Headteacher Support Groups Initiative within the Prism Project Kenya

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Research Note

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ABSTRACT: The Primary School Management (PRISM) project is a Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) project funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK, and managed locally by the Centre for British Teachers (CFBT). The purpose of this study was to examine the operation of the Headteacher Support Groups (HTSGs). HTSGs have been and continue to be formed as a result of PRISM training, with the purpose of adding to the body of knowledge related to headteachers' management training and development.

The study focused on five themes, namely, primary school management, impact on the school community's involvement, sustainability of headteachers' management and development, reducing poverty, and increasing economic prosperity. The study looked into the operation of twenty selected HTSGs representing ten districts selected from the following regions: ASAL, remote, coastal, pockets of poverty in an advantaged district and urban areas. Two HTSGs were studied in each district. The target groups were the Headteachers, Teachers' Zonal Inspectors, District Inspectors, Teachers Advisory Centre, Tutors, Chairpersons of School Committees and civic leaders. Data for the study was collected using interview schedules and focus group discussions (FGDS).

The findings of this study show that there was poor representation of women in HTSGs. Frequent consultations between headteachers and respective communities on educational issues were taking place in schools. There was networking amongst headteachers. HTSGs have led to increased enrolment and completion rates in all districts studied, especially for girls; however, dropout rates remain high in many districts surveyed except for the ASAL districts. Communities in general still play very little role in administrative matters of the Primary Schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A key component of the PRISM project was to improve the management skill of Primary School headteachers. To achieve this, most Primary School headteachers throughout the country have been trained in key aspects of school management.

It was viewed by the PRISM Lead Team, at the start of the PRISM training in 1996, that institutionalisation of learning and capacity building would be enhanced if headteachers were sensitised to meet with each other in an organized way and with the help of the Zonal trainer/inspector to set up an agenda for action. This would develop the headteachers and trainers professionally and also enrich the School Development Planning, which was at the heart of change and improvement within the school. Zonal trainers (all of whom were inspectors of schools) were therefore trained to exploit the advantages of HTSGs and to facilitate their formation and effective functioning.

The creation of Headteacher Support Groups (HTSGs) emerged as a feature of the plan to strengthen the cascade system at all levels (Herriot and Miti 1997). It was believed that a planned Hawthorne effect would cause something very new, such as management training, to work well based on the ideas that the headteachers and the trainers would be motivated by the learning and the intellectual freedom of engaging in continuous innovation. Headteachers were expected in their training to take a community view of improved education, and in particular, to ponder the questions: how can the community assists the schools? and (conversely) how can the schools contribute to the well-being of the community? It was expected that headteachers, with the assistance of the zonal trainer/inspector, would be able to form clusters and meet regularly to share ideas and discuss progress in School Development Planning and improvements in the   provision of quality education for all pupils in the respective communities.

As a way of providing a mechanism for strengthening the work of headteachers in School Development Planning, heads were encouraged to form groups at zonal levels. The zonal trainer was to act as the facilitator during the formation of these groups, which were to be referred to as Headteacher Support Groups (HTSGs). The formation of support groups of clusters for schools at zonal level was to give headteachers an opportunity to meet with their peers and develop a network of self-help which would be both motivating and sustainable. The main purpose of the HTSGs is to provide a forum for headteachers to meet in a professional environment to discuss their progress on management training and the impact it has on schools. By engaging in such a dialogue, headteachers were to learn from each other and develop the group into a sustainable "pocket of excellence" or learning centres (Waudo and Juma 1997).

The formation of HTSGs is an important initiative since research in many parts of the world has suggested that one of the key factors influencing a successful school operation is the effectiveness of the school head (Chatavanich and Fry 1990). Hence, a gathering of a number of headteachers to consider aspects of school management was appealing to the PRISM lead team.

Very little in the way of training and preparation for the job had been given to Kenyan primary school headteachers prior to the PRISM training. Studies show that as result of this lack of training, school heads experienced problems in accomplishing fundamental tasks related to running a school (Njihia 1987; Waudo and Juma 1997; Juma and Ngome 1999). Consequently, there has been a tendency by headteachers to concentrate their efforts on finance and administration rather than on supervision, curriculum delivery, monitoring and evaluation (Mbugua 1987; Kamau 1985; Kihara 1991; Karanja 1992; Waudo 1998).

It has been established that women hardly feature in senior positions in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology or at any other level from provincial/district positions to the school level, (PRISM 1996; Wanjoma 1997). There are many factors which contribute to the low representation of women in key positions, not least, patriarchy. Primary school headteachers (currently 90% males) tend to rely on male teachers to perform important tasks in schools such as leading the subject panels (Simiyu 1990; Juma and Ngome 1998).

In the past, headteachers have not rated the importance of community involvement in education very highly except for their essential role of raising school founds. This is often done through "Harambees" that involve the community and important local dignitaries coming together, voluntarily, to raise cash for a specific purpose (Olembo, Wanga and Karagu 1992). However, it has been found that many of the decisions taken on behalf of the school continue to be the responsibility of the haedteacher and the school committee chairperson (Action Aid, Kenya 1996). PRISM research, however, has noted a positive shift in attitudes by the headteachers towards the committee and teachers.

From the review above, the Headteacher Support Groups are instrumental in improving the quality of the teaching/learning in primary schools. Much can be achieved through good school development planning involving the HTSGs.

2. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to examine the operations of the HTSGs, which have been and continue to be formed as a result of PRISM training. The specific objectives of the study were:

- to investigate the formation and management of Headteachers Support Groups;

- to inform the PRISM project and provide evidence of the project impact;

- to establish the major constrains in the operation of Headteachers Support Groups;

- to document the good practice of HTSGs;

- to suggest ways of enhancing the effectiveness of HTSGs;

- to gain more knowledge about the wider aspects of HTSGs such as impact on the school management, alleviation of poverty and increase in economic well-being, gender and community involvement.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was descriptive in nature utilizing both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study adopted a participatory approach involving field visits for the purpose of interaction with the target groups in order to objectively assess the impact of the Headteachers Support Groups. The case study approach was adopted in order to identify the good examples of the Headteachers Support Group operations.

4. RESEARCH TEAM

The research team was composed of the following personnel: the lead researchers (university consultants), the PRISM lead team members (MoEST and Senior Inspectors of schools) and the PRISM regional trainers of schools (inspectors in the field). The lead researchers and the PRISM lead team members were charged with the responsibility of planning, designing, supervising and monitoring the entire research process. The regional trainers were responsible for data collection. The team composition emphasized the need for strong linkages and interaction between the top level Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and its grassroots and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the Universities. Being a participatory kind of research, it was imperative to encourage teamwork in the entire research process in order to successfully complete the research tasks.

5. SAMPLING PROCEDURES AND TARGET GROUP

This research study took place in ten districts listed below. The selection of the ten districts was based on the criteria indicated below:

Criteria	**Districts studied**
• ASAL	• Garissa, Mwingi
• Remote	• Kuria, Mt. Elgon
• Coastal	• Taita Taveta, Kilifi
• Pockets of poverty in an advantaged area	• Nyeri, Trans Nzoia
• Urban	• Nairobi, Kisumu

A total of twenty Headteacher Support Groups were studied. Two Headteacher Support Groups per district were studied to find out how HTSGS were operating and also to enable the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to identify some good and poor examples so that the weak ones can be strengthened and the good ones can be replicated.

The following groups of people were studied: headteachers, teachers, zonal inspectors, district inspectors of schools, Teachers Advisory Centre tutors, chairpersons of school committees, and civic leaders. In total, 81 headteachers, 19 deputy/senior teachers, 21 zonal inspectors and 21 chairpersons of school committees participated in the study. Additional data was obtained from 54 regional trainers, representing 51 districts.

6. DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES

Several data collection techniques were used to gather data for this study. These included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDS), observation guides and secondary documents. The interviews were largely constructed and designed to assist the informants to identify what they themselves perceived as key issues in the operation of the Headteachers Support Groups. The FGDS were used for a wide group of informants and basically focussed on broader issues of the Headteacher Support Groups operations.

Five instruments were used to collect data for this study. Three instruments were carried out as interviews, one instrument as a FGDS and one as a questionnaire. The FGDS was carried out with the entire group of stakeholders.

Twenty trained PRISM researchers collected data. For each cluster two researchers were paired during the data collection process. One of the pair was engaged in taking detailed notes while the other person was involved in the interviewing process since interviews were carried out in a

conversational manner. Each team was charged with the responsibility of collecting secondary data to supplement the interview data. Efforts were made by the researchers to build a rapport with each target group before the interviewing exercise.

The researchers spent two days at each research site in order to gather all the relevant data, with the principal researchers supervising and monitoring the process to ensure that the appropriate techniques were being applied. They advised the researchers where necessary on improvements to be made during the exercise.

To gather additional data and to verify data collected in the field, a questionnaire was administered to 54 regional trainers at the PRISM annual workshop in September 1999. The questionnaire provided information on the functioning of the HTSGs in the districts which had not been surveyed and thus provided a national view of the HTSGs.

7. DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data such as statistical information on enrolment, repetition, dropout and performance were analysed quantitatively using statistical packages (SPSS). Simple descriptive statistics such as means, percentages, etc., were run on all quantitative data. Data collected from in-depth interviews and FGDS were analysed qualitatively, mainly through content analysis and categorization of data thematically corresponding to the research questions and research themes.

8. RESULTS

Findings of this study are reported under the following: formation and management of HTSGs, functioning of HTSGs, good practices of HTSGs, factors contributing to the success of HTSGs and school governance. Formation and management of HTSGS factors the initiative of headteachers.

Formation and management of HTSGs were done by zonal inspectors and regional trainers. From the interviews (58%, 62% and 76% of the deputy/senior teachers, chairpersons and zonal inspectors, respectively, indicated that their headteachers had been trained under the PRISM project. Although some were not quite sure as to when HTSGs were formed in their districts, 64% reported that they were formed in 1997, while 28% said that they were formed in 1998. Forty percent of the deputy/senior teachers and 25% of the chairpersons indicated the main function of HTSGs as being forums for sharing ideas, while 23% of the zonal inspectors saw HTSGs' main function as training headteachers in management. 29% of zonal inspectors and 18% of chairpersons consider HTSGs as agents for improving examination performance. Twenty percent of deputy/senior teachers, 15% of zonal inspectors and 18% of the chairpersons saw HTSGs

as forums for developing school materials. Data from 54 regional trainers representing 51 districts showed that a total of 2273 HTSGs were planned for across 968 zones. Of these HTSGs that were planned for, those that were actually formed were 1538 (64.5%). The actual number of functioning HTSGs is 886 (40%). Those 'functioning' means those which meet regularly and carry out planned activities.

9. THE FUNCTIONING OF HTSGS

From the data, it is only in four districts that the HTSGs formed are fully operational. These are: Migori, Suba, Makueni and Bungoma. Migori district has the highest number (90 out of 94 that were actually formed) of HTSGs that meet regularly and can be said to be active, followed by Makueni that has (65 out of 80) HTSGs that are functioning. In the districts such as Rachuonyo, Koibatek and Nyamira, less than 20% of the HTSGs that were formed are active or functional. In general, Nyanza province seem to have the highest number of actively functioning HTSGs when compared to other provinces.

10. STAKEHOLDERS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE FUNCTIONING AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS REGARDING HTSGS

The results indicate that those who perceive themselves with the highest degree of frequent involvement in decision-making process in the HTSGs are the committee secretaries (84%), followed by the zonal inspectors (82%). The next in line are the deputy headteachers. Those with the lowest (less then 50%) mention of involvement are: councillors (41%), women groups representatives (43%), and representatives of business community (46%). The low participation of councillors and business community means that they cannot do much particularly when it comes to financial support for the HTSGs, yet the HTSGs are supposed to be self-sustaining in the long term through such support. Their contribution is very crucial not only in matters of finance, but on ideas for instance, on how to initiate income-generating activities. Efforts should then be made to interest them in the operations of the HTSGs so that their support is elicited.

11. GOOD PRACTICES OF HTSGS

Most of the deputy/senior teachers (34%), zonal inspectors (46%) and chairpersons (33%) agree that implementing decisions of the HTSGs meetings are key indicators of "good practice". Other indicators of good practice are: making frequent consultations, exhibiting transparency and accountability, holding frequent meetings and keeping records of minutes as well as having the meeting agenda whenever meetings are held. On the impact of the HTSGs meetings, it was noted that it is still a bit too early to

assess the impact of HTSGs since most of them have not been in existence for more than two years. However, some early indicators were noted in the areas of school governance, pupil participation and performance, and school-community relations. There are some actions, however, which the HTSGs still have to accomplish. One of them is the provision of the teaching/learning materials to schools mentioned by the deputy/senior teachers (43%), zonal inspectors (42%) and chairpersons (46%).

12. CONSTRAINTS TO THE FUNCTIONING OF HTSGS

The reasons cited by the regional trainers for the failure or inability to initiate all the planned HTSGs are as follows: lack of initiative by zonal trainers, headteachers not trained on PRISM, frequent transfers of headteachers, long distances between schools, demotion of trained headteachers, community indifference/clanism, lack of commitment by headteachers and too many school activities. The most significant reason reported by half of the respondents constraining the initiation of HTSGs is the lack of initiative from the zonal inspectors. This was reported in all districts.

13. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUCCESS OF HTSGS

A variety of reasons were cited as contributing to the success of the HTSGs. Prominent among these is the effective mentoring and monitoring by the zonal inspectors. This was mentioned by 49% of the regional trainers.

Other factors contributing to the success of the HTSGs include:

  a) support from other stakeholders such as the school committees and provincial administration;

  b) the spirit of competition and ownership that has developed among schools;

  c) the proximity of the HTSGs to the district trainers;

  d) adequate sensitization that was done by the zonal trainers;

  e) commitment of headteachers to HTSGs as a top priority among other activities;

  f) awareness among communities on the important role of HTSGs in improving education standards in the district;

  g) good management by the school executive committee;

  h) co-operation among headteachers, including the sharing of resources and availability of financial and moral support.

According to the regional trainers, the strengths of the HTSGs is seen in the following achievements:

  • improved public relations skills of headteachers;

- improved sensitization of stakeholders, e.g., school committees on SDP policies;

- improved examination performance by pupils;

- improved curriculum implementation, e.g., syllabus coverage;

- better school management practices;

- improved sharing of ideas among schools with in a zone;

- facilitated acquisition of important school resources;

- initiation of common evaluation tests/clusters quizzes;

- started income-generating/fundraising activities or held jointly among schools within a zone;

- reduced absenteeism and dropout rates;

- fostered unity and networking among headteachers;

- organized education tours to entrance learning experience;

- planned in-service training/induction courses for teachers in the zone;

- revived subject panels in the schools;

- held regular zonal prize award ceremonies;

- developed confidence in the headteachers;

- improved physical facilities at schools;

Generally, a sense of teamwork which had hitherto been lacking among headteachers is gradually taking root.

14. SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Findings reveal that there has been a considerable improvement in the style of school management. Thirty percent of deputy/senior teachers and 42% of zonal inspectors view HTSGs as having greatly improved headteachers' public relations. Although it is a little difficult to accurately assess the impact of HTSGs' initiative on variables, there is a general increase in enrolment and completion rates for most of the districts. It was noted that enrolment and completion rates for girls seems to feature highly in most districts. Dropout rates remain high in a majority of districts except for the ASAL districts, which shows a general fall especially for 1998.

15. SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

The HTSGs initiative which started as a result of the PRISM project in 1996 to train primary school headteachers is still relatively new and probably not ready for an evaluation. This study has yielded some useful information as to the functions and future operation of the HTSGs initiative. The study has led to the following conclusions.

- Out of 2273 HTSGs planned for across the nation, 1538 (65%) were formed and 886 (40%) were functioning. Migori, Makueni, Suba and Bungoma districts have HTSGs that are fully operational.

- The most prominent issues discussed at the HTSGs are: evaluation tests, school management and development, provision of the teaching/leaning materials and INSET.

- Good practices of HTSGs include: implementation of HTSGs deliberations, frequent consultation with other stakeholders, exhibition of transparency and accountability, holding of frequent meetings, keeping of minutes and having the agenda for meetings.

- The significant achievements of the HTSG include improvement of pupils' performance and school management skills by the headteachers.

- The factor constraining the HTSGs is the lack of support from the zonal inspectors who have yet to accept that HTSGs are an integral component of their normal supervisory functions

- The community is not actively involved in the HTSGs due to the lack of sensitization of this initiative.

- Factors contributing to the success of HTSGs include: support from other stakeholders such as the school committees and other MoEST officials, the spirit of competition and ownership that has developed among schools, the commitment of headteachers to the HTSGs, and the placing of HTSGs as a top priority among other school activities.

- The strengths of HTSGS include: the promotion of a sense of teamwork among school heads, improvement of public relations among heads, enhanced delegation of responsibility among heads, promotion of transparency, accountability and co-operation among stakeholders, and working collaboratively to identify problems within zones.

- The HTSGs have received less support from the MoEST officials because they have not been integrated into the normal schedules of the education activities in the respective districts and municipalities.

16. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations that may strengthen the HTSGs:

- Increase participation of and support from MoEST officers, especially those at the senior levels in the districts.

- Open avenues for increased participation by communities beyond the involvement of some key members of the school communities or PAs. The community should play a more active role in the administrative matters of the school.

- Facilitate more sensitization meetings so that the community may understand and appreciate the functions of HTSGs and how they are likely to benefit from them.

- Diversify the sources of funding for the HTSGs to generate sufficient money for their operations.

- The PRISM programme should continue funding the operation of HTSGs through INSET.

- HTSGS should be made part of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology mainstream activities such as school governance, inspection and INSET.

- Officially recognize HTSGS in terms of policy, country framework and strategic planning.

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