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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN DEVELOPING 'FAST-TRACK' SCHOOLS: THE CASE OF MASHONALAND WEST PROVINCE

Cleopas Peter Chidakwa, University of Zimbabwe

Wellington Jonga, formerly University of Zimbabwe

Christopher Tafumaneyi Mandizvidza, University of Zimbabwe

Roselyn Dadirai Makoni, University of Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

The study focused on assessing the role that parents were playing in developing 'fast-track' schools in the newly resettled commercial farms under the fast-track Land Reform Programme in the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. Data were collected during focus group discussions and interviews with parents and on site observations of what was going on at the schools. A convenient sample of 58 newly-established primary schools was used for the study. This sample was chosen mainly because the schools were easily accessible to the researchers. The data collected were analysed using content analysis. The study established that parents were instrumental in getting the schools established because they wanted their children to be able to access schools that were nearer their places of residence and to reduce the walking distances travelled by the children to and from school. Parents chose school sites that they considered central to where they lived and that had physical infrastructure that could easily be converted into classrooms. The contributions by parents included setting up school committees that assisted in mobilising the parents to assist in the development and administration of the schools, supplying building materials and providing teaching and learning materials. The major challenges faced by parents included failure to provide adequate, decent housing, sanitary facilities, clean water, electricity, teaching and learning materials for use by teachers and pupils respectively. Parents also complained of the possible wastage of the limited resources they were investing in developing

educational facilities for their children when the schools they had developed were moved to more permanent sites. The researchers recommended that permanent sites for the schools be quickly identified and established. They also recommended that all stakeholders unite as equal partners in developing the schools and that parents should pay realistic and meaningful levies needed to fuel development of conventional infrastructure in the schools.

Introduction

In the year 2000 the former liberation war veterans mobilised the landless people of Zimbabwe and reclaimed land from white commercial farmers. This forced the government to institute what has been popularly known as the 'fast track' land reform programme. Soon after, a land reform bill was passed which further increased the number of families that were resettled. According to the Presidential Land Review Committee Report (2003), 28 648 households were settled in Mashonaland West province. As the people got resettled they took with them their children of school going age. These children needed adequate school amenities to ensure that they continued with their education. Since the government was reacting to a spontaneous event, it did not have time to put in place educational infrastructure that would be required in a normal settlement. This put pressure on the few existing farm schools, prompting the new communities to use tobacco barns, sheds and farm houses as make-shift schools. These became popularly known as 'fast track schools'.

As a result of these efforts, about 495 primary schools were established in Mashonaland West province. This research sought to study in detail the role that parents, who had been resettled as new farmers, played in the establishment of these schools.

Literature review

Parents have always played a role in the development of their children's education (Bishop, 1989; Graham-Brown, 1991). In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MOESC) has instituted School Development Associations/Committees (SDA/CS) to allow parents to contribute meaningfully towards the development of the education of their children. These associations and committees provide opportunities for parents to finance educational activities, put up physical infrastructure and provide any other materials considered useful in enhancing the teaching and learning of the children in the schools.

Kaufman and Herman (1991) argue that the community and society at large, of whom parents are part, are the primary clients and beneficiaries of any educational enterprise who receive the outputs from the education system. As such, they are duty bound to contribute meaningfully towards its development. Several advantages can be attributed to an educational planning approach that involves the parent body. Kaufman and Herman (1991) describe it as a 'proactive and holistic' approach that portrays 'what should be'. By involving parents in developing any educational enterprise, planning information is processed quickly. This allows for quick decision making and increased motivation of the local people.

In addition, community involvement in planning educational enterprises facilitates meaningful, efficient and effective use of local resources. Although the process of involving parents in developing educational enterprises is sometimes difficult, frustrating, risky and often unsustainable, it leads to a more relevant education that is compatible with the goals and aspirations of the people (Kaufman and Herman, 1991). The local people gain a better idea of the life they want to lead which is translated through the contributions they make towards developing the education of their children.

Graham-Brown (1991) points at sterling efforts that have resulted from involving parents in developing educational facilities in Zimbabwe and elsewhere on the African continent. One of these is the success of expanding most education systems in Africa. However, as noted by Bishop (1989) the achievements have not always matched the high expectations.

The purpose of this study was to assess the role that parents played in establishing and developing 'fast-track' schools under the land reform programme in Zimbabwe.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What was the motive of parents in helping to set up the 'fast-track schools?'
- What contributions did the parents make in the establishment of the 'fast-track schools?'
- What challenges/problems were parents meeting in carrying out their role?

Research Methodology

This was a case study that sought to assess the role played by parents in establishing and developing 'fast-track' primary schools in Mashonaland West Province. The survey method was used to collect data for the study (Cohen and Manion, 1989). The population of the study was all the parents with children in the newly established 'fast-track' schools and local authority officials responsible for education in the province. A convenient sample (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989) of fifty-eight primary schools and four local authorities was used for the study. The schools that were preferred were those that could easily be accessed by road. The parents that were surveyed were those whom the researchers managed to contact on the day they visited the schools. Data from parents were collected during focus group discussions. Goss and Leinbach in Billot, (2003) argue that group discussions provide more valuable insight into issues than does a 'summation of individual narratives extracted in interviews'. An interview guide was used to ensure standardisation of the data collecting process. The guide mostly contained open ended questions. The open ended questions had the advantage of facilitating further probing on responses that were given so that researchers could establish the motives that had resulted in the answers they were getting. Furthermore, the researchers were able to verify some of the answers they were getting by observing the progress that had been made by the parents in developing the school and by interviewing the local authorities. McMillan and Schumacher (1989) and White (2005) further observe that the use of a convenient sample is prone to bias and it will be very difficult to generalise the findings to all the 'fast-track schools' that have been established in the country. However, the researchers observed that the siting of most 'fast-track' schools took into consideration that they be established in areas that were central and that were easily accessible by road.

The data collected were analysed qualitatively using content analysis. The researchers identified the main variables on an issue and tried to relate the answers they were given on each question item to these.

Results and discussion

Data that were collected during focus discussions/interviews are presented below according to the research questions that were identified for the study.

Motives of parents in setting up fast track schools

The parents were asked to give the reasons that motivated them to establish the schools. Most parents revealed that they wanted to help their children to access schools that were nearer to where they lived. The parents indicated that their children were too young to walk the long distances that usually averaged more than ten kilometres daily to the nearest schools that had already been established. In addition, parents did not like their children to risk their lives by crossing flooded rivers and busy main roads on their way to and from school. By establishing these schools locally, the parents also hoped that a large number of pupils who had dropped out of school as a result of the resettlement programme would be able to attend schools that were nearer their new homes.

Another reason given by parents for establishing the schools at their present sites was that the places were considered central, near the main road and there was infrastructure such as tobacco barns and sheds that could easily be converted into classrooms; water points that could be used to provide pupils with safe drinking water, and electricity. Almost 64,2 percent of the schools visited were less than three kilometres from the main road where transport to and from main centres was easily obtainable. Data collected on distances that pupils were travelling to school indicate that about 54,5 percent of the pupils were travelling about five kilometres to the nearest school. This confirms that most schools were established at places that were central to most of the newly resettled farmers.

The findings agree with the planning norms that have been made by the International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP). These stipulate that primary schools must be located within distances that allow children to travel at least five kilometres to and from the school (Mbamba, 1993 and Moyo, 1995). The research finding indicating that parents took into consideration the need to locate schools centrally shows that the parents were sensitive of those factors that contribute to successful establishment of schools. This is not surprising as the study revealed that the majority of the schools was established at the recommendation of local committees that were being advised by local authorities and officials from the MOESC. At one of the schools, it was noted that a retired teacher was the driving force who advised and led parents to contact relevant authorities before the school was established. The results show that the fast track schools were not haphazardly founded but that they were properly established to cater for a felt need with the parents consulting relevant authorities for advice. This requirement needs to be met if the schools are to qualify for salary and per capita grants.

The parents were further asked to show the expectations that they had for their children that had driven them to help in setting up these schools. Their replies demonstrate that success in later life for their children was at the top of their consideration in establishing and developing the schools. Their beliefs ranged from the desire to have their children become tomorrow's teachers, nurses, doctors and political leaders to their wishes that the children go to university and study for degrees. These findings indicate that most parents still view education as a vehicle for social upward mobility and the means to a better-paid job. By assisting in setting up and developing the fast track schools, the parents believed that they were helping their children to lead better lives in future. The finding demonstrates that parents viewed education as an investment.

Lastly, the parents were queried on what they required the schools to provide to their children so that the teaching-learning process is effective in helping the pupils realise their ambitions. Their responses show that they expected the schools to be staffed with trained teachers, and be provided with adequate textbooks and stationery. Furthermore, the parents hinted that they should work together with the government in contributing towards the welfare of their schools and that government should stop wasting resources by allowing them to develop schools on temporary sites, but on permanent ones. To them good education for their children could only be attained if their development efforts were spent working on permanent school sites. This reply was not strange as the researchers collected from MOESC officials that most of the fast-track schools had been established on temporary sites and will be moved to more permanent ones with the passage of time. The findings reveal that establishment of fast-track schools was not a result of very careful planning, but an ad hoc response to the needs of parents who wanted their children to receive an education despite having accepted movement to new areas that were not well provided with schools. This may not be surprising as most parents were products of the quantitative expansion of the education system that had taken place in Zimbabwe soon after independence. This shows that parents still appreciated the role of education in improving the lives of their children and this could have motivated them to go ahead and develop the fast-track schools.

Contributions that parents made in the development of fast-track schools

The majority of schools was established in 2002 and 2003. Interviews with parents and officials at the provincial education offices indicate that a total

of 47,7 percent of the schools was set up between 2000 and 2003. A further 33,3 percent was set up in 2003. This was the period when the land reform programme was at its peak. The period saw many people moving from the unfertile and crowded communal lands to the new farms they had been allocated in the former white commercially owned farms. In addition, the movement of the landless appears to have been set to coincide with the presidential elections that were held in 2003. This could have been meant to give political advantage to the ruling party.

The study went on to examine the roles that parents were undertaking in the development of schools. The study revealed that parents had a role to play in helping administer the schools put up and maintain the much-needed infrastructure and in mobilising other parents to support developments at the schools. At all the schools visited, the researchers observed that there was a functional school development committee in place. Most of these committees had been set up to assist with the initial establishment of the schools. When the committees were instituted, their role had been to liaise with the various local authority and MOESC officials to facilitate the establishment of the fast-track schools. This shows that parents were at the forefront in helping set up the schools. Most of the members in these committees had been re-elected to form the first SDCs when the schools were established. The main functions of these parent bodies as established by the study were to mobilise parents to support initiatives to develop the school, advise both the school administrators and the parents on the projects that needed to be carried out at the school and the levies that needed to be paid at the school in support of the development efforts.

Interviews with parents on their role revealed some of the following: providing building and learning materials such as bricks, pit and river sand and ferrying these to the school site; renovating tobacco sheds, barns and farm houses; providing sanitary facilities and providing learning materials like furniture and textbooks. At one of the schools visited, parents were seen constructing a school garden and building brick and mortar benches and desks for their children. At some of the schools, parents had already dug toilet pits and assembled the bricks to be used in their construction. At another school parents allowed their children to fetch water for the teachers from a distance that averaged about fifteen kilometres to and from the school. These findings demonstrate a sound need for the parents to have their children receive an education and that parents wanted to provide the basics that contributed to a sound education for their children.

Challenges being faced by parents in carrying out their role

Lastly, the study sought to establish some of the challenges that parents were meeting in the process of developing the fast-track schools. A number of challenges were identified as affecting the parents in the proper discharge of their role. The following are some of their responses: At 15,1 percent of the schools parents had failed to establish a reliable and safe drinking water source for the children and teachers. The parents alleged that the outgoing white farmers had poisoned the only existing boreholes before leaving. Teachers and pupils at these schools were relying on unprotected water from rivers and dams for drinking and other domestic uses. In 42,6 percent of the schools there was no electricity, making the schools unattractive for the teachers who constantly sought to be transferred away from the schools. At 89,6 percent the parents were failing to provide decent accommodation for the teachers forcing the teachers to stay in pole, grass and dagga houses that had been formally meant for the farm workers. At one of the schools visited, about five teachers and their families were sharing the one farmhouse that had been vacated by the departed farmer.

At some of the schools, the newly resettled farmers were refusing to vacate the farm homesteads that had been reserved for the teachers, forcing the teachers to seek alternative accommodation in the compounds that had been meant for farm workers. Some schools were being vandalised for their electrical and building materials. At other schools, the parents were reluctant to pay the proposed development levies, which they argued were too much. As a result schools had been forced to charge very little levies that were far below the inflation rate. The levies were so small that the schools could not afford to carry out any meaningful development. At one of the schools parents complained of financial mismanagement by the school head which had not been attended to by the relevant MOESC officials. All these challenges were stalling the smooth development of the schools.

Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations are made as a result of the findings from the study.

Parents were instrumental in the development of fast-track schools. The success of the schools largely depended on the contributions that parents were making towards their development. The motives that were cited by parents as influencing their involvement in developing the fast-track schools show that parents view education as instrumental to the successful

development of their children. In view of this, parents were inclined to contribute materially towards the development of the education of their children.

To ensure meaningful development takes place, the study recommends that:

- Strong relationships are fostered between parent bodies MOESC and local authority officials. Each part should view the other as an equal partner involved in planning and implementing educational plans and projects. This will ensure that resources are used effectively without wasting them by developing schools at temporary sites that will be abandoned in favour of new sites in the future.
- Local authorities, parent bodies and education authorities must unite and critically examine the challenges affecting development of fast-track schools with a view to coming up with suggestions that will ameliorate them.
- Parents must be prepared to pay reasonable levies so that the schools have adequate funds to invest in the development of the general infrastructure of the schools. This may add to the general improvement of the quality of education in these schools.

In addition, the researchers recommend that further research of a similar nature be conducted in other regions. The role that the local authorities and Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture officials have played in the establishment and development of the fast-track schools needs also to be ascertained.

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