



Policy promise and the reality of community involvement in school-based management in Zambia: Can the rural poor hold schools and teachers to account?



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Community participation
School-based management
Accountability
Rural poor
Teachers
Zambia

ABSTRACT

Community participation in school management—and in hiring and firing of teachers in particular—has been actively advocated as an effective reform to improve school and teacher accountability in the Global South. This paper examines whether such reform functions in practice as suggested in theory, drawing on the findings of a case study of community schools in rural Zambia. Using the concept of the 'context of practice', efforts have been made to understand the local meanings of community participation in school management rather than that of the central government or development partners. Such analysis illuminates the important roles that local economic and cultural capital, complex cultural norms and unexpected micro politics play in shaping the way parents and communities are actually willing and able to participate in school management, and how these issues influence school and teacher accountability. The findings also underscore the difficulty that teachers face when attempting to respond to the local demands, especially in the context of grossly inadequate resources being allocated to them by the state. The paper concludes by arguing, first, that community management of schools in Zambia was an unfunded and unclear policy that shifted financial responsibility to already marginalized rural communities and, second, that direct hiring relationships between parents and teachers will dilute the importance of the political accountability of the state to ensure quality education for all.

1. Introduction

Decentralising major decision-making authority to the school level while allowing community and parental participation in key decision-making areas has been a mantra in international education development discourse and practices for some time. Such reform is often described as school-based management (SBM). Among other outcomes, it is generally expected that, when the voices of parents and local community members are included in school management, the schools' responsiveness to the local priorities will improve, in addition to strengthening the accountability of the teacher, which in turn will lead to better student learning (Ranson and Martin et al., 1999; Gershberg and Winkler, 2004; World Bank, 2003; Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Bruns et al., 2011).

A growing number of experimental studies have been conducted to analyse the causal relationship between such reform and student outcomes, or other intermediate effects such as teacher and pupil attendance (e.g., Jimenez and Sawada 1998; Kremer et al., 2003; Khan, 2003; King and Özler 2005; Di Gropello and Marshall, 2005; Parker

2005; Duflo et al., 2011; Di Gropello and Marshall, 2011). The high expectation for participatory school management notwithstanding, the results so far have been mixed (Carr-Hill et al., 2015). Thus, there is limited evidence from low income countries of this general relationship. Absence of strong evidence aside, decentralisation and community participation in education continue to attract national and international policy-makers' attention.

Several World Bank publications have suggested that the reason why some SBM practices do not produce expected results is because they tended to devolve insufficient power to the parents over teachers (Patrinos and Kagia, 2007; Bruns et al., 2011; Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009). They contend that giving parents the power to directly hire teachers, monitor their work and attendance, implement payment by results, and discipline or dismiss them if their morale and teaching are unsatisfactory, will incentivise teachers to make a greater effort than their government counterparts (ibid.). However, other systemic reviews of SBM in developing countries indicate that even where the power to hire and fire teachers is transferred to school committees, the results are still mixed across different contexts (Carr-Hill et al., 2015; Westhorp

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et al., 2014).

Arcia et al. (2011) argue that the details of the reform matter and emphasise the need for clearer rules for holding teachers to account. Elsewhere it has been suggested that rules and guidelines (which are often lacking) need to respond to culture and contextual factors (Pryor, 2005). However, studies that examine community participation in school management in relation to local social, cultural, economic, and political contexts tend to be overlooked in the broader, systematic reviews of the effects of SBM—a result of the fact that these studies tend to be qualitative in nature. As such, important insights related to the beliefs, identities, behaviours and inter-relationships of local actors tend to be side-lined in the global debate around the desirability of SBM.

This present study attempts to complement and extend these qualitative studies by discussing research on community-managed schools in rural Zambia. Specifically, the purpose of this research is to shed light on the ways in which community involvement in school management has (and has not) functioned in practice, for what reasons, and with what consequences and implications. Zambia presents a very interesting and relevant case as the government has encouraged parents and local community to establish and manage their own schools since 1990s, by hiring locally contracted teachers called “volunteer teachers.” While such teachers are expected to be directly accountable to the parents and local community they serve, little is yet known about whether such expectation is met in reality.

Rather than viewing community participation in schools through an exclusively institutional or administrative lens—wherein analysis is restricted to rules and regulations—the present paper conceives of community participation in school management as a process and adopts a sociological approach, meaning that it takes into account the particularities of the context and the point of view of the key actors involved. By doing so, the contribution of this paper is that it challenges some of the mechanistic and taken-for-granted assumptions on which attempts to promote local management of schools and teachers in low income countries are premised (discussed further later in the paper). Put differently, the contribution of this paper is that it demonstrates the unintended consequences that can arise and the unexpected obstacles that can emerge when implementing SBM—with both of these issues causing practice to diverge from expectations once policy confronts the realities of communities’ socio-economic endowment, inequalities of power, and endowments both within and between communities and government institutions, as well as complex social norms and mutual relationships embedded in poor rural societies. Examples of the obstacles discussed in this paper include: (a) the lack of confidence of community members (and especially women) when speaking with teachers about attendance, teaching and student learning; (b) the social cost felt by parents when attempting to hold teachers accountable (particularly since the teachers came from the same community and since their livelihoods depend, to some extent, on employment in the school); (c) the way the SBM reflected elite capture (in that meetings were often dominated by more powerful and privileged community members); (d) the inability of school committees to discipline or dismiss teachers (since alternative teachers could not be found); and (e) the inability of teachers and school leaders to respond to parental demands, even if they wanted to (due to the minimal and unpredictable salaries and resources provided by the government and community).

A further contribution of this paper is that it uniquely and importantly examines the complex relationship that community schools have with the government through the district education authority and near-by government schools called “mother schools.” In that these mother schools are thought to be a key vehicle for resource delivery and resource sharing with community-managed schools, it is important to analyse this relationship. Investigating this issue is essential because the practical distribution of resources needed from the government to schools to deliver quality education is rarely considered in the

discussion of education decentralisation and local control of schools.¹ However, as the present study demonstrates, this aspect is of critical importance if schools and teachers are to be held accountable for the people they serve, for one cannot expect better outcomes without sufficient resources. This point has particular relevance to community-managed schools in low-income countries, as they are often integrated into government strategies for expanding education access while often receiving some kind of governmental assistance (Westhorp et al., 2014).

The present paper is organised as follows. The next section offers the historical context within which community managed schools have been promoted in Zambia, and analyses the roles attached to the school committees, as defined in policy documents. Section 3 reviews the empirical and theoretical literature on decentralisation, community participation, and accountability in education in low-income countries and provides analytical framework for the study. Section 4 describes the methods of data collection and analysis. Section 5 then presents findings, while the final sections engage in discussion and offer conclusions.

2. Community schools in Zambia²

In Zambia, formal education system consists of 7 years of primary education, 5 years of secondary education and 4 years of higher education. As secondary schools are frequently not available in rural area, the efforts have been made to upgrade primary schools in such areas to be upgraded as “basic schools” that offer schooling up to Grade 9. Ministry of General Education (MOGE) operates through the nine Provincial Education Offices (PEOs) and 72 District Education Boards (DEBs), which are responsible for basic education in a particular district.

Since early 1990s, the Government of Zambia has pursued the decentralisation of education with strong emphasis on community participation in local education governance, in line with the international promotion of decentralisation and community participation in education. The national education policy *Educating our Future* (EOF) promoted not only decentralisation and community participation in government schools, but also emphasized the right of local communities along with the private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to establish and control their own schools (MOE, 1996: 3, 136). Consequently, at the basic education level, the establishment of community schools that are “provided, run and financed by communities to meet their own needs” (ibid) has been actively promoted in parallel with private and NGO-owned schools.

The *Educating our Future* policy document states:

One of the challenges facing educational provision today, particularly in impoverished rural areas, is to re-awaken an awareness that the first responsibility for the education of children rests with families and with the wider communities in which families live (MOE, 1996: 20).

Thus, parents and the wider local community are explicitly regarded as having primary responsibility for the education of their own children rather than the state.

The number of community schools offering basic education has grown considerably over the last two decades or so, escalating from just 55 in 1992 to 2664 in 2014 (MOE, 2007; MESVTEE, 2014), a figure which accounts for more than 30 per cent of the total number of primary schools nationwide (MESVTEE, 2014). The real driving force for the massive growth in community schools reportedly arose from the

¹ For two exceptions see, Cuéllar-Marchelli (2003) and Edwards, Victoria, and Martin (2015).

² In accordance with local practice in the Zambia, we use the term “community schools” to describe those schools in the Zambia that are managed with participation from the community through a school management committee. The meaning of “community schools” in the context of the Zambia is thus distinct from other meanings (Heers, Van Klaveren, Groot, & Van den Brink, 2016).

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