Transforming Rural Secondary Schools in Developing Countries: Towards Educational Equity in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
Because of various challenges that rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe face, such as isolation, recruiting and retention of personnel and sub-standard accommodation for teachers, among others, leaders at all levels of the education system are often required to design appropriate transformational strategies (Ncube, 2014). This case study, whose purpose was to solicit views on how to transform rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe, sought the insights of 5 chairpersons of School Development Committees (SDCs) of 5 criterion sampled rural secondary schools. The study was guided by two related questions, viz: What are the main obstacles to the achievement of educational equity in Zimbabwe’s rural secondary schools? and How could Zimbabwe’s rural secondary schools be transformed to achieve educational equity? The study employed a questview as a qualitative research technique to generate data. The participants identified five broad barriers to the achievement of educational equity in Zimbabwe’s rural secondary schools, namely: poor conditions; ineffective school leadership; limited community and parental participation; unmet needs of students; and lack of quality teachers. Consequently, the participants proffered the following transformational strategies: making use of local resources; creating a vision for the school; soliciting community and parental support; providing quality teachers; employing technology; and providing parental and community development opportunities. The participants also strongly felt that supporting teachers and other essential staff who choose to work in rural settings is vital in the quest to transform rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The study has highlighted evidence-based strategies for transforming rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. This shift in emphasis is significant to the extent that it attempts to persuade developing countries, including Zimbabwe, to scale up the use of local resources to resolve local challenges experienced by rural secondary schools.

Keywords: educational equity, criterion sampled, qualitative research, questview, school development committees, contextualised, data generation and transformational strategies

INTRODUCTION
The disparity, in terms of educational equity, that exists between rural and urban secondary schools in developing countries, including Zimbabwe, is extensively documented. Educational equity is based on the principles of fairness and justice in allocating resources, opportunities, treatment, and success for every student. Educational equity strategies with regards to the urban-rural dichotomy attempts to promote the real possibility of equality of educational results for both rural and urban students. In this vein, educational equity strategies are transformational in character and are planned, systemic, and focused on the core of the teaching and learning of all students. The objective of this study, consequently, is to proffer some strategies that could be used to transform rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe with a view to achieving educational equality.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
The task of achieving equity between urban and rural students in Zimbabwe continues to be a vexing one for educators at various levels. In the case of rural secondary schools, the actual environment makes it extremely difficult for their students to succeed (Berliner, 2004). It is, therefore, out of this educational inequity that the following research question for this study emerges: How could the rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe be transformed in order to achieve educational equity?

Pursuant to this research question, the following sub-questions were developed to guide the study more specifically:

- What are the main obstacles to the achievement of educational equity in Zimbabwe’s rural secondary schools?
- How could Zimbabwe’s rural secondary schools be transformed to achieve educational equity?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
Berliner (2004) aptly points out that educational equity in respect of the rural-urban dichotomy has two interrelated dimensions. One is the issue of fairness, in that achievement ought to be based upon ability and application, and not on factors such as geographical location, socio-economic status or ethnicity. The second dimension is that all students regardless of their geographical location or socio-economic status have a right to basic functioning literacy and numeracy. In the interest of educational equity, therefore, it becomes imperative that the educational gap between rural and urban secondary schools be addressed.
Carlson et al. (2002) and Ncube (2014) argue that due to challenges that rural secondary schools face, such as poverty, location of rural schools, recruiting and retaining of personnel, lower salaries, housing shortages, among others, leaders at all levels of the secondary system are often called upon to design their own transformational approaches. In this regard, Redding and Walberg (2012) posit that rural secondary schools must rely heavily on available resources and use them wisely and creatively to drive the transformation process. For instance, as Redding and Walberg (2012) add, there are many positive community attributes and resources such as strong family and community ties that rural secondary schools can leverage.

Carlson et al. (2002) point out that several studies have found out that parents in rural areas tend to be less involved in their children’s lives and are more intimidating in their rearing strategies. Similarly, on the issue of involvement, Ncube (2014) opines that the quality of rural secondary schools depends on the extent of community involvement in the activities of the school. In this regard, Ncube (2014) poignantly makes the conclusion that the community has an enormous impact on rural schools and students.

Monk (2007) posits that supporting teachers in rural settings is critical to retaining them in their positions. In this regard, Redding and Walberg (2012) add that to recruit qualified teachers to rural secondary schools, authorities need to offer equitable pay and incentives. Redding and Walberg (2012) further suggest the employment of technology as an important way of transforming rural secondary schools.

**METHODOLOGY**
This study is anchored in the qualitative paradigm which is based on the philosophy that reality is subjective. Specifically, the study employed a case study methodology, with special reference to the instrumental type of a case study. McLeod (2008) explains that a case study is instrumental when it is used to understand more than what is obvious to the observer. In this sense, a case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed. By design, a case study is meant to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants (McLeod, 2008).

**PARTICIPANTS**
Case studies tend, perhaps by character, to be selective, focusing on one or two issues that are fundamental to understanding the system being examined. Informed by this belief, the researcher chose the criterion sampling technique to select, initially one rural educational province out of the eight largely rural educational provinces, after which he once again criterion sampled five rural secondary schools which had registered zero pass rates in the “O” Level Examinations of the preceding year. The chairpersons of the School Development Committees (SDCs) of the five criterion sampled rural secondary schools, as bona fide representatives of parents, were then used as units of analysis. The choice of the units of analysis was guided by a statement of caution by Feagin et al. (1991) who aptly argue that studies of the powerless should not always be presented from the viewpoint of the “elite”.

**THE QUESTVIEW**
The researcher used a questview with two questions on demographic data and five open-ended questions which were extracted from the two sub-research questions. The questview instrument afforded the participants to move from “public accounts” towards “private accounts”.

**DATA GENERATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS**
As Patton (2002) aptly notes, unstructured interviews require a large investment of time. This is because they aim for depth of information, which can be time-consuming to obtain, analyse and interpret. The aim, during the interview, was to move from ‘public accounts’ towards ‘private accounts’ as given by the participants. In other words, with the aid of the two sub-questions, probes and follow-up questions, the researcher guided each participant to go from the sort of answers that an interviewee would give to anyone towards the type of answer that reveals his or her true feelings and views. Where a participant chose to elaborate using the local language, he or she was allowed to do so. The statements so made were then translated to English.

Interviews were recorded on audiotape and thereafter transcribed into a written form. The researcher then proceeded to conduct a content analysis of the data obtained from the participants. The analysis sought to, among other things, discern themes and sub-themes from the various views expressed by the participants.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**
The analytical approach used was informed by the recursive abstraction technique and guided by the following research questions:

- What are the main obstacles to the achievement of educational equity in Zimbabwe’s rural secondary schools?
- How could Zimbabwe’s rural secondary schools be transformed to achieve educational equity?

**Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>nf</th>
<th>%f</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Demographic characteristics by sex (n=5)
As Table 1 indicates, the participants comprised 4 males and 1 female. This disparity is not surprising as it tends to confirm the gender gap with regards to senior management in education in Zimbabwe.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics by level of education (n=5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational level</th>
<th>nf</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O-A Level</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 indicates the distribution of participants by level of education. It is significant to note that 80% of the participants had an educational level of higher than O-Level. Perhaps this can be attributable to the fact that 3 of the participants were retired persons who had spent a great deal of their productive years working in the urban settings.

Participants’ Views on the Obstacles to the Achievement of Educational Equity in Zimbabwe’s Rural Secondary Schools

As Table 3 indicates, the participants cited six themes in respect of what they considered to be obstacles to achievement to educational equity in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe as follows: poor conditions; administrative challenges; limited community and parental participation; unmet needs of students; and lack of quality teachers. Ncube (2014) appears to buttress these thematic groupings when he cites teacher qualification, money, school attendance and parental involvement, among others, as some of the main challenges that exist in rural secondary schools in developing countries. In addition, the participants generated fifteen sub-themes. We now discuss each of the emerging themes in the order they have been arranged.

### Poor Conditions

There was a general consensus among the six participants that the general poor conditions that obtain in the rural areas militate against any meaningful achievement of educational equity in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. In this regard, De Young (1991) singles out poverty as a major problem that exists in most rural secondary schools in developing countries. As most participants aptly observed, a critical factor as to why rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe have such problems is the funding that they receive. The views of the participants in this study seem to affirm the conclusions reached by McClure and Reeves (2004) that rural secondary schools in developing countries face poor conditions that their learners are exposed to on a daily basis. In elaboration, McClure and Reeves

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### Administrative challenges

- Under-qualified principals
- Limited supervision
- Geographical isolation from major cities

### Limited community and parental participation

- Communities around rural secondary schools tend to be both physically and socially detached their schools
- Communities are poor

### Unmet needs of the students

- Most rural secondary students come from economically marginalised families.
- Most rural secondary school students lack motivation.
- Students in rural secondary schools lack exposure to technology.

### Lack of quality teachers

- Social, professional and cultural isolation.

### Substantiating statements

- Some lessons are conducted in the open; in some instances under a tree” (Participant 2).
- “Because of lack of funding, the condition of most of our rural schools is terrible” (Participant 4).
- “There are no computers at our schools. We hear that every urban secondary school has computers” (Participant 1).
- “Most rural secondary schools such as ours are manned by temporary teachers” (Participant 2).
- “This school has not been inspected in years” (Participant 1).
- “It is difficult to buy anything for the remote rural secondary schools like ours” (Participant 5).
- “Our community does not seem to value education” (Participant 4).
- Communities are poor. “There are no income-generating projects in this area” (Participant 2).
- “Many students go to school without having had anything to eat in the morning” (Participant 3).
- “Students in rural secondary schools like ours do not receive any encouragement from their parents” (Participant 5).
- “Some of our children have not seen a computer” (Participant 2).
- “Many teachers do not want to stay in rural areas” (Participant 4).
- Retention of teachers is difficult. “Teachers “run away” as soon as they come her and see our school” (Participant 1).
add that these schools lack the facilities, learning materials and programmes that wealthier schools in urban settings have.

Administrative Challenges
Four of the six participants asserted that most rural secondary schools were being managed by under-qualified persons. In amplification, the participants contended that this resulted in blurred transformational processes because of general lack of vision on the part of school leadership. Harber and Davies (2006) seem to affirm this notion when they opine that school leadership is often seen as a key variable in school effectiveness studies.

Limited Community and Parental Participation
The variable of lack of active participation by communities in most rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe was cited by five of the six participants. All the five participants highlighted the fact that communities have a huge influence in rural environments, explaining that rural communities have relationships that are close. In this context, the participants argued that parents, families and communities in rural settings are crucial to learner achievement. Most participants also stressed the point that lack of participation by parents and communities in the development of rural secondary schools is widespread. These views by the participants in this study seem to lend credence to a research by Brown (2003) which showed that community norms and values are more influential for rural secondary school students than urban secondary school students.

Unmet Needs of Students
Four of the participants opined that most rural secondary school students do not receive sufficient support and encouragement from their teachers, parents or communities. In amplification, the participants observed that parents are role models for the children. In this regard, the participants noted that most rural secondary students do not receive adequate levels of parental support which would influence student motivation and feelings towards academic achievement.

Lack of quality teachers
One other major challenge that was highlighted by all the six participants was the lack of quality teachers. In amplification, most participants mentioned two variables in particular: firstly, reluctance of qualified and experienced teachers to work in rural secondary schools and secondly, the proliferation of untrained teachers in most rural secondary schools. Most participants’ sentiments, in this regard, seemed to buttress De Young’s (1991) conclusion that rural secondary schools in developing countries struggle to find quality teachers and if they do, these schools find it even more vexing to retain them. This situation leaves most rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe with no option but to engage large numbers of unqualified teachers, commonly referred to as “temporary teachers.” In turn, the teaching suffers and so do the prospects of achieving educational equity.

Participants’ Views on Possible Strategies for Transforming Rural Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe
Responding to the question on possible strategies and actions for transforming rural secondary schools in order to trigger achievement of educational equity, the participants proffered various views which are summarized in Table 4.

Responding to the question on how rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe could be transformed to achieve educational equity, participants advanced several strategies which were collapsed into six thematic areas as indicated in Table 5. The discussion that follows, therefore, focuses on each thematic strategy in turn.

Making use of Local Ideas and Resources
Four out of six participants suggested that rural school leaders and staff should seek input from the community and parents regarding, for instance, the history of the community and the school. The participants also stressed the need to use local resources and skills. In amplification, the participants opined that the school leaders should consult with the communities and parents regarding the changes that they feel might be needed. The participants’ views, in this regard, seem to affirm the warning by Carson et al (2002) that those seeking to transform long-held practices in the rural secondary schools without consulting with the communities within which the schools are situated risk being viewed as outsiders wanting to impose their will on the local communities.

, three participants thought it would be also be crucial to gather inputs from parents and students in terms of what resources would be required and what changes would be needed in order to transform rural secondary schools. The import of the participants’ views seem to be emphasising the importance of listening to the stakeholders’ voices when considering the transformation of rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe.
Table 4: Strategies and actions for transforming rural secondary schools towards educational equity in Zimbabwe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging themes</th>
<th>Emerging sub-themes</th>
<th>Substantiating statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relying on local resources</td>
<td>Making use of local resources</td>
<td>“Our area is full of natural resources, but they are not benefiting from these resources” (Participant 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Many of our community members have a lot skills that they could offer to the schools if asked to do so” (Participant 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a vision for the transformation process</td>
<td>Merging views of the school with those of community members</td>
<td>“Many principals who have worked at our school make the mistake of thinking that community members are uneducated - therefore their views do not matter” (Participant 4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“We require principals who will respect our culture, not young people who think they know better that community members” (participant 2).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soliciting support from community members</td>
<td>Need for communities to work together with rural secondary schools to drive the transformation process.</td>
<td>“There is need for the Government to deploy to our schools experienced principals who are capable of mobilising the community to support the schools” (Participant 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“The transformation process requires strategic planning, with the schools and the community working together” (Participant 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“As the community, we need to be consulted when new programmes are being introduced” (Participant 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing quality teachers</td>
<td>Need for trained teachers</td>
<td>“The Government should hire qualified teachers for our schools. At the moment, our schools are manned by under-qualified teachers and this is affected the performance our children” (Participant 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“The Government should pay incentives to those teachers who choose to work in rural schools such as ours” (Participant 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employing technology</td>
<td>Making use of computers</td>
<td>“We hear that children in urban secondary schools are now using computers to look for information. We want our children to learn how to use computers as well” (Participant 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Our rural schools need to employ technology so as to provide students and teachers with learning opportunities” (Participant 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing parental and community development opportunities</td>
<td>Community involvement</td>
<td>“It is important that Government should educate some rural parents and the community about the value of education” (Participant 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Parents should also be provided with meaningful volunteer opportunities” (Participant 5).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Creating a vision for the transformation process

All the six participants repeatedly stressed the importance of gathering input from all stakeholders and communicating the need for change in the way rural secondary schools ought to be run in order to promote educational equity. This suggestion seems to lend credence to the opinion by Carlson et al (2002) that school staff, parents, students and other stakeholders ought to be included in creating the vision and basis for the transformation process to be employed.

Two participants pointed out that the change process in the rural areas require honest discussions about the barriers to educational equity and the positive effects that change would bring to the community and the students. Elaborating on this idea, the two participants argued that integrating the existing culture, values and norms into the transformational process would trigger buy-in from the parents and other community stakeholders. This view seems to be in sync with the suggestion by Redding and Walberg (2012) that involving parents and other community stakeholders in strategic planning can create a supportive environment for transforming rural secondary schools in order to improve student achievement.

Providing Quality Teachers

The six participants were unanimous on the need to support teachers and other essential staff who choose to work in rural settings. In amplification, the participants pointed out that giving incentives to teachers who chose to work in the rural secondary
schools is vital to retaining them in their positions. The participants’ views on the provision of quality teachers as an important variable of rural secondary school transformation finds support from Redding and Walberg (2012) who strongly assert that people closest to the student have the greatest impact on the student’s performance. Therefore, in addressing low-performance in schools, it is critical to hire highly effective, skilled and credentialed teachers. One participant added that in order for the Government to recruit qualified teachers who are willing to come to the rural secondary schools, it should offer equitable pay and what he termed “discomfort allowance”.

**Employing Technology**

Three participants made the point that rural secondary schools may need to rely on technology to provide students with additional learning opportunities and teachers with necessary professional development. Technology can enable students to access a wider range of curricular content than is available at the school. Unfortunately, rural schools are generally limited in the range of classes they can offer, in access to educational resources that might advance students’ learning in their particular areas of interest, and in the ability to provide remedial support to struggling students (Redding and Walberg, 2012). In this regard, the participants went on to suggest that the use of technology would allow students to engage in distance learning.

**Providing Parental and Community Development opportunities**

Two participants spoke passionately about the importance of educating parents and communities in general about the value of education. As Malhoit (2005) aptly points out, some families in rural communities in the rural areas do not see the value of education. In this regard, it is important that rural secondary schools should consider developing a plan and programme that will build parents’ understanding of the value of education and how the transformation process will open opportunities for their children. Furthermore, as Canales et al. (2008) aptly assert, it is crucial to provide frequent and transparent communication to all the stakeholders regarding

- the progress of the transformation effort;
- its impact on students’ achievement;
- the school’s performance;
- how the school intends to address and close the achievement gap,
- how barriers and issues that impede student achievement are being addressed, and
- what the parents’ and community’s roles are in supporting the improvement effort.

One of the participants opined that because the school is usually the centre of the community, it is crucial to provide ongoing, purposeful training and learning activities for parents and the community so as to empower them to meaningfully to the transformation of the school. Such efforts can also increase parents’ knowledge and skills for helping their children succeed in school. This participant’s view seems to support the assertion by Canales et al (2008) who argue that providing much needed services for the community and students can anchor the transformational approach in the existing culture and create a framework for the change process to establish roots for the school’s new way of operating.

**CONCLUSION**

It is the conclusion of this study that rural secondary school issues of equity issues cannot be addressed by a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement, but current research and the contributions of the six participants in this study offer some solutions and insights into turning around rural secondary schools in developing countries in general and Zimbabwe in particular.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Successful transformation of rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe in the context of the results of this study requires thoughtful and flexible school leadership and staff actions that integrate a community’s unique qualities into the change process. In light of this, it is recommended that any efforts to transform rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe should:

- take into account the views of the parents, the community and students;
- integrate the unique attributes and resources found in the rural areas into secondary school transformation efforts;
- ensure that quality teachers are given incentives to persuade them to remain at the rural secondary schools; and
- attempt to introduce or enhance the use of technology in the rural secondary schools.

**REFERENCES**


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