Negotiating Roles and Responsibilities in the Context of Decentralised School Governance: A Case Study of One Cluster of Schools in Zimbabwe

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1. Introduction and background to the study

Decentralisation and school clustering have become internationally acclaimed educational reforms (Bray, 1987; McGinn & Welsh, 1999) that are consistent with the notion of good governance (Grant Lewis & Motala, 2004). However, there remain questions about how those tasked to implement such reforms understand, experience and respond to them, and about the impact this has on the success or failure of these innovations. This study examines stakeholders' understandings and experiences of, and responses to, decentralised school governance in one cluster of five primary schools in the Gutu District of Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe.

Because of apartheid-style policies during the colonial era, at independence in 1980, most Zimbabwean blacks had suffered a plethora of deprivations, among which was lack of adequate access to education, let alone to quality education. Upon attaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe straight away embarked on a rapid expansion of its education system. To illustrate, in 1979, there were 2401 primary schools in the country, but a decade later in 1991, they had almost doubled to 4549 (Mumbengegwi, 1995). The system of governance became highly centralised (Reynolds, 1990). This model was apparently informed by the thinking that since the focus was on redressing previous imbalances nation wide, central government was perceived as best placed and resourced to drive this arduous process. Government footed the huge education bill for salaries and allowances, transport, services, pupil grants, furniture and equipment, student loans, examination expenses, among others (Reynolds, 1990). However, this bold and spirited trend was soon to face teething problems. Towards

the end of the first decade of independence, the heavy government expenditure on education was no longer sustainable, neither was it defensible any more. The rapid expansion gave rise to grave concern over economic efficiency (Reynolds, 1990). Critics noted the tumbling pass rates and evident decline in the quality of education, with the concomitant high unemployment rates for the school graduates (Dorsey, Matshazi, & Nyagura, 1991). The highly centralised, top-down system of governance made it difficult, if not impossible for stakeholders at various levels of the education system to participate in decision-making thereby alienating them from the entire approach, and pointing to the need for a change in organisational culture (Rukanda & Mukurazhizha, 1997).

Informed by both local imperatives and international trends, Zimbabwe adopted a decentralised system of school governance.This shift emphatically manifests itself through *Statutory Instrument 87* of 1992, by which legal tool government created School Development Committees (SDCs) to govern the affairs of government-aided public schools. A similar body: the School Development Association (SDA) was created for government public schools. An SDC is composed of five parents elected by fellow parents of pupils enrolled at the school; the head of the school; the deputy head of the school; a teacher at the school and where the responsible authority of the school is a local authority, a councillor appointed by the local authority; and for any other relevant authority or body, a person is appointed by that authority or body (Government of Zimbabwe, 1992:613).

Recognising the importance of developing the capacity of education professionals for this new educational context, government launched a capacity building strategy, the Better Schools Programme in Zimbabwe (BSPZ) in 1993 (Ministry of Education, 1995). The objectives of the programme include developing teachers' and school heads' competences in school management and professional development and improving the quality of teaching and learning experiences in schools through continuous formal and non-formal in-service training of teachers (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2000). The BSPZ's major tool is the cluster. This is a group of about five schools in the same vicinity, comprising primary and/or secondary schools, which have agreed to share human, material and financial resources in order to improve the quality and relevance of education in their institutions.

2. Rationale and purpose of the study

While decentralised governance and school clustering are internationally acclaimed reforms (Bray, 1987; Education Quality Review, 2004; McGinn & Welsh, 1999), it is doubtful that decentralisation is the panacea to all the ills of centralised governance (Lyons, 1985). Also, despite the rapid growth of school-and-cluster-based teacher in-service programmes in developing countries, there are outstanding questions about their organisation, content, effectiveness, cost, and sustainability (Education Quality Review, 2004), given that most school-based and cluster programmes are originally supported by outside donors. Centres of power, such as a government ministry, may delegate or de-concentrate authority to the periphery, without necessarily relinquishing real decision-making powers at the centre (Bullock & Thomas, 1997; Cheng, 2002; Education International, 1996; Weiler, 1990) . Thus, this study sought

to examine stakeholders' understandings and experiences of, and responses to, decentralisation. Therefore this study investigated, among other things, stakeholders' views about their capacity to function effectively in a decentralised school governance system.

The study revolved around three questions:

1. How do the stakeholders in the cluster understand, experience and respond to decentralised school governance?
2. What are the stakeholders' views regarding their capacity to function effectively in a decentralised school governance system?
3. What are their experiences and views of the factors that hinder and/or enable decentralised school governance in the cluster?

3. Method

The study is located within the broad category of qualitative research. Qualitative research's interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) suited the study's quest to investigate stakeholders' understandings and experiences of, and responses to decentralised school governance. Within the qualitative research realm, the study adopted a multi-site case study design (Merriam, 1998), which involved each school within the cluster as both a research site on its own, and also as a component of the cluster. The cluster constituted a 'case' in that member schools are bounded (Smith, 1987) by a common goal of working together to improve their performance collectively and individually.

Qualitative research often thrives on the utilisation of various data gathering instruments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). As such, the study utilised four data collection methods: a questionnaire, observation, document analysis and interviews. The questionnaire was administered among all teachers in the cluster. Among other issues, the questionnaire asked them to indicate on a 0-4 point scale,[1] the extent to which they felt authority to make decisions in given decisional areas had been decentralised to the school level, and the extent to which they felt involved in making decisions in those areas. Respondents were also asked to substantiate their responses through written comments. A total of 40 teachers (80%) responded. Group interviews were conducted among teachers as well as parent governors in each school. Individual interviews were held with cluster co-ordinating committee members, Education officials, as well as the five school heads and selected education officials. Policy documents, work plans, minutes of meetings and related written evidence pertaining to school governance and cluster activities were analysed. Relevant meetings and workshops were observed. Through these techniques, both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered.
The participant schools are identified in pseudonyms as Mishi, Boka, Pfungi, Mari and Konde. The cluster is psuedonymed Chikanda.

[1] Zero stood for 'Not at all', one for 'To a little extent', two for 'Average extent', three for 'High extent' and four for 'Total extent'.

4. Highlights of related literature

Decentralisation is seen as a means to several ends: the socio-economic transition to democracy and good governance; improved service delivery (by shifting decision-making closer to the grassroots for improved accountability and responsiveness); and the empowerment of citizens and participation in governance (Barberger 1986; Weiler 1990; Smyth, 1996, McGinn & Welsh, 1999; Paqueo and Lammert 2000; Bush and Heystek, 2003; Fiske and Ladd, 2004; Watson 2005). Many reformers believe that the transferring of governance and management authority from a centralised state educational agency to schools will energise schools by giving parents and local communities a greater role in setting school missions (Fiske and Ladd, 2000).

McGinn and Welsh (1999) hint that for successful implementation of any reform such as decentralisation, two conditions must be met. First, there must be political support for the proposed change. In concurrence, Watson (2005) reports that in Ethiopia, political consensus (that devolution must be made to work, and that local accountability structures have an important role to play) was an essential ingredient for decentralisation. Second, those involved in the reform must be capable of carrying it out. McGinn and Welsh contend that many decentralisation reforms have failed to achieve their objectives because they did not adequately meet one or both of the conditions.

School-based and cluster teacher in-service professional development programmes have become widespread and popular in recent years in both industrialised and developing countries (Educational Quality Review (2004). Several elements have come together and prompted education systems to recognise the necessity for ongoing career-long support programmes for educators. These include widespread curriculum reforms that emphasise active learning and teacher change. An example of this is Outcomes-Based Education in South Africa (Media in Education Trust, 2004). A second element is the growing realisation of the central role that teacher quality plays in improving educational quality. The third element is the declining quality of education as a consequence of rapid growth and expansion of education in the absence of sufficient resources, such as mass education in Zimbabwe (Dorsey, Matshazi, & Nyagura, 1991). The cluster concept has also grown from developments in educational micro planning (Bray, 1984;1987; Dittmar, Mendelsohn, & Ward, 2002). Proponents of micro planning argue that even in the smallest country, it is impossible for a central ministry of education to know the specific conditions of every school and its locality.

Decisions that tend to be decentralised include: financing of education (Abu-Duhou, 1999; Bullock & Thomas, 1997; McGinn & Welsh, 1999; National Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002); decisions about the curriculum (McGinn and Welsh, 1999); decisions about human resources (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992; National Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002; Rideout & Ural, 1993); decisions about school organisation (Bullock & Thomas, 1997; Abu-Duhou, 1999); and decisions about external relations (Bush, Coleman and Glover 1993).

5. Findings

Findings are aggregated across the five schools. This is because no significant differences were found in the responses among the schools. From both the study's research questions and the obtained data, three themes emerge:

- Stakeholders' understandings and experiences of, and responses to decentralised school governance;
- Stakeholders' perceptions of their capacities to function effectively in a decentralised system; and
- Factors that hinder and/or enable decentralised school governance in the cluster.

While the paper is organised around these themes, the latter theme was found to relate very closely to each of the other themes, to the extent that it would be artificial and unproductive to tackle it separately. As such, findings regarding this theme are integrated into the other themes and permeate the entire discussion. Overall, the thematic boundaries are quite porous.

5.1 Stakeholders' understandings and experiences of, and responses to decentralised school governance

Findings are discussed through three selected areas of decision-making: School Organisation, Financial Resources and Human Resources. In the course of the discussion in this section, factors that enable and/or hinder decentralised school governance emerge.

5.1.1 School organisation

This area encompassed decisions about administration structure, timetabling, and class size. Interviews with school heads and document analysis revealed a number of policies informed school organisation in this cluster (and others in the country). The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture prescribed a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:40 in primary schools. Thus, the enrolment determines the number of teachers. Similarly, the size of the teaching force determines the number of permanent management positions in the school and the status of such positions. To illustrate, a school with 15 or more teachers (i.e. an enrolment of 600 learners) may have a non-teaching school head and a permanent deputy school head post. The head of a school with less than 15 teachers is required to teach a full class, in addition to administrative duties. The head appoints one of the senior teachers to act as the deputy, but this is on a non-permanent basis.

Within each of the five schools studied, there was a teacher responsible for coordinating cluster activities. This teacher was the link person between the cluster coordinating committee and the school. He/she would attend relevant cluster meetings on behalf of the school. Interviews with these teachers revealed that they did not necessarily form part of the administration structures at their respective schools. They only facilitated staff development functions as sponsored by the cluster. This is consistent with the role of the Better Schools Programme as reported earlier.

Interviews with the school heads revealed contradictions in the way school policy was experienced. School heads reported that they enjoyed some autonomy in the way they organised their own schools. For example, they made the final decisions in the appointment of teachers into posts of responsibility. Nevertheless, they felt constrained with the current policies on school organisation. All the four teaching school heads reported that it was overly demanding for them to fulfil both teaching and management functions. As a result, both functions tended to suffer. Teachers reported that teaching heads often asked them to 'baby sit' their classes while they attended to other business, with a negative knock-on effect on the teachers' other classes.

Questionnaire responses revealed that teachers perceived some significant decentralisation of decision-making to the school level in this area. 41.2 percent of them reported high to total decentralisation in the area. However, 45 percent of them perceived little to no decentralisation at all. This significant difference of opinion may mean that some educators understand decentralised decision-making authority only within the constraints of existing policy frameworks, while others may see it as entailing the revision of those regulatory frameworks. Again, most teachers (58.7 percent) felt that they were not involved in making decisions to do with school organisation.

The apparent lack of teacher involvement in decisions about how schools are organised was further evidenced by their added comments in response to the questionnaire. One respondent wrote: 'We are just sent circulars that tell us everything'.

5.1.2 Financial resources

A fourth area of decision-making studied involved three decisional items about school finances: the charging of fees and levies, budgeting, and other ways of raising funds (fundraising). Two sections of the *Education Act* (Government of Zimbabwe, 1996a) guide schools in charging fees and levies. Section six of the *Act* refers to the need for schools to charge minimum fees:

> *It is the objective that tuition in schools in Zimbabwe be provided for the lowest possible fees consistent with the maintenance of high standards of education, and the Minister shall encourage the attainment of this objective by every appropriate means, including the making of grants and other subsidies to schools.*

Section 21 stipulates that the Secretary, (the head of the Ministry), shall prescribe maximum amounts of fees and levies. No responsible authority shall increase any fee or levy by more than the prescribed amount or percentage in any period of twelve months unless the Secretary has approved it. An authority wishing the approval of such a fee or levy increase may submit a written application to the Secretary setting out the full details of the proposed increase and the rationale for it. SDCs are empowered to find other ways of generating funds (Government of Zimbabwe, *Statutory Instrument 87*, item 5(c).

All the school heads reported that parents were the key role players in all matters relating to school finances. One school head reported:

> *In the eyes of most parents, the quality of a school head is largely measured through his/her financial management abilities.*

Questionnaire responses show that more than half (53.3 percent) of the surveyed teachers perceived high to total decentralisation of decisions about school financial resources to the school level. However, the majority (63.3 percent) of the respondents reported no to little involvement in making decisions in this area. One teacher elaborated:

> *Government leaves this to the school and its SDC. It's not even aware of the fees and levies charged and does not follow up or audit.*

One teacher from each school serves as a member of the SDC. However, most of them felt that they were not adequately involved in financial decisions. One of them reported:

> *It is a very sensitive area. To some parents, too much involvement on our part as teachers would be construed as wanting to embezzle school funds. Our levels of understanding of issues are different. Because most parents are not knowledgeable, and also because funds have been misappropriated before in this school, there tends to be suspicion on the part of parents. Thus the safe thing to do is to allow them to make the decisions.*

Similarly, interviews with SDC parent members in the cluster showed that to them, decisions on school finances constituted the core of their business as parents' representatives. One SDC chairperson reported:

> *Our major roles as the SDC are to charge fees in consultation with parents and to construct school buildings. In today's meeting for example, we are discussing the progress in completing that new classroom block you see in the middle.*

. Emphasising the SDC's key role as the custodians of school funds, the councillor of Boka Primary had this to say:

> *Parents expect the SDC to look after school funds well. They must be able to accurately and convincingly report back to parents how money has been used. Parents are willing to pay all the fees and levies if the use of money is transparent.*

5.1.3 Human resources

In this area, the study investigated three aspects: the hiring and firing of teaching staff, staff development and staff appraisal. The Public Service Commission is the mother

employer of all civil servants. At the time of this study, authority to hire teachers had been shifted away from schools, where it had been devolved previously, and assigned to provincial offices of education. The Commission finalises the firing of teachers, through recommendations from the Education Ministry. As reported earlier, most staff development of teachers is supposed to be done through the cluster system.

The policy on staff appraisal is that supervisors and supervisees (heads and teachers respectively, in this case) should discuss, agree and sign annual work plans. There are two performance reviews each year. Results of appraisals are to be copied to the supervisee, the district, provincial and head offices, and the head office sends the report to the Ministry of the Public Service. Training is meant to be ongoing for all staff in the service and a must for new appointees. A performance audit team monitors the training process. Thus, the entire performance management system is founded on the spirit of empowerment and the building of trust between supervisors and supervisees.

Interviews with the school heads in the cluster revealed that the employment of teaching staff was an area experiencing re-centralisation. One school head reported:

> *In 2001, schools were authorised to hire teachers. We worked through a committee comprising parents' representatives, selected senior teachers, the head and the deputy head of the school. However, after one term, we were told to discontinue the practice with immediate effect. The job was now going to be done by District officials.*

On why this had happened, he replied:

> *The staff selection committees were accused of corruption. We were accused of employing our own relatives. We know, however, that people in higher offices discovered that they had lost a big power base, so they decided to reverse the whole thing.*

Another school head stated that:

> *The idea of localised selection of staff was very noble, but the powers that be, realised that we would be more powerful than them, so they would not buy that. However, politically, we are now safer because we can no longer be accused of favouritism and nepotism.*

On schools' capacity to effectively recruit teaching staff most teachers and school heads reported a high deficit in the necessary capacity. They indicated that processes of short-listing and interviewing candidates were demanding if they were done properly. Some argued that it was disempowering to ask people to perform such responsibilities without adequately preparing those who would be tasked to perform that function. Most interviewees however, felt that the way forward was not to exclude schools and their communities totally from the hiring process, but to first build capacity in the stakeholders.

The District Education Officer (DEO) had this to say:

> *First, the capacity of school committees to recruit teachers in a transparent manner, particularly in rural areas, was very suspect. Second, there were many reports of corruption on the part of school heads and their SDCs. They lacked the necessary professionalism that goes with this task. And third, because of poor communication, again particularly in rural areas, the method had become unduly expensive to the prospective teachers who had to travel from school to school. We had to protect the image of the ministry.*

The Deputy Provincial Education Director (DPED), echoed the sentiments of the DEO more bluntly and alluded to briberies taking place:

> *The employment of teachers was withdrawn from schools because of corruption. The heads were selling vacancies. The image of the Ministry and Government was at stake. We received the same outcry at district level. Also, the process was expensive for job seekers.*

In an attempt to counter such practices of undue influence, central government is often left with no option other than to limit the scope of decentralisation. This scenario poses a contradiction that bedevils decentralisation policies.

With regard to staff development, all the school heads in the cluster reported that individual schools and clusters had authority and were expected to design and run their own staff development activities, in addition to those conducted by district or provincial officials. Thus, decision-making about staff development was significantly devolved to the cluster and school levels.

With regard to staff appraisal, the school heads confirmed the policy, as described above. However, they reported that performance appraisal was not proceeding as planned. One reason was that while the system was designed to reward good performers through promotion and salary advancements, and to assist poor performers to improve, such monetary rewards were not forthcoming from the employer. Also, the lack of adequate teaching resources in most schools undermined an objective assessment of teacher performance. Against this background, the school heads reported that the little performance appraisal they did was inspecting teachers' record-keeping and assessing teaching.

Teachers' questionnaire responses show that more than half (51.6 percent) of them perceived little to no decentralisation of decision-making to the school level regarding staff matters. Pertaining to their involvement in decision-making in this area, the majority (62.5 percent) of the teachers perceived no to very little involvement on their part. However, a closer look at the statistics shows that this overall picture was largely influenced by responses about the hiring and firing of staff, which recorded the least decentralisation and involvement. In the other two sub-areas namely, staff development and appraisal, respondents indicated significant devolution and involvement in decision-making.

Interviews with parent governors revealed that they played no part in staff matters. However, the parents at Boka Primary felt that, although they did not recruit or appraise teaching staff, they had power to exert pressure on the Education Ministry to transfer an educator from their school. Expanding on this, the Boka SDC chairperson argued:

> *[The Ministry of Education] had to remove Mr [Gara] from being school head here after we visited every office, from district to provincial, complaining about his misuse of school funds.*

5.2 Stakeholders' capacity to function effectively in a decentralised school governance system

According to the BSPZ's handbook for Training and support for teachers, heads and education officers: Module A: Information and awareness (Ministry of Education, 1995 p.:21):

> *Professional growth of the stakeholders will be organised in a participatory manner…. Increased accountability will be fostered at a local level with regard to professional growth and development.*

This suggests that capacity building was extremely important, particularly for the decentralisation of school governance, because schools would make key decisions about themselves, as opposed to merely implementing decisions imposed from higher offices in the system. Also, there was a need to help school heads, teachers and parents to cope with shared decision-making, an important feature of decentralised school governance.

Thus, in order to investigate stakeholders' perceptions of their capacities to function effectively in a decentralised system, this study examined stakeholders' views regarding the success and/or failure of the BSPZ as a capacity builder. This was achieved through using, as the unit of analysis, the extent to which the BSPZ was achieving some of those of its objectives relevant to this study. Therefore, stakeholders' capacity to function effectively in a decentralised system was an indicator of the success or failure of the BSPZ as a capacity builder.

5.2.1 Developing school heads' management competences

The development of school heads' competences in school management is one of the objectives of the BSPZ. Such competences include planning, organising and coordinating school activities. Thus, although this BSPZ objective refers to school management competences, the same are indeed some of the necessary school governance capabilities. The principal is an important factor in the context of educational change.

While school heads need to be competent in these areas, the objective does not harness other stakeholders (such as teachers and SDCs) who, in the spirit of shared decision-making, need similar competences. As pointed out earlier, shared decision-

making is an important characteristic of decentralised school governance. Therefore school management can no longer remain the monopoly of the school head. Thus, one of the barriers to successful decentralisation of school governance in the cluster may be the lack of adequate inclusion of all stakeholders in training programmes.

In relation to the school heads' views of the success of the BSPZ in developing decentralised school governance capacity among all stakeholders in the schools and cluster, the interviews with the five school heads revealed that this objective had not been achieved. The school heads reported that they did not feel they possessed adequate school management competences, let alone other stakeholders (such as teachers and parents). They reported further, that from the time the donor wound up its funding of the BSPZ programme in 2002, staff development activities had dwindled drastically. Reportedly, the cluster had not been able to sustain the momentum set in the donor era. Cluster workshops were now few and far between, to the extent that one school head asserted that the school heads in the cluster did not know each another well enough for their professional cooperation:

> *We do not meet often. As a result, there is not enough follow up to the issues we handle in the few workshops we have had. As a school head I cannot say the BSPZ is developing my competences enough.*

Highlighting some of his training needs that had yet to be adequately addressed, one school head argued:

> *We need training in areas such as financial management, supervision of teachers, building school infrastructure, current issues like HIV/AIDS and so on. On paper, the BSPZ is very good, but it still lacks advocacy and practical activities, particularly in this cluster.*

All the four teaching school heads in the cluster reported that they felt incompetent and needed training on how to cope with both teaching and school management, including such coping skills as time management. They argued that while their schools were small and expected to pose fewer management problems, they still had to attend to parents' and teachers' concerns as any other school head should and, in the process, their classes suffered.

Interviews with the school heads further revealed that even during the donor period, workshops tended to be sector-based as opposed to being inclusive, in that issues relating to school management tended to be directed towards school heads, while those relating to teaching were directed to teachers, and those relating to school finances, to parent governors. One school head explained:

> *Yes, we are aware that even the teacher needs to develop capacity in school management if we have to move forward. It's only that now the cluster system is weak, otherwise we should be doing that.*

This apparent lack of inclusiveness in capacity building programmes as well as the evident dearth of staff development activities around school management issues are anathema to decentralised school governance.

The school heads also reported that district and provincial officials sometimes held workshops with them to develop, among other things, school management competences. However, interviews with the school heads revealed that these workshops were not synchronised in any way with cluster staff development plans, and that such management workshops were targeted at school heads alone. Thus, local conditions as a context for change seemed to be ignored. School heads also reported that these workshops tended to be top-down in their approach, in the sense that it was the officials who decided on the topics, the timing and the venues. Thus, in this case, authority over developing management competence seems to be located in those who administer the education system (higher tier officers), and not in those who implement policies (school heads). All the heads were of the opinion that, although such workshops were very few and far between, they tended to value them more than cluster workshops, not because they were more useful, but because they provided them with an opportunity to interact with senior officials in the education system. This suggests an entrenched attitude characteristic of centralised systems described in the policy implementation dilemmas theory, which suggests that the centre (higher tiers of the education system) tends to perpetuate centralised control, and by so doing, those in the lower rungs of the system feel powerless and obliged to align themselves sheepishly to the centre (Smyth & van der Vegt, 1993). This attitude is likely to be one of the major inhibitors to decentralised school governance.

Questionnaire responses show that 45 percent of the teachers consulted reported little to no achievement at all for this objective. Another 27.5 percent reported average achievement. The remainder (27.5 percent) perceived high to total achievement. Therefore it seems the majority of teachers did not think that stakeholders in their schools possessed sound school management competences necessary for effective decentralised school governance. Interviews with teachers revealed that, like the teaching school heads, most of them did not cope with their share of school management responsibilities as well as teaching. In this regard, one teacher explained:

> *The school head tries to involve us in school management, but this means less time for our classes. The balance between the two is difficult. Worse still, when teachers are assessed, the focus is on their teaching. This is the trend even with staff development workshops.*

Concurring with this view, another teacher reported that the BSPZ's capacity building efforts around school management competences were not targeted at them.

> *The few workshops we hold in the cluster as teachers focus on teaching. School management issues are rather restricted to the administration (school heads and their deputies).*

Both school heads' and teachers' views regarding the development of school management competences suggest that, not only was the BSPZ failing to achieve this objective, efforts towards achieving the goal were not holistic in approach, in that they were not inclusive of all the stakeholders, and this was negatively impacting on decentralisation.

In relation to parents' views of the success of the BSPZ in developing school management capacity among stakeholders, interviews with parent governors in the

cluster revealed that their understanding of school management capacity tended to be restricted to how school heads handled school finances. In the four schools (Mishi, Pfungi, Mari and Konde) where finances were reportedly to be properly managed, parent governors felt that the BSPZ was achieving the objective to develop management competences. At Boka Primary, where school funds had reportedly been mishandled previously, parent governors felt that it was only in the past 12 months after the change of the school head that they began to experience sound school management.

In tandem with teachers' responses above, records of staff development action plans for each of the five schools, as well as those of the cluster, focussed on the teacher and only on such needs as the teaching of specific subjects. They reflected nothing about school heads' staff development needs or about the needs of all stakeholders for decentralised school governance. This suggests that in most cases both teachers and school heads do not construe the latter stakeholder to be a candidate for staff development, and that they do not understand that parents and teachers have a role in school governance.

5.2.2 Extending the role of SDCs in schools

A further objective of the BSPZ cluster programme is to expand the capacities of SDCs, particularly the parent component, so that they become full partners in school governance, as opposed to being mere providers and maintainers of schools' physical infrastructure. This study investigated, through the perceptions of stakeholders, the extent to which the BSPZ had succeeded in developing the SDC's capacity to function as a full participant in school governance issues in the cluster.

In this regard, interviews with school heads revealed that they viewed parent governors as important, not only as school financiers, but also for the moral development of the school community. The parent governors mirrored the values held by the local community, which was especially important for young teachers entering the profession, and for community members, when parent governors acted as mediators in cases of school-community conflict. Therefore, in the eyes of the school heads, SDCs played a much bigger role than what appeared on the surface. To illustrate, findings reveal that Pfungi Primary had a much closer relationship with the local chief than other schools in the cluster. The Pfungi Primary school head reported that this relationship ensured a fluent tripartite means of communication between the school, the parents and the traditional leader. Through this cordial relationship, parents tended to respond positively to the school's financial requests. However, school heads still held the view that the BSPZ had not transformed the SDC into full partners in school governance. As reported by one school head:

> *In most cases, SDC parent members rely on the school head to tell them their functions in the school. The policy document that stipulates the roles of the SDCs is written in English and most of them have just basic literacy, although they may be quite clever.*

Asked why the BSPZ was not developing such capacity among the SDCs, one school head explained:

> *The BSPZ has tended to focus on teaching, given that there is so much to be done to improve the goings-on in the classroom. Parents themselves would want to see better pass rates.*

While one cannot dispute that teaching and learning should be the core business of any school, the above response suggests that the BSPZ's capacity building efforts in Chikanda cluster were limited. Explaining this paradox, another school head argued:

> *The Rural District Council was supposed to work with clusters to develop the capacity of SDCs, but the council has reneged on this. You only see council officials coming to schools when the school head or the committee is alleged to be mishandling school funds.*

Despite the apparent shortcomings of the Rural District Council reported above, the exclusion of SDCs from most cluster staff development workshops in Chikanda suggests that the SDC has not yet become an equal partner in school governance. The exclusion also suggests that teachers and school heads' understanding of the role of the SDC is one of a peripheral structure to the core business of the school, which has neither the capacity nor the interest to participate in decisions around such business.

Teachers' questionnaire responses show that of the 40 respondents, four (10 percent) reported no achievement at all towards the objective to expand the role of SDCs, while 10 (25 percent) perceived little achievement of the objective and 16 (40 percent) reported average achievement. In contrast, seven (17.5 percent) teachers reported high achievement of the objective and two (5 percent) perceived total fulfilment of the objective. Overall, 35 percent of the teachers surveyed perceived little to no achievement at all towards this BSPZ objective. Forty percent felt that the objective was being achieved to an average extent, while the rest (22.5 percent) reported high to total achievement of the same.

Both the records of cluster action plans and interviews with teachers revealed that the SDC's role was hardly an issue on the cluster's agenda. The Cluster Resource Teacher explained:

> *The District Council does us down. They are supposed to develop the capacity of parent governors while we concentrate on developing the capacity of teachers. All the Council has done is to install SDCs.*

The above comment from the Cluster Resource Teacher reiterates the tension arising from the overlapping school governance roles of the Ministries of Education, Sports and Culture, and Local Government and Public Works. The former has no mandate over SDCs, and the latter, while responsible for SDCs, is peripheral to activities in schools. The teacher's response also implies that the BSPZ has not adequately integrated the various stakeholders into its capacity building programmes.

As a result of the inadequate integration into these programmes, the scope of SDCs' involvement in school governance seemed to remain limited. Interviews with SDC members across the cluster showed that they saw themselves as more of a supportive unit to the school system than an equal partner in school governance. This is in

agreement with findings in section 6.3 above, in which the involvement of SDCs in school decision-making tended to be restricted to the areas of finance and physical infrastructure. Responding to the question about how the BSPZ was helping SDCs become equal partners in school governance, the chairperson of one SDC explained:

> *We used to be called to meetings where we met SDCs from other schools, teachers and school heads. It used to be very exciting. What has happened to that, we really do not know.*

All the school heads and teachers reported that a lack of knowledge and skills to participate effectively in running schools was the major limiting factor among SDC members. To illustrate, while SDCs conducted their business (for example, meeting deliberations and minutes of meetings) in the home language, the laws governing schools are written in English, so they needed assistance from school heads and teachers to interpret these laws and regulations to them. It may be argued, perhaps rightly so, that there is nothing wrong with these stakeholders helping one another; after all, this is why the SDC is made up of these various stakeholders. However, in this case, parent governors are at the mercy of other stakeholders. Teachers and school heads may take advantage of them in the helping process. This seems to explain why parents did not contest their lack of involvement in most decisional areas investigated in this study.

6. Emerging Issues

Findings suggest that a strong national regulatory framework drives school governance in Zimbabwe's public schools system in general, and in the cluster studied in particular, and this strong and rigid drive hindered decentralisation efforts. To illustrate, the common curriculum followed by all such schools, the administration of schools through a uniform organisational structure and the employment of teachers through the provincial office of education, are all indicative of centralised control of schools. Such centralisation of control is obviously anathema to decentralisation.

In addition, findings also suggest that district and provincial offices of education were reclaiming some of the authority that had been decentralised to schools (such as the hiring of teachers), as and when they deem the education enterprise to be in jeopardy. The centralisation tendency (Smyth & van der Vegt, 1993) in which organisations, in this case the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, experience a strong push to centrally coordinate the implementation of policy, lest things fall apart, might explain this tendency. To illustrate, in this study, officials in higher tiers of the Zimbabwean education system (for example, the District Education Director and the Provincial Education Director) argued that re-centralisation decisions were informed by findings that schools were not coping with the responsibility of hiring teachers.

Findings also suggest that as much as the regulatory framework was strong, it was also problematic. While the SDC parent component, teachers and school heads were the key stakeholders in the decentralisation discourse, with regard to schooling, they were accountable to two different ministries of government. On one hand, the SDCs for public schools are an arm of the Rural District Council (RDC), which, in turn, is connected to the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works. Apart from officially installing SDCs and being the legal authority of schools, the RDC was

reportedly absent as far as supporting school governance efforts is concerned. On the other, educators were accountable to the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, which was only responsible for educators and their professional duties. Emerging from the findings in this study is the indication that there was no evident coordination between the two stakeholder Ministries with regard to school governance. There are a few possible interpretations for the implications.

Thus, this study found that the centralisation tendency was strong in the Zimbabwean education system in general, and (as a knock-on effect) in the cluster studied in particular. This may be because the Zimbabwean education system has a long history of centralised control, to the extent that, in the post-independence era, those in higher tiers of the organisation evidently are unwilling to shed some of their decision-making authority, and have little confidence in the capacity of those at the lower tiers to make the same decisions. This centralisation tendency negates the notion that the devolution of school governance decision-making power can only succeed in a reciprocal relationship between the higher and the lower tiers of the education system, in which the former is willing to relinquish some of its power, and the latter is able to utilise such power. This may explain why educators in the selected cluster perceived little decentralised school governance overall.

The little decision-making power that makes its way to the school level tends to be unevenly distributed among stakeholders, with school heads enjoying the most power at this level, while parents and teachers have the least. For example, school heads have the overall administrative authority at the school level, while teachers have some powers in relation to curriculum, and parents determine fees and levies within the maximum limits that central government prescribes from time to time.

Linked to the above, in terms of their understandings and experiences regarding decentralised school governance, findings suggest that educators (teachers and school heads) and parent governors in Chikanda cluster had different views. On one hand, educators felt that school governance decision-making was still largely in the hands of those in higher tiers of the education system. Comments such as '*we are just sent circulars that tell us everything'* are testimony to this perception. On the other, despite their unenviable status highlighted above, parents in general, and SDC parent members in particular, felt empowered and a sense of ownership of the schools. According to them, this was largely because they had the final say (within the constraints of the law) regarding one of the key resources of the organisation, namely, finances.

Given that the greatest source of revenue for schools was parents, SDC parent members had a strong influence on the rates of payment of fees and levies in the schools. This, in turn, strongly influenced, not only the financial status of a school, but also its image before other schools and the community at large. To this effect, the policy of decentralised school governance was palatable to parents in so far as they could decide financial matters.

The problematic dual ownership of schools, in which parent governors were not accountable to the mainstream education administration system, may partially explain differences in perceptions about decentralised school governance. For example, parent governors' understandings differed significantly from those of educators' in that

parents were content with deciding school financial matters only, while teachers were looking for more authority in more areas of decision-making. Furthermore, within the school, there were significant differences in perceptions about the nature of decentralised school governance – even between teachers and school heads. The former felt deprived in all the areas investigated save for curriculum, while the latter believed that teachers are adequately involved in making all decentralised decisions.

Teachers and school heads in the cluster were academically and professionally well qualified, with a significant number of them holding qualifications above the minimum required for teaching (for example, two of the five school heads and 10 of the 40 teachers held bachelor degrees). In addition, over 60 percent of the respondent teachers had six or more years teaching experience. Such relatively high credentials provided the cluster with potential capacity to develop and enhance school effectiveness. In such a context, educators ought to be able to interpret policy, analyse, design and run staff development activities in the cluster, among other responsibilities. However findings suggest that these potential abilities lay idle.

On the other hand, low levels of education among parents in general, and parent governors in particular, posed as a stumbling block to increasing their involvement in decision-making. This was because all the relevant legal documents pertaining to school governance, such as the *Education Act*, *Rural District Councils Act* and *Statutory Instrument 84*, that established School Development Committees, are all written in English. To educators in the cluster, it had become a relatively accepted notion that most parents had limited skills and capacity for effective involvement and contribution to school governance issues. To the parents themselves, it was also almost a given that their school governance role was restricted to finance and infrastructure development of the school. This narrow understanding among parents of their role in school governance indicates a lack of capacity, real and perceived, on their part.

Evidence suggests that the district, provincial and national tiers of Zimbabwe's education system (the regulatory framework) exercised strong co-ordination roles. This central control tendency was apparently informed by the desire to increase accountability and effectiveness of the system. In the process, the locus of school governance decision-making power remains in the higher echelons outside the school, thus favouring the national outlook of the education system at the expense of the local. Therefore, the battle to create a balance between central coordination and the degree of autonomy that central government allows at the grassroots was being lost in favour of centralisation.

This political framework, in which local structures had been put in place to implement the policy of decentralised school governance, also posed contradictions for the implementation of decentralised school governance in Chikanda cluster. On the one hand, the national policy framework for decentralised school governance functioned as an enabling factor. On the other, the policy had not been sufficiently translated into practice. At the central government level, evidence from this study shows that while the policy discourse was one of decentralisation, certain functions and decision-making powers were being returned to central government and rendering a strong re-emergence of re-centralisation.

In addition, while some decision-making powers continued to be located at the school level, the uneven distribution of power, characteristic of non-democratic systems of governance prevailed in all schools, further hindering decentralisation efforts. Thus, while the policy of decentralisation may well be understood in schools, and might even be welcome, undemocratic school cultures, and the centralisation of power in the management of schools tended to militate against shared decision-making in all aspects of schooling, and decentralised school governance remained elusive

School heads found it difficult to function under the cluster leadership of a 'mere' teacher. In essence, they were insubordinate. To them, cluster leadership went 'against the grain'. This arises against the background that the structure of schools was such that teachers reported to school heads and not the other way round. Thus although decentralised school governance entails central government shedding off significant portions of its responsibilities to grassroots authorities, in practice, the top-down decision-making model, as opposed to the bottom-up model, characterised the Zimbabwean education system. This study found a deep-rooted lack of confidence, on the part of those operating in higher tiers of the system, in the ability of those in the lower rungs (for example, schools and clusters), to make significant school governance decisions. This applied even at the school level. As such, the hierarchical organisational structure of the education system tends to exert pressure on school heads to defy the logic behind teacher leadership of the cluster and reduce their confidence in the arrangement.

A history of failure or success in innovation attempts by a system is likely to have a similar impact on new attempts at implementing change (Fullan, 1993). This view suggests that because people carry meanings from one experience to the next, the more stakeholders have negative experiences from previous implementation attempts, the more apathetic they will be about the next change, irrespective of the merits of the new idea. Concomitant with this view, this study found that after decentralising the hiring of teachers to the school level in 2001, and after subsequent countrywide outcries against alleged nepotism and favouritism in the process, there was an emerging trend for increased control of schools by central government. Those in the higher tiers of the system blamed those in the grassroots for abusing decentralised power and for lacking the requisite capacity to function effectively in a decentralised system and therefore decision-making authority was withdrawn from them. Thus, the apathy in Chikanda cluster to initiate and engage in on-going staff development activities can be partly explained by the history of failure. Therefore innovation failures in organisations tend to impact negatively on subsequent attempts at change by these institutions. This suggests that innovations must be well conceived and articulated since they bear far-reaching implications.

The study found that lack of support from the higher tiers of the education system serves as another hindrance to decentralised school governance in the cluster. To illustrate, literature suggests that the two concepts, centralisation and decentralisation tend to denote different degrees on a continuum (Buckland & Hofmeyr, 1993; National Education Policy Investigation, 1992). There can therefore be no such thing as total decentralisation in all aspects of the administration of a system (unless the system is totally privatised). This is because it would yield a fragmented arrangement without a centre. This conceptualisation indicates that the centre (central government), which is usually more resourced and stable, must necessarily support the periphery

(individual schools and clusters), which is usually less resourced and turbulent, if the system is to prosper and remain coherent.

Contrarily, findings from the study show that the cluster under study and the individual schools therein lacked the support described above. To illustrate, while decisions about performance appraisal were decentralised to the school level, central government was not honouring its promises to reward good performance by way of salary advancements and promotions. As a result, schools no longer took the process seriously.

The study raises questions about the Zimbabwean education system's reasons for decentralising. While literature suggests that key reasons why education systems decentralise include the desire to increase participatory decision-making, to improve efficiency and effectiveness, in Zimbabwe, the pressure on central government to cut educational costs seems to have been the strongest, even to the extent of government reneging on its promises and abdicating its responsibility.

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