

## **Community Engagement in Education and Educating the Community to Engage: Taking Research to the Grassroots in Botswana\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This methodology paper explores a partnership between Botswana Educational Research Association (BERA) and the Mmathethe community in the south of Botswana, which sought to identify strategies for improving academic performance at a local primary school. The project was implemented within the theoretical framework of the school improvement approach, which argues that schools have the capacity to improve themselves with the help of both internal and external stakeholders. Both parties engaged in work-based learning, fieldwork, applied research collaborations, policy analysis seminars and other exchanges of information. Action research was employed to ensure community involvement and cascading of research skills to the community so that they can address similar challenges that may arise in the future. Several data collection strategies were employed and they included (i) focus group discussions; to elicit for opinions, brain storm, probe in to performance issues, and suggest new ideas as well as responses to new proposals; (ii) interviews to capture opinions, informed inputs, preferences and rationale behind some current pedagogical practices and (iii) document analysis to reveal performance trends, patterns and indicators, year on year and group by group comparison in performance before any intervention could be put in place. Data collection was done by a team in which community members were fully represented. This engagement was an eye opener in a number of ways. Besides cascading research skills, Community interest in improving academic performance at the school was rekindled. It proved that there is need to work with traditional leaders since communities have faith in them. It may be a pointer towards how future collaborations could be handled. In short, there was a deliberate effort to change current practices and improve efficiency within the way the school operates by changing the mind-set of the community members in which the school is located. It is quite possible that the way this project was planned and unfolded could become the cornerstone of how communities should be empowered to solve their own problems in Botswana, and could act as a model of how BERA could interact with other communities.*

**Keywords:** Community engagement, School improvement, Action Research, qualitative research

### **INTRODUCTION**

This project initiated by a primary school and the Mmathethe community in the southern region of Botswana, sought to identify strategies of improving academic performance after observing a significant decline in the Standard 7 pass rate over 6 years (2006 – 2012). This

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prompted teachers, school administration and other stakeholders to identify the root cause of the poor performance and hence approached the Botswana Educational Research Association (BERA<sup>†</sup>), to help them research and solve the problem. The nature of their problem fits well within one of BERA's interest groups<sup>‡</sup>, that is, the School Improvement Interest Group (SIIG). This group addresses a diverse range of research areas in schools. It focuses such issues as equity factors, which affect school performance and output, school organization, operations and administration, community involvement, teacher welfare issues, curriculum and classroom methodology. It seeks to provide information on ways of improving school environments and make them conducive to learning. Thus this particular study assumed a University – community partnership, where the two collaborated to solve problems affecting the community. This is in line with current trends that community engagement is now regarded as one of the core goals of higher education and the idea that researchers and community members need to engage in a symbiotic relationship in which both will benefit (Mathews 2010). Thus as argued by Klein et al (2011), the outcome of such partnerships between institutions and community result in knowledge co-generation, and not knowledge transfer hence does not imply the transmission from 'expert' academics to 'lay' community members.

BERA and the Mmathethe community's cooperation took the form of work-based learning, fieldwork, applied research collaborations, policy analysis seminars and other exchanges of information where applicable.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The school improvement approach proved to be the most attractive guiding principle since improving academic performance is one of the central components of the general school improvement. Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994:3) define school improvement as "a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change...". In this study the central issue was improving student performance by focusing on the teaching-learning process and conditions that support it. However the school improvement approach is based on a number of assumptions about the nature of educational change and schools as organisations and these were found to be applicable to this study as well. As outlined by Hopkins et al. (1994), central to the assumptions is the idea that schools have the capacity to improve themselves, if conditions are right. Therefore the responsibility of stakeholders outside the immediate school environment is to help improve teaching and learning conditions. Once need and purpose are there, conditions are right, adults and students alike learn, each energizing and contributing to the learning of the other (Hopkins et al. 1994). Thus If any meaningful improvement in academic performance is to be realised, then there is need to improve school culture, the quality of interpersonal relationships within schools, as well as the nature and quality of learning experiences.

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<sup>†</sup> BERA was founded in 1982, and its main aim is to contribute to national development through conducting educational research, participating in educational policy and planning, to build national research capacity and dissemination of information to stakeholders in education in Botswana and internationally. BERA is an all inclusive independent research organisation with membership from researchers from various socio economic sectors, and is housed at the University of Botswana.

<sup>‡</sup> Other interest groups that exist within BERA include Comparative Education Interest Group (CEIG), Language Teaching and Learning Interest Group (LTL), Gender in Education Interest Group (GEIG), Student Life Interest Group (SLIG) and HIV/AIDS Interest Group (HAIG).

In short, the school improvement approach stresses on internal and external stakeholder contributions thus underlining the idea that a school does not exist in isolation, but is part of the larger community, hence Hopkins et al (1994) emphasise the importance of contributions of external stakeholders. Chapman and Harris (2004) also confirm the importance of the larger community from the one of their studies they carried out in England from which it was realised that schools that have solid and lasting links with the local community were more likely to gain their support and loyalty in difficult times thereby creating opportunities for parents and teachers to cooperate in efforts meant to improve performance within a school. Potter, Reynolds and Chapman (2002), also point out that schools should be made to understand that each of them can improve, and that such improvement must be assessed in terms of improved pupil achievement outcomes hence every stakeholder in the school has a contribution to make towards school improvement.

The interpretive paradigm (constructivist/symbolic paradigm) was also employed to enable both BERA researchers and stakeholders to interact and collaborate in finding appropriate solutions particularly through the needs assessment approach. A need is a gap between current and desired results and the desire could be to improve current performance or to correct a deficiency; deficiency being performance that does not meet the current standard (Barbazette 2006). Its relevance to the problem was taken to mean that current practices are at variance with the prescribed or best ways of doing a task and as such the variance was the source of the problem. Thus as McCawley (2009) concludes, collecting and analysing needs assessment data allows investigators to describe the gap between what exists and what is needed. Filling the gap becomes the purpose of improving performance, which is exactly what was needed in Mmathethe. Kaufman (1977) had earlier highlighted that needs assessment identifies what is and what should be in terms of results and thus also prioritizes on filling the gaps. Rossett (1985) had gone further saying that a needs assessment is a means of obtaining opinions, ideas, facts, and feelings about a given performance problem and hence the need to use qualitative design. Undertaking the study was also informed by the fact that the needs assessment had to be carried out from two perspectives; that is, externally and internally. External aspect focuses on organisational outcomes whilst the internal needs assessment considers gaps in outputs or products.

A number of areas as identified by Chapman and Harris (2004) became the focus of the study in Mmathethe and they include among others: Improving the learning environment, generating positive relationships amongst stakeholders, continuous professional improvement for teachers, Leadership issues within the school and in the immediate community, and lastly the need for external support. However, these pointers helped mainly in giving the researchers a head start since the school had needs unique to its situation.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed to ensure triangulation and also get the best out of the participants. There was need to involve all stakeholders on the ground and hence the target population included community leaders, school administrators, teachers; parents, pupils and drop-outs. It was believed that this wide spectrum of stakeholders would improve the trustworthiness of the findings and help come up with appropriate solutions. A variety of data collection methods were also employed and these included focus group discussions, interviews, document analysis as well as use of questionnaires. Focus group discussions were used to elicit for opinions, for brain storming, and interactive probing into performance issues, suggestions of new ideas and responses to new proposals. Structured interviews were employed to elicit for opinions as well, for expert or informed inputs, preferences and rationale behind some current organisational and school practices. The

advantage of using a structured interview was its ability to be able to provide important background information on current practices whilst at the same time giving participants an opportunity to express their views freely about teaching and learning challenges encountered. The search team also felt that interviews were an important instrument to access information concerning feelings, intentions, beliefs, knowledge and opinions of parents and other community leaders. Data from interviews was analysed to reveal patterns, themes and recurrent ideas pertaining to the research objective of improving performance at the school.

On the other hand document analysis was used to gather evidence on performance trends, patterns and indicators, year on year and group by group comparison within the period 2006 to 2012.

The advantage of using structured interviews was their ability to be able to provide important background information on participants/respondents' perceptions whilst at the same time giving them an opportunity to express their views freely about teaching and pedagogical issues. The researchers also felt that interviews were an important instrument if they were to access information about feelings, intentions, beliefs, knowledge and opinions. Informal interviews were also used along the course of the research. The data from the interviews was analysed to reveal patterns, themes and recurrent ideas pertaining to research objective. The data from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS<sup>§</sup> statistical package to generate frequencies and other descriptive statistics.

Action research was adopted since it fits in both qualitative and quantitative designs. The research cycle pertaining to this study is shown in Figure 1. The first step was the stakeholders meeting, which brought together all the interested parties.

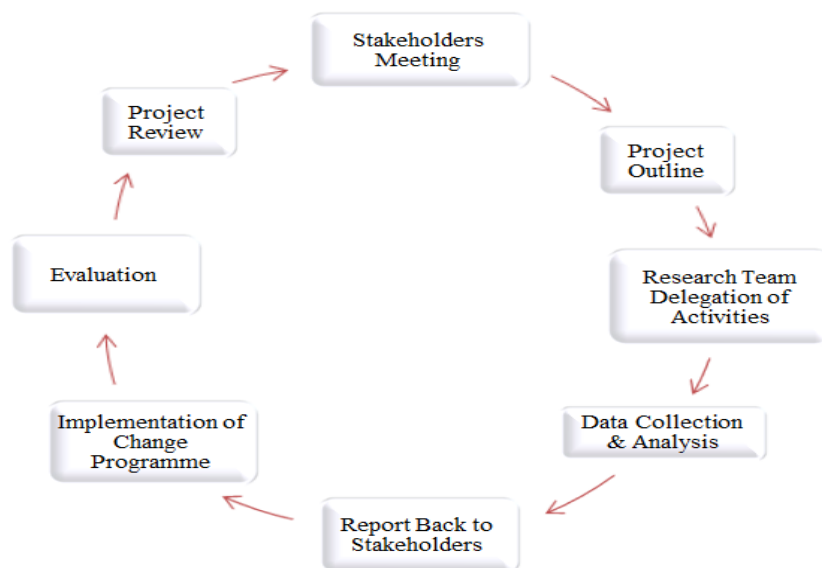


Figure 1

Stakeholders were taken through the basic principles of action research. During the methodology training an effort was made to link it to the problem at hand. Stakeholders included community Leaders such as the Kgosi<sup>\*\*</sup> and councillor, school administrators (head and the deputy), teachers' representatives, members of the parents and teachers association (PTA), health officials, as well as current students and school drop outs. The problem was

<sup>§</sup> SPSS stands for Statistical Package for Social Sciences

<sup>\*\*</sup> Kgosi is the traditional title given to the Chief

outlined, and so were research objectives and outcomes. A research team composed of representatives of all stakeholders was put in place and it then drew up a research timeline and delegated tasks for each of the members. BERA researchers were tasked with drawing up instruments for data collection of which they did. The instruments included questionnaires for students, teachers, parents and the school administrators, interview guides for various stakeholders, resource check lists as well as guidelines for document analysis. Once these tools were in place, they were analysed and amended to capture the objectives of the research. Questionnaires were translated into Setswana without compromising meaning and were pilot tested on the students who were about to write the primary school leaving examination. This enabled the team to perfect the instrument further and determine its usefulness. Changes were effected as shown in fig 1. Digital recorders were used to capture interviews in addition to field notebooks whilst checklists and cameras were employed to objectively compare what is as opposed to what should be. All members of the research team took turns to ask questions during interviews and this was done to ensure ownership of the whole process. Once the data was analysed by all parties, the findings were presented to all the stakeholders to keep everyone on course. The community then brainstormed on the findings and solutions and presented them to BERA. Among other things the change program included improving teaching methods, altering beliefs behaviours and perceptions through workshops, training, and other methods to ensure capacity building. Figure 2 illustrates the objectives, process and outcomes of the change program.

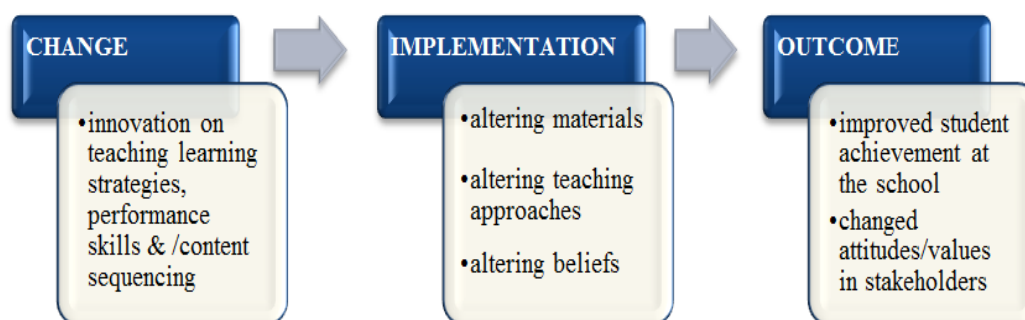


Figure 2

However, it is not the scope of this paper to discuss results in detail since they are still to be discussed at a dissemination seminar for this and other BERA projects. The focus is on how the Mmathehte community initiated engagement in pursuit of improving education for their children, whilst at the same time acquiring research skills through effective participation. It was a practical or action research project involving theory and practice where theory guides practice and practice refines theory.

This change process is expected to take place over a long period of time and both BERA and the Mmathethe community will continue to implement and monitor the school improvement activities.

### **Ethical Issues**

The initial step was for the research team to obtain a research permit from the Ministry of Education and Skills Development. This ensured that the study conformed to research requirements and the permit was valid for a year. Participants, both students and parents were made aware of the objectives of the research and that they were free to opt out at any stage of the process. However, since the research originated from within the community, it was not difficult to obtain the parents' consent to enable school pupils to participate. Both the

Kgosi and the PTA played an important role in sensitizing community members to participate.

### **Emerging Issues in Brief**

Whilst discussing emerging issues is not the objective of this paper since it is purely focusing on methodology, some issues can still be noted. Generally issues emerged around three broad areas; learners, pedagogy and learning support. There are several reasons for poor performance that are related to learners, and these include irregular school attendance and increased dropout rate. A variety of socio economic factors are in turn a cause of such a scenario, such as long distances to school, income generating activities taking precedence over school attendance and at times some children being family heads. In terms of curriculum it emerged that Mathematics and CAPA<sup>††</sup> are the most difficult subjects for students, the main reasons centring on poor mathematical skills and language problems associated with the use of English. Learning support materials are also a crucial factor that emerged. Need for more books, computers and a consistent internet connection are needed to improve performance in general. Lack of materials for practical subjects (Sewing, embroidery etc) or projectors to watch documentaries are good examples

### **LESSONS AND PROSPECTS**

This engagement was an eye opener in terms of cascading research skills. The participating community demonstrated interest and commitment in understanding the cause of declining performance at the school. The interest was sustained by the fact that the research originated from within the community itself and hence it was easy for the community to claim ownership of the change process. Project meetings involving the research team and community members were well attended, interaction was meaningful, objective and realistic on all occasions highlighting the importance that was attached to the project. It is important thing to note the realisation that a community can fully engage in meaningful research without being immersed in technical jargon used by academics. The stakeholders meeting proved to be the anchor on which the University – community collaboration was based on. During the subsequent meetings, action research procedures were discussed and activities carefully worked out. This included identifying research tools, construction of questionnaires, validating them, pilot testing and modifying the tools. Once data was collected by a team that included community members, it became easy for them to accept the findings that were gleaned from such information. In short the community did not only benefit from the findings but also from how the process is done, which would help them to solve future community problems. The success of this project could help BERA to extent it to other communities and hence help build capacity in research across the country.

Another important lesson from this engagement was the realisation of the importance of working with traditional leaders such as the Kgosi. The Kgosi was on the forefront from the very beginning. He is a member of the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA). Thus he is quite influential in school activities as he intervenes from three levels; that is, a parent, member of the PTA and being the chief or community leader. Interaction with the community revealed that members have faith in the role played by traditional leaders and hence, it may be a pointer towards how future collaborations could be handled.

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<sup>††</sup> CAPA stands for Creative and Performing Arts

## CONCLUSION

Whilst a lot has been done, the impact of the change programme will only be realised after sometime. There was a deliberate effort to change current practices and improve efficiency within the way the school operates. This could not suffice without changing the mind-set of the community in which the school is set as well as cascading problem solving skills to ensure their ability to handle future problems with confidence and efficiency. It is quite possible that the way this project unfolded and was planned, it could become the cornerstone of how academics will interact with various communities in the future

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