

Exploring the Capacity of Formal School Governing Bodies in Rural Ghana: The Case of Effutu Municipality

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Abstract

As part of wider social and democratic governance reforms, the Government of Ghana embarked on a process of education decentralization in 1987 (GOG, 1996). The central focus of this policy was the prescription of community participation in the affairs of school in each locality (Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011). Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy recommends the formation of School Management Committees (SMCs), governing bodies and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) by individual schools to work hand-in-hand with the head teacher and guide him/her in school policy formulation (GES, 2001). Capacity has become a topical issue in decentralisation discourse and critics of the latter have argued against the lack of technical and human resource availability at the local level (De Grauwe et al., 2005; Robinson, 2007), but unfortunately, research on capacity of formal governance bodies appears to have been less undertaken in poorer rural areas in Ghana. In recognition of this, the study sought to understand the nature and quality of capacity and how that impact on participation in school from the perspectives of SMCs in two rural school communities in Effutu Municipality. The study adopted qualitative methods of focus groups, supported by some initial documentary analysis to gain understanding of school governance from key stakeholder perspectives. The findings revealed that although formal school governing bodies existed in the rural study communities, many of the SMC members lacked human and material resource to engage fully in school management. The study recommends capacity building and training programmes to enable the SMC members upgrade their knowledge and skills in school governance.

Keywords

education decentralization, community participation, School Management Committees (SMCs), capacity and school governance

1. Introduction

There has been a revived interest in the notion of capacity in the decentralization discourse as it has been seen to have the potential to affect the outcomes of education decentralization (Watt, 2001; De Grauwe et al., 2005; Robinson, 2007; Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011). Capacity is used in terms of availability of needed stock of skills, availability of logistics, financial and other resources. Critics of decentralization have argued on the issue of lack of technical and human resource at the local level which creates inequities more especially between urban and rural regions in developing contexts (Akyeampong et al., 2007; Robinson, 2007).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Ghana, the widespread introduction of PTAs and SMCs has served urban communities better because they have been able to muster financial capital to improve the quality of SMC urban schools, thus widening the gap between them and rural public schools (World Bank, 2004; Akyeampong et al., 2007; Dunne et al., 2007). School governing bodies in rural communities face many challenges including weak knowledge of school related issues, which affect their capacity to assume full responsibility. Rather than focussing attention on the nature and quality of capacity among school governing bodies in rural communities, relatively, research appears to have been largely focused on urban communities in Ghana and rural communities in Effutu Municipality are no exception. This is a significant gap in knowledge considering its implication for the outcome of education decentralization in Ghana.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The importance of community participation through active involvement in SMCs and PTAs is highly covered in 1987 Ghanaian Educational reforms and FCUBE policy, so the study's benefits lie in enriching the existing literature more importantly where many researches in this context have tended to focus on quantitative study and this research is mainly qualitative. Again, the findings and recommendations of this study may be useful for policy formulation to address challenges affecting the capacity of school governing bodies in rural communities. Educational managers also stand to benefit from the recommendations in effective governance of their school communities.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study is intended to explore the quality and nature of capacity of school governing bodies.

In rural communities in Effutu Municipality and how best the challenges within such context can be addressed.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the objectives and research focus.

RQ 1: What capacity challenges affect school governing bodies in school governance in Effutu Municipality.

RQ 2: How can challenges confronting capacity of the school governing bodies in the context be addressed.

2. Related Literature

Previous research has shown that there is unequal access to participation in bodies such as SMCs and PTAs by socio-economic status and gender (Dunne et al., 2007). In developing countries, the local elite and relatively more highly educated community members tend to take on the role of brokers of decision-making and, through their actions, close up the space for representation and participation in the affairs of the school by a more inclusive group of community members (Kingdon et al., 2014). In a review of decentralization policy and practices in six sub-Saharan African countries (Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Uganda, Malawi and Zimbabwe), Dunne et al. (2007) conclude that core education decisions are hardly ever decentralized in a way that encourages local community participation in decision-making. Dunne et al. (2007) conclude that there has been insufficient research on how parents and community partners actively collaborate with the school to address issues of access, attendance, completion, and other local education problems.

Most educational systems in developing countries are affected by tension and conflict as PTA executives and SMC compete against one another for dominance in the running of the school (Dunne et al., 2007). The situation undermines not only efficiency in school management but also performance of the two bodies (Dunne et al., 2007; World Bank, 2008; Tatliah & Igbal, 2011). Disagreement over the roles of these bodies in school governance invariably leads to confusion (Dunne et al., 2007). In their study of four West Africa countries, De Grauwe et al. (2005) found that the relationship between SMC members and school heads was usually affected by conflict rather than collaboration. Consequently, school governance tends to be dominated by head teachers and local political leaders who do not have sufficient resources to carry out their responsibilities (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2006). It can thus be inferred that at least in developing countries, the composition of SMC and PTA executives do not sufficiently reflect the interests of the communities and parents of the school.

In Ghana, two important fora that emerge as particularly important for parental engagement with school communities are the SMC and PTA. The formulation of Free Compulsory and Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy saw the need to constitute the School Management Committee (SMC). It is a school-community based institution designated under the Ghana Education Service Act of 1995. The establishment of SMC is a national requirement in all public basic schools. In comparison, the PTA is composed of the immediate stakeholders of the school in the community. The SMC aims at fostering effective community involvement and mobilization for efficient education provision and delivery (Addae-Boahene & Arkorful, 1999). The SMC is:

The body that provides a monitoring and supervisory role in the school, to ensure that quality educational services are being provided through efficient management and equitable allocation of resources (Nkansah & Chapman, 2006, pp. 509-532).

This can be linked up to the decentralization policy of the country, which aims at bringing the decision-making process of governance to the doorsteps of the ordinary citizen through participation in all diverse ways. In Ghana, the School Governing Body (SGB) is an appendage of the SMC and

involved in financial and disciplinary issues of the school. In contrast to the SMC, the PTA is “a mechanism for building parent support for the schools and involving them in activities of their schools” (Nkansah & Chapman, 2006, pp. 509-532). The PTA is a voluntary association of the parents or guardian of children at the school level (Ghana Education Service, SMC/PTA Handbook, 2001, pp. 9-11). However, it needs to be mentioned that some schools in Ghana do not have PTAs. This is due to the fact that it is not much of a requirement unlike the SMC. It is a forum where teachers and parents meet as partners to improve teaching and learning in the school.

In Ghana, resources from District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF) are mostly used to support the provision of infrastructure at the district level while the Internally Generated Fund (IGF) at the basic school level is spent by the schools directly. In the year 2005, as in most other Less Developing Countries (LDCs), Ghana started implementing the capitation grant which enables district education directors to fund school projects at that level. However, limited financial allocations and delays in disbursement of funds from the Ministry of Finance to districts and schools continue to bedevil the implementation of that noble policy. In addition, the capacity of district assemblies to effectively manage their finances has often been in doubts (World Bank, 2004). The widespread introduction of PTAs and SMCs has served urban communities better because they have been able to muster financial capital to improve performance of some urban schools, thus widening the gap between them and rural public schools (Akyeampong et al., 2007).

The low literacy levels limit the active parental involvement in school governance (Donkor, 2010). English language is an issue in terms of home learning and it is the language used in the formal structures and therefore alien to many parents (Opoku-Amankwa, 2009) some of whom are also not literate in their own language. This is problematic if we are to promote parental involvement in these structures as communication and information flow are important factors in terms of the success of parental involvement in school governance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Context

The study was conducted in two school communities in rural Effutu Municipality in Ghana’s Central Region. According to the Poverty Profile of Ghana in the 1990s, Central Region is the poorest region in southern Ghana (GSS, 2000). Vulnerability to poverty in Effutu Municipality is further deepened by low returns on fishing which is the major occupation of the people of Effutu Municipality (Brown, 2005). The municipality has a total population of 68,597, which amounts to about 3.1 percent of the total population of the region (GSS, 2010). The major economic activities are farming and fishing, with full occupational distribution showing that 49 per cent are involved in fishing, 22 percent in farming and 29 per cent in commerce (GSS, 2010). The choice of Effutu Municipality for this study was informed by the fact that in most rural areas, school children engage in commercial activities, mostly to support their families and themselves (Casely-Hayford, 2002; MOE, 2005). Considering the potential

impact this could have on schooling and parental involvement in school governance, it seemed useful to explore how this challenge was addressed. Two schools that represented the municipality's two broad livelihood profiles' engagement in fishing and farming (School 1) and trading and commerce (School 2) were selected for the study.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The research was a qualitative study. In the research methods literature on the case study, a "case" may be theoretical, or empirical or both; it may be a relatively bounded object or a process; and it may be generic and universal or specific in some way (Ragin & Becker, 1992, pp. 1-18). By this definition, my research is a qualitative study of parental involvement in basic education in rural Ghana with the SMC and PTA as school governing structures for parents also being presented as case studies.

A three stage design for the focus group sessions was used. The first was conducted with eight community respondents drawn from the SMCs of the case study schools. The second focus group was held with eight school respondents made up of head teachers and teachers of the two case study schools. SMC members were put in one group because it represented a forum or path of engagement in the school for parents; and teachers and head teachers in another group because they represented on the other side of the relationship. The third focus group of 16 participants comprised both community (SMC) and school respondents and it was conducted after the second focus group discussion. The rationale for the third combined group was to allow interaction between the SMC members and school respondents, thus yielding a wider range of responses. It allowed for discussion of contrasting views between SMC and school respondents. The choice of eight participants in each group was made in accordance with the recommendation of Johnson and Christenson (2004, p. 185) that a "focus group should involve 6-12 members in a group to enable interaction freely among themselves". The design for the focus group is thus made up of community participants, school respondents and a combination of both community and school respondents. Additional data was collected through interviews with individual teachers.

I began the process of data analysis after all the audio-recorded discussion had been fully transcribed. The process involved in data transcription and analysis was as follows: I transcribed and discussed both focus group (community and teacher focus groups) data. The first step was the identification of codes. Coding has been described as a means of identifying and labelling concepts and phrases in interview transcripts and field notes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Every response of each participant was checked and assigned a code, a process that generated several codes for each interview transcript. The initial codes were listed on separate sheets of paper after which they were compared, sorted and grouped. The groups of codes were then summarised into general themes for the analysis. These included: the monitoring role of the SMC and the administration of capitation grant.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Membership and Functions

The rationale for instituting SMCs was to engage qualified community members with technical wherewithal to support a school's internal administrators (Mankoe, 2002). In Ghana, in line with the GES, PTA/SMC (2001) policy, membership of a SMC is made up of the head teacher; a representative of the Metropolitan/Municipal/District Assembly; chairperson of the Unit Committee; a representative of the Education Unit; a representative of the PTA (selected at a general meeting through voting); a representative of the village chief; two members of the teaching staff; and two co-opted members of the community who might be parents.

It emerged at the Community Focus Group Discussion (FGD) that SMC membership in School 1 was all male-dominated: most were activists of political party and/or influential people (e.g., those who had the greater authority to mobilize villagers for communal labor), but had little knowledge or experience in school management. The highest educational attainment of the SMC members at School 1 was Middle School Leaving Certificate. The inference from the composition of the SMCs is that rather than provide a platform for parental participation, it creates room for a few, well-connected community members to assume responsibility for school management (Dunne et al., 2007; Kingdon et al., 2014). As one Focus Group Discussion participant (FGD) puts it:

Appointment of people to serve on SMC largely recognizes people in the community who are well-to-do and influential, leaving out the poor. Yes, affluent people offer support, especially with financial assistance; but they hardly attend meetings because of their business schedules. I have also noticed that only a few appointees do have their children in the school [Community FGD, School 1 Participant].

As discussed in the literature review, the local elite and relatively better educated community members tend to take on the role of brokers of decision-making and, through their actions, close up the space for representation and participation in the affairs of the school by a more inclusive group of community members (Kingdon et al., 2014). In this sense, it would appear that the policy expectations for greater representation and involvement in school by parents were not being achieved. In the case of School 2 community, the data revealed that most of the SMC members tended to be more experienced and knowledgeable in management and education matters. The highest educational attainment was first degree in Basic Education. It was agreed at the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), however, that in both schools, the position of SMC chair was restricted to a parent which is contrary to the stipulations in the PTA/SMC manuals.

Most participants in the focus group discussion in School 1 raised concerns about how some community members come to serve on the SMC and the extent to which due process was observed in their appointments:

I don't know how members are appointed to serve on the SMC. I feel the membership needs to be reviewed. If you listen to the type of contributions made by some members, you begin to wonder the

criteria for their appointment—I strongly suspect that some of them are favorites of the ruling political party which makes the appointment anyway [Community FGD, School 1 Participant].

The GES Manuals provide that the tenure of office for an executive member of the SMC shall be three years though a member shall be eligible for re-election to another additional three-year term only or one year in the case of a chairperson. As an SMC member commented:

The school administration is very strict on tenure of office for members including the executive position and would ensure that members stick to the stipulated number of years demanded by the SMC/PTA manuals regardless of one's personal contact or relations with management [Community FGD, School 2 Participant].

The focus group discussions also threw up questions about the length of years in relation to appointments to SMCs, some SMC members at School 1 community identified as being in office far longer than their mandated tenure of office. As one participant stated:

Our SMC chairman has served for 12 years, contrary to what we were made to understand from the beginning. Is he the only person with ideas to lead the committee? All efforts to get this anomaly rectified have proved futile as he has the full backing of the head teacher [Community FGD, School 1 Participant].

This situation in which a head teacher at School 1 insisted on his favorite as chairperson even after completing his/her mandatory term of office compromises accountability and transparency. However, excellent the chairperson's performance, the rule must be upheld and enforced. This raises questions about people's suitability for the roles assigned them.

A critical determinant for appointment to an SMC is the issue of relevant skills and expertise because of their combined efforts on school policy, administration and development (Mankoe, 2002; MOESS, 2005). Yet, these criteria have been described as barriers to the democratic process because the majority of parents in rural communities are unlikely to contribute on account of their obvious lack of these skills (Adam, 2005). As one of the head teachers put it:

Getting the right members to serve on the SMC has been a major source of worry to us as head teachers. Our work as heads is often impeded by a number of appointees who may be financially okay but may lack the requisite educational backgrounds. Most of them lack the skills and knowledge to make meaningful contributions at meetings [Teacher FGD, School 2 Participant].

The quote above indicates that the ability of the SMC to participate in school management varies. It suggests that most SMC members in rural communities such as this one lack the capacity or skills to effectively participate in school management. Another head teacher corroborated the limited capacity and skills of many of the SMC members saying that:

The low educational attainment of some SMC members is a big blow to the governance system. Most of them rarely contribute to discussion of SPIP and budgets. They are often traders and fishermen with very low education but who find themselves as political appointees. Sometimes, the school is expected to co-opt other members to assist for a fee. More or less like consultants all because of limited

educational background of most substantive members. For these, the major responsibility is checking teachers' lateness and attendance to school. Apart from the chairperson and a few others who meet the minimum requirement, the rest are mere followers [Teacher FGD, School 1 Participant].

A lack of suitable persons negatively affects parental involvement in formal school governance with ramifications for both school and community since, in some instances, head teachers relied on 'others' who perform some duties for a fee. It is clear that in the study schools, membership of the SMCs left much to be desired. The question that then remains unanswered is where to apportion blame: the idiosyncrasies' of the head teacher or the environment.

4.2 Training for SMC Members

The importance of training in school management for SMC members in poor rural communities like this one stems from issues such as lack of knowledge and skills (Watt, 2001; Mankoe, 2002; Adam, 2005). During the focus group discussions, most SMC participants were positive about the training organized for them but also pointed some shortcomings. For example, one SMC member indicated:

One month after my appointment, I received a letter from the Municipal Director of Education (MDE) instructing the head teacher to organize an orientation for the newly appointed members. The head teacher took us (new SMC members) through the GES SMC manuals on SMC/ PTA. Unfortunately, we were not given copies of the manuals but were asked to come to the office any time we are in doubt about our roles and functions as SMC members [Community FGD, School 2 Participant].

One SMC member expected, as a matter of right, to be issued with his/her own copy of the manual.

One SMC member commented:

At the orientation sessions, we were told to visit the school often to check teachers' lateness and absenteeism. We were also told to see the head teacher when in doubt of anything in connection with our functions as outlined in SMC/PTA manuals. Surprisingly, we were not given copies of the manuals [Community FGD, School 1 Participant].

The above quote makes it clear that the inability of the head teachers to provide orientation training for newly appointed SMC members is due to a lack of resources. This explains the lack of support to the SMC's role in school governance.

A major responsibility of the SMC members outlined was the need to check teachers' lateness and absenteeism. One SMC member described her understanding of the role thus:

We (new SMC members) were made to understand that the school belongs to us and that the school management or governance was therefore, in our hands and so, we should regularly visit the school to check on the teachers and the pupils as well. We must report teachers' absenteeism, lateness, drunkenness and other immoral behaviors to the head of the school, and then to the circuit supervisor, who, in turn, would take it up with those concerned [Community FGD, School 2 Participant].

Another SMC member noted:

We were told to visit the school often to check teachers' lateness and absenteeism. We were also told to see the head teacher when in doubt of anything in connection with our functions as outlined in

SMC/PTA manuals [Community FGD, School 1 Participant].

The study shows that most SMC members in both schools had limited knowledge of their responsibilities and they tended to focus on teachers' absenteeism or lateness. However, as indicated in the GES manual, other roles such as financial and property management, as well as conflict resolution were expected of SMC members and these should be addressed in the orientation sessions.

As indicated in the literature review, the capacity of rural communities to provide this sort of supports (refresher courses, seminars and in-service training) is challenged (Watt, 2001; Adam, 2005). One major challenge is that poor communities with low levels of educational attainment often lack the time, money, confidence, skills and lack of cooperation of the school staff (Watt, 2001; Adam, 2005; Donkor, 2010). When asked why seminars, in-service training, orientation and refresher courses were not organised for SMC members to enable them upgrade their skills and knowledge in school governance, one head teacher noted:

We are not able to organise seminars or in-service training for SMC members in this rural community due to a lack of money [Teacher, FGD, School 2].

Another head teacher added:

Most of the SMC members in this rural community have not had in-service training or seminars which could have fully enhanced their capacity to perform due to resource constraints [Teacher FGD, School 1].

The head teachers in the above quotes seem to be saying that the capacity of SMC members in rural communities to access in-service training and seminars stem from limited finances and/or resource constraints.

What capacity challenges affect rural communities (RQ1) and how can they be addressed? (RQ2)

Among other factors, the extent of SMC and PTA involvement in school governance depended on members' educational attainment, life experiences, including knowledge in school affairs, and more importantly, opportunities provided by the MOE and the school concerned. In the current study, the majority of SMC and PTA members in both school communities were fishermen, farmers and traders, with most of them holding Middle School Leaving Certificates. Many SMC members in School 1 community were also political appointees and/or influential people, who lacked knowledge of management and experience in educational matters. Moreover, the study findings reveal that SMC members were not given sufficient orientation about their roles to equip them for the tasks ahead and therefore had limited knowledge of their responsibilities. In other words, SMC members were denied the capacity-building measures that would have made them function more effectively. It is therefore suggested that the GES liaise with education authorities to organize adequate training programs for SMC members to enable the latter upgrade their knowledge and skills in governance issues.

5. Conclusion

There is a considerable premium placed on the collaborative efforts of the SMC, schools and their wider communities. However, this collaboration needs to include greater consideration of contextual factors, including the availability of skills and knowledge, competencies and networks. A key contribution of this study is therefore increased awareness of the importance of the capacity of local school governing bodies within rural contexts.

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