



Active Parents, Active Learners? Lessons from Two Community Schools in Zambia

Nkhunje Community School* stands proudly at a bend in the road in Zambia's Eastern Province, its sign bright with fresh paint. Flowers border the head teacher's house and a solid two-room school building. Inside the classrooms, three teachers work in shifts to instruct 167 learners in Grades 1 through 4. The chair of the school's Parent Community School Committee (PCSC) looks proudly at the new construction—visible proof of community-led progress in education.

Several hours' drive to the south is Mtsinje Community School. Like Nkhunje, the school came into being because children in the eight villages it serves simply could not make the daily trek to and from the nearest government school, which is 10 kilometers (about 6 miles) away. "We saw our children really suffer, going far off [to attend school]. Imagine," the chair of the Mtsinje Community School PCSC said. So, the community pooled its limited resources to create a local school. But those resources went only so far. The school building was a dilapidated mud-thatch structure with a roof that recently collapsed.

One might assume that Nkhunje Community School's performance, with the school's obvious advantages, far outpaces its counterpart to the south. In fact, it is the opposite: Mtsinje Community School learners achieved significantly higher literacy outcomes in a 2012 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), a part of Zambia's ongoing education reforms with special focus on literacy. How is that possible? And will that good performance continue? A look at dynamics in each community indicates that an important factor could be where the schools' governing bodies, the PCSCs, direct their attention.

** School names have been changed to protect the anonymity of those who participated in the study.*

By Zachariah Falconer-Stout and Kalisto Kalimaposo

Time to Learn
Plot No. 203B
Off Kudu Road, Kabulonga
Lusaka, Zambia

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ZAMBIA'S COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Zambia's community school movement started in the 1980s as a response to a scarcity of schools and high fees, which placed primary education in government schools beyond the reach of many vulnerable children. Today, community schools represent an estimated 30 percent of all primary schools (Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education [MESVTEE], 2013). The growth in the number of community schools, along with the introduction of free basic education in 2002, has been a large factor in Zambia's near-achievement of the Universal Primary Enrollment Millennium Development Goal (MESVTEE, 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2012).

Not unlike their government-funded counterparts, many community schools suffer from overcrowded classrooms and few resources. These problems are particularly prevalent in community schools, which also struggle to find qualified teachers. Community school teachers are often volunteers from neighboring communities who lack formal training or credentials. Despite these challenges, there is evidence to suggest that many community schools excel, and often even outperform government schools (Examinations Council of Zambia, 2012; Gardsbane et al. 2013; Rhodwell, 2013).

THE ROLE OF PARENT COMMITTEES IN ZAMBIA'S COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Although research shows that parental engagement in school management can be an important factor affecting school quality (Barrera-Osoria et al. 2009; Ginsberg et al. 2014; Nielsen, 2007), these dynamics have not been

studied extensively in the Zambian community school context.

Limited existing research suggests that the level of PCSC activity is an important predictor of learner performance in Grade 2 literacy assessments (Gardsbane et al. 2013), but the specific forms of PCSC engagement that are most productive in improving learner performance in the Zambian community school context are not known. Understanding the factors that affect community schools' performance in Zambia is particularly important in light of the government's stated aims of increasing support for and oversight of community schools.

By examining two community schools with similar characteristics (province, language of instruction, rural setting, school infrastructure, base of teaching and learning material, pedagogical quality, head teacher education level, and PCSC activity), but different performance levels based on the 2012 EGRA, this study explores the role of the PCSC in contributing to learner performance.

THE PCSC'S ROLE IN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

Each of Zambia's community schools is founded, financed, and managed locally through the PCSC. Considered the "owners" of the community school, committee members have a unique role in the school's governance structure. Indeed, the government's definition of a community school ties its existence to the presence and function of a PCSC.

The PCSC is typically responsible for hiring "volunteer" teachers who staff the community school and for collecting cash or in-kind contributions from the community used to pay the teachers. (This function is often a point of

contention between community members and teachers, as will be seen in the case studies.) One of the most common PCSC activities is its most visible role: organizing the community to take part in construction projects and “work days” to erect school buildings and housing for teachers.

“PCSC AS BUILDER”: THE CASE OF NKHUNJE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Like many of Zambia’s community schools, Nkhunje Community School began as a nursery school. In 2007, with urging from MESTVEE officials, and recognizing how far their many school-age children had to travel to reach the closest government school, community members began the process of registering the institution as a community school. The first Grade 1 classes were held in 2008 or 2009 (accounts vary). Grades 2 and 3 were added in 2010 and 2011.

Classes initially met in a thatched shed, but as the school added primary classes, the community began erecting a dedicated school building. As is typical, community members provided the standard construction material (i.e., sand, bricks and similar), while the MESVTEE provided iron sheets for roofing. The school also had a grant for materials from the District Council. Construction finished in late 2009, although the walls were yet to be plastered.



Community school building (credit: Zachariah Falconer-Stout)

The school has seen a good deal of teacher turnover, reportedly due to parents’ inability or unwillingness to pay allowances for the school’s volunteer teachers. These “salaries,” originally 50 kwacha per month, are now officially 120 kwacha per month—about 20 U.S. dollars. However, they are often not paid. In addition, there were reports of improper financial stewardship by PCSC members and accusations of theft by several committee members who have since been replaced. Whatever the causes, lack of payment fueled teacher absenteeism, which created a cycle of learner disengagement and parents’ further unwillingness to pay. By the third school term in 2012, classes had effectively ceased.

This cessation in 2012 coincided with the 2012 EGRA in which the school performed very poorly. Even so, the lack of classes in session only partly accounts for Nkhunje Community School’s low performance; there is evidence that the school was achieving minimal educational outcomes even before its struggles in 2012.

At this point the MESVTEE, which had been monitoring the situation, had a choice: it could let the school “die” or take action to support its recovery. Officials pledged to provide a government teacher who, by definition, would draw a government salary. This solution would relieve the community of some of the financial burden related to the school. In return, the PCSC was expected to provide suitable housing for the teacher, who would not join the school until the housing was in place. The new teacher arrived in October 2013, nearly a year later, to assume the role of head teacher, a position previously filled by the PCSC chair.

PCSC Role

The Nkhunje Community School PCSC first convened in 2007, in parallel with the school's registration. Since then, the committee has held an annual general meeting, ostensibly to elect new members, although in practice there has been minimal turnover in membership. The current PCSC chair has held his position since 2009 and has been repeatedly talked into continuing in that role. On two occasions there was turnover among some of the non-officer committee positions, but never of more than half the positions. The PCSC includes an Executive Committee and a Works Committee that oversees building projects.

The PCSC is primarily involved in two tasks: infrastructure development ("building") and collecting contributions of time or funds from parents to pay for school needs. To incentivize parents to participate in school "work days," the school imposes a fine of one chicken on those who do not show up; the chicken is used to feed those who work that day. When the school needs a new teacher, the PCSC forms a hiring panel. Decision making within the committee is supposedly by consensus, but the chair and some parents indicated this is not the case in practice.

The PCSC chairperson expressed regret that the committee's overall work too often falls to him alone. Other committee members expect him to personally collect contributions for teachers and oversee construction projects. "If the chair doesn't do the job," he said, "the blame, it comes back to you. They say, 'You are weak.'" He is the only committee member who is active in any routine monitoring of classroom instruction at Nkhunje Community School.

Overall, the PCSC does not appear to be extensively or constructively engaged in the

school's educational program beyond encouraging parents to make sure their children attend classes. Additionally, the committee does not discuss educational issues with parents. In the words of one mother, "They [PCSC members] are leaving the work of checking whether or not the children are learning only to the chair. I would rather that the other committee members [also] observe lessons, so they know the way the children are learning. Also, they should be giving the feedback to the teachers." In other words, some members felt that there is a lack of appropriate accountability structures and the PCSC should be exercising more fully its authority to oversee school performance.

The PCSC did not appear to engage with other local leadership structures on learning outcomes or school issues beyond personnel and infrastructure questions (i.e., a letter to a village headman asking for building materials or a call from the chair to MESVTEE officials to discuss staffing needs). To quote the vice headman, "The only way that we are involved with the PCSC [is] when we are written to by the Executive Committee."

Nkhunje's Challenge

Nkhunje Community School exemplifies the "PCSC as builder" model in which the committee is primarily engaged in putting up structures and enforcing contributions from parents. Meanwhile, the committee has struggled to retain teachers and keep the school open.

The PCSC's structure, with its Works Committee and limited, but present turnover, offers parents potentially more leadership roles than is typical for a Zambian community school. However, these facts do not seem to have increased parents' sense of ownership over the school. The Works Committee has put up the key structures,

but the Executive Committee seems less active, placing most work on the shoulders of the PCSC chairperson.

Moreover, the PCSC does not seem to seek out or engage with traditional leaders (village headmen) or MESVTEE officials (zonal and district) outside of logistical matters.

Even taking into account the chair's classroom monitoring, the PCSC is fairly uninvolved in activities to monitor the school's educational outcomes. According to one traditional leader, "The actual involvement in the learning of the learners, the direct involvement, like sitting in the class and sensitizing the parents about observing lessons, they [PCSC members] don't do. It's like the knowledge of that was lacking."

Nkhunje's Outlook

It is not yet clear if Nkhunje Community School has overcome the challenges that have made it difficult to provide consistent education in recent years. On the surface, the school seems re-energized by the arrival of the government-seconded teacher. In his first four months, he worked with the PCSC to reopen the school, recruit two new volunteer teachers, improve recordkeeping (including a receipt system to track community payments to the school), and organize the PCSC more effectively. Organizational and learner enrollment charts now hang in the head teacher's office, and volunteer teachers and learners again fill the school's two classrooms. Hiring the two new community teachers was also a fresh start; the head teacher appeared to be providing significant mentoring of those untrained colleagues.

For its part, the PCSC has redoubled its efforts to collect contributions for teachers' salaries, and

committee members report that parents feel more encouraged as a result of the recent changes. Nkhunje Community School may have untapped potential if the PCSC can improve its engagement in educational processes, expanding its work beyond building school infrastructure to include a much stronger role in accountability for teaching and learning outcomes.

Nkhunje Community School showed noticeable improvement in the 2014 EGRA. On the surface, the changes brought about by the new government teacher seem the most plausible explanation for that improvement, though this cannot be known for certain—a subject for possible further study.* If the improvement is a result of the new teacher, then the PCSC's focus on infrastructure could be seen as a long-term investment in infrastructure and a neglect of short-term measures that could have improved school performance. What is known in this case is that the MESVTEE established an incentive for the PCSC to improve school infrastructure and that the resulting change—the government teacher's arrival in the community—is apparently a positive one for the school.

PCSC AS ACCOUNTABILITY MONITOR: THE CASE OF MTSINJE

Mtsinje Community School stands next to a dusty soccer field at the nexus of eight villages, straddling a small but swift river in another rural part of Zambia's Eastern Province. The community is a 2-hour drive from the nearest town during the dry season, but the roads are impassable for much of the rainy season. The

* Questions such as what makes a government teacher successful are outside the scope of this study; see Time to Learn's case study, "Government Teachers in Community Schools: Two Zambian Success Stories," for an exploration of this topic.

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nearest government school is about 10 kilometers (more than 6 miles) away. That distance is what motivated parents to found the school in 2002—reportedly, with urging from a Christian missionary—and it remains their primary motivation. The school serves 60 primary-school learners.

The school building belonged to a church that gave the school permission to use it on weekdays. The structure was a dilapidated mud-and-thatch structure with a caved-in, leaking roof. (The building collapsed a few months after the research team left). Before the first structure was completed, classes were held in the PCSC treasurer’s house and under a large tree next to the site. After the building collapsed, classes returned to the shade of the same tree. When the chalkboard broke the community transferred the learners to a government school 10 kilometers away. Construction of a new building was underway a few months later.

Accounts of Mtsinje Community School’s history tend to focus on the challenges of retaining teachers and their level of educational attainment. From 2004 to 2008, Mtsinje Community School had two teachers: one male teacher who completed Grade 12 and one female who completed either Grade 8 or 12 (accounts vary). Both eventually left due to inconsistent payment. In 2008 two other Grade 12 teachers joined the staff, but they also left after four years (in 2012) because they were not paid. (The teachers in question were no longer in the vicinity during the research team’s visit, so the team could not confirm the reason they left.)

Since the school was founded, the head teacher has always been the teacher with the highest educational attainment because the PCSC deemed that the teacher who completed the highest grade in school was the most qualified

teacher. The current head teacher, who finished Grade 9, assumed that role after the previous head teacher, who finished Grade 12, left in 2012.

The current head teacher completed coursework for Grade 9 but did not write his exams and has been with the school since its founding. He had always taught Grades 1 and 2, while the more educated volunteer teachers took the higher grades. Parents and PCSC members have recently expressed a lack of confidence in his competency, conveying their desire for a “more qualified” teacher. Nevertheless, he is dependent on the school for his livelihood and has struggled on, teaching several grade levels on his own and taking initiative to improvise teaching materials using locally available resources. Perhaps understandably, the head teacher has reacted with some hostility to potential new teachers.

The conflict around school staffing prompted the MESVTEE zonal head to make a special visit to the school to mediate a solution. In addition to resolving tensions for the time being, this visit indicated that the MESVTEE is actively supporting the school community when it needs an objective arbiter. Additionally, the zonal head has taken an active role in monitoring the school, has attended at least one committee meeting, and has conducted a number of site visits.



Sample school site visit (credit: Zachariah Falconer-Stout)

For their part, the PCSC chair and the head teacher both engaged with the MESVTEE through visits to zonal and district offices, although they have never made these visits together. The chair paid for his visits out of pocket without a community reimbursement.

PCSC Role

Mtsinje Community School's PCSC, which includes six men and four women, first convened when the school was founded in 2002. The first PCSC chairperson left the area in either 2004 or 2008 (again, accounts vary). After his departure, the villagers elected a new committee. The committee's makeup has not changed since then, and the lack of regular elections seems to have irritated some parents and created a faction that opposes the current chairperson.

The PCSC meets every month or so and its members place a high value on decision by consensus. If needed, the committee calls the ward counselor or village headmen to join a meeting, indicating engagement with authority structures beyond the committee's immediate membership.

Although many committee meetings seem to have revolved around construction matters, individual PCSC members have played an active school-monitoring role. Both the treasurer and the chair live near the school and routinely observed classes. Committee members also collaborated with the head teacher and village headmen ensuring parents keep their children in school, issuing notes when absenteeism becomes serious, and reserving the right to refer extreme cases to the chief. The committee has also acted as the recruiting and hiring body for teachers; they have never had to fire a teacher. The PCSC, with support from parents, also bought notebooks for learners.

PCSC members reported that the school's high point was probably in 2012 when there were three teachers and many learners. The PCSC was very active at that time, mobilizing villagers to contribute corn for the teachers and collecting contributions of 50 ngwee from each learner each term.

Mtsinje's Challenge

This PCSC is not especially effective in its "builder" role. The head teacher, who is not a voting member of the committee, tried to fill the gap by resurfacing the two blackboards and creating some teaching materials on his own. He lamented the committee's lack of follow-up on infrastructure development, saying, "I have not really seen what they do best, because even those plans that look like good plans, they never really implement them." Indeed, their plans to improve the dilapidated school building did not materialize in time to save it. Since the structure collapsed, however, the community began working on a new foundation. The PCSC has also consistently struggled to collect funds and pay teachers, which has resulted in high turnover and an overburdened teaching staff.

Mtsinje's Outlook

Despite its struggles, Mtsinje Community School performed relatively well in the 2012 EGRA. The 2012 staffing—two teachers in addition to the current head—does not explain the strong EGRA performance because the two teachers only taught Grade 3 and above. This underlines the important role that PCSCs play in accountability. This PCSC was definitively engaged in school-monitoring work. The committee also engaged with traditional leaders in this role, bringing the larger community into the role of monitoring school performance.

The PCSC was effective in engaging with supportive community structures and with the wider education system. Moreover, the school had a positive rapport with MESTVEE officials. The MESTVEE zonal head had a significant advisory role in the school, which seems to have enhanced the PCSC's ability to function as a decision-making authority.

The Mtsinje Community School PCSC has used community structures to hold learners, teachers, and parents accountable for attendance, homework checks, and contributions to school operations. However, the school may require more of a balance between its accountability role and its "builder" role to attract additional teachers to its staff. Also, if the committee cannot improve payment of teacher salaries, it is likely to struggle even to keep the single teacher who remains today. Consequently, the school may not be able to improve or even maintain its standing in the EGRA.

ANALYSIS: INFRASTRUCTURE OR ACCOUNTABILITY?

Given their visible role in managing the physical construction of school buildings, there is a tendency to see PCSCs as simply "builder" entities. The cases in this study begin to complicate that assumption, indicating that a PCSC that limits its role to "building" may hinder its school's ability to achieve good teaching and learning outcomes. In contrast, a school whose PCSC sees itself as holding authority for oversight of educational functions within the school—for example, in monitoring attendance and observing and giving feedback on classroom lessons—can influence school performance. In the environment of decentralization and education reform that is underway in Zambia, this accountability function deserves further

exploration to see how PCSCs can be engaged more fully as authorities with the power to hold community schools accountable for meeting teaching and learning standards.

The cases of Mtsinje and Nkhujje Community Schools offer some insights in this regard. Although their PCSCs' formal activities overlap in significant ways, there are some telling differences, particularly in community members' accounts of PCSC effectiveness. Mtsinje Community School's PCSC seemed more effective at involving local traditional leaders in the school, and was practically dogmatic in managing learner attendance. Combined with monitoring of teacher attendance, this may lead to greater time on task at Mtsinje. Many parents took great interest in school management (if not so much in its infrastructure). This was demonstrated by consistently high parent turnout at each visit by the research team and by the many parents who asked to speak with the researchers at their own behest (i.e., without invitation from the researchers). In contrast, community members from Nkhunje Community School were observed in the school only on a single occasion, when the researchers invited them for a focus group discussion. In the absence of other observable differences between the two schools, these differences in PCSC roles are the most plausible explanation for Mtsinje Community School's better performance in 2012.



Data collection activities (credit: Zachariah Falconer-Stout)

Three themes emerge when examining these cases together: infrastructure, teaching quality, and authority structures.

- **Infrastructure.** Nkhunje Community School’s PCSC excels in this area, although it is worth pointing out that the government provided initial material support for the school building and teacher’s house. The promise of tangible material support incentivized and motivated the community to mobilize these initial inputs.
- **Teaching Quality.** The story of teaching quality is more complicated. Classroom observation data from 2012 indicate that pedagogical quality was comparable at the two schools, but 2014 observations indicated a dramatic improvement at Nkhunje Community School, while Mtsinje Community School is temporarily closed. However, the situations are not entirely comparable. At Nkhunje Community School, the change can be attributed to the new teaching staff, particularly the addition of an exceptional government teacher. At Mtsinje Community School, despite the relative shortage of teachers, the PCSC is strict about monitoring teacher absenteeism. This could be because of perceptions of authority. The Mtsinje PCSC is monitoring the performance of volunteer teachers, whereas Nkhunje PCSC members noted that they did not feel they had the authority to address the government teacher’s actions in this respect. This finding raises additional research questions related to the influx of government teachers into community schools, as explored in the case study “Government Teachers in Community Schools: Two Zambian Success Stories.” (Falconer-Stout, et. al. 2014).

- **Authority Structures.** Though the MESVTEE has a significant advisory role at Mtsinje Community School, the PCSC seems to exercise real decision-making authority. The Nkhunje PCSC, on the other hand, while holding authority over school action, was pushed by the MESTVEE at numerous points to implement specific policies, even the initial registration of the site as a community school.

In weighing these observations against the two schools’ relative performance in the 2012 EGRA, infrastructure does not appear to be a determining factor in learner performance in these schools. Instead, the differing focus on teacher and learner attendance is the most plausible explanatory factor the research team observed. However, the relatively “high-performing”, but infrastructure-poor, community school may be failing to extend its educational gains. This raises the possibility that infrastructure may pay dividends under certain conditions in the longer term, once teachers and learners are held accountable for meeting basic quality standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides modest evidence that Zambia’s PCSCs should be engaged as more than just “builders.” They have the potential to be the key party holding the range of school actors accountable for learning outcomes: teachers, learners, parents, and other community members. Without that accountability, there may be a building, but no true school.

Although the current Operational Guidelines for Community Schools and other MESVTEE policy documents formally empower PCSCs to be more than “builders,” in practice this policy framework incentivizes PCSCs to focus on their role as

“builders” by tying the most valuable form of MESVTEE support—seconded government teachers—to infrastructure requirements (for example, constructing housing for teachers). In addition, communication from local MESVTEE officials as well as cultural norms of deference to educational experts may make it more difficult in practice to realize policies that envision PCSCs as more than “builder” because these norms lead PCSCs to naturally refrain from involvement in matters related to educational quality. The form of accountability exercised at Mtsinje Community School offers an opportunity to tap into the full potential of PCSCs as *partners* for ensuring school quality. Reforms that encourage PCSCs to exercise this kind of authority could hold the potential for improving educational outcomes at limited cost.

Accountability alone, of course, is insufficient to achieve the desired educational outcomes. Proven classroom instructional techniques and other educational supports (including infrastructure) are also needed to amplify the gains achieved through the PCSC’s accountability-monitoring role.

The hope in sharing the results of this case study research is to encourage Zambian policymakers and education officials to consider specific ways to incentivize activities beyond the PCSCs’ “builder” role and involve them more consistently in the school-level accountability processes that seem to have an important role in learner achievement.

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[†] Ministry of Education changed its name to Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESVTEE) in 2013.

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SEE ALSO

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Time to Learn's *Case Study Series* provides insight into best practices in the education of orphans and other vulnerable children in Zambia, including an emphasis on Zambia's community schools. Designed for policymakers and program implementers, these case studies focus on key research priorities identified by stakeholders in Zambia's educational sector, including government officials, academics, and civil society.

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