

The Role of School Heads in Equalising Educational Opportunities in Disadvantaged Rural Primary Schools in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Primary schools that exist in disadvantaged rural areas in Zimbabwe face serious challenges in delivering equal educational opportunities to the learners. Learners in these areas generally do not perform well in public examinations at grade seven level. They show reduced tendencies to progress beyond compulsory education cycles and contribute more to wastage indicators such as dropping out of school. Using Rawls' Distributive Theory of social justice (1971), this study explores how school heads deliver equal educational opportunities in selected disadvantaged rural primary schools in Bindura District of Zimbabwe. The study used a qualitative research approach conducting a case study to gather data through semi structured interviews. The participants were primary school heads, deputy heads and school chairpersons selected from five purposively sampled disadvantaged rural primary schools according to their performance status, that is, bottom performing schools in national examinations at Grade Seven level for the year 2024 (based on the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) rankings for Bindura District. For purposes of this study, a bottom performing school in the context of Zimbabwean schools is a pass rate below 25–30 for grade seven (7) examinations. The participants were selected because they experienced the phenomenon under investigation on a day-to-day basis. Findings reveal that school heads who focus on learner welfare, provision of school feeding programmes, using digital technologies, community involvement and collaboration, provision of teaching, learning and financial resources, have the potential to equalise educational opportunities in their disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District. School heads must therefore prioritise identifying inequalities in educational opportunities that exist in their schools so that they are in a better position to enhance the equalisation of educational opportunities in the disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District.

Keywords: School head, leadership, educational opportunity, equalising educational opportunities; disadvantaged rural primary schools.

Introduction

Education is priceless in terms of empowering individuals and a significant pillar for the development of human capital (Singh, 2014). Consequently, the global community has ratified several treaties meant to ensure increased access to education (ibid, 2014). The global community through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 has made a commitment towards inclusive, equitable and quality primary and secondary education for all children by 2030 (Walker, Pearce, Boe & Lawson, 2019). SDG 4 is education oriented and focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. The challenge remains that of bringing to reality the aspirations of SDG 4 and these demands taking heed of quality and inequality as twin crises in countries with disadvantaged schools (Singh, 2014). The United States of America has a No Child Left behind Act of 2000 that promotes the equality of educational opportunity and is a good way for enhancing social justice and commonwealth (Lin, 2018).

In Zimbabwe, inequalities in education have their roots in the pre-independence era when it was racially oriented (Maposa, 2016). Efforts to redress the situation have witnessed the introduction of several reforms through policies meant to increase equalisation of educational opportunities. Primary schools that exist in disadvantaged rural areas in Zimbabwe confront serious challenges in delivering equal educational opportunities to the learners. Learners in these areas tend to perform less well in public examinations at grade seven level. They show reduced tendencies to progress beyond compulsory education cycles and contribute more to wastage indicators such as dropping out of school. This is indeed a problem which if left unchecked will perpetuate unequal participation of learners in disadvantaged primary schools. This study therefore focuses on the role of school heads in equalising educational opportunities in selected primary schools in Bindura District of Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

1. What inequalities in educational opportunities exist among learners in disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District?
2. How are school heads equalising educational opportunities in disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District?

Literature Review

Equalising educational opportunities is a challenge that should be confronted by all nations if attention is to be availed to the basic principles of non-discrimination and equality for all in education (Salihu and Jamil, 2015). It is evident that lack of material and financial needs of learners creates a handicap on the part of school heads which makes it difficult for them to navigate through the need to equalise educational opportunities. Time is another resource that school heads do not have (Dorado, Barrios & Lumapenet, 2024). It is every professional's misery and for school heads time poses a specific challenge since they seek to spend more time in classroom where teaching and learning is delivered (*ibid*, 2024). The heads are overwhelmed with a lot of work such that they cannot find adequate time to deal with administrative, instructional and transformational duties that they must address each day. Their days are marred by one encounter after another with diverse stakeholders all of whom have questions and requests and problems demanding their time. In this regard, equalisation of educational opportunities requires adequate material, financial and time resources and their lack impacts the process.

Equalisation of educational opportunities can be negatively impacted by lack of leadership skills (*ibid*, 2024). When a school head lacks leadership skills, he or she cannot influence effectively the equalisation of educational opportunities among learners from different and diverse socio- economic backgrounds. Considering that equalisation of educational opportunities is affected by a learner's social background, stakeholder involvement in general and parental involvement in particular becomes mandatory. In this regard, lack of stakeholder participation in school programmes meant to ensure equalisation of educational opportunities will limit the extent to which school heads can equalise educational opportunities in primary schools. Shava and Heystek (2021) note that among the challenges that leaders contend with include negative attitudes from some parents and teachers. The significance of stakeholder participation in equalising educational opportunities cannot be overemphasised since this issue demands collective participation and collaboration among all stakeholders for the benefit of the learners.

Governments enact policies that help to ensure that school heads are empowered in their efforts

to equal educational opportunities. Apparently, government has been noted to lack the political will to support their policies with adequate financial resources. The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) policy in Zimbabwe has been noted to be noble in its quest to ensure that marginalised and vulnerable children have equal chances of accessing education (Dzvimbo, Zimondi & Magijani, 2018). However, failure by government to pay BEAM funds timeously has resulted in school heads facing financial resources constraints making it difficult for them to avail adequate financial resources needed to support the needs of all the learners in the school. The delays in disbursements incapacitate disadvantaged schools whose greater part of levies comes from BEAM allocations. In addition, the benefits from BEAM are not being enjoyed by the intended beneficiaries as quite often those not deserving end up being the beneficiaries.

Equalising of educational opportunities is significant in ensuring that SDG number 4 becomes a living reality. The role of digital technology in speeding educational equity and the contribution of technology to education is unquestionable (Xiao, 2021). The utilisation of technology in education has the effect of helping to enhance educational opportunities and quality (Aksu and Canturk, 2015). It is undoubtedly evident that the internet has the potential to assist in equalising educational opportunities by ensuring information resources are available to learners in all schools more similar than has been the case previously.

Digital technology can be embraced by schools through the school head having a sustainable information communication technology policy. Learners in remote and small settlements are availed with the same opportunities to make use of their talent and potential to perform at the optimum level as their peers in the urban areas through digital technology (ibid, 2015). Integrating technology into education and ensuring internet accessibility for learners at home would certainly help enhance equal opportunity, by enhancing social activities for special education learners and increasing social programmes for all learners (ibid, 2015). Technology utilisation in schools can ensure a specific degree of equality in opportunity in education as learners are provided with an instructional context that supports individual needs. When technology and the web are not utilised in schools, the prevailing digital divide that triggers inequality for learners with low socio-economic conditions will widen.

Inclusion is a principled approach to education and society whereby inclusive values such as participation, equity and community reverence for diversity should be utilised to guide policies and practices (Messiou, 2017). This approach dovetails with the United Nations' SDG 4 which advocates that no child is left behind (Xiao, (2021). The basic principle to inclusion is respect for individual differences and it is evident that inclusive education leaves no one behind (ibid, 2017). Sharma (2021) asserts that inclusion entails the utilisation of different tools and diverse technologies from which learners can choose based on their specific contexts and needs. It is a form of equalisation of educational opportunities which facilitates every individual learner to rise the educational ladder based on his or her learner's aptitude and ability (Ojulari (2011).

Provision of technology and embracing of inclusion without exhibiting practical care in schools would not yield results. The most significant thing that schools can provide for their learners is genuine care for them, their happiness and their well-being (Xiao, 2021). Ethics of care brings forth a moral imperative of enhancing education practice and learner outcomes for the marginalised and economically disadvantaged majority who have not been traditionally served well in schools (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Using Rawls' distributive theory of social justice (1971) informs this study. It is mainly premised on the concern to attain a socially just distribution of primary social goods (Khechen, 2013). The central issue to Rawls' theory is the notion that justice is hinged on creating the priority of that which is right over that which is good (Nieuwenhuis, 2010). Distributive justice is due to a collaborative venture of mutual benefit hinged on the two principles, the principle of equal liberty and the principle of difference (Van Deventer, Westhuizen & Potgieter, 2015). These principles according to Rawls should be to the greatest benefit of the most disadvantaged individuals in an equal society. According to the liberty principle, every individual is to be afforded an optimal degree of liberty consistent with similar liberty for everyone.

The difference principle states that practices that result in inequalities among individuals are allowable only on condition that they come with greater benefit and are accessible by all. In this regard, Van Deventer et al., (2015) note that Rawls' The Distributive Theory of social justice points towards fair and equal management, found in just organisations of the state and education (ibid, 2015). This theory provides a framework under which school heads should operate to ensure that there is movement towards equalisation of educational opportunities in their respective schools. They should strive to build structures and strategies within the school environment to ensure that all learners within the school set-up benefit which will also translate to the community at large.

The difference principle entails that the school leaders should come to terms with understanding the diversity that exists among individuals in a school set-up and these differences should be celebrated instead of being a source of discrimination, victimisation and marginalisation. Thus, differences in schools should be embraced and provide a source of learning experiences to propel the idea of equalising educational opportunities rather than use it to heighten marginalisation, discrimination and manipulation of disadvantaged learners in a school set-up. In this regard, Rawls' Distributive Theory of social justice advocates society to exhibit more attention to the less privileged and those marginalised if all individuals are to be treated equally and afforded with real equality of opportunity. The theory therefore provides the basis of understanding the idea of equalising educational opportunities among learners in primary schools.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach through a case study to collect data using semi structured interviews. The qualitative approach was chosen for its capacity to provide deep insights into participants lived experiences and the meanings they attach to how school heads deliver equal educational opportunities in selected disadvantaged rural primary schools in Bindura District of Zimbabwe. It is well-suited for capturing the essence of how school heads respond to the negative impact of their disadvantaged schools in the short term and long term. According to Yin (2014) qualitative study is commonly utilised when the phenomenon studied and data anticipated is non- quantifiable but seeks to evaluate perception, attitude, intensity and effectiveness of opinions and practices. The research adopted a case study research method. Yin (2014) describes a case study as a first-hand investigation that examines an existing phenomenon in complexity and within natural settings, particularly when the limitations between phenomenon and context are not noticeable and the researcher has slight control over actions. In the context of this study, the researchers interacted with the participants as they solicited for their views. The method was therefore considered appropriate to help the researcher interact with the participants consisting of primary school heads, deputy heads and school chairpersons in their school environments and obtain primary data in the form of their views.

Sampling

The participants were from purposively sampled disadvantaged rural primary schools in Bindura District according to their performance status, that is, bottom performing schools in national examinations at Grade Seven level for the year 2024 (based on the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) rankings for Bindura District). For purposes of this study, a bottom performing school in the context of Zimbabwean schools is a pass rate below 25–30 for grade seven (7) examinations. The participants were selected because they experienced the phenomenon under investigation on a day-to-day basis. The school head, the deputy head and the school chairperson from each of the five purposively sampled schools constituted the sample of fifteen (15) participants.

Table 1: Sample size

Targeted population	Number of schools	Number per school	Total sample
School heads	5	1	5
Deputy heads	5	1	5
School chairpersons	5	1	5
Total	15	3	15

Data Collection

Permission to undertake the research was requested from the Secretary of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe and the Education Director of Mashonaland Central Province and District Schools Inspector for Bindura District. After permission was granted, the researchers explained the purpose of the study to the school heads and other participants before the interviews were conducted. Informed consent was sought from the sampled participants through the distribution of consent forms. A “qualitative investigation procedure” (Creswell, 2013), through a self-developed interview guide, was used in this study. The researcher used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to collect data from the participants.

Participants were interviewed individually. The researcher used a voice recorder to record the responses of participants during the interview sessions, and he also made field notes. The school heads were interviewed in their offices while the teachers were interviewed after school hours in a convenient location for them, such as the staffroom or their classrooms. School chairpersons were interviewed at their schools during working hours. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. As far as this study is concerned, all ethical concerns required in human research were observed.

Data Analysis

Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2012) define data analysis as “the process of observing patterns in the data, asking questions about those patterns, forming conjectures, purposively collecting data from specially selected individuals on targeted topics, confirming or refuting the conjectures, then continuing analysis, asking additional questions, seeking more data, furthering the analysis by sorting, questioning, thinking, forming and testing the conjectures and so forth”. The researcher used ATLAS.ti, a data-analysis software programme, to code the transcripts, using open coding. After establishing codes, the coded data were grouped into three

categories, which converged into one theme, namely, equalising educational opportunities.

Findings and Discussion

The results of this study are presented concurrently with the discussion. All fifteen (15) participants participated in the study. Participants' views on how school heads deliver equal educational opportunities in selected disadvantaged rural primary schools in Bindura District of Zimbabwe converged under two categories as is illustrated in figure 1 below:



Figure 1: Categories and codes

The theme “Equalising educational opportunities” reveals how participants in this study viewed how school heads are equalising educational opportunities in selected disadvantaged rural primary schools in Bindura District of Zimbabwe. Although the schools in this study were purposefully selected based on size, the views of the participants, as will be indicated in subsequent discussions, were similar. The researchers sought the participants' views on their understanding of the inequalities in educational opportunities that exist among learners in disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District.

What inequalities in educational opportunities exist among learners in disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District?

The Head of School A had this to say:

They experience different inequalities which include access to teaching and learning materials.

The Deputy head of School A answered:

Teaching demands the use of diverse teaching and learning methodologies which are learner centred and cater for different learner needs and abilities. Failure to recognise such methods creates inequalities in educational opportunities among learners in primary schools.

The School Development Community (SDC) Chair of School A said:

The major inequalities in educational opportunities are usually hinged on resources. Lack of adequate financial resources results in schools failing to cater for the needs of different learners.

The Head of School B replied:

Inability to use Information Communication Technology (ICT) and access to learning materials are inequalities that exist among learners in disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District.

The Deputy Head from School B also said:

Differences in the teaching experience of teachers teaching the same grade may mean that learners in the different classes will benefit differently. As teacher competences vary across schools it entails that learners in these schools will have inequalities in educational opportunities since their teachers will serve the learners differently.

The SDC Chair of School B replied:

Conflict amongst SDC members, school administration, teachers and the community contribute to inequalities in educational opportunities. Where there is conflict there is no consensus on how resources can be allocated and what strategies and steps can be taken to promote equalisation of educational opportunities. Consequently, conflicts contribute to increased inequalities in educational opportunities.

The Head of School C responded:

Lack of effective leadership skills causes inequalities in educational opportunities. When school heads do not possess competences needed to deal with the issue of inequalities in educational opportunities then the chances of addressing the challenge will be minimal. In addition, there is lack of staff development for school leaders in terms of addressing inequalities in educational opportunities.

The SDC Chair from School C said:

There are inequalities of educational opportunities in terms of the kind of assistance they receive both at school and at home concerning schoolwork and homework respectively. Teachers at times assist some learners more than others and at home some parents are more prepared to assist their children in doing homework than others, thereby creating inequalities among learners.

The Head of School D answered:

Learners in primary schools showcase different inequalities which include access to teaching and learning materials. There are inequalities in teaching methodologies provided by teachers.

The Deputy Head from School D said:

Inequalities in educational opportunities also exist in terms of teaching and learning methodologies used by teachers. While learner centred approaches are encouraged some teachers make use of teacher centred approaches which at times benefit some learners more than others, thereby creating inequalities in educational opportunities.

The SDC Chair from School D replied:

Due to their socio-economic backgrounds some learners tend to be more comfortable with the use of ICT tools whilst others are not. In addition, teachers tend to avail more resources to talented learners whilst not giving the same opportunity to not so talented learners.

The Head of School E had this to say:

Teacher turnover is impeding the ability of school heads in equalising educational opportunities. Teachers come and go and this makes it difficult for the head to retain developed and empowered staff who would have understood what needs to be done in equalising educational opportunities.

The SDC Chair from School E answered:

Differences in socio-economic backgrounds and the level of parents' education cause inequalities in educational opportunities among learners. When learners' parents are poor, they may not be able to provide adequately for their children and they at times engage children in income sourcing activities. This reduces the learners' chances of attending school daily and accessing educational resources regularly.

An analysis of the participants' responses reveals that there are inequalities in educational opportunities that exist among learners in disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District. Notable among them were inadequate teaching, learning and financial resources, teacher incompetence, home background and teacher turnover. The issue of access to resources and teaching methodologies that emerged from the study is consistent with findings by Blanden et al., (2022) who found out that learner access to resources and teaching methods used in the school influence inequalities in educational opportunities among learners in primary schools. They assert that the sources of inequalities in educational opportunities can emerge in terms of the skills gained at different ages and the inputs and influences from parents, schools attended and the environment. This suggests that learner access to resources, teachers, the school environment and teaching methods used in the school influence inequalities in educational opportunities among learners in primary school.

Findings from the study also provide evidence that lack of material and financial needs of learners creates a handicap on the part of school heads which makes it difficult for them to navigate through the need to equalise educational opportunities. Equalisation of educational opportunities can be negatively impacted by lack of leadership skills (Dorado, Barrios & Lumapenet, 2024). When a school head lacks leadership skills, he or she cannot influence effectively the equalisation of educational opportunities among learners from different and diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

How are school heads equalising educational opportunities in their schools?

Head of School B replied:

As school heads we are making concerted efforts to supervise and monitor BEAM selection committees to ensure that they undertake their duties effectively and select learners who are really disadvantaged in terms of levy payment so that they do not face challenges in levy payment. In addition, as a school we have income generating activities that provide us with extra money to cater for

the needs of disadvantaged learners. Furthermore, I have installed internet connectivity in the school to ensure that learners and teachers access additional learning resources besides those from textbooks.

Deputy Head of School B responded:

Provision of internet connection has given us the liberty to effectively use ICT tools and online resources that ensure that we use different teaching and learning methodologies meant to benefit different learners in the school.

The SDC Chair from School B replied:

The provision of the school feeding programme has given school heads the leverage to equalise educational opportunities in the school. This has enhanced learner attendance as they have remained in school longer than what was previously the case.

The Head of School C answered:

As a school leader I have realised that the provision of the school feeding programme helps in equalising educational opportunities as this has ensured increased enrolment, learner retention and completion rates have been improved. Consequently, the school has gone on a drive to ensure a home-grown school feeding programme to ensure a drive towards equalisation of educational opportunities. In addition, the school has initiated income generating projects to boost learners access to more learning resources like computers, learner assistive devices and provision of inclusive resources in the school.

The SDC Chair from School E said:

The head has built resilient and rewarding relationships with the community and business stakeholders. It has given the school the opportunity to benefit in terms of resources provision from the stakeholders. Consequently, the drive towards equalisation of educational opportunities has become evident and enhanced.

The Deputy Head from School E responded:

The availing of relevant instructional materials and provision of lunch meals at schools has made it possible for school heads to push for equalisation of educational opportunities. These efforts provide peace of mind to learners and availability of instructional materials enable teachers to be motivated to work towards addressing inequalities in educational opportunities.

The Deputy Head of School C replied:

School teachers have formed WhatsApp groups where they share information concerning learner welfare, teaching and learning resources that help learners to improve in their learning. The school has a focal teacher in charge of learner welfare and this teacher in collaboration with other teachers has made it possible to identify learner needs, challenges and strategies that can be employed to address these needs and challenges. In addition, the use of technology for example, the use of school Wi-Fi, WhatsApp platforms and use of radio lessons has made it possible to equalise educational opportunities. This has seen increased learning in different ways.

The SDC Chair of school D said:

Community involvement and collaboration with different stakeholders have made it possible for the school to have equal educational opportunities in our school. The essence of multi stakeholder involvement is that learner challenges can be viewed from different perspectives and diverse strategies can be put in place to ensure equalisation of educational opportunities. In this regard, educational opportunities are being equalised through contributions from various stakeholders, supporting diverse learners.

Head of School D had this to say:

The school has an effective child protection and learner welfare department which is working hard to promote equalisation of educational opportunities. In addition, the school keeps an up-to-date database of learners which gives the school a realistic analysis of the situation faced by different learners in the schools. Consequently, learners' needs are addressed with special attention to their vulnerabilities.

The Deputy Head of School C said:

The head has engaged the local business community to assist vulnerable learners. This has ensured increased learner retention in the school. The learners' levies are covered and with school feeding programme in place, they have no reason to miss school daily.

An analysis of the participants' responses reveals that school heads in disadvantaged schools in Bindura District were equalising educational opportunities in their schools. They were doing so through provision of school feeding programmes, staff development, focusing on learner welfare, community involvement and collaboration, provision of teaching, learning and financial resources. These findings seem to be premised on the need to attain a social just distribution of primary social goods and are consistent with Rawls' distributive theory of social justice which informs this study. The theory is premised on the notion of justice (Nieuwenhuis, 2010) and points towards fair and equal management found in just organisations of the state (Van Deventer, Westhuizen & Potgieter, 2015). The theory appears to provide a framework under which school heads should operate to ensure that there is movement towards equalisation of educational opportunities in their respective schools.

There is evidence to suggest that school heads in this study are focusing on learner welfare through using digital technology which Xiao (2021) contends that it speeds educational equity and has an effect of helping to enhance educational opportunities and quality (Aksu and Canturk, 2015). It is undoubtedly evident that the internet is assisting in equalising educational opportunities by ensuring information resources are availed to learners in all schools regardless of their location. Learners in disadvantaged schools now have the same opportunities to make use of their talent and potential to perform at the optimum level through digital technology (ibid, 2015). The integration of digital technology into education and ensuring internet accessibility for learners in disadvantaged schools appears to be helping to enhance equal opportunities.

This study established that school heads are involved and collaborate with their communities thereby embracing the principle of inclusion whose values of participation, equity and community respect for diversity are utilised to guide policies and practices. Participants note that school heads have built resilient and rewarding relationships with the communities and business stakeholders which have seen schools benefiting financially and materially. This

spirit of inclusion has also been witnessed regarding the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) whose selection committees are quite inclusive.

The study revealed that school heads provided genuine care for their learners through school feeding programmes. These programmes have given school heads the leverage to equal educational opportunities in their schools.

Participants note that learner attendance has been enhanced and learners are now remaining in schools longer than was previously the case. Schools have witnessed increased enrolments, learner retention and completion rates are said to have improved significantly. Still on genuine care, participants in this study note that their schools have effective child protection and learner welfare departments which pay particular attention to learners' vulnerabilities and take appropriate action.

Limitations of the Study

The research scope and site were deemed limitations. The research site was limited to a few primary schools in Bindura District (15 out of 59). Although the sampling procedures were implemented to ensure good representation of participants' views, the sampling was limited to a few schools. Owing to time and financial constraints, a larger sample could not be selected to conduct the interviews. These limitations are acknowledged, but they do not undervalue the significance of the study, as they can provide potential avenues for further research. For example, the study may be replicated in urban districts of Zimbabwe. Such further research could help in determining the role of school heads in equalising educational opportunities in disadvantaged rural primary schools in Bindura District.

Conclusions

The study notes that there are inequalities in educational opportunities that exist in disadvantaged schools in Bindura District. This creates a handicap on the part of school heads which makes it difficult for them to navigate through the need to equalise educational opportunities. However, school heads who can identify these inequalities are likely to adopt innovative and creative practices which can result in diverse ways of equalising educational opportunities. Therefore, school heads who focus on learner welfare, provision of school feeding programmes, using digital technologies, community involvement and collaboration, provision of teaching, learning and financial resources, have the potential to equalise educational opportunities in their disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District.

Recommendations

School heads in disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura District must prioritise identifying inequalities in educational opportunities that exist in their schools. The school heads must focus on learner welfare, provision of school feeding programmes, using digital technologies, community involvement and collaboration. Resources should be mobilised to enhance equal educational opportunities in disadvantaged primary schools in Bindura.

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