Several challenges bedevil the running of both primary and secondary schools in Mudzi District ranging from critical shortage of standard classrooms, teachers' quarters and ablution facilities, a lack of furniture for sitting and writing places, crippling shortfalls in teaching and learning materials and shortage of teaching staff to adequately attend to the learning needs of pupils. These challenges in schools have persisted over the years in spite of the presence of School Development Committees, making it imperative that a concerted effort to assess the impacts of SDCs in addressing school challenges be undertaken.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to:

- 1) Identify the challenges being faced by schools in Mudzi in their day to day operations and long-term infrastructural development.
- 2) Ascertain the effectiveness of School Development Committees in addressing the noted challenges.

4. JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

The state of many schools in Mudzi District is deplorable with many schools facing challenges in the provision of quality and inclusive education as envisaged by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. A wide range of challenges are inherent in most institutions and the major ones include shortage of standard classrooms with many classes having to conduct their lessons in the open under tree shades. In most of such instances, the learners conduct their lessons while seated in the dusty ground. The situation is exacerbated by a critical shortage of teaching and learning materials and shortage of teachers. Mudzi District has been experiencing high staff turn-over every term with new teachers only coming to Mudzi to assume duty and then transfer to other districts and provinces.

With this background, it is imperative that studies be carried out to ascertain how effective SDCs have been in addressing the challenges being faced in schools at both Primary and Secondary level. Whilst the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education believes that the establishment of effective SDCs is one of the most critical factors for successful implementation of the National School Curricula and that effective and democratic school governance can be achieved when the committee members are procedurally and democratically elected and have a clear understanding of their duties and responsibilities, meaningful progress in many schools is still a far cry.

According to the School Development Committees Handbook that has been drafted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, SDCs have a direct impact on the core business of schools which is mainly teaching and learning. However, such impact has not been adequately qualified and quantified as yet taking from what is obtaining on the ground, making it obligatory for researchers to search through the institutions and verify the likelihood of any positive progress being made by SDCs in uplifting the teaching and learning processes in schools in Mudzi. This research was crafted along these lines and will help to inform decision makers and policy makers come up with sound intervention strategies that will make SDCs more effective in the discharge of their duties. Results and recommendations of the study will stimulate more research in other geographical and socio-economic settings in Zimbabwe and internationally, correct shortfalls observed in the operationalisation of SDCs, as well as designing effective induction and training programs for SDC members.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the characteristics of effective institutions depends on the extent to which their administrative, governance and management strategies make a practical contribution to the organization (Arnwine, 2002). Miller (1995) and Roedel (2008) both suggest that historically communities have played a vital role in the development and provision of education to children worldwide, and Zimbabwe has not been an exception in this experience

Transparency International Kenya (2014) carried out a study entitled “Assessing corruption risks in the education sector in Turkana County” in which a total of 16 schools were randomly sampled for the study. In this study it was discovered that many schools did not have procurement committees in place and there was a conflict of roles by the School Management Committees (SMCs), the equivalent of School Development Committees (SDCs) in Zimbabwe. Despite the presence of the SMCs in the Kenyan schools, it was observed that some valuable assets, for example land, were not secured in some schools and security of finances was not assured thereby increasing the risk of the leakage of education resources.

In his study titled *Involvement of School Management Committees in School-Based Management: Experiences From Two Districts Of Ghana*, Abreh M. K. (2017) found out that the state of stakeholder involvement and participation in school-based management within selected communities in these two districts were not well coordinated. Besides, school governance structures were not fully operational at their best with the work of the School Management Committees being usually left to the Chairman and in some cases to the Parent Teachers Association chair.

Coombs and Hallak in Mafa and Nyathi (2013) posit that administration of school funds deals with managing the flow of funds in and out of school. This calls for sound financial management skills, which entail the ability to produce income and expenditure budgets to meet operational plans and overall school objectives, skills to formulate procedure and controls in authorizing and processing expenditure as well as maintaining accurate and complete accounting records. According to Mafa and Nyathi (2013), in Zimbabwe, courts have handled a number of cases where people entrusted with administering public funds convert the funds to their own use. The Nziramasanga Commission as cited by Mafa and Nyathi (2013) also noted that parents’ major concern was the calibre of SDA (now SDC) members and their trustworthiness in the proper administration of funds. From the parents’ submissions to the Nziramasanga Commission, it would appear that in some cases, some members of the SDA executives may not have the academic and professional qualifications to competently discharge SDA duties. Mafa and Nyathi were of the view that, SDAs should look beyond the executive members in cases where the capacity of the executive members in handling funds is limited. For example, some of the parents and guardians may already be working in the financial sector as accountants or auditors and therefore progressive SDAs should take advantage of such individuals.

Dhliwayo (2021) studied “The role of school development committees in the implementation of decentralisation in Zimbabwe”. He studied two schools comprising a poor school and an affluent school. In his findings, he noted that shifting power and authority to schools increased responsibilities to school heads, teachers and school development committee members in both schools. The professional expertise and socio-economic status of parents and SDC members of the affluent school curtailed autocratic tendencies of the school head. Another important finding from the study was that the neoliberal induced withdrawal of government education (tuition) grants affected the financial position of the poor school more negatively than the affluent school thereby leading to a highly differentiated structure of schooling between the two schools. This serves to institutionalise educational inequality and widens disparities.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was applied in the study. 10 schools in Mudzi District were selected for study using simple random sampling. Of the ten schools selected, 5 were primary schools and 5 were secondary schools. The target population consisted of 10 school heads, 10 SDC chairpersons, 10 teachers from the ten schools and 10 village heads. These were interviewed for their views on the impact of SDCs on solving challenges in schools and the observed shortcomings of the mode of operation of their SDCs. Informal interviews of other members of staff and villagers were made to

ascertain their views on the impact of their SDCs in addressing challenges faced by the schools. Key informant interviews were conducted for councilors and Schools Inspectors who happen to be the responsible authorities' representatives for both council and government schools respectively. Descriptive analysis of results was conducted for challenges being faced in schools and how the SDCs are addressing such challenges.

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the structured interviews, informal interviews and key informant interviews suggested that the majority of the SDC members in the schools studied lacked professional expertise and were of low socio-economic status given the rural setting of the schools studied. This diminished their capacity to challenge autocratic tendencies of school heads. Most of them were made to sign bank transfer forms and withdrawal slips without questioning the purpose of the withdrawals or transfers. In many instances signing was done in advance of payments thereby giving room to financial malpractices such as making unauthorized payments. Payment vouchers were signed without scrutiny when they were presented to the SDC leadership for signing.

Another finding was that, while school-based inductions were conducted for new SDC members in 90% of the schools studied, new SDC members in all the ten schools in the study started their work without any financial training at Ministerial level thereby exposing them to manipulation by corrupt school heads. This is causing serious leakages of finances in the school system, leaving meagre financial resources available for solving the challenges faced in the schools. The greatest impact of SDCs would be made if SDC members are empowered to make sound decisions in the development of the schools and when they have sufficient financial resources that can be invested in solving the problems prevalent in the schools.

It was also noted that, whilst school development plans (SDPs) were present in 80% of the schools in the study, only 20 % of interviewed SDC members reported any form of involvement in the drafting of the SDPs. This is indicative of their diminished participation in the decision making process leading to a minimal impact in the solving of challenges in the schools. All the schools in the study do not reveal marked progress in the solving of developmental challenges nor in provision of adequate teaching and learning materials. Shortages of teaching and learning materials and a poor state of infrastructure continue unabated.

Common challenges that still persist that were cited by interviewees and observed by the researcher during the study included the following:

- Non-payment of levies by parents.
- Lack of financial resources to keep schools running effectively and efficiently.
- Shortage of classrooms, teachers' houses and ablution facilities.
- Non-availability of electricity and/or solar systems to provide power for the various school activities.
- Shortage of water for both teachers and learners
- Shortage or total absence of reading materials for both learners and teachers
- Shortage of basic teaching and learning materials such as stationery items
- Shortage or virtual absence of modern technological equipment necessary for effective teaching and learning such as computers, projectors and interactive boards.
- Non-availability of Wi-fi to access the internet.
- Shortage of teachers leading to high teacher-pupil ratios and failure to offer critical learning areas such as mathematics.
- Poor management of financial resources leading to misappropriation of school finances.
- Non-adherence to procurement procedures leading to financial leakages

All these challenges were observed to be persisting despite the presence of SDCs in all the schools in the study suggesting that the presence of SDCs, particularly in rural schools, has not been very effective in solving and mitigating challenges faced in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- That SDC members be adequately and timeously trained in basic principles of financial management by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education before commencement of their work upon election into office.
- That such trainings be conducted in the presence of the school heads and deputy heads so that there is a common understanding of requirements and regulations in order to preclude any manipulation of SDC members by school authorities.
- That there is need for frequent supervisory visits from District, Provincial and Head Office staffers as a stop gap measure to minimize financial malpractices and leakages and increase the development of schools through elevating the amount of funds available for investing into the school system.
- That, wherever possible, parents should be encouraged to elect SDC members who have numeracy and literacy skills or professional expertise that can meet the demands of running schools if they are to make any impact in solving challenges faced by schools.

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Citation: NDONGWE EVERSINE & MUKUCHA MUGOVE. "Impacts of School Development Committees in Addressing Challenges in Mudzi District of Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe" *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 11, no.8, 2024, pp. 66-70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1108008>.

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