

## Rurality and Curriculum Implementation in Zimbabwean Primary Schools: Challenges and Opportunities

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### ABSTRACT

The paper argues that harnessing community epistemologies can greatly improve the implementation of the curriculum in Zimbabwean rural primary schools. The contribution of rural communities in educational discourses has been less valued and this position is being challenged given the wealth of knowledge and skills that are prevalent in rural communities. Employing the Social Capital Theory, the study empirically analyses the implications of engaging rural communities based on a qualitative descriptive survey design with a small purposefully selected sample of four rural primary schools, twenty primary school teachers, and ten community members. The study employed focus group discussion and in-depth unstructured interviews in data collection. The research findings indicated that rural teachers cannot self-provide all the educational knowledge critical for quality primary school education. They need to meaningfully engage community members in the implementation of the primary school curriculum. Furthermore, rural community members felt the primary schools did not value their contributions and, therefore, did not engage them in curriculum implementation discourses. The study concludes that there is a need to change the current teacher-community relationship practices that erode trust and voluntarism on classroom matters and create favourable win-win educational conditions. The study recommends that teachers identify specific attributes of members of the rural community and exploit them for the good of curriculum implementation at the primary school level.

### KEYWORDS

Rurality; rural communities; social networks; community engagement; primary school curriculum; curriculum implementation.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Most educational institutions have underestimated, underrated and disrespected rural communities' involvement in curriculum implementation matters. Teachers and schools have protected themselves from being accessed by these communities. Yet, rural community participation arouses awareness, interest and enthusiasm among the members of the community to actively take part in the educational matters of their children (Chimbi & Jita, 2023). Communities constitute external contexts for schools, and the need to reach out and make use of knowledge resources within communities and pool them together with teacher sources (Doloreux et al., 2023) creates a healthy curriculum implementation environment. What has become important is the possibility of rural communities providing supporting knowledge to teachers which can aid learner success. It is important to point out though that the knowledge from communities may be difficult to extract and use it in curriculum implementation settings as some of it is not well documented and unstructured. Furthermore, and of importance to this study, is the lack of organisational engagement structures for communities to make a claim of their space in the primary school implementation of the curriculum. This is hardly surprising given that rural communities have had reduced access to curriculum implementation in the Zimbabwean education system.

Rural communities remain marginalised in curriculum implementation resulting in declining quality of the learners' experiences. Therefore, it becomes important to continue to explore attempts to bridge the gap between rural communities and teachers to ensure a healthy interaction in curriculum matters. Thus, community engagement becomes critical in primary school teaching and learning contexts as it encompasses context-integrated issues that are of significance to the learners (Nyika & Motalenyane, 2023; Spark, 2022). Community participation in curriculum implementation has great implications for rural contexts given that urban communities offer a wide range of information sources and access points from which learners are exposed to unlike their rural counterparts (Konyana & Motalenyane, 2022; Isaksson, 2023; Makuvire et al., 2023). Thus, together, rural community members bring something refreshingly novel and challenging to the teaching-learning context. This adds value to the learners' experiences. One interesting argument in this debate is that rural schools continue to struggle to attract and retain highly qualified and experienced teachers (Isaksson, 2023; Ntuli & Mahlangu, 2023) raising the need for collaboration between teachers and communities in curriculum implementation. Thus, community participation continues to be a significant factor in curriculum implementation in rural contexts. The strong expectation is that communities and teachers remain the custodians of character and moral building and are keenly interested in the academic and moral success of the learners. The positive result is that communities may take full responsibility of the school product given their own contribution to the process (Chimbunde et al., 2023; Daly, 2022). This raises the trust question between rural communities and teachers, which is a manifestation of the education priority that favours the educational development of the learners. A lack of trust between teachers and communities cannot be seen in isolation, but

may contribute to hostilities with ramifications to the provision of education in rural schools. It becomes important for teachers and community members to balance the arguments about what is best for the learners. Prah (2008) points out that without this partnership education progress is curtailed as teachers fail to exploit indigenous knowledge bases in their community.

Rural communities play a big role in building and developing education (Saepudin & Mulyono, 2019). The power of interaction between teachers and rural community members give credence to the fact that local human potential is not left behind and forgotten in curriculum implementation matters. This kind of blended curriculum implementation with a community participation bias is expected to add value in forming better learning experiences for the learners. Thus, the need to support the primary school teachers' rapport with the rural members of the community cannot be overemphasised. The new global educational developments have led to renewed interests to build active communities in the provision of education. Collaborating with communities in curriculum delivery should not be viewed as counterproductive but to produce a relevant school product in accordance with the social and cultural demands of the community (Saepudin & Mulyono, 2019). In rural settings, it appears teachers have been enduring on their own in the classroom 'wilderness' (Bernhardt, 2006). Therefore, how rural community members could efficaciously collaborate with primary school teachers in the delivery of the curriculum has become an important research area.

In this paper, the participation of communities in curriculum implementation is regarded as the engagement of parents and other community stakeholders in supporting and contributing to successful teaching and learning activities of learners. This involvement of the rural communities can start from the school-level planning of curricula activities, implementation, and evaluation (Weldegebriel, 2014). In this study, curriculum implementation is understood as how teachers through systematic planning and organisation deliver instruction and assessment in the teaching-learning context. It also takes into account how teachers can be assisted by knowledgeable members of the community to enable them to effectively present content that can be easily accessed by learners in a creative and interesting manner (Asare, 2023). Asare (2023) further notes that the process involves the teachers interpreting the curriculum documents and selecting what is age appropriate to the learners so that learning takes place. Thus, this affirms teachers as key curriculum implementers at this stage and their position should not be compromised. At the same time, other education stakeholders can also assist teachers when called upon either directly or otherwise so that the burden on teachers is lessened as they do their work (Makewa & Ngussa, 2015).

Of importance to note is that community participation in curriculum implementation sounds a strange idea as evidenced by Ethiopian teachers' responses in Swift–Morgan's (2006:347) study;

*There is no viable role for rural communities in the classroom, said one teacher. Because parents are not educated, voiced another group of teachers, they have nothing to contribute to*

*the teaching and learning process. Community involvement in the classroom would provide no advantage.*

Largely, rural community members see the classroom as a straight-jacket which is a teacher professional area where they do not have any meaningful role to play. In fact, the effectiveness of the teachers is measured by these rural communities through the success of learners in public examinations (Swift-Morgan, 2006). While rural communities may have been previously left out of the curriculum implementation process, today they are transitioning from that stage and are determined to contribute to the education of their children. Usually, teachers and rural community members have used high poverty rates and low education as factors that have militated against rural communities' ability to participate in curriculum implementation matters. However, what has emerged is that communities have identifiable strengths such as self-organisation, social capital and networks, access to community resources and the willingness to participate (Moore et al., 2023) and work together with teachers. It becomes incumbent upon rural teachers to harness the rural community strengths, skills, knowledge and abilities and turn them into educational assets.

Needless to say that one area that has militated against community participation in curriculum implementation has been teacher attitudes. Rural teachers feel that these community members do not have what it takes to contribute to curriculum implementation apart from supporting their children with requisite educational material and resources to enable them to do their work effectively. Beyond that, they cannot participate as they are not trained to do so. In addition, they cannot be held accountable when things go wrong in the end. Yet, according to Moore et al. (2023), the contention is not on accountability, as it is commonplace that teachers remain accountable, but it is about sharing educationally relevant knowledge and experiences. This can be achieved through sharing traditions, cultural norms, beliefs, values and symbols, and oral histories, which some teachers may not have. Within these limits, the learners are connected with their past and helps them understand the future. Moore et al (2023) further say that teaching from this point becomes real and relevant information for the learners as it is drawn from community life and the group's cultural heritage. Thus, the attitudes displayed by teachers towards threats to their professional life and the protectionist thinking falls off. According to Nishimura (2017) having communities participating in curriculum implementation complements teacher efforts rather than competing with teachers in the teaching spaces. According to MacLean (2003) teachers fear that their profession would be diluted, hence defending their territories, fear that their inadequacies would be opened up to 'strangers', violation of classroom etiquette, the thinking about wasting time for 'real' teaching and learning and examinations, these have no place in modern day provision of education.

Scholarship on community participation have not explicitly incorporated the concept of participation in curriculum implementation but discourses and networks in rural development and other issues outside the classroom (Saepudin & Mulyono, 2019; Isaksson, 2023; Iyengar, 2021). It is of paramount importance to appreciate that rural teachers need to network so that

their teaching is not within the narrow confines of the classroom but encompasses broader knowledge forms which the communities can offer. Developing a positive attitude towards rural communities and valuing their contributions creates a health working relationship and has the potential to build a strong and sustainable curriculum implementation partnership. Holcomb (2009) reiterates that there is a need to realise the importance of developing networks that work for successful curriculum implementation in rural schools.

Sadly, Kaspas and Gyan (2023) reminds us that the engagement is usually saddled with communication power play which subdues the interest of community members to participate. Transmitting and messaging information correctly about the role of communities has a positive effect as it builds trust between teachers and communities. Education is continually evolving and better communication between teachers and community members creates satisfaction resulting in curriculum implementation improvement (Salamondra, 2021). Unfortunately, in curriculum implementation, rural community voices disappear without proper communication, yet they are always ready to participate when properly communicated to. What then prompts challenging situations between teachers and communities is a lack of clarity in communication and messaging the right feedback and information related to curriculum implementation issues. Therefore, the ability for teachers and communities to communicate has become more urgent in this engagement context.

With a positive mindset, the rural communities can play an important role in curriculum implementation. There is a need to appreciate that Zimbabwean primary school teachers may not have all the knowledge and skills to teach all the more than eleven subjects they are required to teach (Davis et al., 2002). Teachers need a great deal of support in curriculum implementation.

Given this background, we sought to explore the rural communities and teachers' engagement practices and challenges in curriculum implementation in Zimbabwe's Chivi rural district primary schools. In addition, community participation in curriculum implementation remain under-researched and underrepresented in the research community in Zimbabwe.

The questions that guided the study were:

- To what extent have members of the community been involved in the implementation of the curriculum in Chivi rural district primary schools of Zimbabwe?
- How can the community participation in curriculum implementation be enhanced?

### **Theoretical framework: Social capital theory**

In the new knowledge economy, teacher engagement of rural communities in curriculum implementation has become a central issue. This article employs Social Capital Theory framework as an analytical tool to unpack the teacher-community relations in curriculum implementation. The Social Capital Theory developed by Putnam (2000) with its major tenets of value of all social networks, shared values, trust knowledge and belonging that make social exchange possible (Claridge, 2018) couched this study. Social Capital can be understood in terms of the amount of social participation, volunteering with confidence and reciprocity in

community activities to achieve collective positive outcomes (Gannon & Roberts, 2020; Gerolemou et al., 2022). Thus, Social Capital Theory is about closeness, co-operation, trustworthiness, and reciprocity as strengths that reside in individuals and collectively can be used to improve the quality of life of communities (Smith, 2000-2009, Iyengar, 2021). According to Claridge (2018), with Social Capital Theory, it is not about teachers as omniscient and omnipotent in classroom matters but whom they can work with in order to have a powerful impression on the teaching-learning process. Education always brings communities together and is arguably one of the most important repository of social capital in Zimbabwe.

Social Capital as a theoretical framework informed the researchers to understand that community engagement in curriculum implementation can be realised when teachers appreciate the rural communities' idle education resources (Claridge, 2018) that can be put to good use. The community's role can transcend being observers to what goes on in the classrooms to problem-solvers of classrooms teaching-learning challenges. This is consistent with Tedin and Weiher's (2011) observation of how teaching and learning contexts could be enriched when members of the community share and contribute to knowledge generation and its transmission in the classroom. To this end, teachers have a responsibility to have greater understanding about their own capacities and inadequacies in order to identify those areas where networking and collaboration is needed to enhance teaching and learning processes as implied by the Social Capital Theory. Teachers and communities should not view each other as in competition but in cooperation to impact and enrich the teachers' teaching and the learners' learning lives. There is growing evidence that the collaboration between teachers and communities in classroom issues brings about social cohesion necessary to achieve sustainable educational development (Claridge, 2018). Rural communities, just like any other, are reservoirs of knowledge and skills. By not taking them on board both teachers and learners are disadvantaged as rural schools often operate in contexts where book resources are limited due to financial constraints. Networking and collaboration with these communities help solve some of these challenges.

The article examines the Social Capital framework and provides an opportunity to appreciate the Zimbabwean primary school education context and the education outcomes in a teacher-community curriculum implementation led process. Furthermore, the study makes an important contribution regarding Social Capital by providing relationally dependent opportunities and processes of social contact between teachers and communities in curriculum implementation (Albertson, 2021). For rural teachers to get maximum support from the members of the community, they need to respect and value their contribution and appreciate that the knowledge they possess can edify classroom processes (Claridge, 2018; Gerolemou et al., 2022). The Zimbabwean rural primary school context is so complex that even the most knowledgeable teacher cannot survive without other education stakeholders coming to their aid given the more than thirteen learning areas they are supposed to teach (Mufanechiya & Dube, 2024; Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2011). The concept of Social Capital is useful for

education development in rural areas as it creates a win-win situation. Therefore, there is a need to harness the human capacity from willing members of the rural community as support services for teacher efforts for the full realisation of curriculum implementation in Zimbabwean rural primary schools.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

We adopted the descriptive survey design to couch this research study using qualitative research strategies. Our objective was to gather and interpret information on community participation in curriculum implementation from four randomly selected primary schools. The design choice was motivated by the need to gather data from a heterogeneous group of participants to understand prevailing conditions, practices, processes, trends and making accurate interpretations (Khoa et al., 2023). We used in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussion to gather qualitative data. The qualitative data was presented in descriptive form taking into account the actual language of participants (Tuli, 2010). We found the design flexible enough to accommodate the systematic collection of qualitative data to represent the teachers' lived experiences and community members in the curriculum implementation engagement process. Thus, we were guided by Busetto et al's (2020) view that qualitative designs are characterised by adaptability, receptivity and responsivity to a given context. The main aim was to investigate how community knowledge resources and abilities can be optimally utilised in the implementation of the primary school curriculum in the rural context in Zimbabwe.

### Selection of participants

Primary school teachers and community members who were closely associated with the primary schools were the research participants in this study. We randomly selected four primary schools from the population of twenty-five schools in the district, given the homogeneity of the schools. Twenty teachers (five from each of the four schools) were sampled using the purposive technique with the aid of the primary school heads. Our selection of the primary school teachers took into consideration the most number of years they had been at the school, those with the most number of years in the service and their relationship with the community around the school with little regard to gender balance. As for community members, the ten that were purposively sampled had the following characteristics; they resided within the vicinity of sampled schools, their participation in school organised activities, whether they had a child or a relative learning at the schools, a village opinion leader, belonging to a church organisation and owns a business in the locality. We sampled these community representatives in order to discover their own lived experiences regarding their involvement in the implementation of the curriculum at primary school level (Gilbert, 2011). We identified the community education stakeholders during the initial visit to research sites in Chivi rural district of Masvingo. We were assisted by the school administration as they had a better understanding of the rural communities and their relationships with the school in curriculum implementation processes.

**Data collection**

In the study we used in-depth unstructured individual interviews with community members to gain insights into their subjective experiences and opinions (Busetto et al., 2020). With regards to primary school teachers, we conducted focus-group discussions to explore their expertise and experiences on the engagement with communities in curriculum implementation. In the focus group discussion, we brought together homogeneous group of teacher participants on community engagement on which they shared and compared thoughts (Busetto et al., 2020). We went in person to the research sites at schools and community members' homes, interviewing and discussing with them. Our first contact with the participants allowed us to make arrangements for interviews and focus group discussions. We collected the data on a day and time that was convenient for the participants. We prepared focus group discussion and interview guides to ensure that key characteristics regarding the involvement of rural communities in teaching-learning processes were captured. The duration of focus group discussions and interviews depended on how the major aspects were discussed and usually would not exceed an hour and a half. In line with Gray's (2011) view, the interviews allowed the researchers to get the thoughts, feelings, challenges and aspirations of the community members regarding their participation in the implementation of the curriculum. Using the two data collection methods was consistent with tenets of qualitative studies of trustworthiness and triangulation.

**Data analysis**

We employed the thematic data analysis approach in this study. We used this approach, a non numerical examination to interpret the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022) collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion. The tool enabled us to find common shared meanings, experiences and stories (de Vos et al., 2012) of primary school teachers and community members. The collected data was organised into related concepts, themes and recurring ideas. This required us to make connections between sources of information in a data-guided manner (Krippendorff, 2004). The notion was to fully focus on describing the lived experiences of these education stakeholders regarding their engagement in classroom teaching and learning contexts at primary school level in Zimbabwe.

**Ethical issues**

We respected the relevant ethical principles throughout the research process. Firstly, we sought permission from the education province of Masvingo to get to Chivi primary school sites. With the permission granted, we engaged our participants to properly inform them about the nature of the study, including risks, benefits, and consequences (Taquette & Souza, 2022). Thereafter, we asked our participants to sign consent forms, which also allowed them to voluntarily withdraw when they felt uncomfortable to continue participating in the study. In order to protect our teacher and community participants, we used pseudonyms to ensure that no information was traced back to them. These ethical issues were present in the entire process



ensuring that there were no possibilities of social, moral and intellectual harm (Taquette & Souza, 2022) at any of the phases of the study and thereafter.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The paper's thrust is to appreciate the networking, collaboration and trust between rural teachers and communities in the implementation of the curriculum in Zimbabwe. The collected data speaks to a myriad of challenges, but also presents a lot of opportunities. Using the thematic analysis approach and the collected qualitative data the following themes emerged: Pride and satisfaction; discipline; attitudes; knowledge sharing and development.

#### **Pride, satisfaction and discipline**

The findings indicate that the engagement of community members has become imperative if we are to address the challenges of curriculum implementation in this knowledge economy. Teachers continue to struggle in the classroom in the midst of plenty of human resources who are willing and with a sense of pride and satisfaction can offer their services at no cost. This is contained in the following summarised statements from community members:

*We are more than willing to work together with teachers because both the school and the pupils belong to us. We should work together to build a good reputation for the school and this will give us pride and satisfaction as a community. If there is a healthy partnership, teachers will have the confidence to execute their duties professionally. This kind of partnership brings about growth and sustainable development in both schools and communities. The school's success is also our success.*

In the same vein, one community member noted that the presence of anyone at school, let alone in the classroom enhanced learner discipline. The fear is that they could be reported to their parents or guardians if they are involved in any misconduct. One community member said:

*The presence of a member of the community has a telling disciplinary effect. Learners tend to behave when they see a member of the community at school. A good relationship between the community and schools helps in the discipline of children and this usually leads to their educational achievement and eventually gives the community pride and satisfaction.*

The above statements extend the importance of school–community in learners' education and the attendant advantages. When this partnership brings pride and satisfaction to the community, it raises the level of discipline among learners and eventually their educational achievement and development are enhanced. Discipline here is, thus, seen as a positive way of instilling community values in learners. In this way, the whole rural education ecosystem becomes accountable to learner educational development without any blame game.

The findings also indicate that both teachers and community members celebrate the successes of the learners. According to teachers during focus group discussion, when they work together with community members they felt empowered to make decisions in the best interest of the learner, especially about learner discipline aware that they are supported by

communities. The following statements from teachers summarise some of the merits of an engagement process in which communities take an active role in curriculum implementation:

- *Communities understand why we act the way we do when at school- they have a better appreciation of how the classroom environment operates*
- *Communities learn more about how to support teachers in their work especially when they give homework*
- *We both take great pride when we are both involved in the learning of children that it is a collective effort and not just the teachers.*
- *We have now established a stronger working relationship with communities and no hostilities*
- *There is a high attendance rate and incidences of absenteeism and other forms of indiscipline are minimized thus enhancing curriculum implementation*
- *The engagement brings in refreshingly new dimensions and strategies of delivering content - making learning more interesting*
- *Communities may fill in some knowledge gaps in some learning areas.*

From the above statements from teachers, one can deduce that teachers see a lot of benefits in engaging community members to achieve educational goals. Thus, the findings show that when properly, systematically organised and planned, the involvement of community members in teaching and learning can transform the way education has been provided at primary schools in Zimbabwe. If what teachers said is anything to be believed, they cherish building a powerful thriving and mutual relationship with community members that will grow curriculum implementation in rural primary schools.

The participants also noted attitudes play a critical role in effective school-community partnerships to be realised.

### **Attitudes**

In this paper, attitude was seen as a mindset, a way of thinking or acting positively or negatively in any given context. Attitudes thus include feelings, thoughts and actions. Therefore, attitudes become important in any initiative especially an educational reform.

While the findings revealed that rural community members underlined the importance of the school-community partnership, they blamed some teachers who have attitude problems. According to the community members, some teachers look down upon rural people as less knowledgeable with very little contribution to make in educational settings. One traditional leader had the following views about teacher attitudes towards their contribution in curriculum implementation:

*Some teachers have the mistaken notion that we do not have knowledge and ideas about education hence they often dictate to us what to do. Yet, we help them especially when they give learners homework which we assist in answering. Teachers think that what we only know is to build the school, pay school fees and buy books.*

The findings above reveal that, despite teachers professing the need to work with members of the community, it is becoming clear that the attitude of mistrust still exists that community members do not have the capacity required to make meaningful contributions in curriculum implementation. This illuminates one of the barriers to engaging community members which mirrors an attitude of lack of trust and respect. Communities are simply less recognised in curriculum implementation matters.

From the teachers' perspectives, community involvement in the implementation of the curriculum confined them to other peripheral activities such as attending open days and being present to motivate children during sports days, teach some traditional performances and provide much needed resources for infrastructural development. One teacher had this to say:

*While engaging communities in curriculum implementation may be important to some extent, it should be exercised with a lot of caution because if it is just done anyhow it may disturb and confuse the teaching and learning process. For example, community members should only be involved in their children's education by attending open days and providing material resources to build classrooms for their children. Some community members can also be invited to teach children some traditional dances and not the core curricula.*

Teachers, according to this finding, mostly valued the outside classroom support of the community members where they build school infrastructure, provide monetary and material resources to the school and the learners. The finding supports the feelings that community members have always known that they are isolated from the main curriculum implementation discourses.

However, teachers unanimously agreed that they benefitted from community knowledge and experiences through assisting with homework given to learners. It appears from the findings that teachers viewed this as the only useful contribution of community members to curriculum implementation. One teacher said:

*We will always give children homework in those areas where we need assistance from parents or any other community member, but we cannot invite them to the classroom. The classroom is a restricted area and needs to be treated carefully lest we create unnecessary chaos and panic.*

Of interest is that community members have been unwittingly part of the curriculum implementation process as they provided solutions to academic problems as they also researched and used experiences to provide appropriate responses through homework given to learners. One can then assume that teachers do not want to acknowledge the fact that they may not have some of the traditional knowledge they get through homework, a gap filled in by community members. This has been a way in which teachers have managed to get new ideas through an informally organised process of obtaining academic knowledge from the communities. The information has often come to them without anyone interfering with them in the classroom.

The overall observation by the community members was that their classroom involvement was very minimal if any. One parent observed:

*There are very few members of the community, if any, who work with teachers in the classroom. I do not remember anyone saying that he or she has been asked to assist in teaching any concept. What we have heard are NGOs who are invited to present on various aspects, especially the rights issues. The only time we talk about what children learn at school is when we assist them with school assignments they would have been given by their teachers.*

What cannot be denied by teachers is that while they assume a smart professional identity, they may not dismiss the fact that community members, through homework, have made an indelible contribution to teaching and learning. While teachers get the credit at the end, the connection with communities would have increased and provided a wide range of options and opportunities to solve classroom academic problems.

Some community members were not even aware that such opportunities to contribute in curriculum implementation existed and they felt they were not up to the education standard to make a contribution. The following statement by one parent attests to that:

*The classroom is not meant for us, it's for the educated and the trained teachers.*

In the same vein and in support of their non-involvement one traditional leader said:

*This is not our area and we have never been involved.*

The above views are a clear indication that the community members did not have confidence in themselves. The teachers' negative attitudes towards engaging them drove community members to think that they are not capable of helping out and collaborating with teachers during the process of teaching and learning.

### **Knowledge sharing and development**

When an effective partnership exists between schools and rural communities through knowledge sharing, the outcome is the academic achievement and development of learners. From the findings, one parent reminisced when she lamented:

*Long back teachers used to bring their classes to our homes for us to explain and teach some concepts. We used to call them visiting classes. It was really interesting and it benefited everyone, the child, teacher and parents. These days, schools are now preoccupied with getting money from parents and not the education and development of children.*

The above quote is a clear indication of a parent lamenting on the good old days when they used to enjoy sharing knowledge with the teachers, to the benefit and development of both the school and community.

Another finding appears to suggest that teachers had not found the business community as a potential partner in curriculum implementation. Just like any other community members, teachers and schools have only approached business people in the area of resource mobilisation

through donations as they also advertise their goods and services. One representative from the business community said:

*I have never been invited to the classroom and I don't know anyone in the business community who has been invited to school to teach an aspect or topic. Yet, there are so many topics related to business. If it happens it should be a new development.*

The same could be said from the religious community, they have not been accorded the opportunity to participate in curriculum implementation. The following views from one church leader summarise their observations:

*We have never heard of any church member who has been called to assist with the teaching of children in the classroom. What we have heard of is when some church leaders are called upon to preach the gospel at assemblies but again this is not always done. About getting into the classroom to teach, it's a taboo but we really like it and we are ready to do that if given the chance. This will assist much in imparting moral values to our children.*

Despite their willingness to participate, what is clear from the church and the business community is that teachers had not found a way to connect with them to provide their expertise. Teachers appear not interested in inviting community members to participate in teaching and learning activities.

The voices of community members were collaborated by teachers who felt hesitant to incorporate them into classroom activities. The following are summarised views of teachers in focus group discussions:

*Inviting communities to teach certain concepts would be a waste of valuable teaching time more so given that you might have to correct some issues after their contribution. The fact that they may confuse learners is another problem.*

*Involving them too much might be interpreted by these community members that teachers are not knowledgeable.*

Teachers felt they had a professional responsibility for all the classroom activities and may not listen to pleas for the contribution of 'outsiders'. While they may have accepted some help, they felt they had the capacity to guide the nature of that help and may use it the way they thought was academically necessary. It was also about their professional integrity which had to be protected.

As the participation of communities in curriculum implementation gets more traction, there is a need for teachers to develop a better understanding of how to engage community members so that it becomes less problematic. As we have seen from the findings, it appears teachers have paid lip-service to the community engagement process as they protected themselves and their classrooms. Teachers and communities could come together and make informed choices about how to develop action plans for engagement practices in curriculum implementation.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings in this paper offer a new perspective in examining the curriculum implementation processes on communities traditionally excluded from involvement in curriculum issues. These findings enrich discourses into curriculum spaces about the curriculum accessibility at primary schools in Zimbabwe.

The experiences of the participants indicate that while at face value teachers and rural communities value each other in curriculum implementation, this had not materialized in real practical terms. All indications from teachers seemed to point to a successful teacher-rural community engagement at classroom level and that it had been accessed by both parties, yet the fact has been that teachers had continued to protect their classrooms. Teachers have remained ultra-conservative with traditional norms of what constitutes teaching and learning. This finding resonates with Kasper and Gyan (2023) observation that the engagement between teachers and communities while on the surface appear possible, it is saddled with communication power play which subdues the interest of community members to participate. These findings further support the idea that teachers and communities need to understand each other beyond the superficial level to bridge the teacher-community divide leading to a meaningful engagement relationship. These findings speak to Tedin and Weiher's (2011) observation that schools may result in being effective curriculum implementation sites if communities are given space to make some contribution. In addition, the conversation resonates with Social Capital theory according to Gannon and Roberts (2020) that the amount of social participation, volunteerism and reciprocity in community activities such as education help achieve collective positive educational outcomes.

In the context of the teacher-community participation framework, findings indicate that when the two find each other in curriculum implementation matters, there are great chances of an improvement in the quality of learning experiences. These findings are in sync with Claridge's (2018) emphasis on the growing evidence in literature that suggest that collaboration between teachers and communities in the classroom brings about social cohesion necessary to achieve sustainable educational development. The result further supports Social Capital tenets that cooperation, closeness, and trustworthiness are strengths that reside in individuals and communities as they network and can be used to improve the educational lives of schools (Iyengar, 2021). Despite these benefits, however, the results suggest that teachers had not created platforms and opportunities for the engagement to flourish. They had informally used homework as a vehicle to access community knowledge, practices, values and attitudes. When this occurred, teachers have managed to fill in knowledge gaps in their teaching. This inconsistency in results may be due to the fact that teachers and community members do not share similar perspectives regarding how they can collaborate in curriculum implementation.

Reflecting on teachers and communities, we note very interesting ideas generated about the need to network. They are aware of the benefits that accrue from such an arrangement but they appear to find it very difficult to execute an action plan. In addition, communities have

shown enthusiasm and willingness to participate in curriculum implementation when called upon, a call that is yet to come. The realisation is that teachers may not manage to teach all the primary school curriculum areas with the same efficiency and confidence hence the need to use community human capital which greatly benefits and scaffolds learners. Doloreux et al (2023) put it succinctly that communities constitute external contexts for schools, and there is a need to use local human and material resources within communities and mix them with teacher acquired knowledge to create a healthy curriculum implementation environment. From a Social Capital perspective, Claridge (2018) points out that it is not about teachers being omniscient or omnipotent but whom they can work with to provide a powerful effect on the provision of education at primary school level. The insights resonate closely with Salamondra's (2021) explanation that education is continually changing and with better communication, openness and honesty between teachers and communities create satisfaction resulting in curriculum implementation improvement.

One other critical aspect from the results is that communities possess vast amounts of knowledge which have remained untapped by primary school teachers in the teaching learning contexts. Teacher narratives have shown that they have a profession to protect and that at the end they are accountable to the Ministry of Education should anything go wrong. Contrary to this finding, Moore et al's (2023) understanding suggests that the contention is not on issues of accountability as it is commonplace that teachers are ultimately accountable to education authorities, but it is about sharing educationally relevant knowledge and experiences in a collaborative process to promote and enrich innovative teaching and learning. Further, teachers also felt that the community's unprocessed information required them to trade the ground carefully and this may take a lot of teaching time in the Zimbabwean examination-oriented context. Despite this concern from teachers, they need to embrace Asare's (2023) claim that the participation of communities is not only about providing aid and assistance to teachers to ensure that the curriculum does not falter at the hands of teachers but is also refreshed and energised by use of collaborative strategies which may even help learners during examinations.

Therefore, the study findings suggest that teachers and communities can chart a new engagement trajectory in curriculum implementation discourses to support children's learning. This can only be possible if all education stakeholders including the government accede to the fact that classroom spaces can be accessed by communities if teaching and learning is to be improved in the Zimbabwean rural primary schools. The study thus has contributed to debate about rural community engagement in curriculum issues which has continued to receive attention and there is growing evidence of such research becoming part of the emergent curriculum implementation discourse.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study had potential limitations. Due to practical constraints, the study did not examine all the primary schools in Chivi district of Masvingo regarding teacher engagement of communities in curriculum implementation. The sample size of four schools and twenty primary school

teachers was small to ensure a representative distribution of the rural primary schools and the teacher population of Zimbabwe's Chivi district and thus the results may not be generalised to other primary school contexts. However, expressed in terms of the research plan and the problem, the size of the sample was not a significant factor as the qualitative study was meant to explain in greater detail and give meaning to the link between rural communities and curriculum implementation in Zimbabwean primary schools. With respect to minimising subjectivity, which is one limitation of the qualitative study, we allowed each member of the research team to cross-check and analyse the raw data, code separately and then we compared themes to ensure trustworthiness in the results.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has argued that the success of children in education largely depends on teacher-community strengthened networks, trusting relations, shared material and knowledge resources and a culture of openness. The evidence from the study supports the idea for the need to change the current teacher-community relationship practices that erode trust and voluntarism on classroom matters and create favourable win-win educational conditions. The Zimbabwean educational narrative and the distribution of knowledge resources may not be complete without building bridges between classroom teachers and communities. Informed by Social Capital Theory, the paper concludes that involving rural community members during the teaching and learning process is quite possible and can be done effectively if both parties continue to cherish, trust and support each other in curriculum implementation matters. Thus, it is quite manageable for teachers to plan tasks for community members and create spaces on the time-table for community members' visits. The research results showed that teachers had not valued the participation of community members in practice but in theory thus defeating the perceived benefits of a possible rich collaborative teaching-learning environment when communities are meaningfully engaged. The challenges emanated from teachers' attitudes towards community members, and a lack of trust and respect for these community education stakeholders. Therefore, community engagement in curriculum implementation is the missing link in the educational debate in Zimbabwe, yet a promising area for educational change, innovation and improvement.

### **Recommendations**

The study makes the following recommendations in view of the findings and conclusions regarding community involvement in curriculum implementation in Zimbabwean primary schools:

- There is a need for teachers to develop a new mindset premised on a meaningful commitment to transform classroom activities through community collaborations. Teachers and primary schools can identify specific attributes of members of the rural community and exploit them for the good of curriculum implementation.



- Zimbabwe, through the Education Ministry should establish a community engagement framework for primary school teachers in order to build solidarity, expand and strengthen the engagement from an official policy position.

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