



Improving Stakeholder Participation in Schools: Intentionally Inviting Practices of School Heads in Cape Coast and Ajumako School Districts, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

A sequential mixed-method design adopting a non-experimental survey and a basic interpretive study was used to explore the intentionally inviting practices of school heads of the Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district. Data were collected using 2 X 2 *Intentionally-Inviting Matrix* and semi-structured interview protocols. Data collected from the survey were analysed using frequency counts, while the data from the interview were analyzed and put into themes that provided a description on how the adopted practices promote stakeholder participation. The study findings revealed that school heads in Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district adopt intentionally inviting practices that address the physical frame of the school, communication with stakeholders, and building relationship with stakeholders to promote stakeholder involvement in schools. The study further revealed that the adopted practices of the school heads foster a sense of pride in the stakeholders to be connected to the school. The practices also increase stakeholder confidence and trust in the school head. The Ghana Education Service should replicate the study in other school districts to identify the practices that support stakeholder participation in schools and also conduct a similar study to elicit the perceptions of stakeholders on practices that enhance their participation in schools.

Key words: stakeholder participation, school-community relations, school improvement, school capital

INTRODUCTION

School heads have primary responsibility to lead schools to attain educational goals. However, they are not expected to carry out this normative role in isolation. This expectation behooves school heads to collaborate with members of the school community to build a learning community and create a vision of success for all students. A closed system-like structure for running the school gives way to an open system-like structure. In the closed system-like

structure, the school is insulated from the community. Members of the school community are not invited to participate in the activities of the school (Hanson, 2003). The open system-like structure concentrates on dependency relationships and exchanges between the school and the school community. The school interacts with and is influenced by the members of the school community (Katz & Kahn, as cited in Mele, Pels, & Polese, 2010). Lunenburg (2010) notes that in the open system –like structure, schools constantly interact with their environments and members in the school environment participate in the activities of the school. The open system-like structure allows the school to have stakeholders; described as individuals or groups with interest in the success of the school (First, 2009). Lamb and Roundy (2018) refer to stakeholders as persons having vested interests in the success and welfare of a school or education system. These persons include all parties that are directly affected by the success or failure of an educational system, as well as those indirectly affected. Gross and Godwin (2005) identify education's stakeholders as parents, students, teachers and other staff, heads, parents or guardians, alumni, administrators, employers, and community leaders. The engagement of stakeholders is driven by the philosophy of the school as an open system. In a school that functions as an open system there is an interaction between the school and its environment. The school is supported by the community and in turn supports the social, political, and cultural offerings and demands of society. In other words, the school public is interested in what goes on in the school and the school leadership also keeps an eye on events in the community.

The normative role of the school head includes the setting of the agenda to determine the persons to be involved in making important decisions concerning the school, as well as determining the optimum level of stakeholder involvement. In such cases, top-down decision making is replaced with democratic decision making—a process that gives teachers, parents, and other stakeholders opportunities to participate in school improvement initiatives (Hanson, 2003; Kowalski, 2010). The adoption of this democratic decision making places emphasis on stakeholder participation in pursuing the attainment of educational goals. (Amakyi, 2017) describes stakeholder participation as having school staff, parents and guardians, policy makers, and school community working together to develop a cohesive and comprehensive approach to provide quality education to learners. The stakeholder engagement provides a platform for transparent dialogue to address the needs of the school. Henderson and Mapp (2002) intimate that stakeholder engagement embrace a philosophy of partnership towards a shared responsibility for children's education. Ceka and Murati (2016) note that when parents talk to their children about school, set high expectations for them to do well, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, learners improve their performance in school. Similarly, when schools build partnerships with families by responding to their concerns, honor their contributions, share power, and share responsibilities, they succeed in sustaining partnerships that are aimed at improving student achievement and overall school improvement. Holliday (as cited in Kowalski, 2011) points out that the strengthened partnership will assure that political, social, and human capitals needed to drive school improvement are secured by the school (Kowalski, 2011). Political capital provides increased leverage for the school to lobby for resources to get things done, especially gaining financial support to execute programmes and projects. Social capital addresses the positive dispositions of stakeholders towards the school and increased sense of ownership of the school. Human capital broadens stakeholder knowledge and skills available to the school. Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, community, and student learning. When schools and communities work together, both are strengthened and have mutual benefits that

are more than what either entity could accomplish on its own. Amakyi (2017), citing Perrone observes that every school community has persons with expertise and experience that could be tapped to further enrich life in schools, but many schools do not utilize community resources to their full advantage. Schools that remain in isolation in their operation from the community and have solely depended on their staff alone have always been limited by the experience base that the staff brings to the school. Epstein (2001) and Nieto (2004) are of the opinion that strengthening stakeholder participation in schools is essential in creating enabling environment for learning to take place. They postulate that student achievement is positively associated with stakeholder involvement in general and parent involvement specifically. In other words, schools that engage in high levels of stakeholder involvement outperform schools that do not engage in stakeholder involvement or do so at a minimal level.

Gichohi (2015) argues that given that the involvement of school stakeholders constitutes a key component of school improvement practices, it is imperative that the leadership of the school involves all stakeholders in the decision making process. Bartle (2007) describes stakeholder involvement as working with people to attain agreed ends and goals. Bartle opines that a skilled leader first looks for ways to engage each individual to contribute to the good of the whole. Second, the leader acts to draw maximum benefits from the interests and ability of the individuals to support the growth of the school.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

The school head bears the responsibility to identify the relevant stakeholders and their expectations, and map out a strategy to engage them in school improvement efforts (Stosich & Bae, 2018). There are no absolute rules in terms of selecting stakeholders for participation in school improvement, however, the school head has to be intentional in acting to invite them. According to Purkey and Novak (2008), certain practices of school heads may facilitate or inhibit stakeholder participation. Purkey and Novak identify practices that can be categorised under one of four invitational practices of intentionally disinviting, unintentionally disinviting, unintentionally inviting, and intentionally inviting. When leaders are deliberately discouraging people, busy with other obligations, and focused on shortcomings of other people, such leaders are exhibiting intentionally disinviting practices. For unintentionally disinviting practices, the leader is obsessed with policies and procedures, and generally unaware of others' feelings. Leaders exhibiting intentionally inviting practices are purposeful, optimistic, respectful, trustworthy, and are able to affirm and support others. Unintentionally inviting practices come about when the leader has developed effective ways of acting and even though the leader is not purposeful in acting, the manifest behaviour is supportive of others.

Welch and Smith (2014) observe that based on stakeholders' evaluations, intentionally inviting practices of leaders strengthen school-community relationships. Welch and Smith further postulate that a strengthened relationship results in stakeholders having a greater sense of belongingness and ownership of school processes; valuing education, assisting children to take more responsibility for their learning, and supporting teachers in their professional development.

School leaders at education directorates in the Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district have organized continuous professional develop workshops to build the capacity of school heads for school improvement. School-community relations and stakeholder participation

assume centre stage in discussions on long-term success of school systems. Engaging stakeholders has the potential to expand opportunities for improving the quality of learners' lives and their expectations for a positive future. Enquiry into long-term success of students provides the basis for exploring school-community partnership and stakeholder participation. Rogovin (as cited in Amakyi, 2017) observes that schools and the school community seldom collaborate as may be expected, however, there is increasing recognition of the urgency for such relationship to be developed. School-community relations do not just happen. No matter how well intentioned and motivated participants may be, creating school-community relations take careful planning and the development of well-conceived practices that ensure school-community coalesce effectively at the local level. *How are the school heads in the Cape Coast metropolis and the Ajumako district responding to this urgency to pursue stakeholder participation?* The engagement of stakeholders is an on-going collaboration that requires the adoption of intentionally inviting practices by the school heads. This study was to explore the intentionally inviting practices of school heads of the Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district.

The study was framed by two research questions:

1. What are the intentionally inviting practices adopted by the school heads of Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district?
2. How do the adopted practices promote stakeholder participation as perceived by the school heads in the Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district?

The findings and conclusions reported in this study will provide data to inform school heads in other locations about intentionally inviting practices that support school-community relations and stakeholder participation.

RESEARCH METHODS

A sequential mixed-method design adopting a non-experimental survey and a basic interpretive study was used to collect data from respondents. Survey design is a very valuable tool for assessing opinions and trends. The capability of the survey design to gather meaningful facts about a situation under study informed the researcher's choice of the design for collecting data. Basic interpretive study is helpful in understanding a phenomenon and the perspectives of the people involved and how they construct their worlds, as well as the meaning they attribute to their experiences. The sequential design allowed for the survey data collection and analysis prior to the data collection and analysis of the basic interpretive study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

A defined population of basic school heads in Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district constituted the study population. The study population consisted of 149 school heads. A census sampling was adopted and all the school heads were invited to participate in the survey data collection. Using census sampling technique provided high degree of statistical confidence in the survey results, and hence provided a true measure of the population by eliminating sampling error (Neuman, 2014). The purposive sampling technique was adopted to select school heads for the interview. Data were collected from school heads who have been in office for more than five years in their present school. School heads tend to build a school culture after five years (Schein, 2018).

The instrumentation adapted for the study was a 2 X 2 *Intentionally-Inviting Matrix* of Purkey and Novak (2008) and a semi-structured interview protocol. Respondents were given the 2 X 2 *Intentionally-Inviting Matrix* and each respondent was invited to put down five statements in the intentionally-inviting quadrant. The intentionally-inviting quadrant was described as:

1. purposeful practices to support school improvement.
2. respectful and trustworthy behaviours that encourage stakeholder participation,

The semi-structured interview protocol, based on practices that emerged from the most frequently and frequently intentionally inviting practices, was used to elicit information from the purposively-selected school heads.

Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. For research question one, data were analysed using frequency counts. Responses were tallied and classified into four categories:

1. Most frequently mentioned: more than 75% of respondents selected the statement
2. Frequently mentioned: between 50 and 75 % of respondents selected the statement
3. Less frequently mentioned: between 25 and 50 % of respondents selected the statement
4. Least frequently mentioned: less than 25% of respondents selected the statement.

To address research question two, the interview data were analyzed and put into themes that provided a description on how the adopted practices promote stakeholder participation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To address research question one, *what are the intentionally inviting practices adopted by the school heads of Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district?* respondents provided five statements they believe are purposeful practices to support school improvement and are also respectful and trustworthy behaviours that encourage stakeholder participation. Statements with similar meanings were grouped and tallied. The frequency of occurrence of the statements were recorded and classified per the established rubric stated earlier.

The findings revealed that seven practices were most frequently mentioned as intentionally inviting practices. Table 1 depicts the practices mentioned by the school.

Table 1: Intentionally inviting practices

Most Frequently Mentioned Practice	
1.	The school invites community members to school programmes (open days, exhibition, carols service, students' talent days)
2.	The school has an attractive and neat compound
3.	The school has decent layout with accessible walkways
4.	The school buildings are nicely painted
5.	The school allows stakeholders to have access to school playground for community functions
6.	The school buildings, equipment, and facilities are kept in good shape
7.	The teachers are supportive of one another in the school
Frequently Mentioned Practices	
1.	The vision of the school is shared with the parents
2.	The school invites stakeholders to career day programmes
3.	The school sends periodic communication to parents
4.	The school shares academic report with parents and other stakeholders
5.	The school leadership has scheduled meetings with parents
6.	The school extends hospitality to visitors to the school
7.	The school encourages stakeholders to visit the school
8.	The school head and teachers present a united front to the stakeholders
9.	The school has welcoming, safe, and inclusive environment
10.	The school provides support to needy children
Less Frequently Mentioned Practices	
1.	The school insists on the learners dressing smart for school
2.	The school has sanctions for learners who misconduct themselves in the community
3.	The school has sanctions for teachers who misconduct themselves in the community
4.	The schools code of conduct and disciplinary rules are shared with stakeholders
Least Frequently Mentioned Practices	
1.	The school organizes parenting workshops for parents
2.	The school invites stakeholders to give input to set the goals of the school

The findings show that five of the seven most frequently mentioned practices are related to the school's ecology (the physical dimension). The remaining two most frequently mentioned practices address relationship building among staff and relationship building between the school and stakeholders. The focus on the physical frame of the school is consistent with best practices to initiate stakeholder participation. Kowalski (2010) intimates that practices focusing on the school's ecology are easily observed by others outside the school and this can heighten the positive feeling they have about the school. Similarly, Amakyi (2017) points out that practices based on the physical frame serve as effective first attraction to the school, yet they require relatively less effort than the efforts required to implement practices related to culture and milieu dimensions of the school. Renovating school buildings or beautifying school campus, though not necessarily effortless tasks, are visible to stakeholders and easier to accomplish than practices that involve leadership beliefs and operating assumptions of school heads (Amakyi, 2017). The latter practices may include sharing of leadership through the invitation to stakeholders to give input in setting school goals, which demands the altering of fundamental beliefs of school heads.

The findings also revealed that the frequently mentioned practices are either related to communication or relationship building. The findings are consistent with the works of various

authors (e.g., Bourne, 2016; Burnside-Lawry, 2011; Rajhans, 2018, Young, 2006) who identify communication and building relationship as pillars in stakeholder engagement. For example, Bourne (2016) stresses the importance of communication in stakeholder engagement. Communication is at the heart of stakeholder engagement, serving as the tool to enhance transparency. Similarly, Rajhans (2018) and Young (2006) say that effective communication serves as valuable tool to support stakeholder relationships at multiple levels.

Burnside-Lawry (2011) intimates that building positive stakeholder relationships requires effective communication. Young (2006) asserts that effective communication is the key to good stakeholder relationship and that communication and building relationships go together in strengthening stakeholder participation. According to Holliday (as cited in Kowalski, 2011, strengthened partnership increases political, social, and human capitals needed to drive school improvements.

To address research question two, *how do the adopted practices promote stakeholder participation as perceived by the school heads in the Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district?* 12 school heads were interviewed. Questions for the semi-structured interview were culled out of the 17 “most frequently” or “frequently” mentioned intentionally inviting practices. Three major themes emerged from the interviews; stakeholder sense of pride in associating with beautiful environment and edifice, stakeholder confidence in school heads as a result of effective communication, and increased capital emerging out of relational trust.

The study informants indicated that they believe parents and other stakeholders would be filled with pride to be associated with a school that has an attractive environment and well-maintained buildings. The feeling of pride will move the parents to sustain the support they give to the school so they can perpetuate their sense of pride.

An informant stated:

When the school compound is clean; the grass and walkways are well maintained and the buildings are in good shape, you know that the learners are in a safe place and will be ready to learn. When you approach the stakeholders, particularly the parents to ask for support to maintain the environment and the buildings, I don't think they would hesitate to do so. The parents can see that the school has a culture of maintenance and would want to assist a good cause. Support, especially monetary support increases with good school environment.

Another informant stated:

The physical state of the school affects the morale of the children. If the school looks beautiful, the morale of the children will be high, and this will positively affect their performance. I believe when the parents see that the morale of the children is high, they would want to do something

to keep it at that high level.

An informant also shared that:

If the school has attractive buildings, anytime you go to parents and other stakeholders for support, they are ready to go the extra mile because they know you will put their support into good use. You also hear parents saying they won't honour invitations to untidy schools. Beautiful schools attract parents with its serene environment.

The informants shared that regular communication with parents and other stakeholders increased the confidence of the stakeholders in the school head. Providing timely information to parents and other stakeholders keep them interested in the activities of the school. An informant mentioned that:

If the parents are abreast of what is going on in the school, they show a lot of interest in the school's programmes. For example, attendance at school's open day increase if the parents are always kept informed of when the programme will take place.

An informant also stated that:

Communication with the parents saves the head a lot of stress in trying to correct rumours. Once the parents know where to get information from, peddling of rumours has reduced. Once information is giving to parents, you do not hear them complaining about not knowing what goes on in the school. Instead, the parents take time to plan their attendance to programmes.

Majority of the informants pointed to the building of relationship as making the parents and other stakeholders feel that they are part of the school. According to the school heads, inviting the stakeholders to programmes and allowing them to use the school playground for community durbars increase their feeling of belongingness to the school. Their sense of ownership of the school is also increased.

An informant stated:

The relationship we build with the stakeholders create a cordial environment where the stakeholders are not inhibited to come and ask about ways to be of help. The relationship brings us together to discuss issues of importance to the school.

Another informant stated:

The relationship builds trust with the stakeholders which allows us to

discuss issues openly. The trust increases the capital available to the school. The stakeholders will support the school in diverse ways if they feel connected to the school.

The findings having a sense of pride in associating with the school, building confidence in the school head through communication, and fostering relational trust to increase stakeholder capital are consistent with research on stakeholder involvement drawn from the model by Epstein (2010). School- community relationships are described by Epstein as based on communication and cooperation. Roy and Giraldo-García (2018) posit that speaking with frankness, trust, and clarity on the part of the school head, deepens the affection and connectedness stakeholders have for school, hence increasing their sense of pride in being associated with a good school.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are reported. School heads in Cape Coast metropolis and Ajumako district adopt intentionally inviting practices that address the physical frame of the school, communication with stakeholders, and building relationship with stakeholders to promote stakeholder involvement in schools. The adopted practices foster a sense of pride in the stakeholders to be connected to the school. The practices also promote stakeholder confidence and trust in the school head which lead to increased capital to support the operations of the school.

The study explored the perceptions of school heads on intentionally inviting practices to promote stakeholder participation in schools. The study should be conducted to elicit the perceptions of stakeholders on practices that enhance their participation in schools.

The study took place in two directorates that have taken proactive measures to strengthen stakeholder participation in schools. It is recommended to the Ghana Education Service to replicate the study in other school districts to identify the practices that support stakeholder participation in schools.

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