

Accounting for UPE implementation: the contribution of School Management Committees

Fred H. Wahitu, Uganda Management Institute, Uganda

Abstract

the political promise of free primary education but also for the wider reasons of closing the education gap of Access, Quality and Equity. The introduction of UPE coincided with the abolition of Parents Teachers' Associations (PTAs) which were associated with the collection of fees from especially parents to supplement government grants to schools. The Education Act 2008 introduced School Management Committees (SMCs) to be in charge of public primary schools on behalf of government. Using a multiple case study approach involving four SMCs representing the four regions of Uganda, this article investigated the role of SMCs in Universal Primary Education. The selection of the four that SMCs were involved in the planning, budgeting, mobilization of the community and monitoring of the school activities. What was apparent, though, was that such activities were implemented differently across the SMCs due to differences in technical and the three out of four SMCs. As a way of conclusion, SMCs are very supportive of UPE, but government needs to train and regulate them.

Key words: School-Based Management, Governance, Accountability, Universal Primary Education (UPE)

Introduction

The adoption and implementation of universal basic education policy reform, commonly known as UPE in Uganda, has been recognized as a worldwide phenomenon (Willems, 2017). The impetus for this drive ranges from the need to increase national competitiveness, reduce illiteracy levels, correct the disparities of inequality especially for the minority groups, and improve the overall education quality (The Government of Uganda (GoU), 2008).

The continuum of universal basic primary education forms from which governments choose ranged from contributory to free primary education delivery (Dauda, 2004; Onderi & Makori, 2013). Uganda opted for free primary education delivery; where government would provide all scholastic requirements including uniforms, meals and books (The Government of Uganda (GoU), 2008; Aligned et al, 2009). In a comparative study of Kenya and Tanzania, Orodho (2015) reveals that the two East African countries implemented free primary education to attain Education for All.

To achieve the new thrust for Universal Primary Education, governments introduced education governance reforms. Uganda came up with an institutional structure entrusting different partners with a range of responsibilities (Suzuki, 2010). Such institutions included: the central government, local government authorities and school management committees

(SMCs). The central government's roles were in line with the assertion by Bayat, A., Louw, W., & Rena, R. (2014) that school boards must stay within the policy framework of the central government in all their decision-making. The local authorities were to supervise the SMCs on behalf of government under the decentralized education delivery system. The tier close to the school was the SMC. Under site-based primary school governance, schools would benefit from citizens' participation which would increase performance, perception of fairness and was likely to lead to greater support (Nakabugo, 2008; Willems, 2017). This new participatory and inclusive style of school governance was a radical shift from the centralized system (Bayat et al, 2014).

Who constitutes the SMCs?

SMCs draw from constituencies such as foundation body, local council, sub-county, parents' representatives, old girls/boys, and staff including head teachers (Prinsen & Titeca, 2008; Government of Uganda (GoU), 2008; Suzuki, 2010). In reviewing literature from elsewhere, what seemed apparent is that in most forms of school boards, parents' representation was recognized (Hofman et al, 2010; Onderi & Makori, 2013; Bayat et al, 2014; Young, 2016).

Main responsibilities of SMCs

As provided for in the Education Act (2008), SMCs would be judged on their ability to implement the following:

- (1) Management of the school subject to the Education Act and any directions by the Minister on matters of general policy;
- (2) The day-to-day administration, proper and efficient conduct of the school, by the headteacher on behalf of the management committee;
- (3) Consultation with the foundation body before transfer or posting of a headteacher and deputy headteacher to a school;
- (4) Declare vacancies of non-teaching staff for the school to transmit to the District Service Commission to recruit the required staff; and
- (5) To enable the members of staff to submit their views, proposals or representation to the management committee.

Current Research

The need for investigation of the SMC accountability for UPE in Uganda has been expressed (Approach, 2013). With the introduction of UPE, there was need to adapt a system of primary public school governance that would ensure its successful implementation (Guidelines for the implementation of Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), 2009). The cornerstone for this study was especially on accountability for UPE using measures such as: access, quality and equity. Contrary to the government trust and legislation devolving power to SMCs to be the 'owners' of public primary schools on behalf of government, the SMCs did not understand their roles and as such were not implementing them.

Two research questions regarding this investigation were explored. The first research question explored the SMCs roles. The second question pertained to the strategies used by SMCs to implement their accountability role for UPE achievement. This part of analysis enables better assessment of SMC accountability for achievement of UPE with empirical insights from four different SMCs. Furthermore, it enables verification of parents' contribution to supplement government grants through informal parents-teachers' associations (PTAs). Hence the concrete research questions of this study were:

- 1) What roles do School Management Committees perform in the accountability for the management of Universal Primary Education in Uganda?
- 2) In what ways do SMCs exercise and account for the implementation of UPE in Uganda?

Method

This study was initially informed by the researcher's lived experiences while training SMCs in a Netherlands-supported programme to government of Uganda. The researcher claims 'situated objectivity' (Lipman, 2017) since he sampled four SMCs from four regions of Uganda to increase robustness of the findings (Creswell, 2013). The nature of the research questions and study objectives called for a qualitative approach to elicit participants' views on roles of SMCs and how they implemented such roles. The belief that knowledge is co-constructed took the researcher to the field for interviews (Creswell, 2013). Purposely sampled persons thought to be data-rich were selected (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, the voices of the participants were recorded and interpretations were made through the participants' lens. Though the study leaned heavily on interviews, the researcher, while at school sites, observed: the school vision, mission statements, primary leaving examinations (PLE) results and UPE grant breakdown, later interpreted as performance accountability. The article also draws on the analysis of documents which included: SMC minutes and school development plans.

Data analysis

The voice recordings of 16 participants were transcribed verbatim generating a tertiary document (Yin, 2013). By the researcher transcribing for himself, he was able to listen to details of the interviews. The interviewer carefully read through the responses colour coding the similarities in words, phrases or ideas. The connections between codes were identified leading to the generation of themes. The following themes were identified Theme 1: SMC roles in the accountability of UPE; Theme 2: How SMCs implement and account for their roles in the implementation of UPE. These were aligned with the study objectives.

Results and Discussion

Glaser and Strauss (2012) postulate that theory enables prediction and explanation of a phenomenon and its behaviour. This section therefore discusses the findings of the study through the Accountability Theory lens developed by Tetlock (1999). Espousing the discussion in Tetlock's Accountability Theory may facilitate the analysis of policy assumptions that underpin the casual relationship between school-based governance reform and its accountability for Universal Primary Education achievement.

SMC roles and responsibilities in the accountability of UPE

Whilst the Education Act (2008) mandated the SMCs to be in charge of public primary schools implementing UPE on behalf of government, there seemed to be an information gap on whether or not they implemented such roles. As such, this study was premised on the assumption that SMCs may not have had the capacity to understand and implement their roles to expected measures that would lead to improved access, quality and equity. Disconnect to the assumptions, the findings indicate that SMC members carried out roles which included: planning, financial activities, monitoring, personnel matters, academic support roles, and community mobilization. The findings are in agreement with results from a study in England where governing bodies were empowered with responsibilities of agreeing on the school direction, development and approval of the budget and appointment of staff (Young, 2016). Such endeavours were partly hinged on legal and policy backing (Government of Uganda (GoU), 2008).

The insights offered by the accountability theory suggest that SMCs should cultivate sensitivity to complex thinking practices if they are to gain approval of the 'constituent others'. This is consistent with the proposition that governance bodies are increasingly engaging in strategic thinking to balance the immediate and long-term perspectives of the schools (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Report, 2016). Strategic thinking or SMC planning role is implemented through complex structures, norms and vigorous information processing between constituents (Tetlock, 1985; OECD, 2016). The product of the intense interaction is the vision, school improvement plans (SIPs), and school development plans (SDPs) which are shaped by the views of constituents. The literature reviewed augments the finding that school governance bodies elsewhere, just like SMCs, exercised the planning role (Government of Uganda (GoU), 2008; Tsoetsi, Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2008; Davies et al, 2010; Timar et al, 2012; Dimmock, 2013; The Governors' Handbook, 2014). However, as Mbugua and Rarieya (2013) retort, though School Governance Bodies attempted to plan for schools, they seemed to concentrate on mundane roles, dampening the postulation that they would improve educational accountability. Vernez et al (2012) assert that school councils seemed to be ill-prepared for such an important role like planning and as such the visions and development plans were not only wanting since they exhibited differing formats but could not also inform the school activities. The contextualization of the exercise of strategic planning in the education sector by Mbugua and Rarieya (2013) as just catching up in developing countries, especially Africa, and evident in the study findings is likened to the need to contextualize decision-making, as Tetlock argues.

Viewing SMC planning role through Tetlock's pinhole, government used the cognitive miser role by devolving planning powers to school-level management without consultation. Individuals or groups of policy makers in government ministries thought that with the law enforcement, guidelines and induction training, SMCs would be in position to account for the planning role. This seemed to weaken the SMC accountability to central government which seemed far and detached. Analysing the findings from the point of view of the 'Actor' being in the social environment, Christensen and Laegreid (2014) argue that SMCs are expected to establish aspirations, implement activities differently, and monitor results. Where the

community is aware of the school future plans, procedures and processes on how to implement and monitor; there was likelihood of holding SMCs accountable for the UPE achievements (Argon, 2015). SMCs have responded to social environment demands through meetings, consultations, sensitization and reports to stakeholders. As pointed out by Tetlock (1985) ‘people’, and in this case SMCs, ‘are potentially accountable’ for the planning decisions they make.

Accountability theory did not negate the primacy of the ‘Actors’ by merely affecting the forms of judgement and decision-making that subjects express (Tetlock, 1985). Such propositions would limit the analysis to cognitive miser analogy. Rather, as found in the role of financial activities, SMC members were found to engage in vigorous harnessing of views from strategic constituents. The intensive interaction gave birth to activities which included: budgeting, accountability, processing payments and reporting on financial performance. Resourcing school activities, ensuring accountability and value for money involved various stakeholders, premised on the view that variety of stakeholders would translate into different ideas about strategies for use (Government of Uganda (GoU), 2008; Young, 2016). As affirmed by Bayat, A., Louw, W., & Rena, R. (2014), school governing bodies in South Africa, just like SMCs in Uganda, were expected to perform a range of financial activities. In support of the budgeting role, various scholars tend to affirm that budgeting activities were focusing on learner outcomes (Government of Uganda (GoU), 2008; Emechebe, 2012).

By focusing the budgeting on learners, SMCs were aware of the needs of the ‘audience’ and as such the learners and parents worked to meet their expectations. They are also operating in an environment that demands frugal use of resources that influenced their commitment. The budget was developed by several stakeholders not an individual cognitive miser and as such benefitted from the many views. According to Tetlock (1985) accountability of conduct is a universal matter with enforcement norms. As such, in addition to the budget being participatory, there are guidelines to be adhered to by the head teachers (HTs) and enforced by the SMC to ensure that learner requirements are prioritized. Cases of cognitive miser individual processors may be seen in one of the SMCs where the HT usurped the SMC’s powers and only called them to sign the budget and SDP. However, Bayat et al (2014) raise pertinent fears as to whether SMCs had the capacity to implement financial management roles such as drafting school budgets and responsibility for utilization of resources by focusing on school operations, since such roles demand adequate competence and flair in financial management.

The significant recognition of information properties between the ‘thinker’ and the ‘constituent others’ is the bedrock of accountability. Accountability becomes possible because of the exponential relationship between the people to account and to whom to account (OECD, 2016). In adducing evidence to responses, findings indicated that unlike decisions which are reached upon by theory, SMCs made decisions basing on the data from monitoring (Tetlock, 1985). SMCs seemed to be aware of their monitoring role, what to monitor, when and the likely influence on learner outcomes and ultimately UPE achievement. Monitoring involved agreeing on a schedule for monitoring school activities, and developed a checklist on what to monitor. The monitoring function also benefited from SMC members who were especially trained teachers or retired civil servants that had expert knowledge. The findings on monitoring were consistent with other works such as the study by Ofsted (2011) which supports the view that

governors' involvement in the school's monitoring and use of knowledge gained to challenge the head teacher would fill up performance gaps and shape the school direction (Review, n.d.; Pandey, Goyal, & Sundararaman, 2011). As emphasized by Othman et al (2016), boards play a pivotal role in the management of schools and as such there was need to demonstrate adequate and effective monitoring.

Through pre-arranged visits that have a clear focus, governors gained feedback on whether the school is implementing the policies and improvement plans they had signed off and how they were working in practice. Visits also provided an opportunity to talk with learners, staff and parents to gather their views. Through vigilant information processing suggested by Tetlock, SMCs may be able to gain optimal future courses of action. Unlike Arlestig (2008) and Skolinspektionen (2010) findings that governors made few classroom visits (The Governors' Handbook, 2014), findings in this study indicated that most SMCs made regular visits during which they inspected class teaching, teachers' accommodation, conditions of hygiene, among others. Further contention with the findings is the World Bank Report (2008) which found that the impact of community monitoring on school functioning was lower than expected. In most of the SMCs in this study, monitoring was well conducted and information got was used in crafting solutions for improvement. In support of the foregoing discourse on Tetlock's accountability theory, Lee, Kim and Wansoo (2012) affirm that the audience voice underpins judgement and as such plays an active role in forming the actor behaviour (Tetlock, 1985; 1999; Chaiken & Trope, 1999). As such, the clients can improve service delivery by demanding and monitoring services tailored to meet their needs from the providers. To hold actors accountable, Tetlock (1999) suggests that while taking decisions, the important questions should be: who is responsible for answering to whom, for what and under what specific terms?

In the light of the accountability theory, the researcher discusses SMC personnel matters as evident from the findings. Such activities include: recruitment and selection of staff, postings and transfers, staff welfare, and supervision and performance management. One would adduce evidence for the suggestion that government, while devolving personnel matters to SMCs, preferred the cognitive miser strategy. Policy makers in the central ministries and agencies believed in the primacy of their decisions by devolving personnel matters to community structures. Individualized thought and action gave birth to frameworks, guidelines without due regard and consultation of the 'strategic others'. The findings regarding SMC role in personnel matters seemed to be limited in scope and technicality. As such Bayat et al (2014) as well as Enhren et al (2016) seem to argue rightly that one of the daunting roles of governing bodies was to appoint schools' managerial staff, strengthen their leadership, and cause them to account. Bayat et al (2014) further argue that the additional teachers' recruitment to supplement the teachers appointed and paid by government (p. 124), would only serve to perpetuate inequality since some schools would not afford. The concern for recruitment of 'parents' teachers was in line with staff welfare to reduce on workload. The competences of such teachers may be varied since they are likely not to be trained and less committed since the parents' pay was likely to be lower than that of government.

Findings with regard to the SMC role in personnel issues further revealed that strategies

like maintenance of teachers' houses, co-facilitation for rent, meals, top up allowance on government salary and marking facilitation were used for staff welfare. This is consistent with Bush and Glover (2012) who asserted that head teachers and teachers were most likely to show commitment if they were valued by those who have responsibility for them through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions. In line with the aforementioned literature and findings, Tetlock's theory considers the SMCs' initiatives of eliciting commitment from teachers through welfare strategies as acceptability heuristic where SMCs accept the responsibility and adjust their decisions to meet the expectations of the 'audience' (Tetlock & Lerner, 1985; Vance et al, 2015). They are aware of the likely influence of their decisions on the learner performance and UPE achievement.

The other personnel function examined was that of supervision and staff performance management. Whereas SMCs worked closely with the head teacher and would generally be in a better position to supervise and appraise head teachers (HTs), HTs were instead appraised by the district officials. Staff supervision seemed complicated and technical. The policy mandate of SMC was oblivious of their competences and the likely influence on UPE achievement. As such there seems to be contradiction with the World Bank (2008) advice that effective governing bodies hold their head teacher to account for improving school performance by asking the right questions which would consider: learner attainment and progress, school finances, learner absence and school workforce, among others. This would serve to hold the head teacher for the school's sufficient accountability for performance (Bayat et al, 2014).

In comparing literature to the findings, the researcher found that SMCs implemented the mobilization roles (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). SMCs recognized that activities could not be fulfilled by themselves alone. As such they identified partners such as; parents, central government, local authority, old boys and girls, political leaders, learners and friends among others. This was for purposes of sensitization, harnessing commitment and resourcing for school activities. Bringing various stakeholders together through mobilization would make it possible to examine strategies from which to choose a course of action (Tetlock & Lerner, 1985). In some SMCs the mobilization role was delegated to illiterate members implying that the role was less technical. Attempts to strengthen the mobilization role saw the involvement of external parties' especially local authority (Bayat, Louw & Rena, 2014). The accountability theory as advanced by Tetlock (1985) provides that people in positions of responsibility will seek approval and are motivated to maximise the most favourable attitude from the others. As such, the behaviour and nature of decisions made by the 'Actors' will be influenced by the hypothesized reactions from the 'audience'. The concurrence with Tetlock is visible since mobilization involves exchange of information and such information would affect the way SMCs make decisions.

How SMCs implement and account for their roles in the implementation of UPE

In account for the roles and responsibilities, school boards used various means which include meetings, consultations with other stakeholders, sub-committees deliberations, supervision and monitoring. The Education Act (2008) provides for the SMC to meet at least once a term and in times of an emergency. Young (2016) sharing the experiences of England cues that governing bodies met as a full body at least six times a year. During such meetings,

SMCs discussed the school development plan, budget and reports on the performance of the school from the school head teacher. In addition, SMCs through different constituents made arrangements for members of staff to submit their views, proposals or representation to the management committee for discussion and approval. In tandem with the findings, Ehren et al (2015) revealed that school boards that had inspection meetings indicated changes in their governance quality. Through the meetings, consultations and delegation to members (Young & Young, 2017), SMCs are in consonance with Tetlock's' accountability theory since there is a variety of strategies from which to choose the best possible options for the school. SMCs are aware of the 'audience' being the parents and teachers whose views have to be collected and are united by the goal to attain UPE. Meetings reduce the individual cognitive miser thinker since several parties are involved. On the one side of the continuum, the study benefitted from multiple cases where in one SMC it was revealed that HT did not call for meetings, members were called to sign off minutes as a legislative requirement, thus expressing cognitive miser image. Further challenges in attaining effective meetings are expressed in a study in England which found that formalities took centre-stage and matters of substance were rarely discussed and discussions favoured particular members (Young, 2016).

Sharing experiences of England, Young (2016) observes that committees such as curriculum and finance were formed and would meet to deliberate on issues before the full governing body meeting. This study found that in addition to the general purpose and financial committee provided by the Education Act (2008), SMCs in practice formed committees such as academic, disciplinary, hygiene with specific roles. Such committees were charged with responsibilities for discussing, implementing, monitoring and presenting reports to SMCs on the specific areas. Forming other sub-committees demonstrated that SMCs' functionality cannot be seen in terms of cognitive processes in a laboratory setting. Rather SMCs should be viewed in the social environment where the complexities influence the need for more sub-committees. However, as Young and Young (2017) and Mwinjuma and Baki (2012) seem to agree, school committee members lacked basic technical skills and sometimes gave the impression that once a matter was discussed in the committee, there would be no need for the full SMC to debate it again.

Re-emergence of Parents Teachers' Association

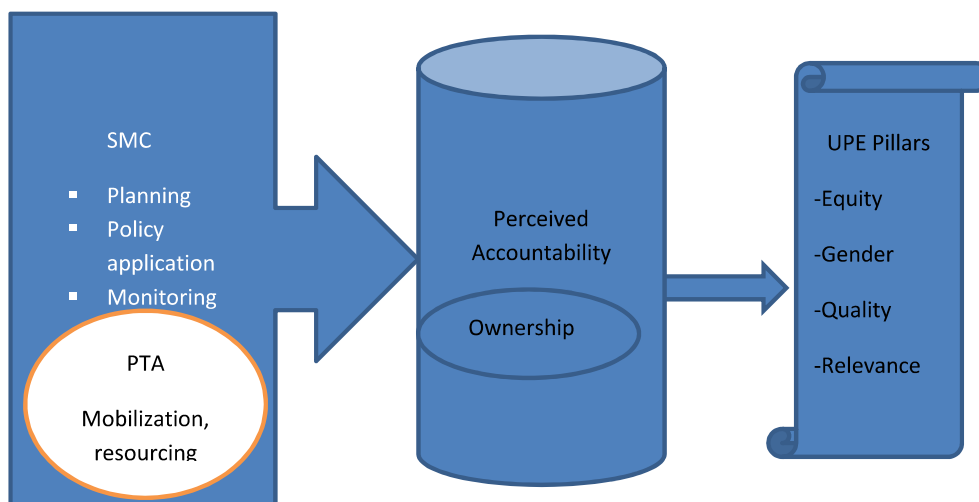
In an environment structured by the complex social and organization structures to which people belong, relying on the central idea of a cognitive miser to identify the behavioural strategies that people develop for coping with invariable or important decision making has limitations. This seems true of the different tiers of primary education governance. Findings indicated that other stakeholders such as government, local authority, NGOs, PTA had a role to play in primary education delivery. The findings are in agreement with available literature that education attainment would only be possible if all role-players grasp their responsibilities and act accordingly (Townsend, 2008; Serfortein, 2010; Hallinger & Lee, 2013). In a bid to implement the different decisions of SMCs, it was recognized that parents' involvement was inevitable. As such the PTA representative was often delegated responsibilities (The Education Act, 2008). The possible reason was that parents as key stakeholders needed to be involved in their children's learning through supplementing funds, physical and material resources.

Onderi and Makori (2013) support the view that parental involvement in education delivery through PTAs and BOGs are a world phenomenon. Whereas the PTAs in Uganda had been banned in 1988 following the introduction of free primary education, findings indicated a re-emergence (Dauda, 2004). This infers the failure on the part of government to fulfil its promise of free primary education.

The suggested model below is grounded in data and emphasises the symbiotic relationship between SMCs and PTAs in the delivery of UPE using measures such as equity, quality and access.

Figure 1.1: SMC+PTA Embedded Accountability model

Figure 1.1: SMC+PTA Embedded Accountability model



Future direction

More research is called for to investigate and understand the complex process of how SMCs' accountability affects UPE outcomes. Furthermore, future research is needed to explore and identify the possibility of a merger between the PTA and SMC instead of having competing groups (Onderi & Makori, 2013). This research was conducted in four schools in different contexts. Future research should include a representative sample of schools.

Conclusion

As a way of conclusion, it has become apparent that in order for SMCs to account for UPE attainment, involving the PTA is necessary (Dauda, 2004; Onderi & Makori, 2013). Increased partnership model between the SMC and PTA will increase access, quality and equity in the attainment of UPE. Appropriate resourcing by government shall be necessary for capacity building to train relevant stakeholders.

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