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The role of active parent community school committees in achieving strong relative school performance in Zambian community schools

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Abstract

Community schools in Zambia are locally founded, financed and managed through a parent community school committee (PCSC). Despite the stigma and paucity of resources associated with community schools, evidence suggests that many produce better learning outcomes than government schools. Significant research shows parental engagement to be an important factor impacting school quality, although evidence is divided about the nature of the impact. While there is consensus affirming *a* role for parents in assuring school performance, little is known about specific PCSC activities that contribute most to strong performance in the Zambian community school context. Building on previous research from Zambia, this case study seeks to establish *how* PCSC roles might contribute to community school learning performance through comparison of a high-performing and low-performing school, each with an active committee. Units were selected through stepwise elimination based on school performance quartile and additional control variables; data collection utilised rapid ethnographic and supplemental quantitative methods. The study finds that active PCSCs can help schools achieve high relative learning performance when they serve a strong accountability function through ensuring pupil and teacher attendance and time on task. This requires PCSCs to engage beyond the traditional 'builder' role, which is prioritised in the current Zambian community school policy framework by tying valuable forms of government support to infrastructure requirements. This study recommends further engagement of PCSCs in order for committees to fully exercise accountability.

Keywords: community participation, education quality, school-based management, decentralisation, parent-school committees, community schools, Zambia

Introduction

Significant academic research on school effectiveness[2] documents several variables fundamental to positive performance. Commonly cited inputs include teaching quality (including teachers' ability, instructional time or time on task and instructional practice), provision and quality of teaching and learning material, and parental engagement. Incentives and accountability mechanisms have recently received significant attention as overarching variables affecting usage of input and educational outcomes.[3]

A logistic model of Grade 2 community school learner performance in a 2012 early grade reading assessment (EGRA) provides evidence that many of these factors are causally linked to learning performance in the specific context of Zambian community schools. These factors include teachers' pedagogical/classroom practice, education level of head teachers, teaching learning material base and level of parent community school committee (PCSC) activity. The latter proves a particularly important predictor of Grade 2 learner performance, with the second largest effect size of variables in the model.[4] There is, therefore, some understanding of the causal relationships affecting community school learning achievement in Zambia, but to date minimal research has been conducted to understand the specific *causal mechanisms* by which PCSCs influence learner performance in this particular context. Given the unique role of PCSCs in Zambian community schools, understanding these causal mechanisms is particularly important.

These questions tie into the broader global discourse on the role of parental engagement in school quality. While this literature is not conclusive on the presence of a causal relationship, it is more conclusive on the ability of this engagement to affect intermediary educational outcomes (a detailed review of the literature follows below). These intermediary outcomes, in particular, provide several hypotheses regarding potential causal mechanisms that could be at play in situations where causal effects have been detected, as in Zambian community schools.

This study helps fill these gaps by bridging international research on parents' role in school performance, the context-specific 2012 evidence provided by Gardsbane et al. (2013) and consideration of unique aspects of Zambian community schools in order to shed light on the 'how' behind the causal mechanism leading from active PCSCs to strong relative community school performance in Zambia.

Background and context: Community schools regionally and in Zambia

The Zambian education system recognises four classifications of schools: public (commonly referred to as 'government'), private, grant-aided and community (Government of the Republic of Zambia 2011: 13.1.c). Government schools are run directly by the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESVTEE), whereas grant-aided schools have government teachers and

assistance, but with significant financial support from non-public sources (typically religious orders). Private schools are fully 'non-public' schools, receiving no financing from the state. Community schools are founded, owned and managed at a local level through a PCSC (Ministry of Education 2007).

Community schools are not unique to Zambia. Though models vary, comparable institutions are common to many countries across the African continent. 'Village' or 'bush schools' were colonial precursors to modern community schools founded and operated by communities and missionaries. After independence, these schools became the basis for the public education system in many African countries (Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder 2002: 3; Chondoka and Subulwa 2004: 1). In a comprehensive review of community schools in Africa, Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder (2002) documented community schools in 15 sub-Saharan African countries in addition to Zambia. The authors note that 'A definition of community schools is difficult and not often attempted in the programme literature' and that the specific model varies from one country to another (ibid.: 3). Nevertheless, some features that distinguish them from public schools include founding by a community actor (religious or community leaders, non-governmental or civil society organisations and parents) and a high degree of community involvement. Alternative sources of funding to public finance as well as different management structures and sometimes curricula distinguish community schools from government schools. Maintaining a connection to the public education sector sets community schools apart from non-formal educational models (Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder 2002: 3-4). One attribute that is unique to Zambia is the extent of collaboration with the MESVTEE; until 2006 there was an umbrella secretariat that worked with the ministry to accredit community schools (Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder 2002: v; Chakufyali et al. 2008: 1).

Zambia's current community school model started in the early 1990s as a response to the paucity of schools and unaffordable school fees, which placed primary education in government schools beyond the reach of many vulnerable children (Chakufyali et al. 2008: 10; see also Chondoka and Subulwa 2004). Today, community schools are a significant portion of the primary school educational sector in Zambia, estimated to represent over 30% of all primary schools (Ministry of Education 2013: 8). The growth in the number of community schools, along with the introduction of free basic education in 2002, has largely accounted for growing primary enrolment rates in Zambia in recent decades. By extension, it has been a large factor in Zambia's near-achievement of United Nations Millennium Development Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015 (Ministry of Education 2013: 12; see also UNESCO 2012).

A 2012 survey of 162 randomly selected community schools in six Zambian provinces found that the most common reason for a school's founding was distance to the nearest government school (57% of schools). Distance was a particularly acute motivation in rural areas, while urban community schools – which tend to be located in 'compounds' or urban slums – were more often founded in response to the local needs of vulnerable

learners and HIV orphans (Gardsbane et al. 2013: 33).

Community school teachers are engaged primarily by the PCSC, although there is a growing practice of the MESVTEE 'seconding' government teachers to work in community schools. Teachers engaged by the PCSC typically lack formal teaching credentials and often have not completed secondary school. In return for their service, the PCSC provides the teacher with a small cash or in-kind compensation. For these reasons, the teachers are often referred to as 'untrained' or 'volunteer' teachers. Infrastructure, a severe deficit of teaching and learning materials and the socio-economic vulnerability of the learners are additional challenges (Gardsbane et al. 2013; Chakufyali et al. 2008). Despite this shortage of resources and the commen-surate stigma, evidence suggests that many community schools produce better learner outcomes than government schools (Examinations Council of Zambia 2012; Gardsbane et al. 2013; Rhodwell 2013).

Literature review

Parental and community involvement in education is a broad domain covering several distinct forms of engagement. The typologies presented by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) and Hoell (2006) are useful in distinguishing particular activities. Broadly speaking, parental engagement can be separated into school-based and home-based involvement. School-based involvement can be further classified into school communi-cation and school participation. School communication is contact between parents and school personnel to share information, discuss the child's progress and emergent problems and to establish good relations between teachers and parents. School participation involves volunteering for school activities and attending school func-tions, as well as participation in school governance (Jeynes 2005; Houtenville and Conway 2008). Epstein's framework of six types of involvement overlaps with these typologies, but adds useful nuance: parenting (type one) and learning at home (type four) fall under home-based involvement; communicating (type two) maps directly to school communication; and volunteering (type three), decision-making (type five) and collaborating with community (type six) are collectively comparable to school participation (Epstein 1995: 704-707).

Zambian PCSCs, as governance bodies, fall within this latter realm of participatory school-based involvement. In relation to Epstein's framework, the obvious role of a governance body relates to the decision-making form of involvement, but it is possible that in the close-knit community environments typical of Zambian community schools PCSCs in practice may also engage in the volunteer and community collaboration types of involvement. While critical to the educational attainment of the individual child, school communication and home-based involvement (and Epstein's types one, two and four) occur within the domain of child-rearing; they are the focus of interaction between a specific learner and their family unit and thus are not expected to influence the performance of the school *as a whole*.[5] Consequently, they fall outside

of the domain of this study, though it should be borne in mind that there may be interesting interaction effects between these distinct forms of parental involvement.

In the context of developing countries, much of the literature focused on parental participation in school management occurs within the context of the recent focus on decentralisation and school-based management (SBM). This trend has brought the role of parents and communities fully into the centre of the discourse surrounding school effectiveness (Ginsburg et al. 2014: 31-32). Decentralisation has been referred to as 'a critical buzzword in education policy in developing countries' (Altschuler 2013: 121), while school-based management has been 'one of the more popular approaches to decentralisation,' (Ginsburg et al. 2014: 31).

In terms of learning outcomes, many studies have found significant impacts on actual learning outcomes, but others have failed to detect a relationship. Jimenez and Sawada (1999: 415) found that 'enhanced community and parental involvement … has improved students' language skills and diminished student absences' in El Salvador's Community-Managed Schools Programme. An analysis by Nielson, on the other hand, found that 'In none of the [eight] cases … is there any evidence that community empowerment has helped improve the quality of the teaching and learning in the classroom' (Nielson 2007: 90).

There is less ambiguity on the side of intermediary outcomes, though there is substantial variation in the outcomes analysed across studies. Barrera-Osoria et al. (2009: 12), for example, note a 'general finding that SBM has had a positive impact on some variables – mainly in reducing repetition and failure and in improving attendance rates' and also altered teachers' actions (on attendance rates also see Nielson 2007). Community involvement may include supervising teachers, including hiring and firing teachers and managing teacher attendance (Nielson 2007). Di Gropello (2006: 24) contends this may not be an uncontested process: 'Parents may be limited to evaluating teachers on limited measures, such as absenteeism, and teachers may be resentful of being judged by non-professionals'. She goes on to note, however, that in Guatemala an SBM initiative led to greater control by parents over the school calendar, working hours and teaching methods.

One of the most common activities of parent groups globally is providing schools with material support. In Malawi, Barnett (2013) found some evidence of a causal link between community financial support of schools and improved learning outcomes. Ginsburg et al. echo this in a 2014 study, leaving no doubt that material support is a common activity of parent groups in Malawi: '66,3% and 77,9% of head teachers interviewed reported that in 2010 and 2011 respectively their school communities engaged in income-generating activities to supplement the resources received from the government … with the main source of such resources being parents' contribution of cash or casual labour for the school' (Ginsburg et al. 2014: 49). Nielson (2007) similarly notes that infrastructure development or maintenance is one of the 'most common' roles of school committees.

Nielson importantly summarises the fact that all of these functions relating to intermediate school outcomes have the *potential* to support learning outcomes and does not prioritise between functions. Instead, he notes, 'The extent to which they actually do make a difference depends on how effectively they are pursued' (ibid.: 88).

A significant caveat is that much of the school-based management literature has examined community involvement in the context of government- or donor-backed reform initiatives designed specifically to improve school quality. This involvement is, thus, a 'top-down' process. In contrast, community-based school management in Zambian community schools has occurred through a 'bottom-up' process whereby the community has taken the provision of education upon itself in response to perceived inadequacies in the locality. By definition, in Zambia a 'community school' is existentially tied to the presence of a PCSC. This distinction points to a broader consideration discussed by Altshuler (2013) of real versus token authority, or formal authority according to policy versus the actual exercise of authority. In an evaluation of an SBM initiative in Malawi where school improvement groups were given some budgetary authority via a grant mechanism, for example, Ginsburg et al. (2014: 48) note that the actual relative emphasis on different budgetary categories may have been more significantly influenced by district officials than school committees. Such occurrences underscore the possibility that parent committees may exist in a corporatist relationship that serves more of an official purpose, a situation in which participation is a form of tokenism.[6]

The distinction between official versus actual authority may depend on the underlying motivation of policy-makers for devolving authority to the local level. The typology of three justifications for SBM provided by Ginsburg et al. (2014) can be a useful means for interpreting these power dynamics. Decentralisation and SBM may be justified 1) by *democratic ideals* affirming the 'inherent value in participation'; 2) as an efficient means for improving *school performance* by placing decision-making authority with those who better understand the local needs and context; or 3) as a means to fill resource gaps through increased local contributions (ibid.: 32).

Based on previous research (see endnote 2 and introduction), this study takes the existing evidence of a causal link between active PCSCs and learning outcomes in Zambian community schools as the *starting point* for further exploration of the dynamics of *how* PCSCs affect learning outcomes. The literature reviewed here provides several hypotheses for the causal mechanisms through which PCSCs may affect school performance.

Methodology
By restricting the number of units analysed, case studies increase the potential for explanatory richness. To achieve this depth, case study research involves a detailed data collection effort on a particular unit or units. Process tracing – a detailed exami-

nation of history and context to capture complex and interrelated causal connections – is a key approach of this method (George and Bennett 2005). As a result, the approach is useful for building understanding of *why* X leads to Y or *how* they interrelate in situations where causal relationships are already established (Gerring 2004: 348). This ability makes the case study method particularly well-suited to examining the *causal mechanisms* leading from active PCSCs to stronger learning outcomes. To allow for maximum depth and explanatory richness, this study restricts the sample to two units (i.e. schools).

This article is based on in-depth research into these two schools conducted in 2012 and 2014 and is situated within a broader five-year research and evaluation initiative examining community schools in Zambia. It draws on two primary datasets: 1) a 2012 school-based survey covering a random sample of 79 community schools from six of Zambia's 10 provinces, and 2) qualitative data from the two schools collected over two weeks in early 2014 using rapid ethnographic methods.

The 2012 dataset provides access to data covering school demographics, learner reading performance, household educational support and teacher pedagogical practice. The data are derived from three related tools which were implemented simultaneously at each school in the survey: 1) EGRA, an oral literacy assessment administered individually in the local language of instruction;[7] 2) a community school head teacher questionnaire, an interview-administered survey questionnaire capturing a wide range of school data, and 3) classroom observation protocol, a previously validated tool that scores a Grade 2 literacy lesson on five-point criteria-based Likert scales along 16 different items of pedagogical quality. The explanatory model of early-grade learner literacy performance by Gardsbane et al. (2013) is based on this 2012 dataset.

Case study units were selected through a stepwise elimination method that began with the 79 schools in the 2012 dataset and eventually yielded two highly comparable schools. In order to isolate the PCSC activities most likely to contribute to improved learning outcomes, units were selected to provide variation on the dependent variable (school performance, defined below) while holding the independent variable (PCSC activity) constant. Comparison between the two units is then able to search for *within-variable* differences in PCSC activity, thereby improving the ability to hypothesise relatively more versus less productive PCSC activities (Eckstein 1975).

The first elimination in the stepwise unit selection process was to group the 79 schools in the 2012 dataset according to performance, using the school's mean outcome on the letter-sound EGRA subtask.[8] Schools with means in the top and bottom quartile were retained as those exhibiting high and low performance respectively. Schools were then filtered to include only those that had active PCSCs (those meeting monthly or more frequently). The approach resulted in comparison between a *pathway* unit and a *deviant* unit. The observed dependent variable of the former is consistent with the model of learning performance –it is 'on the path' of the regression line, while the

latter is inconsistent – it 'deviates' from the expected value because its performance is low *in spite* of the active PCSC.

Owing to the fact that there are several other plausible independent variables besides PCSC activity that could explain school performance, the second phase of the selection process applied successive restrictions to hold these other factors constant between the two units through successive rounds of elimination ('steps'). Holding as many of these independent variables constant as possible by selecting units that are similar on these factors allows for a more rigorous examination of the specific relationship between an active PCSC and school performance by increasing the chance that the variation in learning outcomes is not due to variation on another independent variable (Gerring 2004).

The variables below are selected for two reasons. First, the model provided by Gardsbane et al. (2013) includes the variables denoted by an asterisk and shows them to be significant predictors of learning outcomes. Second, with the exception of province/language and setting, all have been argued to have significant positive impacts on learning outcomes (see literature review above). Because Zambian community schools are by definition of the community, setting and province were important variables to hold constant in this context. In addition, the literacy assessment used to calculate learning outcome is language-specific and cannot be compared across languages.

- Head teacher education*: The highest academic qualification attained or grade completed for teachers with less than Grade 12 (end of secondary schooling in Zambia).
- Province (and, by extension, language*): Zambia has 10 provinces and 73 languages, seven of which are 'languages of instruction' taught in school.
- Setting: Whether the school is located in an urban, peri-urban or rural setting.
- Teaching and learning material base: Existence of reading materials that learners *could* take home and a self-reported assessment by the head teacher of the material endowment of the school. Possible answers: 'more than adequate', 'adequate', 'inadequate' or 'none'. Prior to its visit, the research team verified that both schools lacked a full set of government textbooks and a library.
- Pedagogical/classroom practice*: Using classroom observation protocol data (see tool two above), units were considered comparable if the sum of the absolute value of the difference on each of the 16 items was less than or equal to eight (the maximum possible difference under this metric is 64).

This process ultimately produced two highly comparable units in Zambia's Eastern Province:

A. High-performing school with an active PCSC (pathway case)
B. Low-performing school with an active PCSC (deviant case)

Additional data and pre-interviews with local education officials confirmed that these

schools were also similar in a number of other facets, including teaching and learning material endowment and type of community (community size and wealth). The schools differ slightly in age, with School A having been founded approximately five years earlier than School B. At the time of the 2012 survey, the schools were also similar in terms of Ministry support.

The school narratives are largely based on the 2014 qualitative data derived from a week of intensive data collection in each school using a wide range of rapid ethnographic, participatory and observational methods, including classroom and committee meeting observation, focus groups, community mapping, document review of school log books and other records, and village walks led by community leaders. The team used a variety of interview methodologies, including in-depth (unstructured), semi-structured and group interviews, in addition to significant unstructured interaction with and observation of community members. Informants for each school included teachers, parents, PCSC members, traditional leaders, political leaders (ward counsellors), and zonal and district MESVTEE officials. These qualitative data are supplemented with both qualitative and quantitative data from the 2012 dataset. Quantitative data, similar to those collected in 2012, were being collected as this article neared completion and they provided preliminary additional evidence on recent developments at each school.

School narratives

Community School A

School overview

School A is located two hours by car from the nearest town on roads impassable for much of the rainy season and the nearest government school is about 10 km away. The school structure is made of mud and thatch. The roof is caving in and leaks signifi-cantly in the rain. The classroom is devoid of desks and chairs; pupils sit on makeshift seats moulded of bricks and clay. The building belongs to a church, but the land belongs to the school, having been granted by the chief in accordance with customary land law. In the past, classes were held in the PCSC treasurer's house and under a large tree next to the current school building.

The school and its PCSC were founded in 2002 by community members from eight constituent villages. Community members were motivated by the area's remote location and distance to the nearest government school, and that remains their primary motivation. As the PCSC chair stated, 'We see our children really suffer, going far off. Imagine those small children. So, that has created a stronger desire in the community and the committee to make sure there is a school nearby.' The committee considers the school's high point to be in 2012 when there were three teachers and many learners. The PCSC was very active at that time, mobilising

villagers to contribute corn for the teachers and collecting 50 ngwee (about eight cents) from each learner per term.

School A is typical of rural community schools in Zambia. Children are eager to learn and some walk long distances to and from school. Learner absenteeism is a routine struggle, which community members attribute in part to a lack of latrines (the sole latrine was inoperable owing to heavy rains) and potable water (pupils draw water from a stream a few kilometres from the school that is shared with cows and goats). Some pupils cannot reach school during the rainy season because the bridges en route break down. Teacher absenteeism also discourages pupils from attending school. The school currently serves approximately 60 learners from Grades 1 to 3, which is comparable to its school size in 2012.

Committee's roles

The first PCSC chair left the area two or six years after the school's founding (accounts vary), after which the school's eight villages elected a new committee that included the current chair and treasurer. The head teacher serves as secretary and an ex officio committee member. The committee is comprised of six men and four women, not including the head, and its composition has not changed since its initial formation. There have been no elections during this period, which may have irritated some parents and created a faction opposed to the chair. PCSC meetings are typically unscheduled, but occur approximately monthly. The counsellor or headmen may be called to join meetings, if needed. Decisions are made by consensus, a process committee members value highly.

The role of the PCSC is not formally defined, but includes school development and infrastructure, collaborating with teachers to enhance pupil learning, fostering good parenting and encouraging parents to send their children to school and provision of teaching and learning materials. Occasionally, for example, the PCSC purchases notebooks for pupils through the support of parents. Many committee meetings seem to revolve around construction (participation in which is compulsory and non-compliance incurs a fine), but development plans often fail to come to fruition. As the head teacher stated, 'I have not really seen what they do best, because even those plans that look like good plans, they never really implement them.' Some community members echoed the view that school construction decisions made by the PCSC were never implemented. A case in point is a project where the community was mobilised to mould 5 000 bricks, which were later loaned to a local church without the knowledge of some community members.

Individual members play an active role in monitoring the school. The PCSC is active with the school in terms of staffing and support to learners, but is most effective in monitoring pupil attendance. Both the treasurer and chair occasionally observe classes (the last time was three months before the research team's visit) and PCSC

members work with the head teacher and village headmen to ensure good attendance: the head teacher informs the committee of significant absences and a committee member then talks to the parents, with involvement of the headman if necessary. In serious cases the head teacher and PCSC send notes to the parents and the headman. In the opinion of the head teacher and the traditional leaders, this attendance monitoring is what the PCSC does most effectively. Related to this task, the PCSC also encourages parents to support children in completing homework.

The committee also recruits and hires teachers; they have never had to dismiss a teacher. From 2004 to 2008, the school had two teachers: one male teacher who had completed Grade 12 and one female who had completed either Grade 8 or Grade 12 (accounts vary). Both eventually left owing to inconsistent payment. In 2008, two other Grade 12 teachers joined the staff, but similarly became discouraged by inconsistent payments and left by term 3 of 2012 (accounts vary regarding the exact time of departure).

Since the school was founded, the head teacher has always been the teacher with the highest educational attainment because the PCSC deemed that the teacher who completed the highest grade in school was the most qualified teacher. The current head teacher, who finished Grade 9, assumed that role after the previous head teacher left in 2012. The current head teacher completed coursework for Grade 9, but did not write his exams and has been with the school since its founding. He had always taught Grades 1 and 2, while the more educated teachers took the higher grades. Parents and PCSC members have recently expressed a lack of confidence in his competency, conveying their desire for a 'more qualified' teacher, but the absence of a teacher's house, toilets and adequate classroom space deters trained teachers.

Ministry role and relationship with the PCSC

The MESVTEE has supported the school through the zonal head, who has taken an active role in monitoring the school by attending at least one recent PSCS meeting and conducting a number of visits. Both the PCSC chair and head teacher pay visits to the zonal and district MESVTEE, but they have never made these visits together; the chair pays for his visits himself.

The MESVTEE is seen to support the PCSC when an objective, external arbiter is required. For example, parents and the PCSC recently had a 'crisis of confidence' in the head teacher's competence: they felt that his level of education was very low and wanted a more qualified teacher. The head teacher reacted with some hostility to potential new teachers. He is dependent on the school for his livelihood, has taught three grades on his own at times and has struggled during the 'hungry season' when parents do not provide support. He appears active in the improvisation of learning materials using local resources. For example, two chalkboards were resurfaced under his initiative and flash cards were made from cardboard and manila paper.

This conflict may have been aggravated by the fact that the head teacher was not opening the school on time. He felt the failure to open was a result of parents trying to transfer their children to a government school 10 km away. The zonal head paid a special visit to the school to mediate a solution, which seemed to have resolved tensions at the time of data collection.

Discussion

This PCSC is not very effective at organising. The building is dilapidated, they have not managed to improve it and they struggle to pay teacher fees. In contrast, the committee is much more effective at holding others accountable, ensuring pupils attend class, ensuring teachers are hired, retained and teaching and at holding caregivers accountable for their wards' attendance and homework. Traditional leaders and the MESVTEE play important supporting roles. The local chief set aside one 50 kg sack of corn for teachers' payments and the headmen take a constructive role in supporting learner attendance and enrolment. There is ongoing rapport between the MESVTEE and both the PCSC chair and head teacher. The zonal head has taken an active role in monitoring the school, attending at least one meeting, conducting a number of visits and mediating at least one conflict.

Despite the committee's struggle to improve school infrastructure, the school performed relatively well on the 2012 EGRA. While it is tempting to ascribe this performance to the school's staffing history and presence of a Grade 12-educated teacher at that time, examination of the details makes this argument fall flat: the Grade 9-educated teacher (the current head) has consistently taught the lower grades. The assessment data are from Grade 2 learners. So, the sample would have had limited classroom exposure to the more educated Grade 12 teacher.

Community School B

School overview

Three kilometres from town, School B is marked by a freshly painted sign with the official MESVTEE nomenclature, a flag flying on a pole in the centre of the expansive grounds bordered on either side by the new head teacher's home with a carefully delineated flower-filled garden and a solid two-room classroom block. Three teachers work in shifts to instruct the 167 learners in Grades 1 to 4, with visits from the PSCS chair. This is all the more impressive considering that the school neared closure less than two years ago.

School B began in 2006 as a nursery school that grew out of a women's agricultural cooperative. In 2007, because of the distance to the government schools and the number of children who appeared to be of school age, the MESVTEE's District Education Board Secretary strongly urged the community to officially register the

institution as a community school. This move allowed School B to enrol primary classes, the first of which began in 2009 (Grade 1), according to the PCSC chair. Grades 2 and 3 were added in 2010 and 2011 respectively.

The first two primary school teachers began in 2008, one with Grade 9 and the other with Grade 12 qualifications, and the PCSC chair served as school administrator in lieu of a head teacher. After two years, the first two teachers left and were quickly replaced by two new teachers in 2010, who again taught for two school years and left. In both instances, the teachers left owing to the community's difficulty in paying their salaries of 50 kwacha (about USD 8) per month, which was increased to 100 kwacha (USD 16) a month in 2009 because the parents felt 50 kwacha was too little. The salary is now 120 kwacha (USD 20) per month.

The trend of high teacher turnover accelerated in 2012 and the school entered its most difficult period. Parents' inability or unwillingness to pay teachers the agreed amount fuelled teacher absenteeism, which in turn fed a deleterious cycle of pupil and parental disengagement and further unwillingness to pay. By the start of the 2012 third term, the teachers had not yet left the school, but classes had ceased and the school was effectively closed.

These events led the zonal head to consider closing School B, but ultimately in conjunction with district officials, the MESVTEE decided to provide a government teacher instead. In October 2013, a young teacher from the neighbouring government school arrived on government assignment and assumed the role of head teacher.

It is unclear if School B has overcome the challenges it faced in providing consistent education in recent years, but on the surface the school seems reenergised by the new government-seconded head teacher's arrival. In his first four months, he worked with the PCSC to reopen the school, recruit new volunteer teachers, improve record-keeping and better organise the PCSC. Organisational and pupil enrolment charts now hang in the head teacher's office and volunteer teachers and pupils again fill the two classrooms. For its part, the PCSC has redoubled its efforts to collect contributions for volunteer teachers' salaries and there is now a receipt system used to track payments.

Committee's roles

The PCSC was constituted in 2007 in parallel with the school's registration and as a requirement of that process. Although most years an annual general meeting has been held to elect new members, they have remained largely unchanged. The current PCSC chair, elected in 2009, has tried to step down repeatedly, but has been convinced to stay each time because others were either unwilling to take on the role or lacked the community's confidence. The PCSC is organised into two parts: (1) an 'executive' that holds overall authority, and (2) a 'works committee' that oversees building activities.

The PCSC has been involved primarily in two tasks: infrastructure development and collecting money from parents to pay teachers. At first, classes met in a thatched shed of the agricultural cooperative, but the PCSC quickly set about erecting a dedicated school building. The community assembled the standard construction sand, bricks and stones, and the Ministry provided iron roofing sheets. The school also received a Constituency Development Fund grant through the District Council, which funded additional construction materials. The school building was finished at the end of 2009, even though the walls are still not covered with plaster. More recently, in response to the MESVTEE prerequisite for receiving a government-seconded teacher, the PCSC organised the construction of a suitable teacher's house. Once again, the PCSC organised labour and raw materials and the District Council provided a grant for additional construction materials. The school has an interesting system of incenti-vising parents to participate in work days. Those who don't show up may be fined a chicken, which is collected and used to feed the others who are working that day.

The PCSC has struggled more with its other main task. The PCSC chair recounted that parents' contributions used to be collected from the headmen, but the system did not work because some headmen could not or did not pay, so the Works Committee took responsibility for collecting those funds directly. The headmen, however, offered a slightly different account: 'The problem is they never left the work of collecting money to the committee. The teachers themselves used to go into the villages and try to collect the money themselves, and the parents found it peculiar. They said, "The committee should be doing this, how do we know how much you are getting?"'

When it is necessary to recruit new teachers, the PCSC forms a hiring panel to interview applicants and inspect their qualifications. The PCSC chair is very active in monitoring classroom instruction routinely, a trait inherited from his time as the school's administrator. He expressed regret that often too much of the burden has been on him, with PCSC members expecting him personally to collect contributions for teachers' salaries and oversee construction: 'If the chair doesn't do the job, the blame, it comes back to you. They say, "You are weak." So those blames, those words, they sometimes used to discourage me.'

Except for the work of the chair, the committee as a whole does not seem extensively or constructively engaged in the school's educational process. It encourages parents to prevent pupil absenteeism, but does not visit them personally and does not inform parents of their role in the educational process. In the words of one mother, 'They are leaving the work of checking, as to whether or not the children are learning, only to the chair. I would rather that the other committee members could be changing. Today this member comes to check, the other day the other one comes to sit in class and observe lessons, so they know the way the children are learning. Also, they should be giving the feedback to the teachers … In short, the feedback from the observation is not being done.'

Traditional leaders echoed this sentiment. According to one traditional leader, 'The actual involvement in the learning of the pupils, the direct involvement, like sitting in the class and sensitising the parents about observing lessons, they [committee members] don't do. It's like the knowledge of that was lacking.' Headmen added that the PCSC also does not engage them extensively in learning processes. Rather, they are only involved when the PCSC writes them a letter requesting something, typically related to building needs. In the words of a vice-headman, 'The only way that we are involved with the PCSC [is] when we are written to by the Executive Committee.'

In 2010 or 2011, there appears to have been some improper financial stewardship. Some PCSC members were accused of collecting money for the teachers' salaries and keeping it for themselves. The three committee members accused were subsequently replaced.

PCSC members report making decisions by consensus, but comments by the chair and some parents indicate some disagreements that, in practice, may often result in operation by majority rather than consensus. Meeting observation, however, indicated that while not achieving perfect consensus, the committee does nevertheless seem to strive for internal agreement.

Ministry role and relationship with school community

The PCSC engages the MESVTEE primarily through the chair and mainly related to building and staffing issues. The MESVTEE, however, has also made a substantial effort to engage the school. The school registration and construction of the teacher's house both occurred at the urging of the MESVTEE, which even went so far as to intervene directly to keep the school from closing in 2012. While the school is in a rural location, its location places it directly on the road from the district to the zonal centre, which has facilitated the numerous visits by the zonal head.

Discussion

School B demonstrates the 'PCSC as builder' archetype. The PCSC is primarily engaged in erecting structures and enforcing contributions from parents. It has struggled to retain teachers and keep the school open. Committee member turnover (limited but present), larger numbers of available leadership roles for parents (owing to the additional Works Committee) and electoral accountability of the committee do not seem to have produced strong parental ownership of the school. The Works Committee has been successful in erecting key structures, but the Executive Committee seems less active, placing most work on the shoulders of the chair. The PCSC, apart from the chair, does not appear to be significantly involved in monitoring educational processes and outcomes. The committee does maintain a relationship with the MESVTEE. It was the Ministry, in fact, that initially urged the community to elect

a PCSC in order to register the school. This could partially explain why the PCSC seems somewhat 'detached' from the school in terms of its sense of ownership.

The 2012 school performance data collection coincided with the school's nadir when teachers, parents and pupils nearly abandoned the school and it was almost closed by the MESVTEE. But this offers, at best, only a partial explanation of School B's low EGRA performance. The assessed Grade 2 learners should have completed five terms of education over the period when the school was functioning from 2011 to 2012 and, even if attendance was poor, the vast majority of learners at the school failed to sound a single letter correctly. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the school was achieving minimal educational outcomes even prior to its closure.

Comparison and interpretation

While there is significant overlap in many of the formal activities of the two PCSCs, there are also some telling differences, particularly when taking into account community members' accounts of PCSCs' effectiveness at different functions. School A's PCSC seems more effective at involving local traditional leaders in the school and is practically dogmatic in managing learner attendance. While there have been no elections in recent years for School A and, by extension, no turnover in committee membership, many parents nevertheless take great interest in the school, at least in its management if not so much in its infrastructure. This is demonstrated by the consistently high parent turnout during each visit by the research team and the large number of parents who requested to speak with the researchers at their own behest (without invitation from the researchers). This contrasts with School B, where community members were only observed at the school on a single occasion, when invited by the researchers for a focus group discussion.

Infrastructure development is one area where the School B's PCSC excels. School A's PCSC is clearly ineffective in terms of infrastructure development, while School B's PCSC has managed to erect a basic school building providing effective shelter from the elements and a secure location for school materials, as well as a teacher's house. While School B received significantly greater government support in infrastructure development, this support was conditional upon the community first securing its own inputs. The government's concrete promise of tangible material support may have motivated the community to mobilise these initial inputs.

The story in terms of teaching quality is more complicated. The 2012 data indicates that pedagogical quality was comparable at the two schools, but 2014 observations indicated a dramatic improvement at School B, while School A has maintained the status quo. The change at School B is attributed by all stakeholders to the new teaching staff and, in particular, the arrival of the government teacher, who guides the untrained volunteer teachers in their instructional practice. On the other hand, teacher absenteeism is strictly monitored by the PCSC at School A, while in School B

the head teacher was observed to be frequently out on official school business. While the PCSC was aware of these absences and did not object as they were in service of the school, PCSC members admitted that they do not feel they have the authority to act because the head teacher is a government, not community, employee.

There is an interesting distinction in terms of MESVTEE involvement and the exercise of authority. In School A, while the Ministry has been involved in a significant advisory role, it is the PCSC that exercises real decision-making authority. In School B, on the other hand, although the PCSC similarly exercises substantial authority, the MESVTEE has, at numerous points, pushed the PCSC to implement certain policies, including infrastructure development and even the initial registration of the school and formation of the PCSC itself. The MESVTEE identified a lack of educational capacity in the locality of School B and perceives the presence of a community school to, at least partially, help fill that gap.

While there is a difference in total school enrolment, there is a commensurate difference in the number of teachers, yielding an effective teacher-to-learner ratio that is similar. Thus, this cannot account for the difference in learning outcomes. Because PCSC size is similar, however, the difference in enrolment does mean that the PCSC-to-learner ratio varies. It is possible that this allows the School A PCSC to devote more individualised attention to learners.

What then can be made of the differences between the roles and activities of the PCSCs at the two schools and what might this indicate about the reasons for the divergence in school performance? It would appear that infrastructure was not a determining factor in learning performance in these schools, but perhaps that the focus of School A's PCSC on teacher and learner attendance was instead the key factor. This is plausible if this emphasis resulted in greater time on task among learners in School A, which is a reasonable conclusion given that parents frequently observe classes at School A to see what the teacher and pupils are doing. Due caution is needed in reading too much into a small sample, but the careful attention to hold other potential explanatory variables between the two schools constant somewhat increases the confidence in this conclusion.

Conclusion

Overall, none of the functions, activities or power dynamics observed in this case study are unique to Zambia. What is unique is the *specific* mix of activities that seem most important in the particular context of Zambian community schools. The importance of PCSCs in ensuring teacher and learner attendance is consistent with the work of Barrera-Osoria et al. (2009) and Di Gropello (2006). Even though the potential for resistance on the part of teachers to being observed by parents noted by Di Gropello was not noticed, parents' oversight of teachers was also limited to the more modest forms of support the author raised, i.e. oversight of attendance. The finding regarding

infrastructure contrasts with the findings of Barnett (2013) from Malawi, but it should be noted that even School A, a 'high-performing' community school, failed to produce positive educational outcomes relative to standards. This raises the possibility that infrastructure and material provision are a 'higher-order' task that only pays dividends once certain basic quality needs are satisfied.

This article provides modest evidence that Zambia's PCSCs should be engaged as more than just builders. They have the potential to be the key party holding a range of school actors accountable. Without that accountability, there may be a building, but no true school. At the same time, while accountability is *necessary* to get a school to a basic level of achievement, that rudimentary achievement only appears positive in the context of very poor overall educational achievement by most community schools. On its own, accountability has not proven *sufficient* to achieve the actually desired educational levels, which will likely require proven classroom instructional techniques and quality educational materials. By design, the current Zambian community school policy framework incentivises PCSCs to engage in the builder role by tying the most valuable form of MESVTEE support (rewards in the form of seconded teachers) to infrastructure requirements (school building, teacher's house and sanitary latrines). This policy framework echoes the critiques of SBM as, at least in part, a neo-liberal agenda designed to help meet the resource needs of central educational systems struggling to provide adequate capacity. The form of accountability exercised at School A, however, offers an encouraging possibility: this current policy framework may not tap the full potential of PCSCs as partners for ensuring school quality and, by extension, reforms that encourage PCSCs to exercise this kind of authority may hold the potential to improve educational outcomes at limited cost.

Endnotes
1   Revision of a paper presented at the annual conference of the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society, Durban, South Africa, 10-12 August 2014. Part of the research reported herein was undertaken in the context of the broader five-year research and evaluation programme of the Time to Learn Activity funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Zambia, under contract number AID 611-C-12-00002 on 1 March 2012, and implemented by Education Development Centre (EDC) in collaboration with EnCompass LLC.
2   As observed by Di Gropello (2006: 3), effectiveness is 'not necessarily a very precise concept', but tends to look at 'impact on outputs and outcomes, such as the coverage of the services, their quality (measured for instance by learning achievement), their impact on poverty reduction and social development, the equity of delivery, etc.' This article is narrow in its understanding of school performance, focusing on what is arguably the single paramount outcome: learning achievement.
3   On teacher quality, see Hanushek and Rivkin 2010 and, more generally, USAID 2014. On instructional time see Abadzi 2009. For evidence on positive effects of teaching and learning materials, see Pritchett and Filmer 1999; for a view that nuances those findings based on evidence from Kenya, see Glewwe et al. 2009. In a review of literature specific to reading outcomes, USAID (2012: 6-8) notes eight key areas, five of which are relevant school-level factors: teaching technique and instructional approach; text and materials; time use; track-

ing; community and parental support. For a comprehensive literature review on inputs and educational outcomes, see Glewwe et al. 2011. Bruns et al. 2011 give a good overview of the system-level challenges in actually getting inputs to benefit school and classroom environments, with a focus on accountability gaps in management of these inputs. The effects and dynamics of parental engagement are extensively reviewed below.

4   Gardsbane et al. 2013: 139-142. Other variables in the model include school size (negative) and language and gender of learner (non-significant control variables that improved model robustness). PCSC activity is a categorical response variable with possible answers of 'irregular', 'annual', 'termly', 'quarterly' and 'monthly or more'.

5   For seminal works related to the school communication and home-based types of involvement, see Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995 and 1997.

6   In the words of Edwards and Klees (2012: 58), 'Liberal participation becomes an act which is managed, co-opted, and tokenistic,' and has been related to a neoliberal agenda: 'In this case, "progressive" discourses aimed at giving poor people more "voice", appear as mechanisms merely to support the smoother functioning of neoliberal reforms in education' (Verger et al. 2012: 16, emphasis original). Most bluntly in this line of critique, the move to redistribute educational financing has been referred to as 'little more than thinly disguised means to move the burden onto the backs of the poor' (Lynch 1997: 78 in Ginsburg et al. 2014: 32).

7   This is consistent with Zambia's 'local language first' literacy instruction methodology that affirms pupils should be taught to read in the language they speak at home.

8   EGRA results were skewed towards zero, with mean scores on most other EGRA subtasks not significantly different from zero. Thus, the letter sound subtask best captures the distribution of schools from low to high-performing and minimises the assessment's floor effect. Because complexity of early literacy skills varies by language, results cannot be compared across language. Consequently, quartiles are based on performance *for that language group*.

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