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SCHOOL HEADS' EXPERIENCES IN MANAGING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN ZIMBABWEAN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study aimed at exploring experiences of school heads in managing parental involvement in primary schools in Bikita District of Zimbabwe to establish the main challenges in involving parents in schools management. Parental involvement in Zimbabwe schools had not yet fully rooted from a colonial history of exclusion when disturbances in the economy affected schools management negatively. Economic disturbances resulted in serious irregular schooling when teachers went on prolonged industrial actions, resulting in very little learning in schools and general lack of development in schools for years. These challenges increased parental indifference, mistrust and hostility. A qualitative approach of case study design was used in this study. Ten school heads were purposefully sampled from best 20 performing schools in the 2020 Grade 7 national examination in the district. Those school heads were interviewed to establish their challenges and responses. The study found that irregular schooling and poor learner performance as well as lack of development in schools have caused parents to lose trust in school heads and teachers. In response, school heads became more inclusive and consultative in their leadership approaches to bring back parental trust. The government has to fund schools better and pay teachers better to bring back normalcy in schools. School Management Teams have to develop, follow and create space for parental involvement programmes in their schools for parents to play their roles effectively.

Keywords: learner performance, parental indifference, parental involvement, school governance, school heads, school management

Introduction

This study was conducted to find out how primary school heads are managing parental involvement in Zimbabwean rural primary schools. Parental involvement in schools can be defined as any activity that aids the learning of children, school-initiated or parent-initiated (Kim, 2009). The wide and important area covered by parental involvement makes it an important topic that all school leaders should be fully aware of. Parental involvement has been proven effective in improving teaching and learning outcomes by many authors such as Chidarikire and Hlalele (Chidarikire & Hlalele, 2022). This implies that every school administration should strive to bring in parental inputs that can improve school goals like good pass rates and not only infrastructural development. The failure of the Zimbabwe government to resource its schools adequately as well as its failure to pay teachers living wages has made parental involvement in management of schools more urgent. This is confirmed by Sobri, Soh and Roziman (2022) who indicated that parents could fill in important gaps that the central or local governments can leave in the provision of public elementary education. The decline in public funding in the education sector is one important gap that needs to be filled by parents. The disturbances in the economy resulted in a sharp learner decline that has made parents seek solutions to reverse this decline at school level. School heads, on the other hand, are looking to parents to help them in the actual teaching and learning of children at home to make up for time lost arising from several industrial actions and semi-controlled teacher absenteeism as well as school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022. Home learning is now necessary.

There is underfunding of schools as the per capita grants are falling due to inflation, putting maintenance of schools on the shoulders of parents (Zvobgo, 2018). Lack of development in schools for some years in some schools has caused many parents to look at what exactly schools are doing with the school fees that parents pay, forcing school heads to be more accountable to communities they serve. This scrutiny from parents is putting pressure on school heads who are already facing many management problems. The kind of parental involvement that communities are calling for is what the government instituted as far back as 1984 but many school heads were reluctant to embrace parental involvement. This is because of historical factors that include poverty in rural communities as well as reluctance by school heads to share power with parents. Strong historical traditions such as intentional exclusion of parents in school governance are known to die hard so there is a need for concerted efforts by school heads to devise programmes that promote parental involvement in schools. This is confirmed by Nkomo and Manzunzu (2022) who said that school heads should make conscious efforts to check if they are sincere in parental involvement so that they avoid the trap of uncommitted parental involvement. Committed parental involvement is the one that can support school improvement programmes and school heads should, therefore, work to be sincere in how they engage with parents. Circumstances brought about by Covid-19 as well as several industrial actions by teachers call for more parental involvement in schools to keep children learning. The findings of Tsimba, Mugoniwa and Mutembedza (2022) in their comparison of urban and rural schools point to a stronger parental involvement in urban schools which gives them an advantage over rural schools in times of crisis like the recent Covid 19 pandemic.

There is a widening gap between teachers and communities in Zimbabwe Zimbabwe due to schools' underperformance (Dube, 2021). Such gaps are common in times of crisis if dialogue and a common focus are not initiated by the leadership to bring groups to a common perspective (Dunn, 2020). The significance of this study is in bridging the gap between school heads and teachers and the communities they serve.

Literature Review

Parents have always been involved in the education of their children from the times of pre-formal education to today's modern education systems (Anderson, 2017). School heads should, therefore, be positive in implementing programmes that promote parental involvement in schools for the benefits of committed parental involvement are known. This supported by Jeynes (2022) who points out that the relationship of parental involvement and academic performance of learners is positive. Even in countries where education is free, parental involvement is still evident and key to school success particularly now when school governance decentralisation is gaining momentum in most countries (Makuvaza, 2018). Parents teach their children at home and support their learning at school in various ways, even into adulthood. They provide necessities like food and clothing for children to be at school and help them understand and adapt to school (Zvobgo, 2018). Schools exist to educate children and parents' interest in what happens in schools can be understood as obvious and natural (Muchemwa, 2017). School heads should, therefore, be aware of these facts so that they involve parents in school management and learning in schools.

Historical Background of Parental Involvement in Africa

Poor parental involvement in African schools has a historical background (Zvobgo, 2018). Missionaries built most of the colonial schools in Africa where children were to be taught Christianity at school and take it back to the community, which according to the missionaries, was pagan, (Muchemwa, 2017). There was not much space for full parental involvement in those settings. Traditions and the culture of little parental involvement were set. Teachers and school heads with their old mind-sets shunned parental involvement even after the schools were taken over by the local government after independence (Zvobgo, 2018). That negative mind-set has survived many decades and has to be consciously fought by today's school heads. This means that school heads have to create a new mind-set of parental involvement in their schools (Anderson, 2017).

Legislation and the Logic of Parental Involvement in Schools

Magwa and Mugari (2017) observed that parents are interested parties in the education of children and involving them will ensure that community wishes are expressed in school policies. This explains why almost all countries in both developed and developing regions have elaborate legislation with regards to parental

involvement in schools. The authors also noted that government legislation alone will not bring about full parental involvement. More work has to be done to capacitate parents and to force school heads to genuinely involve parents. The follow-up efforts need to be persistent and thorough until school heads have fully embraced the importance of parental involvement, are enthusiastic about it, and parents are empowered to fulfil their roles. School heads have the power to facilitate or derail parental involvement and their attitude with regard to this issue has to be positive. Fortunately, the legislation in Zimbabwe, as encapsulated in the Education Act, supports parental involvement (Makuvaza, 2018). This legislation, however, came into an education system that did not have a tradition of genuine parental involvement in school governance. School heads and teachers have to make a deliberate effort to give space to parental involvement (Magwa & Mugari, 2017). They should draw up schedules and ways of taking parents on board in schools.

Socio-Economic Status of Communities as a Factor of Parental Involvement

Poverty in communities was found to enable school heads to sideline parents in sincere parental involvement although School Development Committees (SDCs) will be found on paper in most schools (Anderson, 2017). Poverty is known to silence citizens, preventing them from participating in many civic activities like school governance (Bosch, 2019). School heads have, therefore, to welcome parents into their roles and help them build self-confidence as they participate. The 2004 Education Act of Zimbabwe prescribes the establishment of a School Development Committee in every school, comprising of the parents, school head and teachers (Zimbabwe Government, 2004). In rural Zimbabwe, labour-intensive peasant farming is common and that type of farming generally leaves little time for parental involvement in schools. Poverty also lowers literacy levels that are needed in promoting parental involvement (Zvobgo, 2018).

Types of Parental Involvement

There are generally school-initiated programmes that involve parents in the learning of their children and parent-initiated initiatives that support parental involvement in their children's learning (Hlanga, Mthiyane, & Muresherwa, 2021). School-initiated programmes include school meetings, homework and participation of parents in school events. Less direct parental involvement includes parent- and learner-initiated communication about school work, good parenting styles and a general secure home that is positive and supportive of learning (Lara & Saracostti, 2019). School heads should use this knowledge to create space for parents in their schools, help them to know exactly how they can be involved and how important their implicit behaviour like high expectations for their children can make a difference in children's learning (Lara & Saracostti, 2019).

School heads should go beyond the statutory formation of SDCs and discuss with teachers ways of parental involvement in the actual learning of their children (Hlanga et al., 2021). The involvement can include parents assisting learners with homework, asking their children about their school experiences and allowing children to speak about how they are feeling about anything that happens at school. Parents should be encouraged by the school management to be free to speak to teachers about how their children are coping with school work for them to be able to help and initiate such dialogue (Magwa & Mugari, 2017).

Benefits of Parental Involvement

According to Hlanga et al. (2021), parents can bring about very positive contributions in the school once the school management has earned parental trust. Parents can play a significant role in school transformation and the general improvement in a school and in the actual teaching and learning. They can bring up good ideas on school development and fund them. Most parents of the current generation are literate and they can help with their children's learning at home if the right platforms are created for discussion on how parents can help (Chikutuma, 2017). It is, therefore, important for school heads to take stock of where their schools are in involving parents in teaching and learning programmes so that steps can be taken to create an environment where parents can play their role in their children's formal learning. Parental involvement has been seen to improve student and teacher discipline as schools become more accountable to the communities they serve, and the community tends to develop a better sense of ownership when it is involved in school governance (Harber, 2017). Since there are many benefits to parental involvement, school heads should be courageous enough to create avenues for parental involvement so that schools can enjoy the benefits that come with that involvement (Harber, 2017). Unsatisfactory performance by the school usually gives parents a reason for the school head to account for that failure (Anderson,

2017). Considering that schools in Zimbabwe have underperformed significantly since 2019 (ZIMSEC, 2021), parents are expecting answers from school heads and the government.

Sterling and Davidson (2000) state that school heads who consult and share information with parents help build trust between the school and the community. This helps in building a sense of owning the school by parents. Unfortunately, many principals and teachers view parental involvement as a burden and an infringement on their professional territory, making them fail to take advantage of its many benefits (Anderson, 2017). The mentality of such school heads, in addition to a tradition of exclusion of parents, has kept the concept of parents in school governance in its infancy even in the twenty-first century (Simuforosa & Shamiso, 2017). If parents are sincerely involved in the governance of their schools, they can make school heads and teachers more accountable for what happens in the classrooms more than anyone else for they have the interests of their children at heart (Makuvaza, 2018). Parents can directly impact the learning of their children if schools allow for dialogue on how parents can help with schoolwork.

Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by Bandura's Social Learning Theory and his revised Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). These theories were chosen considering that new research is showing that the concept of parental involvement is wider than direct activities that parents do with their children in support of their school work (Tan, Lyn & Peng, 2020). Bandura's Social Learning Theory as well as his revised Social Cognitive Theory were inspired by earlier behaviourist theories of learning of classical conditioning. Bandura added that human behaviour is a result of mediation between stimuli and response as well as observational learning from the environment (McLeod, 2016).

These two contributions are important for they point to both internal and external characteristics of the individual that aid one's learning. The environment provides an individual with models and other stimuli to observe and learn from while the mind processes the stimuli (Bandura, 1986). Role models and stimuli are from the physical and social environment like family members, the animals in the family, peers in the neighbourhood and teachers and peers in school. In today's world the environment also includes Radio and TV personalities as well as cartoon and story characters children and adults are exposed to. The models and the whole environment reward the learner both positively and negatively, prompting the learner either to repeat or stop any behaviour the learner may have done or observed happening. The learner, according to this theory, may also learn from what happens when others behave in a particular way and then either copy the behaviour or avoid it. Observing and learning from external characters is called vicarious reinforcement. An important aspect of this theory is that between observation and behaviour, there is thinking that happens – the mediation – according to Bandura (1986).

This framework was used to investigate the environment that schools and school management provide for parents that may promote or hinder parents' participation in both school governance as well as the actual learning of children. The framework was also applied to investigate the home learning environment that parents provide for their children in support of the child's general learning as well as school-assigned learning. The main environment that was investigated through this framework is the one school management creates in their schools. Such an environment can be welcoming and promote or discourage parental involvement.

Methodology

The nature and aim of this study, to explore and describe school head experiences in parental involvement in their schools, required an in-depth qualitative study. Ten school heads were purposely sampled from the 2020 Grade 7 top 20 performing schools in the district, five from Bikita North and five from Bikita South circuits. The choice of purposely sampling from the best schools was informed by the need to choose only information-rich sources suitable for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). The decision to include an equal number of school heads from both circuits in the district was to capture the diverse perceptions from all corners of the district for experiences and realities on parental involvement may be different from sections of the same district. Sample size should be feasible and practical (Mertens, 2010). The sample size was 10 school heads to allow for explorative qualitative research that had to be in-depth and thorough enough to reveal parental involvement strategies that work. It had to be wider than one school head to determine the perceptions of different school heads so that a balanced picture of good parental involvement could be developed. The research was conducted by a single

researcher with limited resources; thus, 10 school heads was a feasible number. Since the sample was drawn from the best performing schools, it was anticipated that these schools would be led by talented and effective school heads and it was expected that these schools could explain how they were successfully managing parental involvement in their schools. This study was done during the Covid-19 pandemic era where access to schools was very restricted. Interviews with school heads were, therefore, the only data-gathering tool since there was restricted access to schools in 2021.

Findings

Characteristics of Sampled Schools and School Heads

The yards of all schools that participated looked tidy. Plants in the school yard were well attended to and pleasing to see in nine of the schools. Eight of the 10 schools were fenced with a diamond-mesh wire while two were fenced with barbed-wire fence. Two schools had a learner enrolment of above 1 000 while two had less than 300. Four schools in the study did not have enough classrooms and had to shift some classes while six schools had enough classrooms for all classes. The quality of some classrooms was said to be poor in nine out of the 10 schools. Most of the classrooms blocks looked old and needed repainting, except for one school that had all of its classrooms modern. School Development Committee charts were displayed in all school offices sampled, suggesting that they have such committees in the schools.

The 10 sampled schools were led by qualified school heads, nine out of 10 having Education Management degrees with only one having a Diploma in Education. Three out of nine had a Master's in Education Management. They demonstrated very good understanding of the Education Acts that deal with parental involvement; nine out of 10 said that they were working towards better parental involvement than what existed in their schools. Only one school head spoke happily about the level of parental involvement that already existed in the school.

Challenges of Parental Involvement and School Heads' Responses

Nine out of the 10 school heads described challenges they were facing in their efforts to fully involve parents in the management of schools as serious. They spoke of challenges they inherited as well as new ones that came as a result of the education environment that has obtained in the last four years. The traditional challenges have to do with a culture of non-involvement while the recent ones have to do with economic disturbances that have affected normal schooling activities, resulting in very low learner performance.

Parental indifference

Schools serve communities, parents and children of the areas where they are found. If parents do not care much about what happens in their schools, that is called parental indifference (Lara & Saracostti, 2019). Participants cited several challenges they faced in managing their schools that were linked to high levels of parental indifference. Seven said that they inherited the problem where some meetings had to be postponed in the past due to very low turnout. They said that former school heads had not taken parents seriously and parents became less interested in school meetings. They said that some just came to attack school leadership based on events that happened years ago. School Head B responded:

"We cancelled several meetings due to parental indifference in the past. In one meeting only 12 parents attended when we expected hundreds. It was that serious. It is after two years of transparency and listening to parents that they now come in acceptable numbers."

One school head said that financial mismanagement in the past had failed parents and they no longer cared much since they were not able to get help from the Council to deal with the school head who was alleged to have misused the funds. School Head C said,

"Once the school gets it wrong with finances parents resist and if they cannot change things they stop attending meetings. We are making sure that we are together with them so that they can trust us again fully."

Boonk et al. (2018) also found that not taking parents seriously in matters that concern the running of schools made parents to lose their zeal in attending meetings.

School heads responded to parental indifference in different ways to bring back the trust that should be there between the school and the community. Six school heads said that they really listened and considered parents' inputs in their meetings. Two said that they made members of the SDC do school purchases together with the treasurer as opposed to previous practice where such purchases were only done by the school heads. They did

this to increase transparency in the way that school finances were managed. Four school heads mentioned that those parents who were attending school meetings regularly were beginning to appreciate that school heads were not stealing parents' money, a perception that was reported to brood mistrust in the school. School Head summarised his strategies as follows:

"Parents are human beings just like us teachers. They think and they feel. If you mistreat them they will not cooperate. We are sincere in our dealings with parents. We consult them and use funds as approved."

The Education Act (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004) directs school heads to use any funds raised by parents in an approved and transparent manner.

Poverty as a hindrance to full parental involvement

Eight participants cited the need for parents to carry out daily agricultural tasks for survival as a hindrance to full parental involvement in the governance of the school and children's learning. The life of communal farmers was described as one that involved tilling the land, chasing baboons away from the field and looking after domestic animals all day long. Participants said that, to an average parent, attending a school meeting was a luxury that many parents could barely afford. Six participants explained that agricultural activities did not allow parents to help children with homework after school. School Head E responded,

"In this community it is safe to say that almost all learning has to take place here at school. Most homes cannot support learning due to very high poverty levels where children have to carry many chores all day long. Agricultural activities like ploughing, planting, weeding and harvesting involve children"

One school head mentioned that the poorer a family is the greater the burden children had to carry in the family. This was in relation to how child labour was a common practice among poor families. Schoolwork and school-related issues did not occupy a central place in poor families' lives as they struggled to put food on the table. School Head B responded,

"At the end of the day we know the reality that our parents are facing. Life is too busy for an average parent to find time to assist children with their homework, talk about school or even attend termly meetings. We have to do the best we can here at school with our learners, knowing what the home environment for most children is like."

Muchemwa (2017) also noted that chores that were tantamount to child labour were common among poor rural communities of Matebeleland North Region and affected children's normal schooling.

To improve meeting attendance, eight school heads said that they called their meetings on traditional holidays such as the third day of each month when community members did not work in the fields. This was said to help although such holidays were also targeted by other community leaders for their meetings. Nine school heads said that all their meetings were held between 8 and 10 a.m to allow parents who needed to go back and attend to livestock to do so. Two school heads said that they had resorted to such measures to bring parents on board to discuss crucial matters that concerned school development. School Head I responded,

"We came up with arrangements for our meetings that accommodate parents' busy schedules. We have agreed that as much as possible our meetings shall be on communal holidays and they may not be longer than two hours. That has helped in getting the support of our parents."

Teachers' behaviour as hindrance to parental involvement

Seven school heads mentioned teachers' bad behaviour as a hindrance to good parental involvement. Abuse of corporal punishment was mentioned by six school heads as a cause for resentment. Three school heads mentioned immoral behaviour by male teachers as a very serious problem that caused the whole community to rise against the school, especially if committed by the school head. Nine school heads mentioned very poor performance in schools as a cause of worry by parents who no longer took schools seriously. All 10 school heads mentioned repeated teachers' industrial actions and an unusual rate of absenteeism as hindrances to good parental involvement in their schools. School Head F said:

"Considering that we are now going for industrial actions termly, one may not blame the attitude that parents are now having towards us. We are no longer committed at all and the situation might worsen as inflation rises and younger teachers join the profession."

Some of what participants mentioned was supported by Marishane (2013) who wrote that schools get the respect of the community when they commit to achieving school goals. This means that if teachers are not committed to achieving school goals, parents will lose interest in what they should be doing in schools.

School heads responded to these challenges in ways that sought to appease parents by managing schools according to the Education Act. All school heads said that they took the new law that forbade corporal punishment seriously to make their schools safe for children and to reduce conflict with parents. Six school heads spoke of induction programmes for beginner teachers that aimed at teaching new staff members to live morally with the community. One school head said that he discouraged teachers from getting too deep into drinking in communal setups as drunken behaviour usually brought disrespect to teachers. Professional conduct by teachers is known to attract parents into the affairs of the school (Muchemwa, 2017).

Three school heads said that they cautioned members of School Management Teams (SMTs) and other teachers to live a moral life as violating communal values negatively affected their efforts to improve parental involvement in schools. School Head C said,

"I encourage all our male teachers to avoid improper relationships with married women in our community. In a conservative community like ours, such mistakes can cost the whole school."

Participants' efforts to behave professionally were in line with what Tichagwa (2018) observed when he said that school heads should improve their schools' image by behaving professionally in communities they served.

Bringing parents closer to the school

All participants said that they had realised that there was a wide gap between teachers and parents that kept the school at a distance from parents, reducing effective parental involvement. They said that they had opened their classroom doors to parents during consultation days. On these days, parents spent some time inside the classrooms of their children with their children and the teacher. Parents would check the written exercises page by page with their child then consult with the teacher, pointing out areas of concern, if any, to the teacher in the presence of the child. That forum was reported as giving an opportunity to teachers to point to how parents could help their children at home. The exercise was reported to be bringing parents closer to teachers and the school as well as making supervisors more effective to avoid complaints from parents. School Head D said:

"The best strategy we have used to bring parents closer to the school is the consultation that we do during the first term. Parents get to know what teachers are doing behind the classroom doors. They see children's work and talk to their children and teachers. That day opens communication between teachers and parents."

Another strategy reported to be bringing parents closer to the school was calling for particular grade meetings with parents. Four school heads said they started it a few years ago to explain Continuous Assessment Learning Areas to parents. From that exercise, they realised the value of calling parents for a particular grade with their teachers to discuss school issues and issues affecting that particular grade or those particular grades. The advantage of that arrangement was reported to be that there was better order and listening to one another. This was regarded as better than traditional Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings where all parents were called but only SMT members attended the meeting while the rest of the teachers were teaching. School Head A summarised it as following:

"Smaller meetings have the advantage of personal communication before, during and after the meeting. More parents contribute when the gathering is small. We are now closer this way."

Discussion of the Findings

All participants are aware of the importance of comprehensive parental involvement in their schools and they went beyond nominal committees formation and statutory termly PTA meetings. School heads were also aware of challenges that hinder effective parental involvement and they were taking measures to address those challenges. School heads had taken measures to improve PTA meetings attendance by calling meetings early in the mornings to allow parents to go back to do their farming chores. Some have also timed their PTA meetings to be on the third of the month when field work is not permitted in some communities as a holiday to honour their ancestors. Some schools were calling grade meetings, such as infant grades meetings as well as upper grades meetings to split and attract smaller gatherings that can focus on issues affecting those grades as well as general issues affecting the school.

Consultation days were reported to be helping in home learning when parents saw the challenges their children were having at school and taking remedial action at home. This was also reported to make schools more accountable to parents for parents were said to question teachers if they were not satisfied with what teachers were doing in the classrooms. These consultations had therefore brought about better accountability to the

communities these schools are serving. School heads also reported how they were trying to be sincere in their approach to parental involvement to make the school environment welcoming for parents.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The frequent industrial actions, unusual teacher absenteeism and the resultant learner performance decline were said to be the major causes of parents and schools disharmony. School heads said that they were encouraging teachers to commit to their work and they had opened the school doors for parents to feel welcome in the school. SMTs were working to improve transparency so that parents could trust that teachers and understand that the school heads were working for the community. School heads were promoting good moral behaviour among teachers so that the schools did not anger parents and put them off from becoming involved. All school heads reported that they strongly discouraged corporal punishment to avoid violation of learners' rights and conflict with their parents. All sampled schools had opened their classroom doors to parents to bridge the gap between teachers and parents and to allow parents a more active role in the actual learning of children.

Despite these efforts, school heads feared that their efforts in promoting parental involvement would not be sustainable if teachers were not fairly remunerated in the short term. They feared that learner performance would decline further as industrial action continued, making parents question school heads' seriousness in addressing school challenges. The government should, therefore, pay teachers adequately to end the frequent industrial actions by teachers. School heads should continue with intervention programmes that bring parents to schools to reduce the impact of the current crisis. This study contributed to practical leadership strategies that school heads could initiate in promoting conversations that would improve parental involvement. The types of consultation days and meetings that sampled school heads were implementing were of a nature that could promote both the traditional and the less overt aspects of parental involvement. These interventions are needed in communities experiencing periods of crisis such as in the current Zimbabwe school environment.

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