

Research Note

School-Based Management in Secondary Education in
Sub-Saharan Africa

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Secondary Education in Africa:

**PREPARING YOUTH
FOR THE FUTURE
OF WORK**

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Note on School-Based Management in Secondary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

School-based management (SBM) became a predominant education management reform over twenty years ago, when a number of OECD countries saw it as a way of improving responsive school management and also give their education systems an edge in international learner comparability studies. These high stakes assessments encouraged many education systems to look at improving ways of supporting and putting pressure on schools to improve their performance. The belief was that if decision-making, control of budget and of the curriculum were devolved to school level, and if this led to parents and the local community holding the school accountable for its performance, then schools would become more responsive, efficient and effective. In the following decade the World Bank (2008) and other aid agencies promoted SBM innovations in Europe, Asia and the Americas, as part of a wider decentralization agenda. Africa was slow out of the blocks, with SBM only picking up on the continent after the start of the new millennium, although some countries, such as South Africa (South African Department of Education 1996a), had been making legislative changes which created space for SBM in the 1990s.

Before looking at SBM and decentralization it is important to reflect on the earlier arguments for centralization in education systems, as the supposed benefits of centralization are likely to be lost or diluted by decentralization. These were, according to Pillay (1995: 17), predominantly two-fold: to enhance equity by reducing social disparities between communities and different parts of the country; and to utilise economies of scale and allow greater mobility of scarce resources to where they were most needed. In South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia centralization was also related to control by apartheid regimes, which were facing pressure from decentralizing tendencies towards education for democracy and liberation encapsulated in the Peoples' Education movement (Fiske & Ladd 2004; Nekhwevha 2002; Prew 2013a).

Decentralization is viewed by policy makers and donor agencies as helping to ensure wider representation of legitimate interests, in this case public school stakeholders, in school decision-making. By so doing, it is argued, better decisions can be made, which are more sensitive to local needs and priorities (Kiragu et al 2013; Thurlow 2003). In the OECD countries the main powers which are devolved from the centre to school level are the payment, hiring and firing of staff; allocation and management of the budget; delivery of the curriculum; procurement of learning and teaching materials; maintenance and extension of the school infrastructure; and monitoring and evaluation of teacher and learner performance (World Bank 2008). Apart from broadening local-level engagement with making school decisions, it also provides the basis for SBM, by providing the school's headteacher, and often a formal management team, with more authority and space to implement such site-based decisions. There is also an intention of making schools more accountable to their communities by exposing school planning, finances and other decisions to local oversight through school governance bodies.

While donors and governments tend to profess commitment to decentralization as part of a prevailing international political discourse favouring decentralization, with growth of local democracy along with the rights of the users of government services to have a say in the management of those services, the process can create negative tensions. Fullan (1999) argues that there is little evidence that decentralization achieves what it intends to as it almost always leaves considerable residual power at central and regional levels, and has little or no impact on the teaching and learning process. This is because it tends to focus on the management and governance of the school. Further, in true decentralization, changes in power relations are liable to take power away from some parties, which will be resisted. At the other end democratization can empower local leaders and structures, which may see opportunities to 'capture' power through school governance structures and use it for political

positioning or for self-aggrandizement. In addition, in some countries while devolving responsibilities central authorities are loathe to devolve financial, administrative and technical resources to the local level (Pillay 1995), leading to an 'unfunded mandate'.

The World Bank (2008) points out that SBM has different elements and a different flavour in every country in which it is introduced, due to varied cultures, politics and education norms. Nevertheless, there is a general agreement on what constitutes SBM. It is, as the World Bank states, "the decentralization of authority from the central government to the school level" (2008: 2). Malen et al, quoted by World Bank (2008: 2) go further and argue that SBM sees the school as the primary unit of improvement and assumes that by redistributing decision-making to the "school level improvement might be stimulated and sustained". The conditional in the last quote is critical – there is mixed evidence as to how well SBM does lead to improved performance of learners, or even to improved efficiency and responsiveness and better decision-making (Thurlow 2003). This is particularly the case in sub-Saharan African (SSA) education systems.

School-Based Management in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)

The need for an improvement in the management of secondary schools in SSA is particularly critical as SSA is lagging behind other regions in youth access to secondary schools, access to quality schooling and developing skills in schools which open pathways to employment (Majgaard & Mingat 2012). At the same time the secondary school sector is expanding rapidly in most African states, with a focus on universal secondary education (USE). This trend is being accompanied in most countries with a drive to decentralize decision-making to these secondary schools, with much focus on SBM. Nevertheless, as Majgaard & Mingat (2012:144) assert, "with a few exceptions, schools in most Sub-Saharan African countries have little autonomy". Why is this still the case?

The stated intention of decentralizing in SSA education systems, is not dissimilar to those we detailed for the OECD countries. Usually, the SSA central government devolves responsibility to principals and communities, often through a school governance structure. This redistribution of power is often sold as encouraging participation and so the democratization of the education system (Pillay 1995). This line is encouraged and supported financially by international donor agencies through both project funding and policy support. However, the motivation for such a policy at SSA government level is often more about saving money, than about improving performance. Lugaz and De Grauwe (2010) illustrate in four Francophone West African countries how the motivation behind decentralization in education was part of a broader process of decentralization, which was driven by a conviction by government and major donors that "decentralized management is more efficient and less costly than traditional centralized control" so reducing "the budgetary difficulties of central governments" (2010: 33).

Basing decentralization on the need to cut costs in effect transfers responsibility for schooling costs (and risks) onto local communities, local government, NGOs, the private sector and the schools themselves (Pillay 1995). The assumption is that if the responsibility for education is devolved to a local level, that this will lead to the generation of new funds for schools and allow the expansion of education opportunity (Pillay 1995). The danger is that overall less funding is spent on education and that this creates opportunities for middle class communities to improve their schools while those serving poorer communities, with little access to new funding, are starved of resources. This is even the case in South Africa which has a relatively well-funded education system which is under-performing (Nyanda 2014). As a result, schools and principals in South Africa, and particularly in township and rural areas, which have been historically under-funded and cannot mobilise funds easily from their communities, are often ambivalent about SBM (Botha 2006). This ambivalence is seen in other SSA countries (Kiragu et al 2013), where school-based survey respondents, prior to SBM being

introduced, indicated concerns about the impact of local politics, limited resources and personnel, and lack of commitment by stakeholders, and had concerns it might lead to conflict among the stakeholders, misuse and embezzlement of funds, delays in decision-making, lack of clear demarcation of duties, and conflicts of interest.

These concerns are compounded by the menu of powers which are devolved and the lack of funds in many SSA countries to implement them. Certain authorities are rarely devolved to public schools in SSA, including the authority to set the curriculum the school delivers and the right to hire and particularly fire permanent staff (though many systems, including South Africa and Zimbabwe (Majgaard & Mingat 2012) allow schools to appoint their own additional teachers if they can mobilise the funds). These are powers central ministries of education hold onto for the public sector, although these powers are available to the growing number of low-cost private schools in most SSA countries.

Control of the curriculum provides the central ministry with the confidence about what is being taught – and influence over the messaging within the curriculum – and also allows the central government to manage a register of allowable textbooks, with all the financial clout and advantage this gives individual officials. However, there is more teacher involvement in many countries in the development of the curriculum than there was in the past, (even if it is just through teacher representatives sitting on curriculum panels) and more flexibility within the school over implementing the curriculum (Jansen & Middlewood 2003).

The control of hiring and firing of staff leaves the authorities the power to reward friends and family with posts. No SSA education system allows secondary schools to appoint substantive teachers free of all government involvement. However, a few countries in SSA allow schools to short-list, interview and recommend their preferred candidate for hiring by the Ministry or public service commission. These countries include Mauritius, South Africa, Namibia, and rural schools in Lesotho (Majgaard & Mingat 2012; Namibia Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture 2016; Prew 2013b; South African Department of Education 2016a). Selection of teaching staff by schools can be fraught with problems. There is a tendency of community members who sit on the school board and so are involved in the process to appoint ‘sons of the soil’ or political party cadres, which does not necessarily recognise skill. As a result, in South Africa the Department of Basic Education is trying to erode the right of SGBs to appoint educators into promotion posts (South African Department of Basic Education 2018). In part this is a reaction to a national scandal where teaching posts have been ‘sold’ (DBE 2016b). Ghana has experienced a similar scandal (www.ghanaweb.com).

Decentralization to schools implies the provision of grants to schools, and so, as de Grauwe (2013) neatly summarises it, the “decentralization of (both) education and corruption”. The opportunity for fraud is increased when funds are provided irregularly to schools and where the schools are not under a requirement to account for and manage the funds transparently (de Grauwe 2013; Levacic and Downes 2004). Unfortunately, schools in SSA are often the victims of irregular and opaque grant flows, which complicates planning (Kayabwe & Nabacwa 2014; Nampota & Chiwaula 2014) and maximises the opportunities for fraud, as it makes community monitoring of income and expenditure very difficult (de Grauwe 2013). Primary schools are more at risk than secondary schools as the latter usually have stronger staff skills (including often a commerce teacher who can help with the school accounts), a more empowered school governing body, and more checks and balances on the management of the school’s financial books. Where graft is found in secondary schools it is often more related to examination administration and to irregular tenders for textbooks, building work and provision of services (Berkman 2013; Whawo 2015).

The growth of SBM in secondary schools in SSA has been accompanied by a positive growth in the generation and use of data at school and system levels. This data means that the system is better informed and has allowed better tracking of teacher and learner attendance as well as creating realtime data at district level on absenteeism and where teachers are working and where replacement staff are required (McMeekin 2013). However, McMeekin asserts that verification of data is required to ensure that data is not falsified at various levels in the system for selfish reasons. Lack of verification creates conditions for schools to hide negative data and exaggerate any data which may lead to increased funding, such as learner enrolment.

Generally, the secondary schools which have grabbed the opportunities which SBM – and decentralization more generally – have offered are those which were already the most functional. This is in line with the reaction to all innovations and instructions, which such schools are better able to indigenise to the school and own, making it work for the school (CDE 2011; Mzabalazo Advisory Services 2016). In contrast, struggling schools which have weak management teams and are often led autocratically tend to be destabilised by innovation, including the demands of SBM (Mzabalazo Advisory Services 2016). Ironically often the latter are the very schools which decentralization was aimed at assisting. Compared to primary schools, which are often buffeted by innovations, secondary schools tend to be more stable and are more likely to be confidently and professionally led, with greater depth and knowledge in their staff and governors, so are generally more resilient and able to absorb – or resist – change. They are more likely to see change as an opportunity rather than a threat. So, SBM tends to be more successfully implemented in better organised and managed schools compared to those which are poorly led and in secondary schools rather than primary schools.

Across SSA, secondary schools generally, as a reaction to SBM and devolution of responsibilities, have become more democratic in their management. As a result, there has been a shift from more authoritarian modes of school management to ones with distributed power and more focus on leadership alongside management. This has been particularly explored in South Africa with its strong research community (e.g. Botha & Triegaardt 2017). This has not been conflict-free, as greater democratization and the integration of various stakeholder groups into the decision-making processes of the school can lead to tensions (Bush et al 2006). This is particularly common among factions of parents and between parents and teachers. Teachers often indicate frustration at the lack of parental and community engagement with school governance which then undermines the whole basis for SBM as it leads to greater inefficiencies and falling performance (Ayeni & Ibukun 2013). In addition, various studies have indicated that poorer parents in both middle-class schools and rural schools feel uncomfortable about not being able to contribute funds, as the school seeks new funding lines through parents, so avoid school governance and parent meetings (Bonilla Bogaert et al 2013; Tikly and Mabogoane 1997).

Bonilla Bogaert et al (2013) argue that decentralization in African schooling systems often leads to structural and procedural bottlenecks which require effective management at all levels. This is because SBM is built on three assumptions: that communities will participate; that community members have capacity to improve the school; and that the school-district office interaction supports the accountability of all actors and promotes efficiency in school management. While South Africa and a number of other SSA countries have been successful in electing and maintaining school governance structures, and have relatively functional district offices, some education systems have struggled to establish such structures. In Nigeria the lack of skills among community members and the use of directives to set up school governance structures has led to an estimate that 60% are not functioning (Ayeni & Ibukun 2013). Motala and Pampallis (2001) predicted that this would be the result when considerable powers are devolved through legislation to communities with limited capacity and

expertise. The lack of literacy and management skills at local government level and in communities, particularly rural communities, is a common reason cited for the failure of school governing bodies to play the role assigned them under SBM. Some countries, such as South Africa, have helped alleviate this concern by intensive training of school governance members often alongside district officers (Tsoetsi et al 2008; Padayachee et al. 2014). Given that membership of the governance structures changes regularly through elections, training is an expensive process which needs to be repeated every few years (Padayachee et al. 2014). In Wa, Ghana, the school governance structures have formed a coalition across schools. This coalition allows them to solve common challenges, engage the district and regional education offices on equal terms, train members and act as a funding conduit (Bonilla Bogaert et al 2013).

The Case of SBM in South Africa

From the dawning of the post-apartheid dispensation in 1994 there was a commitment to decentralization, or at least deconcentration, across government. In education this was articulated by the South African Schools' Act (SASA) 1996a, which provided for the gradual devolution of considerable powers to schools through their school governing bodies, which could apply for powers under Section 21 of the Act. Under this section schools could apply for all or some of the following five powers:

- Maintenance and improve the school's infrastructure;
- Set the school's extramural curriculum and determine the subjects to be offered;
- Purchase textbooks, educational materials and equipment;
- Pay for services (water, electricity) used by the school;
- Other functions consistent with the Act.

In the 2000s most schools were given no-fee status, which means that they couldn't charge any user fees from learners. This put the onus on the state to provide adequate funds for these schools to operate. The policy on resourcing public schools was in part aimed at targeting resources, in a pro-poor manner, to mitigate the skewed impact of race-based school funding under the apartheid regime. This has been achieved to a large extent and most schools have adequate funds to manage their responsibilities, with the cash transfers being managed by the school and its SGB (Nyanda 2014).

Along with political decentralization which confers powers on the School Governing Bodies (SGB), the education establishment has pursued a policy of administrative decentralization, which devolves power to the school management team (SMT) and so leads to SBM (Thurlow 2003). Collectively these actions have provided 'Section 21 schools' with considerable autonomy.

A problem arose in some schools with the SGB being conferred with Section 21 powers by the provincial authorities before it was ready for such responsibility. This was allowed for within the legislation, although it had been assumed that the schools would individually apply for specific powers when they felt ready to manage them. When the powers were conferred on schools without their agreement, schools were often worried about adopting these powers as they did not believe the circular giving them the powers, or did not know how to implement them, having had no training, or through concern that the funding would not be made available for them to manage the power effectively (DDSP 2003). The first concern – that the circular may not be trustworthy – indicates the problem of conferring SBM powers on schools which have no experience of managing their own space. There was also a concern in rural and peri-urban schools that their communities would not support them and may accuse the principal of mismanaging funds. This situation is typical of weak institutions (Agesa 2000; Pillay 2004) and where government in decentralizing withdraws from close monitoring of them – relying on the local community to do so, but not empowering the community with skills to do this – while also providing funds directly to the school (Serfontein & de Waal 2015).

Key documents including the Task Team Report on Education Management Development (South African Department of Education 1996b) and the Standards for Principals (South African Department of Basic Education 2016a) define SBM and roles of school managers in the context of SASA. Both documents stress that SBM in itself does not assure transformation, and that real improvement will only come with competent management and transformational leadership of schools and with distributed leadership – sharing of responsibilities amongst school stakeholders. Both documents also position value-led management and curriculum/instructional leadership at the core of the principal's role.

A key power devolved to school level was that of selecting staff and even the school principal. The regulations allow that the school will then recommend three possible candidates for appointment with the provincial Minister making the final selection. The provincial Minister and staff rarely do so, and instead normally appoint the first on the School's governing body's (SGB) shortlist unless the department has been informed that there is a dispute over the post (Prew 2013b:67). The exponential increase in school-based corruption in South Africa has accompanied the increase in the number of principals appointed on the recommendations of SGBs, to a situation where about 11% of all corruption cases reported across all sectors are related to schools (Corruption Watch 2018; The South African 2018), which makes education the sector with the most cases reported. The report states that "the trend features principals, school governing body members and staff members conspiring and colluding to rob schools of funds and resources or to flout procurement and employment processes" (Corruption Watch 2018: 13).

Significantly, the South African Department of Basic Education is realising that simply handing powers and even budget to school principals is not enough to create real SBM. Hence in October 2018 the DBE held a workshop to ascertain what needs to be done to empower principals so they can manage their schools effectively. The Director for Education Management stated, "The Department is looking into a long-term plan of handing administrative powers to principals and to establish autonomous and self-managing schools. A School Principal Induction Programme for newly appointed principals is one of the Department's strategies to professionalise principalship in addition to standards, qualifications and appointment processes to ensure that only qualified and competent teachers are appointed as school principals". This has been on the cards for a decade, but is now receiving the support of the senior management in the DBE.

Most South African schools are now largely self-managing within the terms of Section 21 of SASA. They do not have control of the curriculum they teach. However, these schools are a lot closer to having SBM than in most SSA countries.

Conclusion

While there have been some attempts to decentralize management and governance to secondary schools in SSA, in line with international trends, it has often been done grudgingly and with reservations. In most countries the process is driven by donors, with limited SSA government commitment and buy-in. This helps explain why even after a myriad of projects have had SBM and decentralization at the core of their theory of change, in much of SSA secondary schools are still lacking real autonomy. Both push and pull factors account for this. Governments are wary of losing control over important and often profitable functions like appointing school staff and setting the curriculum. On the other side schools struggle to get their communities to engage and take responsibility, and are also wary of the intentions of government when it offloads financial responsibilities onto schools. Against this generally gloomy situation, there are education systems which are making a serious

attempt at decentralizing school management and governance, and positive experiences of schools which have taken the initiative and made a success of SBM and in the process increased learner performance.

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